

Marius Căldăraru. 2022. *Particularitățile Misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în Comunitățile Romilor Căldărari* [Particularities of the Romanian Orthodox Church's mission in the Căldărar Romani communities]. Bucharest: Bucharest University Press.

Book review by

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Critical
Romani Studies

The book *Particularitățile Misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în Comunitățile Romilor Căldărari* explores the historical, theological, and sociological dimensions of the Orthodox Church's role in the enslavement of Romani people, specifically the Căldărari sub-group. The author aims to present the community's ethos and examine the impact of the Romanian Church on their evangelization.

Written with an academic rigor that resembles a doctoral dissertation, the book provides valuable and broad insights into the history of Romani people. The book starts with an introduction that explains the scope, aims, and methodology. It then surveys a large historical narrative of Roma in Chapter 1. Further, in Chapter 2, Căldăraru uses original sources and existing literature to analyse the status and conditions of Romani people in the institution of slavery. Chapter 3 discusses the role of the Orthodox Church in the centuries-long enslavement of Romani people within the Romanian principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, and Transylvania. Next, he focuses Chapter 4 on the Căldărari community's interactions with the Orthodox Church. Chapter 5 examines the influences of other Christian traditions within Romani communities and critically assesses the impact of Neoprotestant religions. In the last chapter, Chapter 6, the author reflects on the ethos and pastoral mission of the Church in the life of Roma. The book concludes by offering an overview of Romani history, focusing on Romania, detailing their enslavement, persecution during the Holocaust, and ongoing oppression. And while presenting the enduring social, economic, and political challenges the community faces, the author expresses hope that their ultimate freedom lies in God.

The book starts by providing an analytical overview of Romani people's origins, community development, and their economic, social, and geographical transitions. This is never an easy task, especially considering the lack of reliable data and historical sources. For centuries, Romani people did not have access to writing their own history – and, until recently, the insights we have come from the “hegemony,” that is, the majority community who has been recording history. Since one's history and origins are assumed to be “given,” being the very basis of one's identity, and belonging narratives are paramount in today's world, not having them “other”-izes and marginalizes communities. This leaves Romani people needing to produce and reproduce discourses of history and power. And because Romani history is neither widely known nor uniformly accepted, many studies on Romani topics must reiterate a definition of the community, explaining yet again who Roma are, how diverse and unique they are, how their names came into being, and how all this needs to be used today.

The originality of the book lies in the examination of the Orthodox Church's historical role in the lives of the Roma people – balancing between spiritual salvation and complicity in their subjugation. An important and precious asset of this book rests on the author's access to monastic writings and documents – a privilege not awarded to many. These references are well-cited, and the research is comprehensive. The critical analysis and breadth of perspective, however, fall short, especially regarding the complex institution of Romani slavery in Romania.

More specifically, one of the book's most compelling sections delves into the historical roots of Romani slavery in Romania, beginning with the first attestation of Romani presence in 1385. To support his argument, the author highlights a critical document referencing enslaved Roma being donated to the Tismana Monastery, which underscores the early institutionalization of slavery. By examining the historical details of the monastery's documents, the author effectively illustrates how such systems of oppression were embedded into societal structures by the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

His approach aims to situate the Orthodox Church within the customs and practices of its time, and to create a synchronic perspective on its historical entanglements.

However, the argument he is trying to make is undermined by the fragile rigor of the writing style and analysis. Căldăraru attempts to show that, compared with other institutions such as the state or the boyars (that is, a high-ranking aristocratic class in medieval and early modern Eastern Europe), the Church acted in good faith, treated enslaved Roma better, and was preoccupied with saving their souls. While the author emphasizes the Church's role in the eventual emancipation of Romani people, his evidence actually reveals how slavery was accepted, perpetuated, and supported by the Church.

Căldăraru sharply outlines how Roma were enslaved in monasteries throughout the three Romanian principalities. This practice is mainly presented as a form of gift-giving from state officials or boyars to monasteries. For example, in 1578, "Boyar Detco gifted Mărgineni Monastery some 'țigani,' given for the peace of his dead brother" (Căldăraru 2022, 99). The author enumerates multiple instances of Romani families being 'gifted,' and fully acknowledging how this system reinforced human enslavement would reveal how inequities have been systematically justified and supported. However, once in the Church's possession, Roma are objectified, as there is no reference to their lives or conditions. This framing seems to absolve the Church of actively participating in the slave trade and ownership, instead portraying it as a passive recipient of such "gifts." Yet, the Church had to play an active role once human beings officially became its property. In this regard, Căldăraru falls short of analyzing how the Church perceived and treated Romani people.

Nevertheless, the book allows the reader to take it upon themselves to examine critically the unique role that the Church played in all Romanian principalities and see how the practice of Roma enslavement brought together many types of enslavers, including boyars, monasteries, and the voivodeship/state. Căldăraru's minute presentation clearly distinguishes between the roles of different systems of governance across the Romanian principalities: Wallachia, Moldova, and Transylvania, and their impact on Romani enslavement procedures (for example, in Transylvania – part of the Austro-Habsburg empire – slavery was not institutionalized). He argues how the pathways into slavery were equally diverse, ranging from traveller donations and enlistment in slavery to escape poverty, to landlords becoming monks and bringing enslaved Roma into religious domains. Yet, the perpetual nature of this institutionalized system ensured that children born into slavery were also enslaved, with the cycle further reinforced by practices such as buying and selling enslaved individuals. Furthering this reflection on the social, economic, and cultural consequences of these interactions between Romani people and those in power, especially the Romanian Church, could create a strong analysis of slavery as an institutional power.

In spite of these shortcomings, Căldăraru's access to resources, as well as his careful inspection and documentation are a significant strength of the book. Its reliance on primary sources to describe the dynamics between Roma and Romanians, and references to specific documents – such as Mavrocordat's *Hrisov Domnesc de Învățătură* (1785) – provide valuable first-hand insights into these relationships. The book is descriptive, and by being so, misses an opportunity to analyze the institutionalization of human ownership critically. A more thorough interrogation into how and why such systems were justified, particularly through religious and societal norms, could empower research into the underpinnings of systemic injustice perpetuated on historically oppressed communities.

As this work aims to bring to light how the particular characteristics of the Romanian Orthodox Church's Mission impacted the Căldărar Romani people, the author highlights the spiritual journey some Roma undertook. Căldăraru argues that the encounter of Roma with the Church in Romania led to interactions and often conversion to Christianity. This could be seen as an emancipation within a spiritual journey, which is honorable. However, we also need to recognize that this encounter of Roma with the Church in the Romanian space also led to nearly 500 years of slavery. Furthermore, this brings us to the elephant-in-the-room questions: "Why did it take the Church so long – that is, centuries – to advocate for emancipation?" and "Why did the Church oppose the progressive intellectuals' and state's efforts to abolish slavery in the 1800s?" Yes, the Church operates within society and historical time, but as Căldăraru himself outlines, it also has a special role in referencing "the transcendent Truth." If that logic applies, why did not the Church propose alternatives to enslavement or voice ideas of human freedom for all within its own quarters? These questions remain unanswered in the current version of the work, leaving the reader to speculate. Perhaps the Orthodox Church – at least in its social functions – was simply a product of its time and acted accordingly. Maybe they tried but were unable to move the abolitionist agenda/acts forward. Or maybe its delay in advocating for emancipation, and at times its opposition to abolitionist efforts, resulted from a combination of complicity, institutional self-interest, theological conservatism, and a reluctance to challenge the societal norms it had helped shape and from which it also benefited. While these possibilities are implied in Căldăraru's work, the absence of a clear authorial stance makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions or move the discussion forward.

Additionally, while the author touches on the intersection of slavery and the exploitation of Romani women, the analysis is limited. The complex gendered underpinnings of the financial, economic, social, political, and ethical dimensions of enslavement of women are only briefly mentioned, with the focus primarily on the eventual emancipation of those who suffered enslavement. A more focused lens would provide a comprehensive understanding of how slavery shaped practices in Romani families, their gendered dynamics, and their place in Romanian society.

Overall, the book offers valuable insights into the historical dynamics of Romani enslavement and the role of the Orthodox Church. It is a trove of data drawn directly from original monastic sources, many of which have rarely been accessible. However, the author's reliance on descriptive narratives and theological framing limits a deeper exploration of the systemic oppression endured by Roma. In so doing, it leaves many critical questions unanswered, extending an implicit invitation to researchers to engage with this data and develop a more profound analysis of power dynamics and the subjugation of diverse Romani communities within the broader context of social justice. Nevertheless, the earnestness of the research and the commitment to uncovering the complex historical experiences of Romani people resonate throughout every page of this meticulously crafted book, making Căldăraru's scholarship an important step in understanding and addressing the historical oppression of Romani people.

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