

# Historical, Social, and Religious Conditions of the Pentecostal Mission in Romania: From Its Emergence to 1945

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**Abstract:** Although the term mission has not been used, within the Pentecostal movement in Romania, the work of preaching the Gospel has been a primary concern of all believers. It was the ministry of simple believers, done through direct witnessing in specific contexts, that became an opportunity to witness. However, the difficult context in which Pentecostalism was born in Romania hindered the institutional development of the Christian community, but not its numerical growth. This led to chain reactions from the country's traditional churches, as well as from the authorities who were building their own kingdom. As a result, we aim to highlight the main historical, social, and religious conditions that marked the course of the Pentecostal mission in inter-war Romania and how they influenced the missionary trajectory of the Christian community.

**Keywords:** Context, Mission, Conditions, Pentecostalism, Numerical Growth

## Introduction

The subject analyzed in this article is framed historically between the emergence of the Pentecostal movement in Romania and 1945. Such a structuring will help us observe the essential aspects related to the organization of the Pentecostal movement, theological education, and also reveal the repressive conditions in which Pentecostalism emerged and developed in Romania in the years following the Great War (Dobrinu & Mănăstireanu, 2018, pp. 25-26). Since the subject is vast, we will summarize and provide sufficient space to understand the historical, social, and religious context in which the Pentecostal movement emerged and developed in Romania until 1945. The aim is to extract the main lessons that have determined and defined the history and theology of the Pentecostal movement.

After assessing the social and religious context of the emergence of the Pentecostal movement in Romania, drawing on primary and secondary sources on mission and evangelization within the movement, we have tried to highlight in the final part of this article those biblical and theological foundations on which the Pentecostal movement developed from its emergence until 1945.

## Historical, social, and religious context of the Pentecostal Movement in Romania

The emergence of the Pentecostal movement in Romania took place in a historical context characterized by many social, political, economic, and religious upheavals. These were determined by the cruelty of the Great War, which affected all European countries (Ferguson, 2021). On a social and economic level, the enormous damage was felt through a deep economic crisis, and on a political level, many upheavals concerning the reorganization of political structures. There are sufficient testimonies which point to the moral and spiritual degradation of the human being, characterized by a social malaise, probably caused by the cruelty of the war, which left behind not only fear for the future, but also a kind of distrust of other participants in social life, combined with contempt and a great deal of rebellion (Schimth, 2017, p. 284). Although the distinction between the front and the civilian zone was maintained, not only in Germany but also in the other countries involved in this world conflagration, „...the war overshadowed almost every aspect of life and led to profound social changes” (Kitchen, 2012, p. 284).

Politically, after the war, despite the peace treaties signed, there were still reactions to the decisions taken, which some combatants hardly accepted. The main actor in the war, Germany, although it had become a republic, was further shaken by internal upheavals which continued to tear the country so apart that it was difficult to improvise governments or parties to take over. The effects of these political, economic, and social tensions highlight the fact that the pressure on post-war Germany did little to help resolve the European conflict (Kitchen, 2012, p. 307).

A major effect of the First World War was the Great Depression of the 1930s, which facilitated the environment in which totalitarian movements along the fascist and communist ideological lines emerged, ideologies that further fragmented societies in the inter-war period. „What is certain is that in most of Europe by the mid-1930s - with the exception of the northern part - liberalism had grown tired, the organized left had been crushed, and the only clashes over ideology and governance were on the right, between authoritarianism, traditionalist conservatives, technocrats, and radical far-right extremists (Mazower, 2018, p.11). In post-war Romania, where the monarchy had lost credibility because of national unrest and the inability of the authorities to manage a Greater Romania, it was the perfect place for extremist movements to emerge. Until the official establishment of the communist regime in the country, the legionary movement probably aligned itself with the national extremist spirit also present in other European countries (Deletant, 2024, p. 49). Add to this the hatred between nations, the exclusivism between those who spoke different languages even within the same territorial borders, the contempt determined by political sympathies, and as if that were not enough, the fighting between different religious denominations deepened the gulf between people even further (Dorz, 2016, p. 10; Bălăban, 2016, p. 27).

Beyond all these aspects highlighted above, the underlying crisis was different, even if it was amplified by the effects of the war, which cannot be doubted. Among those who observed the real drama that the Romanian nation was going through was the priest Iosif Trifa, founder of the *Oastea Domnului* movement in 1922. According to him, the moral-religious crisis in which the people found themselves was the main cause of the nation's decline, and not only in religious terms, but also due to the inability of the historical confessions to fulfill their mission (Trifa, 1922, pp. 1-2). Although the cultural recovery of the Romanian peasant was necessary, it was too little for the fallen state of the citizen. Only a year after his arrival in Sibiu and the publication of the first issue of the magazine *Lumina satelor*, Iosif Trifa, marked by the moral and spiritual degradation of the people, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, calls Christians to a solemn commitment to renounce sin, especially alcohol consumption. „A true Christian must make himself from day to day, from year to year, better and better, more and more pure and closer to the Savior Christ and His teacher. To the Blind! Come let us make a Christian entry into the New Year. We Romanians have two great sins that especially spoil our souls and our Christian life: filth and drunkenness. Come, let us make a resolution and a war resolution to fight against them and to remove them from our house, from our living and from our neighbors” (Trifa, 1923a, p.1).

This decision, taken by signing a written pledge and then sending it to the editorial office, was to unite several Romanians together and form the Lord's Host, a spiritual awakening movement in interwar Romania. Dumitru Cornilescu also contributed to the spiritual awakening movement through his intellectual work between 1916 and 1920 on the translation of the Holy Scriptures into Romanian, which proved to be a point of reference for the Church in the country.

Through Joseph Trifa, calling people to the Scriptures was the essential teaching of his mission. He confesses in *Lumina Satelor*, the gazette he edited: "Take away my Bible - and you have taken away everything. Stop me from reading it and the *Light of the Villages* will go out (Trifa, 1923b, p.1). Also, around 1922, the Pentecostal spiritual awakening began under the leadership of Gheorghe Bradin, from Păuliș, jud. Arad, Arad, a Christian movement

which, since its birth, came under the scrupulous scrutiny of the ecclesiastical and political authorities after the war (Şandru, 1997, p.62).

These religious upheavals, which gave rise to restrictions or even persecution for some Christian denominations, attracted the attention of some Romanian intellectuals, contemporary with the events described, who tried to explain this blameworthy behavior towards those who did not belong to the majority or who, through their life and their speech, called for change and renewal of the spiritual life of each person. This is how the journalist Mikhail Sevastos describes the cause of the adversity against the neo-Protestant movements at the beginning of the previous century: “There were no Christian upheavals in our country, perhaps also because the religion of the peasant masses (in which the sects manifested themselves) bore little resemblance to Christianity. The Bible and evangelicalism had not penetrated the souls of the people. There was fetishism, paganism, witchcraft, whatever, but not Christian faith. Even the pope was less a priest than a witch-doctor... who was a witch-doctor. It's easy to understand the lack of religious persecution in our past. There was not so much tolerance as disinterest. The peasant's mind was set in motion. It had been encircled for millennia. Now he's escaped to freedom and he's not going to stop at two and two. The peasant wants to know, to know, to know. The religion in power doesn't bother with enlightening the faithful and mass propaganda. The sects do that. They respond to a spiritual need of the masses. They lead minds and souls that live in restlessness. They give them enlightenment; they show them paths - at the end of which may be the salvation hitherto unattained. It is only today that true Christians are being formed deep within us” (Synan & Andreiescu, 2004, p. 299)

Sevastos's sober description of the nation's state of affairs reveals the causes that have aroused the resistance of the ecclesiastical and political leadership structures on the one hand, but also the real need for an authentic spirituality in the nation on the other. In general, referring to Pentecostalism, from its birthplace to the far-off lands where it has reached (Europe, Africa, India, South Korea, Latin America), it has played a major role in reshaping not only the ecclesial environment but also the social, economic, and political organization and development of societies. It was, after all, a movement of spiritual awakening that manifested itself in many areas of secular life. The interaction of Pentecostalism with other religions or even with other existing evangelical faiths led to a positive dynamic of life (MacCulloch, 2011, p. 859). The same effect has had in Romania, although the price paid has sometimes even been paid with one's life.

The assessment of Romanian society after the First World War, in which the moral, social, and economic decline is captured, presents opportunities that facilitated the emergence of awakening movements, which led to a spiritual reform manifested throughout the 20th century. Although, in theory, the war had ended in 1918, its aftermath and its continuation with the Second World War made it seem a war without end (Gerwarth, 2017, p. 91).

Indeed, although there were sufficient external resources to help awaken the conscience of the Romanian nation, the social crisis generated by the war created a „resistance of Romanians to foreigners” (Şandru, 1997, p. 61). Foreigners, even Romanians living in other countries, were considered enemies of the security and unity of the state, although the aim was to avoid any religious propaganda. Despite all the resistance that existed, the history of Christianity in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Romania has been punctuated by spiritual awakenings that have contributed decisively to the spiritual rebirth of Christians. Before the First World War, different religions coexisted peacefully on the territory of present-day Romania, and Christians were involved in the life of society after 1918. However, in the context of the emergence of other Christian denominations, acts of cruelty characteristic of the first centuries of Christianity, and not of the 20th century, were born (Synan & Andreiescu, 2004, p. 300).

### **The appearance of the first Pentecostal churches in Romania**

There is ample official documentation, testimonies, and other sources to prove that the beginnings of Romanian Pentecostalism are linked to Arad, Păuliș, where the first Pentecostal church was founded on September 10, 1922, in the house of Gheorghe and Persida Bradin. From this starting point, the Pentecostal faith spread fairly quickly. Just 4 years later „in 1926 there were already 6 Pentecostal churches in Arad County: Păuliș, Cuvin, Arad (Micălaca), Măderat, Pâncota and Șoimoș” (Synan & Andreiescu, 2004, p. 303), and the growth did not stop there, dozens of other Pentecostal churches appeared in the following years. We don't know exactly what made priest Comșa to be so sure and to state about the Pentecostal movement that “it is excluded that it will expand” (Comșa, 1927, p. 107), but the results were contrary to his expectations. The evolution of Pentecostalism in Romania has been different from what he and others like him anticipated.

### ***The factors that contributed to the expansion of the Pentecostal faith in Romania***

Although in inter-war Romania the presence of Christianity had its own history, the emergence of Pentecostalism managed to disturb, because “it was inclined to find the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit rather through living” (MacCulloch, 2011, p. 859) and not by keeping those institutionalized church structures, or by disinterestedly accepting the mixture of faith with non-Christian elements found in the people. The call was for a genuine Christian orthopraxy, not for form or forced culturalization by embracing customs and traditions with no moral impact on life (Priestland, 2012, pp. 194-195). Gheorghe Bradin, drawing inspiration from a historical moment of the people of Israel, characterized by a time of spiritual decline, appeals to the closeness to the Lord. This appeal begins with a specific call to full surrender, an expression with a strong meaning for those who were still affected by the heavy burden of the First World War: “God requires of those who come to full surrender. They must obey Him in everything and be ready to sacrifice themselves for Him. They are to seek out all those who have the same determination to surrender and who have given themselves wholly to the Lord's service, and with them they are to help one another. They are to be one, as the Lord Jesus is one with the Father, so they are to be one with him and toward one another. John 17:21. They are to keep the unity of the Spirit by the yoke of peace. Eph. 4:3. They are to live in love that the world may see that they are God's. John 13:35” (Bradin, 1936, p.1).

Like any spiritual awakening movement, the Pentecostal movement that officially began in Romania with the opening of the first Pentecostal church in September 1922 came as a response to the moral-spiritual crisis that characterized the society (Synan & Andreiescu, 2004, p. 301). Although the majority of Romanians claimed to be Christians, they nevertheless did not live according to biblical Christian principles. Here is how Trandafir Șandru describes the need for spiritual awakening, briefly presenting the socio-religious context of the early 20th century: “Many people claim to be Christians, but they do all kinds of sins: they cheat, lie, deceive, etc. Why do they do all this? Because they have not been born again; they have not received Jesus as their personal Savior. Millions of Christians are still unchurched and that is why they need to be evangelized; as if they never knew God. Because things are misunderstood and because there has been a departure from the principles of the Gospel and a replacement of them with substitutes, we are always in need of evangelization, of revival, of spiritual awakenings that bring us closer to God. Every generation needs to be evangelized” (Șandru, 1997, p. 60).

Any spiritual revival movement always comes with an excitement that is likely to end quickly. At least that seems to have been the certainty that religious and political opponents of the Pentecostal movement have had. Nonetheless, there has been an exponential growth in both the number of Pentecostal believers and the number of churches springing up in more and more places around the country (*Cuvântul adevărului*, octombrie 1931, p. 8). But what led to this dynamic in such a short time? The answers may be many and complex, but in the first decade of their existence, the triggering factor for Pentecostal believers was the biblical

revelation of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and other works that the Spirit by His gifts does, so that they could firmly testify that „Without this power of the Holy Spirit, both the heralds of the Gospel and the churches that were, would not have been sustained, Christianity could not have progressed, and mankind would have remained deeply immersed in paganism” (*Credința Apostolică*, 1931, p.1). Of course, it was not only the belief in this work of the Spirit that led to the strengthening of the Romanian Pentecostal movement, but also the rigorous requirements regarding sanctification, belief in the return of Christ, belief in supernatural healings, and other doctrinal aspects that we will mention at length in other sections of this research project.

On the other hand, cases of severe persecution, aimed at stopping the expansion of Pentecostalism in Romania, generated a wave of emotion and determination, astonishing for the society of that time. Alongside Mihail Sevastos, who published an article condemning these persecutions in the newspaper *Adevărul* in 1931, there were others. It was evident that suffering for the faith continued to be component of the Pentecostal revival movement. Here is how Sevastos (1931) assesses the attitude of believers in the face of these bitter persecutions: “In our country which has been ruled by the stories: ‘the sweet tongue yields much,’ ‘the head bowed, the sword will not cut it off,’ etc.—here have appeared steadfast men who do not understand how to give their tongue through honey, who hold their heads high, boldly proclaiming their faith in the face of bayonets. Those who yoke the chariot of gravel have something of the spirit of sacrifice of the martyrs” (Sevastos, 1931, p.1).

Although a simple agreement with the persecuting authorities would have given them peace of mind, Pentecostal believers have maintained their determination to press on, despite all persecution, which for some has led to martyrdom. Following the example of Jesus and the early Christians, Romanian Pentecostals have understood that even these difficult times contribute to the fulfillment of their mission in the world, namely to be effective witnesses of the Kingdom of God. All these hostile actions contributed, paradoxically, to an increased desire of believers to go and witness the Gospel with even greater „fire”, following the model of the first apostles (Acts 4:29-31). For them to go and preach the Word was not an option but a command that required obedience regardless of the implications. The energy to fulfill this mission was also fueled by the reality of Christ's resurrection, whose omnipotence and omniscience were enough to banish fear and the thought of giving up. Some eight years after the organization of the first Pentecostal church in Romania, the call to continue the witnessing ministry was even more insistent: “Go. This was the order of the march to evangelize the world, to proclaim to all peoples the SALVATION, to baptize them if they believe, and afterwards to teach them all the teaching that Jesus had given for three years” to His disciples (*Știința sfinților*, 1930, pp.4-5). The Gospel had to transcend all cultural, religious, social and other barriers, so that salvation could reach “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Greater than the fear of suffering, and greater than any social or material prejudice, was the fear lest they create a rift between the orthopraxy and orthodoxy they acclaimed, thereby bringing suspicion on the saving Gospel they preached. Here was a show of encouragement and motivation designed to induce even more faith that what they were doing was right: “Beloved brothers and sisters, who are persecuted for the name of Jesus, do not be afraid or troubled, but do as our brothers did at the beginning Acts 5:41. Perhaps the time may come that they will also cast us out of our houses, and will bring us before the judges and the great men of the day. Fear not, for it has been given to us not only to believe in Jesus, but also to suffer for His glorious name” (*Cuvântul adevărului*, 1930, p.8).

From less painful fines, to the tormenting and beating of children in front of their parents, arrests and beatings that left visible marks on the bodies of believers, public humiliation and other atrocities hard to imagine (Sevastos, 1930, p.1), the pressures to which believers were subjected were inspired by the most grotesque human imaginings. Ion Bododea (1931, p. 3) confirms the presence of Christian persecution in an article published in

1931, stating that “Although civilization has reached its peak, freedom of conscience has no stumbling block, religious persecution has not ceased.” These statements were not made without fear of attracting even more contempt from the opponents of the Pentecostal faith at the beginning of the 20th century, a reality proven in the years that followed. The oppressive, communist system that followed was no different, but knowing how to wear, especially in the beginning, velvet gloves, it used every lever of terror at its disposal, for it tended to master by all this “not only matter, but they wanted the soul” (Ghema, 1990, p. 136; Croitor, 2010).

### **Repressive context and missionary initiatives**

The exponential growth of Pentecostalism in the inter-war period could be measured by the number of churches opening, the conversion of the unsaved, but also by counting those baptized in the Holy Spirit. These statistics, which contained the growth indicators of the movement, appeared shortly after 1922, in spite of the restrictions and attempted prohibition of the Pentecostal faith (Bradin, 1931, p. 2). In the „first Romanian Pentecostal expansion” (Synan & Andreiescu, 2004, p. 304), churches were established in Arad, Bihor, Moldova, Oltenia, Bucovina, and Transylvania. In Bucharest, between 1930 and 1942, the ordained ministers were Ioan Danciu and Pantelimon Cojocar. With regard to the increase in the number of believers baptized in the Holy Spirit, the testimonies submitted reveal a steady increase everywhere in Romania: “The Lord worked with us also through what He found good. In 1923, He baptized 8 souls with the Holy Spirit. In 1924, He baptized 10 more souls. In the year 1925, we had no baptism in the Holy Spirit. In the year 1926, the Lord baptized another 42 souls with the Holy Ghost, and in the year 1927, another 117 souls, and since then, we have not been able to keep track of the baptisms with the Holy Ghost, because the Lord has given them in greater measure and in different parts of the country” (Bradin, 1931, p. 2).

This was also the particularity of Romanian Pentecostalism, the belief in the manifestation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as in the apostolic period, which determined the vision of Pentecostal leaders regarding mission and evangelism. Although it is premature to speak of a systematically well-defined vision that would be reflected in an effective (in today's understanding) strategy based on predictability, a fundamental principle nevertheless emerges from Pentecostal practice and spirituality: the believers' love for God and its confirmation by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit give rise to a special zeal for the salvation of unbelievers. The message was simple and straightforward: „Love of God and of man is the principal thing in true religion” (Bradin, 1933, p. 12).

The fact that they understood from the beginning that once saved and then baptized in the Holy Spirit, they had to be dedicated witnesses of the Gospel, led to a visible increase in missionary zeal, regardless of the costs involved in this spiritual endeavor (McClung, 1986, p.10). This was probably the key to missional success in the interwar period for the newly established Pentecostal churches in Romania. “...The Lord has brought to the faith many faithful souls, who have labored with great zeal in the work of the Lord, who have not shrunk from any sacrifice they have had to make for the progress and advancement of Christ's Church” (Bradin, 1931, p.2). The ultimate objective they desired to reach was the sinner in urgent need of salvation.

The emphasis on the charisms of the Spirit was superior to the idea of institutionalization or the creation of organic structures of ecclesiastical leadership, and gave rise to the variety of elements that describe Pentecostal practice and spirituality: prayers in common, baptisms in the Holy Spirit, followed by the manifestation of supernatural gifts, healings, and signs, etc. Even the very name they appropriated as the apostolic church profiled the character of this movement, whose source of inspiration was, of course, the early church of the first apostles (Dobrincu, 2018, p.75). In essence, in the inter-war period, Romanian Pentecostalism “was par excellence a movement to revitalize the life and practice of the Early Church. This is why Romanian early Pentecostalism did not excel in its

institutional structure or in its very rigorously defined organizational forms, but in its desire to revive the charisms of the Early Church” (Croitor, 2010, p.22).

During this period, we also saw the arrival of first Romanian missionaries and evangelists, who contributed to the consolidation and expansion of the Pentecostal faith in Romania. They had a determining role in the establishment or planting of new churches, but also in the consolidation of the existing ones, through the preaching of the Word. Among the preachers who stood out in the first decades of Romanian Pentecostalism were Ioan Neța, from Arad, and Pavel Ciuciu, ordained as a pastor in 1927 in Bihor. In Oradea, through the involvement of two Hungarian missionaries, a mixed Pentecostal church was founded, attended by both Hungarian and Romanian believers. In Timișoara, the Pentecostal movement among Romanians began in 1928, „and in 1947, Alexandru Isbașa became the pastor of a church in Timișoara which today is the largest Pentecostal church in Romania” (Bălăban, 2016, p.21). Through the involvement of the evangelist Suzana Ziegler, as well as through the ministry of a Swedish missionary named Georg Steen, Pentecostal churches were opened in Sibiu County. Also here, an important contribution to the Pentecostal work was made by the German preacher Michael Thelmann, ordained pastor in 1927 by the missionary Georg Steen (Synan & Andreiescu, 2004, pp. 303-305). There are testimonies claiming that Gheorghe Păduche was among the first Pentecostal believers in the Bucovina area, Vicovul de Sus. In 1911, he moved here from Pătrăuții Strujinețului. Others, such as Gavril Cîrsteian and Toader Daniliuc, men baptized in the Holy Spirit, also contributed to the growth of the Pentecostal communities in Bucovina during the interwar period (Bălăban, 2016, p.15).

Certainly, many other preacher- evangelists contributed to the expansion of the early Pentecostal movement in Romania, but it is important to emphasize the initial contribution of Pastor Pavel Budean, ordained in America in 1923, who „in 1924 was sent on a mission to Romania, where he brought with him the hymn book ... and performed the first Pentecostal water baptism in Romania in the Mures River, near Păuliș, on October 16, 1924, at 10 o'clock in the morning, clandestinely” (Șandru, 1997, p.15). His role was to continue through the correspondence he maintained with Gheorghe Bradin, through which he was provided with valuable information about the Pentecostal ministry (*Cuvântul adevărului*, 1937, p.12).

In conclusion, although we cannot emphasize a vision of mission of the Pentecostal movement since its birth in Romania, missionary actions were nevertheless inspired by the life and ministry of the early church, and the Pentecostal believers had the calling and duty to carry on the mission of the believers of the first century. Equipped with great passion and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they used every opportunity to spread the saving Gospel among the people.

## Conclusions

For a correct understanding of how the Pentecostal movement's mission in Romania developed, it was essential to explore the historical and socio-religious context in which it emerged. The political and social upheavals, as well as the moral decay of Romanian society after the Great War, overlapped with the Romanians' search for solutions to emerge from the crisis they faced. Although the reluctance to everything new and foreign was like a defense shield left over from the war, it was against this backdrop that the Pentecostal movement in Romania emerged around 1922, shortly after the formation of Greater Romania.

Referring strictly to the biblical and theological foundations, we can affirm that the missionary work in Romanian Pentecostalism was based on the work of the Holy Spirit and on the conviction that every believer is called to participate actively in the preaching of the Gospel. This calling is integral to the identity of the Pentecostal Christian, and the baptism in the Holy Spirit is nothing other than receiving the power to fulfill this mission.

In the face of social and political challenges in Romania, Pentecostals remained resolute in their missionary work, emphasizing the importance of outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit

through supernatural gifts, miracles, signs, and healings. All this was seen as evidence of God's active presence in the present age. Pentecostal believers kept alive in their faith and church practice the expectation of Jesus' return. Throughout this time, they have worked to extend the Kingdom of God, fulfilling the mandate left by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20. In essence, in the interwar period, Romanian Pentecostalism was a movement of spiritual revival inspired by the model of the Early Church (Rotaru, 2012, p. 5). This fact explains why Romanian Pentecostalism did not excel in organization and institutional development, but rather in turning believers towards receiving and practicing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The love of God and of people remained the bond and force of missionary action during this period. Enthusiasm and passion were not enough. The lack of a thorough theological training allowed the emergence of hermeneutical abuses, and created the framework for internal struggles that affected the unity and resistance to the totalitarian political regime established in post-war Romania. Despite the challenges, after 1950, the theological training of Pentecostal believers increased considerably even with the restrictive measures imposed by the communist regime. While this aspect warrants separate study, it is essential for understanding the context in which the Pentecostal mission developed in post-war Romania.

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