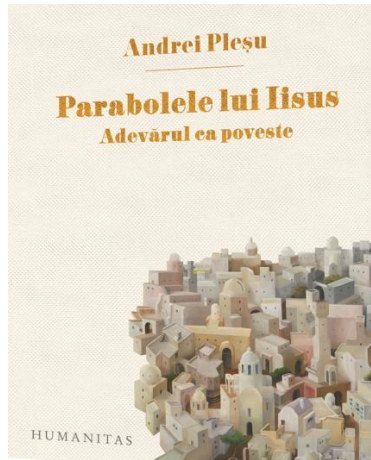


Florin CRÎȘMĂREANU*

**Simple Notes of Reading Concerning an
Event Book:
*The Parables of Jesus*³**

[Andrei Pleșu, *Parabolele lui Iisus. Adevărul ca poveste* (*The Parables of Jesus. Truth as Story*), Bucharest, Humanitas, 2012, 314 p.]

“No prophecy of the Scripture came about by
The prophet’s own interpretation of things”
[2 Peter 1, 20]



Abstract In his most recent volume, *The Parables of Jesus*, Andrei Pleșu intends to offer different interpretations of an important number of parables assigned to Jesus Christ. In parallel with the living exegesis of the fragments from Scripture encountered in this remarkable volume, I have tried to make an inventory in the lines below and a few small inconsistencies, errors of typing and quotation, that have slipped into the pages of the mentioned book.

* Researcher, „Al. I.Cuza” University, Iași, Romania, fcristmareanu@gmail.com

³ **Acknowledgement:** This paper is the result of a research activity financed by The Sectoral Operational Program for Human Resources Development under the project POSDRU/89/1.5/S/49944 (‘Developing the Innovation Capacity and Improving the Impact of Research through Post-doctoral Programmes’).

Keywords: The Scripture, The Parables of Jesus, interpretation, tradition, Andrei Pleșu.

A few days ago I was passing through a square when I saw from a distance a group of restless persons in a building with big windows. I went towards that store, which I have identified by the stairs as being a bookstore. In Romania of the year 2012, in a provincial city, could it be agitation in a bookstore? Bizarre situation... I opened the door with some difficulty and I shyly approached the group inside. Hard to guess their profession, but, considering the clothing and language, they seemed to be intellectuals. Not even a single moment did I waste and I started looking at the books arranged on shelves, and I eavesdropped, in an impolite manner, at their conversations. Shortly, as far as I understood, a book recently published at a prestigious publishing house was about to be launched, and the people gathered there, apparently, intended to buy it at any cost. The young lady at the cash-register did not take into account their carefully chosen words and requested the exact price posted on the fourth cover of the book.

Until those persons have passed the cash-register, paying for the purchased volume, I had already found two books with a discount, thrown in a basket at entrance. After the group left the bookstore, I went to the cash-register to pay for the two volumes. Curious by nature, while the young lady scanned the barcodes and prepared my bill, I took a look at the book from which a few copies have just been sold. It looked very good: it was a hardcover, wrapped in a bright colored jacket, with a very nice drawing, in qualitative paper, that makes one think of the Occidental luxury editions. In brief, it was a volume absolutely successful from an aesthetical point of view, which I would have liked to buy just for this reason. I was already imagining where I could have placed it in my modest library.

The conversation with the young lady at the cash-register gives me the opportunity to further skim over the volume. The title seemed familiar, I had encountered it somewhere for sure; the subject somehow familiar to any Christian, even to the Sunday one, seemed to be very well analyzed; and the author's name is known to almost any living from these lands; and precisely then, as something belonging to destiny, the young lady recommends another valuable book: *Minima moralia*, written by a certain Adorno. Out of courtesy, I would have appreciated her intention, if I had not been so thrilled already thrilled by the volume in bright colored jacket. Briefly, that particular volume gave me at that moment all the reasons to acquire it.

I bought the book. While walking out of the bookstore I also remembered the name of the famous author who happened to write a book

with the same title: the Lutheran Joachim Jeremias. Now, what difference did it make anyway? I was happy with my new acquisition. On my way home, I was thinking about this volume's subject. What can the parables of Jesus tell us today? After two millennia of their enunciation, are they still valid? Without any hesitation, I believe in the validity of these "true stories", in their timeless message. Without this minimal faith, one would not dare to read them, to tell them, to interpret them. A reading of Jesus' parables is what Mister Andrei Pleșu also suggests in his latest published book: *The Parables of Jesus*⁴.

The volume *The Parables of Jesus* has the following structure: after "Foreword" [pp. 7-8], follows an "Introduction" [pp. 11-22], then the first part of the book, which is also the most consistent from a quantitative point of view, "«Why do you speak to them in parables?»" [pp. 25-207] and the second one: "The parable as undermining of the ideological" [pp. 212-277]. Parts that are divided in turn in chapters and subchapters. Instead of "Conclusion" [pp. 281-312], it includes the text "Critics of exegetical reasoning" [281-300], "Bibliographical suggestions" [pp. 301-307] and "Index of Jesus' parables" [pp. 309-312].

Briefly, from the reading of these parables, and not only, it shows that "Jesus does not seem to be preoccupied with building a *doctrine*" [p. 211], and the core of the entire volume *The Parables of Jesus* seems to be summarized in the words: "What conclusion can we reach? None that can be enclosed in a recipe. The truth is always the same, but its colors, its «sides» are ineffably changing depending on the concrete case, the situation, the moment, the discourse's target. Truth is consubstantial with the *wealth* of the world and the *freedom* of the person. Nothing is taken as *standing to reason* [...] We are invited to a continuously *imitatio Christi*, but not to limp pastiche, to sterile good conduct" [p. 235].

An aspect that might seem strange to some is encountered right from the "Foreword" where the request of a publishing house to "order" the writing of the book is mentioned. For a normal reader, the request of such an "order" sounds strange. Anyhow, it is clear that such an "order" is not made to a person that is at the beginning of his career as an author, but to a person that has certain skills as a writer, who confirmed it in time, with a rich CV to support him. For those who do not get me yet, I will recall the fact that in the course of history great works, both texts and especially paintings and sculptures, were made at order. Someone ordered them, and someone else made them.

From the beginning, I have to confess the fact that I do not feel

⁴ Cf. Andrei Pleșu, *Parabolele lui Iisus. Adevărul ca poveste (The Parables of Jesus. Truth as Story)*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2012, 314 p. In our text, the references between parentheses without any other kind of mention, are for the pages of this volume.

worthy to evaluate in any way the novelty, the correctness and not even the usefulness of the interpretations suggested by Mr. A. Pleșu in the pages of his most recently published volume. Of course, there are going to be persons much more competent than myself that will state about these things, if they haven't already done it. In those bellow, I shall stop only at some minor issues, insignificant in the volume's economy, such as the little inconsistencies, incomplete bibliographical references, mistakes in typing, which, if someone finds them useful, can be taken into account in a very possible second edition of the volume *The Parables of Jesus*.

Towards the end of the volume, when a justification is presented, I have felt the absence of bibliographical references to the Patristic writings and even to the scholastic ones where Christ's parables are approached. From the pages of the book that we are taking into account, I understood that the Patristic authors, indiscriminately, belong to "entire centuries of scholastic seriousness and vapid homiletics" [p. 217; see also the final part of the volume, "Critics of exegetical reasoning"]. It is hard for me to accept such generalization. Moreover, I do not think we encounter in the writings of the Church Fathers just a moralizing reading – frequently found in the texts of Latin scholars – of the Christly message, but rather an anagogical reading, an actual feeling of this message. It is true, it is always started from the first meaning, literal, without which the reading would not be possible, but it is aimed at the final meaning, anagogical, that implies the appropriation and feeling of this message. Anagogic lecture is more than just a reading. We sometimes encounter texts even on the road to Damascus.

Can the Scriptures be read without asking help from tradition, neglecting, avoiding, deliberately or not, the writings of Church Fathers? Definitely, yes. An entire Christian confession struggles to do this. Reading the volume *The Parables of Jesus*, is it justified to ask yourself which is the tradition from which the interpreter of these parables claims himself? According to the used sources, it is hard to establish a unique tradition, the catholic and protestant authors are by far the most frequently used. On the other hand, one can say that the volume's author is eastern in spirit, whereas the "Tradition, as *paradosis*, is the continuous taking over and multiplied transmission of the gift: *tradition*, custom" [p. 180].

However, the direct or the indirect references to the writings of the Church Fathers do not lack completely from the pages of the volume *The Parables of Jesus*. Frequently, when it happens for a fragment to be quoted from the text of an ecclesiastical writer, the reference is made indirectly, after other sources, by means of several "apud". An example in this respect is given in a note [p. 153, n. 1], where Saint Irenaeus and Tertullian is quoted; his writings, *Adversus Haereses*, book IV, 26, 5 and, respectively,

Adversus Marcionem, book IV, 29, 9, are taken over after the writing of a certain Christine Gerber. Personally, I cannot argue even a simple thesis by calling on to the readings of others, without checking them first. One can call on fellows for many services, but not also for reading for you. Fortunately, in the mentioned case, Irinaeus' writing, *Adversus Haereses*, has received critical editions, I mention here the appearance of this text in the collection *Sources Chrétiennes*, no. 100-1 and 100-2, Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, livre IV, Édition critique d'après les versions arménienne et latine sous la direction de Adelin Rousseau, moine de l'abbaye d'Orval, avec la collaboration de Bertrand Hemmerdinger, Louis Doutreleau et Charles Mercier, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, Tome I: introduction, notes justificatives et tables, Tome II: texte et traduction, 1965 [2006²]. The same happy faith also had Tertullian's writing, which appears in the same prestigious collection: Tertullien, *Contre Marcion*, IV, tome IV [Livre IV], Texte critique par Claudio Moreschini, Introduction, traduction et commentaire par René Braun, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001.

The line of several "apud" continues. At p. 168, n. 3, it is quoted a work of Saint Basil the Great, "On Renunciation of the World, 31.648.21 apud K. Snodgrass, Stories...". Hard to identify Basil's writing according to this reference. Finally, after some time dedicated to this search, I believe it is about *Sermo XI* [*Sermo asceticus et exhortatio de renuntiatione mundi*], PG 31, coll. 625-648 [Clavis Patrum Graecorum (CPG) 2889].

At the same page 168, n. 4, Saint John Chrysostom is quoted with the text "De Caeco et Zaechaeo, 59.601.42-46", probably after the same reliable source, K. Snodgrass, who does not appear this time in that note. Knowing now how to decipher this kind of *apud*, I have identified faster the text of Chrysostom in PG 59, col. 601, lines 42-46, the writing being mentioned at „Spuria”: „Ad homiliam de Caeco et Zacchaeo” [coll. 599-610]; [CPG 4592].

At a certain point, we encounter the following quotation: "We must act – says Maximus the Confessor – as some contemplative persons and to practice contemplation as active people" [p. 230]. At this quotation, Mr. A. Pleșu does not make any reference, as it would be normal, to a Maximian writing, but to an article signed by André Scrima, „The Hesychastic Tradition. An Orthodox-Christian Way of Contemplation”, in Yūsuf Ībish, Ileana Mărculescu (eds), *Contemplation and Action...*, ed. cit., pp. 136-150 [p. 230, n. 2]. In order to find the Maximian writing from where the quotation is, I went to the "source", i.e. to the article of A. Scrima. I cannot find it in the mentioned version, but I have found a translation in Romanian of that article: André Scrima, „Tradiția isihastă: o cale contemplativă creștin-ortodoxă” [translator Sorana Corneanu], in *Despre isihasm (On Hesychasm)*, edition cured by Anca Manolescu, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2003, pp. 205-224 [the translation quoted however by A. Pleșu a few pages further, at p. 243,

n. 1], where at p. 218 we read a fragment similar to the one invoked by A. Pleșu: “to act as a contemplative person and to contemplate as an active person” (Maximus the Confessor). A first question: why wasn’t the translation into Romanian of that article quoted, since the author knew about it, as he informs us a few pages below. Quoting this translation would have solved also the distinction singular-plural that differentiates the two translations [A. Pleșu and S. Corneanu]. I come back to A. Scrima’s article. To my disappointment, not even here did I find an exact reference to a Maximian writing. Indeed, the idea seemed to be a Maximian one, but in order to identify that passage, I had only one option left: to review the entire Maximian corpus. Going through these texts has strengthened my belief that the idea is a Maximian one, because I have found it in several places⁵. Among all the inventoried passages, the closest to the fragment quoted by A. Pleșu from A. Scrima seems to be the following: “the activity appears as a working contemplation, and contemplation as an experienced activity” [*Answers to Thalassius*, 63, Romanian translation D. Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, vol. III, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 327; see the entire answer given by Maximus to question 63].

Regarding the Confessor, A. Pleșu also reminds us about the “*philautia* upon which Saint Maximus the Confessor constantly warns us” [p. 244]. One of these places where we can find Maximus’ “warning” is the following: “mother of passions, i.e. bodily love of self [Φιλαντία]” [Maximus, *Chapters on Love* II, 8, translator D. Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, vol. II, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 65; see also *Ibid.*, II, 59: “mother of all evil, <i.e.> love of self [Φιλαντία]”, p. 74].

We encounter with another indirect reference when the following passage is invoked: “Prayer – says Saint Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) – «is spiritual life in action [...]. To pray means to put in act the godly feelings and attitudes, which leads to a more intense, a brighter life»” quoted

⁵ Cf. Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Chapter on Love* II, 28, translation D. Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, vol. II, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 68: “A strong man is the one who unites knowledge with making”; *Idem.*, *Ambigua*, 10 [Romanian translation D. Stăniloae, Bucharest, EIBMBOR, pp. 160-161]; *Ibid.*, 92 [Romanian translation, p. 355]; *Ibid.*, 102 c [Romanian translation, p. 382]; *Ibid.*, 124 [Romanian translation, p. 460]; *Idem.*, *Answers to Thalassius*, 48 [Romanian translation D. Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, vol. III, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 164]; *Ibid.*, 58 [Romanian translation, p. 268]; *Ibid.*, 58 [Romanian translation, p. 268]; *Ibid.*, 63 [Romanian translation, p. 333]. Things have been similar also in the western Christianity. For example, for Hugo de Saint-Victor [1090 / 1100-1141], perfect wisdom consists in uniting the two, i.e. to conjugate “jubilation of contemplation” with “fertility of action” [PL 175, coll. 514D-515A]. The Victorin emphasizes especially the complementarity and on each ones insufficiency taken separately [*Ibidem*, 176, coll. 655C-657C].

after Eugraph Kovalevsky, *A Method of Prayer for Modern Times...* [p. 242, n. 2]. Hard to identify the writing where this passage is taken from. Meister Eckhart is also indirectly quoted, „*Apud Coomaraswamy...*” [p. 254, n. 1]. I do not have the time to look for that quotation in the huge work of Eckhart.

To our peace, not just the Patristic and scholastic authors are quoted by using second sources, but also contemporaneous authors, such as J. Jeremias, *apud* C. Blomberg [p. 161, n. 2]. We do not find out about Jeremias' text from this reference. We can assume that it is about a sequence of a discussion with a friend. Maurice Blondel, *Histoire et dogme...* is quoted after Jean Pirot [p. 231, n. 1]; Hermann Hesse *apud* Martin Leutsch [p. 291, n. 2].

Usually, during the volume, clues that send to footnotes are after the point from the end of phrase. I have also noticed a few exceptions from this rule, when clues that send to footnotes appear before the point. For example: p. 25, n. 1; p. 32, n. 1; p. 33, n. 1; p. 35, n. 2, 3; p. 37, n. 1; p. 38, n. 1; p. 40, n. 1; p. 41, n. 2; p. 47, n. 1; p. 62, n. 1; p. 63, n. 1; p. 69, n. 1, 6; p. 70, n. 1; p. 80, n. 2; p. 109, n. 1; p. 117, n. 1; p. 119, n. 3; p. 121, n. 2; p. 134, n. 2; p. 158, n. 2; p. 295, n. 1; p. 297, n. 3.

According to the rules of editing of footnotes unanimously accepted, at p. 89, n. 2, we should have *Ibid.*, as it is used also with other occasions during the volume, for example p. 80, n. 1. At the beginning of the great majority of the footnotes we have the abbreviation *Cf.*, but other times this abbreviation does not appear anymore, as it happens for example at p. 89, n. 1 and 2; p. 103, n. 2; p. 115, n. 1; p. 117, n. 2; p. 134, n. 2; p. 162, n. 1; p. 168, n. 2, 3; p. 174, n. 1; p. 288, n. 1; p. 297, n. 2 and 3.

Going through the volume, I have noticed that there are also references insufficiently used, as it happens for example at pp. 246-247, n. 1, where two texts are quoted, without mentioning where those writings have been published, talking about Princeton and Paris. It is true that from the entire reference, one can understand it all, but, even so, it is a discordant note, compared to the majority of the other references from the bottom of the pages, most of them complete.

From the important saying: „Filozofii vor să te lămurească, fără te oblige la decizii fatale” („Philosophers want to enlighten you, without forcing one to make fatal decisions”) [p. 218], the sequence „să” (‘to’) is missing.

The reference to the autochthonous translation of the work of Chrysostom, *Homilies to Matthew*, does not have the pages mentioned; the same situation is also encountered in p. 134, n. 2.

„Cartea Înțelepciunii lui Isus, Fiul lui Sirah” („The Book of Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach”) [for example, thus quoted at p. 105; p. 291, n. 3], also appears as „Cartea Înțelepciunii lui Iisus, Fiul lui Sirah” [p. 224, n. 2].

Briefly, in the volume *The Parables of Jesus*, I have encountered a variety of inconsistencies, incomplete references and errors of typing; a few of them exemplified in the lines above. Therefore, be careful, because not the devil, as we may think, but „le bon Dieu est dans le détail” [a sequence assigned to Gustave Flaubert].

Ending the reading of this beautiful volume, I am still thinking about those intellectuals encountered some time ago in the bookstore, imagining at the same time the situation generated by the pride of colleagues when seeing the book *The Parables of Jesus* on their desk. How interesting and useful should it be for the soul to enter into a conversation with this kind of people ... Regarding my notes above, I can only say this: if the fact that I have lingered too much in search of “fern spores” [p. 293] is to be taken seriously, then I apologize; as for the “elephant”, be it “in broad light”, I leave it to others more worthy than myself, obviously to the intellectuals.