

**RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AS A POLITICAL SITE OF
 CONTESTATION? POLEMICAL VOICES OF A NEW GENERATION
 OF ROMANIAN ROMANI AUTHORS ***

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Abstract

The 1990s and the early 2000s was a period of revitalization of the Romani studies in Romania. Participants in the process were non-Roma as well as Roma authors. The religious practices and the affiliations of the Romanies was regarded to be a significant matter to start building a dignified profile of the ethnic group from the perspective of the in - group members who ventured to participate in knowledge production. If a first generation of Roma intellectuals were more concerned to find corelations and provide explanations in a more or less essentialized fashion, the analysis of the scientific literature authored by a young generation of the in-group members indicate a certain tendency to over-politicize the topic of religiosity and the religious affiliation of the Romanian Romanies. In the process, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been turned into a target. Specifically, the acknowledgment that the dominating religious actor from Romania took part in the perpetuation of the state of slavery of the Romanies makes the Romanian Orthodoxy vulnerable to a series of recent public attacks. This inglorious past is used to symbolically and rhetorically justify the ongoing reaffiliation of the Romanies to neo-Protestant churches. Recognizably, the politicization of the religious affiliation of the minority group was started by a first generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals and the young generation only intensified their attacks. If one considers the in-group knowledge production in a comparative manner, one can realize that a first generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals found it reasonable to accommodate the Romanipen to the religious background dominating in Romania, while a young generation has chosen to overtly and loudly confront the national hegemon religious institution. This is the main trend, but, as I will demonstrate it is not at all a unique approach to the religiosity of the Romanies as undertook by in-group voices. Some Romanian Roma authors have preferred to re-write back to their ethnic and generational peers and to take side with the Romanian Orthodox Church. In their research, the Romanies end up being blamed by a mendacious relation to the religious institution to which the majority Romanian population has been affiliating for centuries. At the same time, the neo-Protestant churches are suspected to act superficially and their missionary work among the Roma communities could

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be indirectly suggested to represent the convenient meeting ground between two religious scammers.

In the present paper I discuss to what extent the new generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals have considered suitable to weaponize the knowledge production on this specific matter and outline the political stakes behind the arguments employed to carry this symbolical and rhetorical battle between in-group narratives.

Keywords: *Romanian Roma intellectuals; religious practices; religious affiliations; identity politics; knowledge production*

The nexus between religious affiliation and ethnicity has been a recurrent regional pattern manifesting in the past and in the present at different groups from Romania. For a long period of time, the debate around these topics has been aimed to participate in processes of cultural and political self-assertiveness. At the same time, the discursive entanglement between these terms has often conducted to processes of boundary making between groups. Hence, it acted in inclusive and/ or excluding manner. In spite of having lately joined the production of knowledge in a participative manner, Romanian Roma intellectual elites have not been able to overlook the matter. This is telling for the difficulty to ignore, avoid or to cognitively emancipate from authority of the external, non – Roma paradigms. Therefore, in my research I examine how narratives dedicated to religious affiliation/(s) have been tackled by a new generation of Romanian Roma intellectual elites, and how these have become constitutive in the ongoing process of trans-national ethnogenesis and affirmative actions developed by these in-group representatives.

Inescapably, almost all the post - communist in-group productions authored by the Roma elites address the issue. Consciously or not, more or less elaborated references to the topic have insisted on the peculiarities of the Romanies set of religious beliefs and practices. The intent has been to actively raise awareness and understanding about the particular ethnic - cultural profile of the emerging trans-national Roma nation. In an overt or an implicit manner, religious peculiarities and affiliations of the Roma have become relevant rhetorical references to develop a narrative centered on the antagonizing relations of the Roma people with the normative/ dominant religious actors.

1.The (re-)launch of the Romani studies in the post-communist period

In the scientific literature dedicated to the Romanian Romanies, the post – communist period is regarded as a moment of “revivalism” in religious manifestations. The phenomenon has been

intensively examined in various books and articles focusing on different (sub-)/groups of Romanian Romanies¹. Conventionally, the phenomenon is regarded so as to highlight a caesura with the preceding communist decades. However the process of conversion of the Romanian Romanies to neo-protestant churches, for which the term “revivalism” has been metaphorically adopted, can be documented to had begun in communist and even pre-Communist periods². Indisputably, during post-communism times the size and rhythm of the process has significantly increased because the affirmation of a peculiar religious (re-)/affiliation has become also a matter of public assertiveness of the “new born” believers. Considering the origins of this process in communist period, I would suggest that instead of focusing on cessations, it would be more practical to try and look for continuities in religious (re-)/affiliations. Admittedly, they need to be considered in a completely reconfigured and significantly diversified religious landscape because it is undeniable that post-communist constitutional freedoms impacted on the dynamics of the process. Further, the public exposure and publicity around the religious (re-)/affiliation has become also more observable.

1.1. A brief record of the non-Roma publications in post-communist Romania

One can recognize several stages relevant for the development of the knowledge production pertaining to the spirituality, the religious practices and the affiliations of the Romanies from post-communist Romania. At the outset, the post-socialist knowledge production about Roma was almost exclusively in the hands of the non-Roma.

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¹ László Fosztó, *Ritual Revitalisation after Socialism. Community Personhood and Conversion among Roma in a Transylvanian Village*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2009; Joahannes Ries, *Welten Wanderer. Über die kulturelle Souveränität siebenbürgischer Zigeuner und den Einfluß des Pfingstchristentums*, Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2007; Martin Olivera, *Romanes. Tradiția integrării la romii gabori din Transilvania*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura ISPMN, 2012; Mirel Bănică, *Bafta, Devla și Haramul. Studii despre cultura și religia romilor*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2019, p. 361-410; Ioana Bunescu, *Roma in Europe. The Politics of Collective Identity Formation*, London & New York, Routledge, 2014, pp. 127-160; Cerasela Voiculescu, “Nomad self-governance and disaffected power versus semiological state apparatus of capture: The case of Roma Pentecostalism” in *Critical Research on Religion*, 5(2) 2017, pp. 188–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303217690894>.

² See: Iemima Ploscariu, “Faith Church: Roma Baptists Challenging Religious Barriers in Interwar Romania,” *Social Inclusion*, Volume 8, Issue 2 (2020), pp. 316–326; Gabriel Sala, *Neamul țiganilor gabori: istorie, mentalități, tradiții*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 2007, pp. 38-40; Manuela Marin, “Studiu introductiv,” in *Romii și regimul comunist: marginalizare, integrare și opoziție*, Vol. 1, (ed.) Manuela Marin, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Mega, 2017, pp. 57-63.

Non-Roma amateurs published books that were tempted to sketch and overemphasize a radical social deviant profile of the ethnic group³. Other non-Roma contributors to the topic were, on the contrary, interested to do their best to rehabilitate the image of the exoticised ethnic other. In this respect some non-Roma researchers proposed a narrative closely related to the writings authored by the Gypsologists from the Western academic milieu during 19th and early 20th centuries⁴. More scientifically grounded literature was produced by members active in research institutes and universities from Cluj and Bucharest which succeeded to institutionalize the research of Romanian Roma from historical⁵ and social sciences perspective⁶.

In the same context of post-communist Romania there has been adopted an alternative approach, which I would call an informal and semi-institutionalized participation in the knowledge production about the Roma people. It has been also in the hands of the non-Roma authors but it was patronaged by the in-group representatives such as the Cioabă family from Sibiu. These contributions were published in German and served certain domestic and international political agendas. I would place these texts in an intermediary position with their author, a journalist and fiction writer showing readiness and willingness to develop a semi - internal/ mediated internal narrative voice and at the same time struggling to fill a gap in the hiatus of recent bibliography on the topic. Generally these volumes authored by the Banat Swabian Franz Remmel, insisted on the long run historical persecution of the Roma. It cannot be left unmentioned, that

³ Dr. M. (ihai) Băcanu, *Țiganii. Minoritate națională sau majoritate infracțională?*, Brașov, Editura Bravo – Press, 1996).

⁴ Lucian Cherata, *Istoria țiganilor*, București, Editura Z, 1993; L. Cherata, *Țiganii-Istorie, specific, integrare socială*, Craiova, Editura Sibila, 1999; L. Cherata, *Țigni Biblia Rromani (Mică Biblie în Rromani)*, Craiova, Editura Sitech, 2001; L. Cherata, *Devlikano Lil anda Rrom (Carte Sfântă pentru Rromi)*, Craiova, Editura Arves, 2004; L. Cherata, *Integrarea europeană și problema rromilor*, Craiova, Editura Arves, 2005; Mihai Merfea, *Țiganii: integrarea socială a romilor*, Brașov, Editura Bârsa, 1991; Niculae Crișan, *Țiganii mit și realitate*, București, Editura Albatros, 1999.

⁵ An entire record would be too long and goes beyond the intent of my demonstration since it has been already undertaken and, presumably, it will turn into an on-going project. Here I mention only the contributions that have revitalised and have become referential for the non – Roma academic research from post - communist Romania. See: Viorel Achim, *Țiganii în istoria României*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 1998; Lucian Năstasă, Andrea Varga, (eds.) *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare: Țiganii din România (1919-1944)*, Cluj-Napoca, Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală, 2001.

⁶ Elena Zamfir & Cătălin Zamfir (eds.), *Țiganii între ignorare și îngrijorare*, București, Alternative, 1993; Cătălin Zamfir & Marian Preda, (eds.) *Romii în România*, București, Editura Expert, 2002; István Horváth & Lucian Năstasă (eds.), *Rom sau țigan. Dilemele unui etnonim în spațiul românesc*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Institutului Pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2012; Vintilă Mihăilescu, Petre Matei (eds.), *Condiția romă și schimbarea discursului*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2014.

besides their ethnographical and historical content, these volumes can be regarded as overt extols of the political representativeness of the self-entitled Cioabă Royal Dynasty⁷. Yet, with all the critics towards the position adopted by the author, these publications can be considered as samples of an *avant - la - lettre* co-participative knowledge production developed from an privileged position.

1.2. Peculiarities of the Romanian Roma intellectuals' voices with regard to the domestic Romani Studies and the religiosity of the ethnic group

Reediting certain texts written by non - Roma interwar scholars was also found useful and significant in the process of (re-)starting a research field and making sense of the Romanian Romanies condition in the past and in the present. Despite their outward external gaze, these works were not regarded as detrimental to the process of affirmative movement. As a matter of fact the process of reediting could be undertaken at the initiative of Roma activists⁸. This handling of the things may indirectly reveal an latency or recognizable lack of expertise in engaging critically with the historical knowledge production.

In parallel, during the last 30 years one have assisted to the emergence of many NGO's and state agencies for minorities and for the Romanies. Their approach involved direct participation in knowledge production which has materialized in the publication of a series of volumes destined to a Roma and non - Roma readership. Sharing an overwhelming intellectual background rooted in social sciences, Romanian Roma intellectual elite became increasingly more articulate in making their own voice heard and, accordingly, participate in the knowledge production about the group they claim to represent, protect, integrate and empower.

The channels used to participate in the knowledge production about the Roma people from a Romanian Roma point of view were diverse. In-group participants in the process were able to disseminate information about their ethnic group by publishing volumes and

⁷ Franz Rimmel, *Die Roma Rumäniens – Volk ohne Hinterland*, Wien, Picus Verlag, 1993; F. Rimmel, *Nackte Füße auf steinigen Strassen. Zur Leidensgeschichte der rumänischen Roma*, Braşov, Editura Aldus, 2003; F. Rimmel, *Der Turm zu Babel*, Reşiţa, Editura InterGraf, 2004; F. Rimmel, *Alle Wunder dauern drei Tage. Vom Bulibascha der Zigeuner zum Kaiser der Roma*, Reşiţa: Editura InterGraf, 2005; F. Rimmel, *Botschaft und Illusion - Zeugnisse der Literatur der rumänischen Roma („Mesaj şi iluzie” - dovezi ale literaturii romilor din România)*, Reşiţa, Editura Banatul Montan, 2007; F. Rimmel, *Zigeunersitte – Zigeunerrecht. Traditionen im Alltag der rumänischen Roma*, Reşiţa, Editura Banatul Montan, 2008; F. Rimmel, *Die Fremden aus Indien. Nicht die Hoffnung stirbt zuletzt*, Reşiţa, Editura Banatul Montan, 2010.

⁸ George Potra, *Contribuţii la istoricul Țiganilor din România*, edited by G. Pinescu, Bucureşti, Mihai Dascal Editor, 2002.

articles, by editing school – handbooks and children literature, by supporting the publication of literary texts. To these materials one shall add newspaper articles, TV shows and radio broadcastings, online postings of conference presentations and virtual debates held on various social network platforms.

In my article I scrutinize the texts authored by members belonging to the young generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals who own different university degrees defended in Romania and/or in co-tutela with Western academic institutions. Like their elder colleagues, the majority of the authors have an academic track in the field of social sciences⁹. However, this tendency has not excluded the participation of historians and theologians who have also brought their contribution to various topics and have participated in the articulation of an academic discourse about the ethnic group they chose to publicly identify with.

In my analysis I will try to provide brief references about the intellectual, institutional or social background of the Romanian Roma intellectuals involved with the knowledge production. Inexorably, biographical elements and career paths are relevant details for the manner in which religious matters have been addressed, at a certain moment, by the Romanian Roma intellectuals engaged in the process of knowledge production. Here, I am closely looking only to a limited group of publications authored by a young generation of post-communist Romanian Roma authors. Therefore, the paper needs to be read in relation to another contribution to the topic that is going to be published in another forthcoming research¹⁰.

My working assumption is that any text, and particularly those envisioned to write back to the preexistent knowledge production of the non-Roma, actually expresses a political engagement. The participation in such a process is in itself an act aimed to regaining dignity and emancipation from a subaltern position. This assumption is particularly valid for the young generation of Romanian Roma intellectual elites who proudly and increasingly loudly have chosen to participate in the process of decision making and knowledge production, as well. They consider themselves entitled to transform

⁹ See: Mihai Neacșu, “«Românizarea» Rromilor” in *Rromii ... În căutarea stimei de sine*, (eds.) Delia Grigore, Mihai Neacșu Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, București, Editura Vanemonde, 2007, p. 62; Adrian Neculau, Mihai Curelaru, Daniela Zaharia & Daniela Tarnovschi, “Elites rom dans les anciens pays communistes. Le cas de la Roumanie”, *Transitions. Nouvelles Identités Rom en Europe Centrale & Orientale*, (eds.) Andrea Boscoboinik & François Ruegg, vol. XLVIII, (2), 2009, p. 73.

¹⁰ From reasons of editorial conventions an article entitled “The Religious Affiliations of the Romanies from post-socialist Romania. Considerations concerning the In-Group Academic Productions” has been drastically shorten and sent for publication to *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, 14 (3/2022). DOI: 10.2478/ress-2022-0102 Forthcoming.

their wounded and awaken consciousness into an instrument that would eventually contribute to the development of an impactful in-group identity policy.

Recognizably, there are some limits when it comes to discussing about the impact of the participation in knowledge production of the Romanian Roma academic elites. Some politically experienced Roma intellectuals have recently asked if these academic undertakings are really able to give voice to the group they claim to represent and to what extent do they actually represent the heterogenous Roma collective consciousnesses, or, on the contrary, have no echo at all among the ordinary peoples with Roma ethnic background¹¹. Such matters are important to be judiciously considered. However, this is not a reason to get discouraged in engaging with knowledge production. As a matter of fact, the texts I am looking at in this research, attest that there are voices who have acknowledged that it has become crucial to aspire to a decolonialized approach in making sense of the Roma religious experience in the past and the present, even if this stand would lead to internal or external discords.

2. Consecrated vs. rearranged chants and the loudness of their pitches. Religious matters and the political assertiveness of the young generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals

Generally speaking, all the narratives advanced in the Romanian Roma authored academic writings reveal a certain degree of uniformity in matters of interpretation of the centrality of the *Romanipen*. It is usually regarded as a substitute for a distinct religion of the Romanies. Recognizably, *Romanipen* is marked by local variables and/ or constrains inherent from living within a dominating Romanian Orthodox environment. The particularities and specifically the contentions points originate in the interpretation given to the interaction with the churches as institutions and with their actors (i. e. clergymen and/or non - Roma church goers). These could be described as either pragmatical, ambiguous, marked by duplicity or circumstantially confrontational.

As I demonstrated elsewhere, the first - generation of the Roma intellectuals who chose to participate in knowledge production, found it more reasonable to address the religious peculiarity of the Romanies in a relatively judicious manner, although, their writings display a gradual tendency to call into question the manifestations of the

¹¹ Vasile Ionescu, *Rromii – o istorie culturală. A doua abolire și imperativul etic al recunoașterii*, București, Editura Centrului Național de Cultură a Romilor, 2022, p. 23.

religiously articulated antigypism. However, one can say that in a pragmatical and calculated fashion they have been cautious not to stir the majorities' sensitivities and therefore have chosen to embrace a soft core assertive narrative. They seemed aware that giving too much salience to the religious peculiarity and especially to the religious conversion of the Romanies, could be potentially disadvantageous. It might add to the stigmata associated with the ethnic group they were giving a voice after a long period of silence or it would even alienate eventual Romanies who might find it difficult to identify with the proposed narratives and / or profiling.

The burden of Gypsologists' tradition weighs heavy on the way they have addressed the religious practices and the religious affiliations of the Roma people. Hence, the peculiar/essentialized religious profile as epitomized by numerous members belonging to the first generation of Roma authors from post-communist Romania, follow the grand narrative of an ethnic group determined to preserve a proto-Indian system of beliefs which was combined with heterogenous elements borrowed from the religious systems shared by the populations living in the Middle East at the time when Roma people migrated to the European countries. The contact with Christianity is, however, described as the beginning of manifestation of asymmetries with respect to power relations. Such circumstances would force the Romanies to „culturally translate“ their syncretic set of beliefs and bring it closer/accommodate it to the versions of popular religiosity they had become familiar with in Eastern and Western European lands. In the writings of the first generation of post-communist Romanian Roma intellectuals one may perceive a certain captivity in the exoticizing discourses of the national and international Gypsologists. The out-group narratives are rarely critically approached in order to be dismantled from methodological and paradigmatical point of view. However, it is true that these non - Roma essentialized and romanticized narratives have been refiltered, resemantized and rearticulated in order to conceive a distinct Roma religious and ethnic profile.

Other authors belonging to a younger generation of Romanian Roma intellectual elite chose to talk about the religious profile and the affiliation/(s) of their co-ethnics in a distinct way. In their writings the voicing of the minority group has been reconsidered to the level that it is turned into a contesting political outcry. They have begun to blatantly acknowledge the burden of the past, and have articulated their narratives about Romani history in the victimizing paradigm of pariah syndrome¹². The traditional churches and particularly the

¹² As a challenging public act of writing back, Hancock's writings get ink for a movement of empowerment attainable by exposing the religious roots of the long

Romanian Orthodox Church as the biggest owner of the slaves is pointed the finger at and pressured to publicly assume guilt for the exploitation and participation in the collective discrimination. At first sight, the calling for symbolic reparations seems to be a contestation made from neo-Marxist perspective of individuals partially trained in national as well as in the Western university milieu. In order to create a contrast with the practices of the normative Orthodox Church, which is associated with all sort of exploitations, neo-Protestant churches are regarded as an empowering solution because they have given consideration to the ethnic-cultural background of the ordinary Romani worshippers. Adoption of diverse religious affiliations, different from that of the majority non-Roma population, is understood in their writings as an act of emancipation from a cultural narrative of the hegemon/oppressor and of its institutions. Although tolerant to bricolages in the sectors of the religious beliefs and the practices of the Romanies, Romanian Orthodox Church is scolded to have supported/tolerated a dehumanizing popular rhetoric widely shared, in the long run, by the non-Roma majority population. Else formulated, the texts written by the some representatives of the young generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals attack the prestige of a religious institution blamed for profiting from the exploitation and the inhuman treatment of the former Roma slaves.

This radicalizing trend has not been left unanswered. In the recent years there has been articulated a reaction to this kind of victimizing narratives which ultimately has called for retroactive justice and for reparations. The contenders of the Romanian Orthodox Church received an answer back from an ethnic Roma who in his writings focuses especially on religious matters. The young Roma author, aspirant to an academic title awarded by the Romanian Orthodox theology faculties, has chosen to adopt a subaltern position and to vindicate the dominating religious institution in Romania by all the means at hand. The resulting narrative, involves disclosing the religious affinities of the blamers along with the disowning of the activist Roma intellectuals as eventually morally depraving the Roma people as a consequence of their collaboration with various minority NGOs.

lasting deprecatory treatment of the Sinti and the Roma groups. At the same time, the voicing of the Romanies involves identification of the religious resources available which could enable Roma people to emancipate from the marginal position so profoundly rooted in the non-Roma academic or non-academic discourses. Given the importance and the influence of these academic accomplishments, I have found it relevant to learn how the Romanian Roma knowledge producers responded to the Western Roma academic discourses. See: Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome. An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*, Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987; Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy. Selected Essays*, (ed.) Dileep Karanth, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010.

In order to be more specific about the inflections of the narratives developed by the young generation of Romanian Romani authors, in the following pages, I am professing a closer reading of their academic volumes and articles.

2.1. Addressing the religious matters from a distance

Representants of the new generation engaged in the political affirmative action of the Roma trans-nation have found it useful to learn, in a dialogical manner, from leading figures belonging to the first generation of post-communist Romanian Roma intellectuals. Some references from an interview taken in 2005 by Iulius Rostaş to Nicolae Gheorghe were able to provide valuable hints concerning the matter of religious affiliation of the post-communist Romanian Roma¹³. Here I will resume the discussion and will consider the echoes of Nicolae Gheorghe's opinions and how they were readdressed in the book published in 2019 by the interviewer. When Rostaş interviewed Gheorghe, he was an aspiring PhD candidate, an active national governmental expert and a program coordinator for various international agencies. Later, at the time of the publication of his book, Rostaş has succeeded to occupy an established academic position in the Romani studies department and has become the editor-in-chief at the journal *Critical Romani Studies*, both affiliated to the politically sieged Central European University in Budapest. The matter of religion is not exactly central to Rostaş's research as in the book he primarily examines the national and international policy-making targeting the present-day European Romanies. Admittedly, the book is written with a focus on the importance of participative strategies in the political decision-making and only secondarily in the academic knowledge production¹⁴. Yet, in the pages of the sententiously entitled volume "*A Task for Sisyphus. Why Europe's Roma policies Fail*" Rostaş inevitably comes across cultural roots of discrimination and, as he demonstrates, some of them have been religious.

Broadly speaking, Rostaş accounts for the "multilingual, multi-religious, multi-denominational, spread [of Roma minority groups] all over eastern Europe and [highlights his co-ethnics'] global presence but [absence of a] kin state", aspects that have caused an increased vulnerability for the ethnic group in designing and ascertaining a coherent identity politics. Despite his interest to examine and to design strategies that would enable Romanies to participate in

¹³ "Roma or Țigan: The Romani Identity – between Victimisation and Emancipation. Nicolae Gheorghe in dialogue with Iulius Rostas", in *Roma Rights. Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre*, 1, (2015), pp. 43, 46.

¹⁴ Iulius Rostaş, *A Task for Sisyphus . Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail*, Budapest, New York, Central European University Press, 2019, pp. 40-41, 54, 59-63, 92-94.

meaningful and influential knowledge production, Rostaş does not reflect on how religious matters or affiliations may contribute to the creation of an imagined trans-national community and how this would eventually manifest in terms of ethnic mobilization.

First and foremost Rostaş is preoccupied to demask forms of antigypsism, considered to be structural to past and present day institutions responsible for designing and implementing policies towards the Romanies. Rostaş prefers to underline that the intellectual roots of the antigypsism can be traced back “to the arrival of Roma in Europe and can be found in religion”¹⁵. In addition to other economic and ideological factors, Rostaş overstates that “Since the arrival of Roma into Europe, religion and the church, the dominant power in society, played a significant role in othering Roma. Being non-Christian and not obeying the strict rules of the church” exposed Roma people to be “often portrayed as incarnation of absolute evil” [and Rostaş specifies that], “palm-reading, fortune-telling, etc. were contrary to religious teaching and heavily penalized, including by death”¹⁶. In order to highlight the long term and socially widespread effects of antigypsism, Rostaş claims that its religious manifestations are still in place and impact on “the everyday life of Roma last(ing) long after the Roma converted to the majority religion”¹⁷. In making such a point Rostaş relies on what the British emeritus professor Thomas Acton epitomized as “popular antigypsyism,” a cultural tenor which recycled “legends according to which Roma have stolen the fourth nail of the crucifixion of Jesus”¹⁸. Thus, Rostaş proves that even in an apparently unchurched world, racism directed against Roma can preserve something from its ecclesiastical tradition and these cultural residues are deeply stored in the popular imaginary of the European citizens.

It is intriguing that in Rostaş’s book religious aspects are dealt with only in very generic terms and the Christian ethic is exclusively seen as a source for prejudiced discourses oriented against the Roma people. Accordingly, the attitude displayed by the religious actors mostly contributed to what Rostaş called a “victimizing identity” developing from the practice of racialized oppression of Roma individuals and communities¹⁹. In stark contrast to other Roma and non-Roma social scientists, Rostaş remains silent with regard to the category of neo-Protestant religious leaders identified by researchers as active participants in the process of raising of the self-esteem of the stigmatized Romanies. The scholarly studies which have convincingly

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

revealed that the religious choices had the potential to turn into emancipative, assertive and coagulating strategies are entirely overlooked. Even Romanian Roma peers belonging to the first generation of authors, such as the sociologist Vasile Burtea or the armchair ethnologist Delia Grigore, have demonstrated how marginalized and discriminated Roma sub-groups resonated with the religious message preached in these churches. The message delivered in neo-Protestant environment was attractive because it was built around the experience of persecution that Romanies would share and compare with the founder of Christianity himself. Exactly this discursive commonality was used to explain the growing participation at neo-Protestant church services and to illustrate how this choice helped ordinary Romanies to gain acceptance and deference both in-group and in relation to the out-group²⁰.

Yet, it is difficult to elucidate what stood behind Rostaș's disregard for this body of academic writings elaborated by in-group and out-group researchers. It may be suspected to represent a deliberate personal choice meant to keep distance from the category of pastors and preachers "usually traditional leaders, with a low level of education"²¹, and/ or a way to express one's belongingness to a new category of political representatives possessing a high level of training and NGO expertise, who do not seek ingroup prestige by servicing from the pulpit²². If so intended, than Rostaș's delimitation or lack of consideration for the ethnic agenda of the Roma neo-Protestant congregations, with its undeniable contribution to the elevation of the Roma collective and individual self-esteem, is in itself questionable if not a form of condescending attitude. On the other hand, Rostaș's reluctance to engage with the matter may be legitimated by the awareness that the converted Romanies started to regard the rest of the Roma population according to the dichotomy "us" versus "them"²³. The effects of this dichotomy went so far as the converts would be

²⁰ Salomea Popoviciu & Ioan Popoviciu, "Romii în literatura de specialitate. O analiză sistematică a publicațiilor științifice din anii 1990-2011", in *Prezent și perspective în cultura romă în viziunea intelectualilor, liderilor și oamenilor de succes romi*, (eds.) Elena Zamfir & Vasile Burtea, București: s.ed., 2012, p. 26; Delia Grigore, "Rromii și *Rromanipen*-ul: Între stereotipurile unei identități stigmatizate și arhetipurile unei identități reconstruite. Cultura Rromani – stigmat sau Motiv de mândrie?" in *Rromii ... în căutarea stimei de sine*, (eds.) Delia Grigore, Mihai Neacsu Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, București Editura Vanemonde, 2007, p. 43; Delia Grigore, "Concluzii și recomandări", in *Rromii ... În căutarea stimei de sine...*, p. 100.

²¹ Vasile Burtea, "Trei profiluri ale romilor de succes", in *Prezent și perspective în cultura romă în viziunea intelectualilor, liderilor și oamenilor de succes romi*, (eds.) Elena Zamfir & Vasile Burtea, București: s.ed., 2012, p. 68.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 72-73; my translation.

²³ Ioan Popoviciu & Salomea Popoviciu, "Liderii religioși. Evoluții alternative: de la țișanul păcătos la țișanul mântuit", in *Prezent și perspective în cultura romă ...*, p. 129; my translation.

regarded as betrayers of Roma culture, while the new born Christians disregarded their unconverted co-ethnics as immoral, superstitious, religiously illiterate²⁴. Possibly the awareness about this internal tension or the observed practices of exclusion manifesting not only in the traditional churches but also in neo-Protestant ones²⁵ can explain why Rostaş has been evasive in dealing more in depth with the aspect of religious affiliation. Yet, by ignoring the religious local elites as grass root participants in the process of trans-national identity project, turns Rostaş's warning about the factionalism which has unleashed subversive "struggles for authenticity"²⁶ – noticed at the level of traditional, respectively, new intellectual Roma elites –, in an empty or even a demagogical argument.

Rostaş's side glance when it comes to the religious matters may be also an outcome of approaching the subject at a macro-national respectively a European institutional level which might have imposed some sacrifices to be made when it came to the incorporation of micro-community research. Yet, one of the main trends in the field of social studies dealing with Romani issues consists in addressing the present state of marginalization of the Roma as a consequence of centuries of abuses indorsed actively or passively by the traditional churches all over Europe. In both Roma and non-Roma academic writings which discuss past and present forms of antigypsism, traditional European religious actors are commonly blamed to have participated in the defamation of the Romanies from the very moment of the first encounter. It is impossible to turn a blind eye to the fact that for many centuries ecclesiastical bodies participated to the knowledge production about the Romanies and, thus, they contributed to the articulation of "Gypsy threat narrative casting the Roma as superstitious religious outsiders"²⁷. As noticed, this cultural narrative articulating otherness in religious parameters continues to be relevant even in circumstances when present day Romanies chose to convert to neo-Protestant churches²⁸.

Clearly, in his book, Rostaş seems to minimize the role of the religious matters in Romanies' individual or collective strategies "to reduce attributed social anomie or", at least, "to attenuate practices

²⁴ Sorin Gog & Maria Roth, "The Roma People of Romania", in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, (eds.) Michael D. Palmer & Stanley M. Burgess, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012, p. 395.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 397.

²⁶ I. Rostaş, *A Task for Sisyphus ...*, p. 27.

²⁷ Matthew T. Loveland & Delia Popescu, "The Gypsy Threat Narrative: Explaining Anti-Roma Attitudes in the European Union", *Humanity & Society*, Vol. 40, Issue 3, (2016), p. 340; Marian Zăloagă, *Romii în cultura săsească în secolele al XVIII-lea și al XIX-lea*, Cluj – Napoca, Editura ISPMN, 2015, pp. 127-176.

²⁸ M. T. Loveland & D. Popescu, "The Gypsy Threat Narrative...", p. 5.

of social exclusion and marginalization”²⁹. Such a stance indirectly confirms that Rostaș’s participation in knowledge production can be understood as a strive to give preeminence to the top - down initiatives designed, negotiated and implemented by the Roma bureaucratic actors.

2.2. Coercing the Romanian Orthodox Church to address a shameful past

The effect of the anti-Gypsy demeaning discourses build with the rudimental elements rooted in popular religious beliefs are recognized to be long-lasting. Since these popular narratives and practices have been internalized by the Romanies themselves, the Roma intellectuals engaged with the knowledge production consider it is reasonable to imply that an intrinsic antagonism between the dominant religious actor from Romania and the ethnic Romanies has always existed. An illustrative example in this respect is the recent publication co-authored by Adrian-Nicolae Furtună. At first glance it basically represents a collection of documents, transcribed from Cyrillic and translated into English with the main purpose to illustrate Roma slavery and its places of memory³⁰. Interestingly, the authors chose to fill the iconographical section of the album exclusively with ecclesiastical sites (i.e. churches and monasteries). Similarly, a significant amount of documents are concerned with practices of purchasing and ownership of the Roma slaves by the ecclesiastical institutions and their representatives. Indirectly, one learns from a free of charge printed and online accessible material, that the process of slavery was dehumanizing and that the Roma slaves were turned into market objects by their owners and exploiters. In the process, which lasted for several centuries and deeply wounded not only the generations of slaves but also the present time Roma people, the Romanian Orthodox Church is indirectly blamed to had ideologically agreed to the slavery institution and, even worse, took advantage of its existence. Indirectly, but in line with Petre Petcut’s studies and the claims for retroactive justice, these documentary testimonies, may implicitly explain why ordinary Romanies and even members of the Roma intellectual elites, may be tempted to search for religious affiliation to the neo-Protestant denominations.

One can recognize that a younger generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals which grew up and fulfilled their high-education exclusively in post-communist times seems less conciliatory in

²⁹ S. Gog & M. Roth, “The Roma People of Romania”, p. 394.

³⁰ Drd. Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, Dr. Victor-Claudiu Turcitu, *Sclavia romilor și locurile memoriei - album de istorie socială/Roma Slavery and the Places of Memory Album of Social History*, Popești – Leordeni, Editura Dykhta!, 2021, pp. 91-98.

relation to the traditional ecclesiastical actors. In consequence, this in-group voices ask for justice and eventually retributions for the awful past which left multiple mental traumas visible in the present, as well. Thus, participation in knowledge production turns into a public trial that is robustly prepared by the publication of new archive materials or by re-readings of the already available historical sources.

Petre Petcuț may be regarded as the flag bearer in this symbolic clash between a stigmatized and long - time voiceless minority and the hegemon promoter of disempowering discourses against the Romanies, as the Roma historian regards the Romanian Orthodox Church. He published articles in Romanian and Western academic journals and contributed to school handbooks, edited volumes and completed two author books, including a revised version of his PhD thesis. What can be asserted about his recent academic track is the fact that he received a PhD from the University of Bucharest and that the academic title was obtained in close collaboration to the French school of social science from Paris. He has moved to live in France and is presently teaching a complementary course about Roma history at the *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales* (INALCO) in Paris. Several studies published by Petcuț in the Romanian academic yearbook edited by the Romani studies department at the University of Bucharest had been later republished in French in specialized journals such as scientifically esteemed “*Études Tsiganes*”³¹. Thus, his voice has succeeded to transcend Romanian borders and has reached a wider audience, hence, having the potential to reshape the understanding of the Romanian Roma history.

As a social historian, focusing precisely on the traumatic experience of his ethnic group, Petcuț has relinquished to build too heavily on the religious profile of the Romanian Roma from the perspective of Indian ancestral heritage. In his view, the resurrection of ancestral proto-Roma religious beliefs is in some way an audacious proto-chronist approach, therefore, a trap to the real issues the Romanies have been confronting with. Instead, Petcuț prefers to set things in concrete national framework dominated by the Romanian Orthodox Church. Therefore, he finds no reason to go easy with the long practices of exploitation and no single motive to dodge in proliferating direct attacks against the traditional normative church from (pre-)/modern Romanian states. As former slave owner, the Romanian Orthodox Church is challenged to publicly assume the mistakes and mishandlings in relation to the Roma people. The interpretations Petcuț gives when he embarks the process of

³¹ Petre Petcuț, “La valeur des esclaves tsiganes en Valachie (1593-1653)” *Études Tsiganes*, 2 (38) 2009, pp. 44-61.

participative knowledge production, by re-reading edited or editing unknown historical sources, is illustrative for the new radicalized pitches the identity discourse of the Roma intellectual elite in post-communist Romania has reached.

In an article published beforehand the Romanian Roma social historian had published his book, Petcuț ridicules the Orthodox Church when he discusses the equivalence in agricultural products of the market value of a Gypsy/Roma slave. An example would be informative for his attitude towards the main religious actor in Romania: “The life of a «Gypsy» was estimated by two monasteries to «100 buckets of wine» a quantity possibly satisfactory enough in the eyes of the holy fathers who probably after a bad harvest had not sufficient wine for the communion”³².

In his book, *Rromii. Sclavie și libertate. Constituirea și emanciparea unei noi categorii etnice și sociale la nord de Dunăre 1370-1914*, Petcuț repeatedly incriminated the Romanian Orthodox Church which, in his opinion, had played “an active role in the birth of the institution of slavery in the medieval Romanian states”³³. Furthermore, manipulating the fear for the fate of the souls, the ecclesiastical institution profited from the “donations in Gypsies [made by boyars and the prince, thus,] setting the foundation of a history of social violence with no correlative in Europe”³⁴. Repeatedly, Petcuț outlined “the influence of the Orthodox Church as the fundamental cause for the Roma falling and for being kept captive into a state of slavery”³⁵. He explains what stood behind all this blameful involvement: “The run for easy profit made that the moral and the religious considerations would go on second place since the wealth of the church was attained by making use of cheap labor on the vast land possessions. Christian teachings were ignored, as much as the humanist values similarly rooted in the religious and secular tradition”³⁶. This virulent criticism of the Romanian Orthodox Church, perceived as a pre-capitalist exploitative agent, unveils Petcuț’s predisposition to make use of the secularistic and anti-church ideas. Moreover, Petcuț’s connections with the French academia, with its intellectual traditions rooted in the left wing ideology and the critique professed within the postcolonial studies, comes soon to the forefront.

³² *Idem*, “Prețurile sclavilor rromi în Țara Românească 1593–1653”, *Anuarul Centrului de Studii Rome*, Vol. I/2008, București, Editura Universității din București, 2008, p. 11.

³³ Petre Petcuț, *Rromii. Sclavie și libertate. Constituirea și emanciparea unei noi categorii etnice și sociale la nord de Dunăre 1370-1914*, București, Editura Centrului Național de Cultură a Romilor, 2015, p. 36.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

The Roma historian finds it right to blame the Romanian Orthodox Church for at least two major reasons. On one hand, the Romanian Orthodox Church exploited the superstitions of the slaves donors and on the other hand, in relation to the Roma slaves, behaved like “a bunch of feudal owners dissimulated in a religious attire”³⁷. He chooses to highlight the hypocrisy of an institution which “through the mechanism of donations of the slaves to the church decisively implemented the institution of slavery”³⁸, in parallel, feigning that the practice of “donation of pagans to become the property of the ecclesiastical owners was a natural path towards their Christianization”³⁹. However, this allegedly missionary discourse attributed to the Romanian Orthodox Church rests on no written document but on a speculation of the author whose main concern is to denounce the dominant ecclesiastical institution from Romania as being “the main beneficiary” of the slaves donations⁴⁰.

Petcuț’s exposes the abuses against the Roma slaves in numerous instances but, noteworthy, hard facts are, occasionally, accompanied by ahistorical comments. For instance, the process of the abolition of slavery is understood in terms of “cosmeticizing the public image” of the main ecclesiastical institution and slave owner. Noteworthy, Petcuț maintained that the abolition of slavery occurred not at the initiative of the Orthodox Church from the Danube Principalities but somehow against its interests. When it comes to discuss the abolition of slavery, Petcuț tackles the matter in moralistic terms: “One would have expected that the initiative that triggered the abolition, in the sense of condemning the slavery, had come not from the secular authority but to have derived from the religious conviction in the belongingness of the Gypsies to the God’s human creation”⁴¹. Leaving aside the vague formulation, personal comments of this sort can be understood as an in-group response to the out-group derogative representation of the Romanies. In other words, the impiety ascribed by the non-Roma knowledge producers, many of them clergymen, to the Romanies, traditionally stigmatized as non-believers, is in Petcut’s moralistic narrative a clear proof that the practices of the dominating ecclesiastical actor from Romania have been fragrantly conflicting with the basic Christian teachings. In his interpretation, which betrays a strong anticlerical attitude, the priority given to the emancipation of the Church slaves was only motivated by the sheer and snide interests to revamp “the image [of the Church] which had to be seriously revised after five centuries of

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

distorted interpretation of the Christian dogmas”. Further, Petcuț went on stating that “this subterfuge [allegedly had] the advantage to create the impression that the church blew the horn of the social change”⁴². Passionately insisting on the injuries suffered by the Roma slaves, such reasoning is ambiguously set in the context of the modernization projects implemented by the secular rulers of the Danube Principalities⁴³.

In other sections of the book, the assumed resentment of the enslaved Romanies towards the Romanian Orthodox Church is formulated in more generic culturalist terms. Petcuț found it important to mention that there existed a set of customs which reflect the “significant cultural and religious idiosyncrasies which [the Romanies] did not want [...] to abandon, regardless of the circumstance and the intolerance of the peoples with which they came into contact, [even though their preservation only] offered the Romanies centuries of sufferance and humiliation accompanied by a constant struggle to not vanish from history”⁴⁴. In such generalizing and unspecific formulation, Roma are almost looked at as eternal martyrs persecuted by the majority groups and the traditional religious institutions.

Over the centuries the adversaries of the Romanies ignored and/or vilified the particular cultural and spiritual values of the ethnic group. Allegedly, the Roma slaves and their descendants adopted a resilient attitude which helped them resist and preserve their cultural identity. In Petcut’s eyes, Roma history is a relentless struggle to resist historical oppression. Therefore, Petcut’s engagement with the past of his co-ethnics must be understood as an endeavor to rewrite the history of the Roma from Romania in the paradigm of resistance. By developing this narrative, Petcuț also professes a harsh critical discourse targeting the ideological agent upholding the institution of slavery, primarily identified to be the Romanian Orthodox Church. As the last stronghold of the past – the ancient regime states and the boyars being long gone –, the hegemonic ecclesiastical institution in Romania appears to represent the last standing agent of oppression. Consequently, the Romanian Orthodox Church is cornered and pressured to assume the guilt for the past

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 143.

⁴³ On the power dynamics between institutional actors and the articulation of emancipation discourses, see: *Modernizare socială și instituțională în Principatele Române (1831-1859)*, (eds.) Venera Achim & Viorel Achim, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2016; Constantin Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities The Making of Romanian Citizenship, c. 1750–1918*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2019, pp. 127-164; Marian Zăloagă, “Discurs abolitionist în Principate și ideea modernizării (1837–1856)”, *Studia Universitatis Petru Maior, Series Historia*, 5, 2005, pp. 95-108.

⁴⁴ P. Petcuț, *Rromii. Sclavie și libertate*, p. 215; my translation.

injustices and for the trauma caused to the collective identity of the Roma living in the past and present.

Since the consequences of exploitation and dehumanizing treatment can be identified even in the present, Petcut slanders the Romanian Orthodox Church for not engaging in the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In his opinion it is “an abnormal «omission» to not have displayed inside the monastery of Tismana, on a commemorative plaque, on a piece of glass, on a chunk of wood or on a cheap scrap of paper, the first mention of the Gypsies at the north of Danube River. Yet, how would one imagine that some Gypsies can stay next to so countless illustrious saints and princes, overrepresented in inscriptions and paintings, and how would react the tourist, arriving to relaxation or to pray, at the sight of such an old presence of the Gypsies and in the proximity of such sacred items? I cannot precisely imagine their feedback. However, I am personally aware of the reaction exhibited by the Roma whom I had shown the image of his ancestor engraved in the stone from the inside walls of the fountain from the courtyard of the monastery. He just could not believe it. He called over his entire family to show them the wonder. He was utterly exalted. Most probably the attestation of the presence of the Gypsies at Tismana [...] and at Cozia would create an uncomfortable precedent since the next natural step would be the building of a monument of slavery, eventually, the consecration of the former place of the Metropolitan Tigănie from Bucharest and of many other «places of memory» according to the term coined by Pierre Nora, where Roma would be able to gather and show reverence to the memory of their ancestors, remember the history, and, last but not least, become aware of the ethnic and group peculiarity”⁴⁵. The reception of paradigms visited by the recent historical writing, particularly those dedicated to the public mnemonic practices, can be distinguished in the works of Petcuț who finds no embarrassment to act as a public intellectual loudly engaged in the process of affirmative action of the group he belongs to. His preoccupation with the commemoration politics is a striking evidence for the shift the historical narrative has undergone during the last decades. As an activists in the service of a cause, Petcuț adopts these research paradigms as they are helpful to bring the sufferance of the former slaves in the wider public consciousness of the Roma and non-Roma readership and, eventually, to invite to the reconsideration of the in-group and the out-group’s modes of thinking.

2.3. Paradoxical in-group stances. A Roma voice re - writes back and vindicates the Romanian Orthodox Church

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

As already noticed, the institution of the Romanian Orthodox Church has been made culpable for its participation to the lowering of the self-esteem of the former slaves, for virtually dehumanizing the members of this social and ethnic category, for the internalization of the external stigma of the descendants of the former ethnicized slaves, for its apparent passivity to the abolition of the slavery in the long 19th century and, last but not least, for the reticence to rigorously and piously revisit the past by assuming a public guilt. All these, in the conditions that the historical data available are overwhelming and the present would require that a Roma ethnic like the anonymous monastery visitor Petcuț had chosen to mention –who can be regarded as an Orthodox by default– , should be treated with respect and not as a member of a sub-category of believers whose attendance to the religious services, may appear as not exactly desirable, comfortable or worth to be accounted for.

As widely acknowledged, writing back is one of the most powerful strategy available to the oppressed group who reach the level of collective assertiveness. Unsurprisingly, this empowering act is usually undertaken by the intellectual elites, regardless of their ideological affiliation, and uttered as a more or less loud demand for retroactive justice. Petcut's contributions to the history of Roma slavery seems to be perfectly in line with this strategy and from his point of view the Romanian Orthodox Church represents a main target, first and foremost, because it is identified as the symbolical and concrete enabler of Roma slavery. As a result, the main religious actor in post - communist Romania has become vulnerable to the very serious accusation to have betrayed its earthly mission.

All the fierce allegations of indifference, dehumanizing treatments or even sexual and long term psychological abuses, which have been lately loudly directed against the Romanian Orthodox Church, have not been left unanswered. An ethnic Roma priest, aspirant to the academic title of PhD, has raised his voice and formulated replies to his Roma intellectual peers. Essentially, his concern is to defend the cornered ecclesiastical institution which he is also serving as a priest. The Romanian Orthodox Church could hope to have found the legitimate in- group voice suitable to call to peace and, in the same time, to save its public reputation.

To be more specific, through the publications authored by Marius Căldăraru, a Roma priest serving in Sintești, a village populated by a traditional Roma community⁴⁶, the Orthodox Church

⁴⁶ Marius Căldăraru, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în comunitățile romilor căldărari*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2022, p. 14; my translation. (Further *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* - 2022)

has been trying to respond to the accumulation of invectives and even emotional escalation from the part of the contenders, frowningly labelled as “the Roma activists”. Their discourse shaped by the recent academic paradigms are primarily dismantled as confounding with the secularized world and left-wing thinking. In his book, which basically reworks a very recently defended PhD thesis, Marius Căldăraru considers himself entitled to respond to all the accusations and, at the same time, to highlight the particularities of the mission undertaken by the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Roma coppersmith communities.

Before I will examine in depth the author volume, I find it mandatory to mention that the same Roma priest engaged publicly in defending the Romanian Orthodox Church which brought him adverse reactions. In the public debates carried sometimes in a trivial language on various online channels, Căldăraru exposed himself to being brutally bullied⁴⁷. However, he did not give up and wrote an article, documenting the contemporary missionary work of the Romanian Orthodox Church within Roma communities, henceforth, directly confronting the opponents of the dominating ecclesiastical institution.

In the article published in 2019 Căldăraru openly took distance from the “Roma intellectuals from Romania” who, in his understanding, “have an anticlerical attitude and are politically correct”⁴⁸. From the very beginning, he ambitiously stated that his research is meant “to contradict the wrong opinion about the religious and social inclusion of the Roma, concerning the lack of involvement from the side of the [Romanian Orthodox] Church when it comes to the spiritual needs of [this ethnic group], and [promises to] reconstitute, with no attempt to hide, the reality of slavery and of the atrocities from Transnistria during 1942”⁴⁹.

Căldăraru directly and bluntly confronts the Roma historian Petre Petcut, because “I consider that Romanian Orthodox Church is not guilty for the existence of the institution of slavery, and although some despicable members of the institution [may have] misinterpreted their assignment, [the ecclesiastical institution] was preoccupied with the spiritual and social well-being of the Romanians, particularly after 1856”⁵⁰. However, as an ethnic Roma, Căldăraru has no choice but to

⁴⁷Căldăraru Marius mi-a scris, apără Biserica Sclavagistă! at <https://naayram.wordpress.com/2016/05/01/caldararu-marius-mi-a-scris-apara-biserica-sclavagista/> Naayram Publicat în mai 1, 2016 [last accessed 06.09.2022].

⁴⁸ See Footnote 2, Marius Căldăraru, „Aportul Bisericii Ortodoxe în procesul privind incluziunea religioasă și socială a romilor din spațiul geografic românesc”, *Altarul Reîntregirii*, XXIV, 1, 2019, p. 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

concede that “slavery remains a social and historical phenomenon, an unnatural moral accident of the human behavior, which still exists in various forms. Even though there were few clerics who openly denounced this unfortunate social state [...] there were and still are representatives of the Church showing solicitude for the spiritual and social well-being of the Roma”⁵¹.

Căldăraru acclaims the collective christening of Roma in the presence of the Patriarch Miron Cristea, occurring during interwar years. In this respect he quotes the newspaper “*Glasul Romilor*” from 1940 which can prove that the action undertaken by the main religious actor in Great Romania had received a positive feedback from the Roma intelligentsia of that time⁵². His encomiastic narrative, continues with the post-communist times, when “the Orthodox Church regained its pastoral missionary preoccupation with regard to the spiritual needs of the Romanies”⁵³. The initiative of archbishop of Râmnic who opened “an office of catechization and [got involved in] other projects expected to partake to the religious and social inclusion of the Roma” are particularly praised. In the same line, Căldăraru highlighted the preoccupation of Archbishop Andrei Andreicuț who, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1996, “succeeded to ordain a priest for the Roma community from Sebeș - Alba in the year 2005”, “the idea of a church for the Romanies from Sebeș being seriously considered after the ordainment of a second Roma priest in the person of Vasile Frațilă”. The ordainment of Marin Trandafir Roz, “the first Roma priest in the Cluj eparchy, [who] has the mission to serve the Roma communities in Turda and Câmpia Turzii” is credited to represent another example of good practices of an ecclesiastical actor preoccupied with the social inclusion of the local Roma population. The holding of a religious service on the symbolic date of April 8th, in bilingual version, is also mentioned as a praiseworthy action of the contemporary Romanian Orthodox Church in religiously assisting several Roma communities⁵⁴.

Căldăraru did not explain what precisely stood behind this mobilization of the Romanian Orthodox Church leaders from Oltenia respectively from Transylvania. Was it the proximity of Costești, a site of yearly gatherings of the traditional Romanian Romanies, respectively, a response to the Greek - Catholic or the Catholic involvement with these ethnic communities or, perhaps, the distressing neo-Protestant wave of conversions? He only found it relevant to vaguely suggest that the Romanian Orthodox high-clergy’s

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

recent concern with the religiosity and the social inclusion of the Roma communities has a respectable national and confessional tradition, being initiated by the first Romanian Patriarch and that these actions are in line with the expectations of some Roma representatives acting for political emancipation and representation of the Romanies.

As already noticed, the main contenders of the Romanian Orthodox Church were not identified among the ordinary Roma ethnics but amid the elites, more specifically, the authors of a plethora of academic and non-academic writings delivered by NGOs and university trained Roma intellectuals. The involvement in the knowledge production of the Roma intellectuals is acknowledged by the main religious actor in Romania to be specifically problematic as it seems to go hand in hand with an affirmative and militant political movement. In the context of post – communist Romanian, Roma intellectuals are not any longer amenable to adopt a subaltern tone similar to that shared by the interwar Romanian Roma elites who were constantly searching for legitimation from the Orthodox church leaders⁵⁵. In the recent times, the young and old generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals find no reasons to be tactful in their attitude towards the Romanian Orthodox Church. What seems crucial and problematic for the Romanian Orthodox clergymen is the recent predisposition of the young Roma intellectuals to approach the dominant ecclesiastical institution from Romania in a rough tongue.

Aware of this uncomfortable state of affairs, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been hoping to reply to the accusations professed by the ill-intentioned Roma „activists” by backing up the research carried by the theology trained Marius Căldărăru. In tune with the expectations of the Orthodox prelates and the theology professors, already from his first publication, Căldărăru disdained the „activists” involved in the knowledge production. First and foremost, he looks at them as unrepresentative in relation to the reference micro-group of coppersmiths which Căldărăru has designated to be “the authentic” Roma. In the eyes of the Orthodox Roma priest from Sintești, the Roma “activists” actions and writings can be easily discredited by the collaboration of the Roma NGOs with the organizations defending the sexual minorities rights⁵⁶. In subtext such correlations would be able to infer the unreasonableness of the Roma political movement simply because, in the recent years, several

⁵⁵ Petre Matei, „Raporturile dintre organizațiile țigănești interbelice și Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, in *Partide politice și minorități naționale din România în secolul XX*, Vol. V, (ed.) Vasile Ciobanu, Sorin Radu, Sibiu, Editura Techno Media, 2010, pp. 159-173.

⁵⁶ Marius Căldărăru, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* - 2022, p. 94.

representatives of this group have formulated harsh attacks against the righteous Romanian Orthodox Church.

Starting from his activity as a parish priest, Căldăraru finds himself entitled to make strong judgments about the religious profile or the religious affiliation of the Roma people. Alternating between macro- and micro-level perspectives, he aims to provide adequate data to highlight, explain and support the “peculiarities of the missionary work undertaken by the Romanian Orthodox Church among the «hermetic» coppersmith” Roma sub-group⁵⁷. Going beyond the sub-group taken as a reliable source for first hand empirical evidences, Căldăraru also claims to make his point starting from relevant data acquired through his privileged access to ecclesiastical archives. In his opinion, this combination of data would be able to undermine the alleged “lack of reaction of the Orthodox Church with regard to the spiritual and social needs”⁵⁸ of the Roma people. Last but not least, his research wants to be more than just an attempt to defend or rehabilitate the prestige of the Romanian Orthodox Church by describing their missionary activities. It is an implicit examination of the Romanies’ religiosity.

As I will demonstrate, Căldăraru’s engagement with knowledge production is specifically dedicated to the spiritual, religious practices and confessional affiliation of the Romanies. But the manner in which he approaches the matters illustrates a paradoxical stand. Even though he represents an in-group voice, Căldăraru’s publications can be regarded as a veritable act of re-writing back to the production of knowledge delivered by ethnic Roma “activists”. In his employment, the concept carries pejorative connotations and in subtext one could read that “the activists” are secular and rancorous opponents of the main religious actor in post-communist Romania. Although Căldăraru belongs to the young generation of Romanian Roma intelligentsia, unlike his peers, he discards the strategy to highlight and in the same time delegitimize the power differentials between the normative culture and the heterogenous Roma (sub-)group(s).

In salient opposition to the iconoclast “activists”, Căldăraru seems rather interested to serve the dominant ecclesiastical institution in Romania and less concerned to make the voice of his co-ethnics heard. In his exposition, Căldăraru starts by asserting his personal in-betweenness, identifying himself as “a Romanian by birth and a prospective Romanian with a Roma ethnicity”⁵⁹. Even if he acknowledges the processual mechanisms, the circumstantial and the intersectional aspects involved in the process of self-identification,

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

Căldăraru sees no deontological problem to frequently be reproachful and picky in his academic argumentation.

From the very beginning, he undermines a perennialist line of argument according to which the cultural Hindu elements have been credited to be fundamental elements of the Roma religiosity. In his understanding, the ancestral references to the Indian religious landscape are rather irrelevant, as he personally does “not feel Indian at all”⁶⁰. In this line of argument, he goes on from personal to general, stating that, actually, a significant part of the Romanian Romanies do not identify as Indians and some of them even display a “profound feeling of being Romanian and Orthodox”⁶¹. In order to invalidate the overstressed Indian rooted cultural background pushed forward by some of the Roma academic peers, Căldăraru chooses to accuse the Roma along with the non-Roma population, of ignorance in religious matters. If the ordinary Romanian Orthodox believers are perceived as inept to become familiar to the dogmas of the Orthodox Church preferring instead “to give credit to magic and superstitions”⁶², the level of Romanies’ religiosity could not be expected to be any different. As noticed, the missionary activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church among the Romanian Romanies represents the red line of his research. Yet, its sluggish advance is allegedly caused by the appalling leaning towards superstition noticed in both non-Roma and Roma popular cultures.

Contradicting academic conventions, Căldăraru seems unwilling to detach his knowledge production from his personal life-narrative and beliefs. In fact, he militantly goes on affirming them and even considers they represent pertinent empirical evidences.

The theologian and priest Marius Căldăraru refers to the writings of a Romanian Roma historian, who proved particularly critical toward the Romanian Orthodox Church as former slave owner and ideological supporter of slavery of the Romanies, on a passionate, even offending tone. In a peddling manner, Căldăraru exonerates the dominant ecclesiastical actor in Romania by questioning the power of argument of “Petre Petcuț [who] assumes that the Romanian Orthodox Church had a decisive role in the process of annihilation of the Roma freedoms, since it overtook the Byzantine attitude with regard to the slavery”⁶³. Frequently, Căldăraru’s submissive partisanship with the institution he is serving as a parish priest, can turn straightforwardly into a personal and/or institutional attack directed specifically against the Roma “activists”.

⁶⁰ M. Căldăraru, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române...*, PhD diss., „Justinian Patriarhul” Faculty of Orthodox Theology - Bucharest, 2021, p. 31.

⁶¹ *Idem*, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române - 2022...*, p. 34.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p.19.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

In a severe tone Căldăraru commonly denounces the standpoint of the Romanian Roma academic elites whom he mostly quotes in contentious contexts, often, preferring to give more credit to the research undertaken by the domestic or foreign non-Roma. By naming and even providing background information about some Romanian Roma authors, Căldăraru hopes to invalidate their impartial involvement with the knowledge production. Hence, he writes: “I find it necessary to point out that the Roma pastor and preacher Petre Petcuț, the coppersmith Marian Cârpași and many other Roma intellectuals (Delia Grigore) consider that the Romanian Orthodox Church contributed decisively to the birth of Romanian slavery or that it is entirely guilty of its existence”⁶⁴. However, it is difficult to say that his attempt to discredit the preexisting Romanian Roma academic voices is actually effective. On the contrary, by his own submissive partisan attitude, Căldăraru forsakes any claim of scientific detachment. The most he actually achieves is to betray his own biases. They become most poignantly visible when Căldăraru comes to address the neo-Protestant conversion of the Roma.

Most of the observations regarding the conversion of the Roma to different neo-Protestant churches are acquired by means of a seemingly ad-hoc engagement in the field work. Alleged interviews with Roma converts are alternated with testimonies from Căldăraru’s family which are, contextually, correlated with pieces of information collected from the surveillance reports delivered by the communist Romanian secret police (Securitate). Unsurprisingly, this *mélange* of in-group and out-group sources, leads Căldăraru to a negative assessment of the attraction exercised by other religious actors which by their missionary activities have challenged the hegemony of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

To be more specific, the choice for the Pentecostal denomination seems problematic and is repeatedly addressed. At a certain point, Căldăraru writes that “the growth in the number of adepts of the Pentecostal cult in Romania is also related to the Roma people, with the proselytism of the neo-Protestant [taking place] inside and outside the traditionalist Roma communities, targeting those who are, in part or totally, assimilated in the majority population”⁶⁵. Such statements are equivocal, and so it is the entire effort to draw on the profile of the converts. In a biased and narrow-minded way of thinking, the precarious socio-economic background of the converts becomes the main argument in Căldăraru’s elucidation of the conversion to what he hegemonically and disparagingly calls the “Pentecostal cult.” Căldăraru claims that, in broad terms, the process

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române...*, (PhD thesis), p. 64.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* - 2022, p. 163.

of conversion is nothing else but a “form of pragmatism”⁶⁶ of the impoverished Roma who anticipate “religious integration” which is interrelated to “the social integration”. Accordingly, “the conversion of the Romanies to Pentecostalism represents a combination between the personal assumption (the case of few of them) and the yearning for religious affinity (the case of the majority) a desire which seems to be related to the communitarian or to the confessional sense of belongingness”⁶⁷. Noteworthy, within the Roma Orthodox priest’s narrative, the accent falls on doubting that the conversion can be motivated by authentic Christian spiritual needs and/or on strong religious beliefs.

Repeatedly, Căldăraru underlines that the entire process of disaffiliation from the dominant church is the consequence of several factors such as the strong missionary zeal of the neo-Protestant groups, the state of destitution of the Romanies, respectively, a regrettable shortfall identified at the level of the strategies pursued by the abandoned ecclesiastical institution. Accordingly, in a comprehensive and ambitiously definitive manner, Căldăraru claims that “the conversion to Pentecostalism of most of the Romanies has occurred as a result of the process of proselyte inculturation, from the lack of committed pastoral planning of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and from the opportunism characteristic to the very impoverished people”⁶⁸.

In order to give weight to his biased conviction about the shallowness of the act of conversion, Căldăraru highlights the poor religious instruction of several traditional leaders who have been enjoying an enormous but controversial public prestige and symbolic capital. The self-entitled King Cioabă, himself a pastor in a Roma Pentecostal church is unmasked as a Securitate collaborator and mentioned with his secret informant nickname⁶⁹. At the same time, Cioabă’s stratagem to be crowned as king in a Romanian Orthodox monastery is regarded as the sheer expression of the inauthenticity of the Romanies’ choice to switch from Orthodoxy to Pentecostalism⁷⁰.

In other paragraphs, Romanies’ religious affiliations could be reassessed. In some contexts, the sheer pragmatism and superficiality in religious matters of the Romanies has been complemented by a set of culturalist suppositions. In contrast to the nuanced and multifaceted conclusions reached by non-Roma researchers, who after long years of field work advanced a set of reasons standing behind the conversion of the Romanies to Pentecostalism, Căldăraru

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 194.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 181.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 194.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 177-178.

prefers a simplified and prejudiced synthetic explanation. In his opinion, “neo-Protestant Roma have transferred the binary religious understanding” which “on the neo-Protestant ground conducted to the hybridization of a new form of religiosity”⁷¹. Elsewhere, he admits that Pentecostalism, “satisfies better the Romanies’ understanding and seemingly provides them with the necessarily framework where inherited religious elements amalgamate with those of neo-Protestant provenance”⁷². However, Căldăraru implies that by the readiness to absorb and accommodate elements specific to the Roma culture, the competitor of the Romanian Orthodox Church is less rigorous in terms of purity of the dogmas.

In his tenacious commitment to diminish the relevance the new players on the Romanian religious market, Căldăraru insists on neo-Protestants’ overemphasis of the supernatural drive which is also attributed to the Romanies’ understanding of the sacred. Hence, the conversion to neo-Protestantism is liable to be downgraded to the level of a reciprocal deceit between the actors involved, the missionaries, respectively, the Romanies. In this respect, Căldăraru could wrote that the unassimilated Roma show an inclination towards a “morbid supernatural”⁷³, while elsewhere he could epitomize the existence of a “thirst for supernatural”⁷⁴ understood as nothing else but a “pagan *modus vivendi*”⁷⁵. Exactly, this deliberately primitivized background makes the Romanies perfect targets for the missionarism of the neo-Protestant churches, which in the process, cunningly exploit and make use of “the supernatural, the pastoral of fear and the parables which can illustrate radical transformation of the most treacherous Roma persons”⁷⁶.

Căldăraru may occasionally agree on the social disciplining effect of the conversion, a phenomenon widely documented by the academic research⁷⁷. However, the Orthodox Roma parish priest tries

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 182.

⁷³ *Ibid*, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române...*, (PhD thesis), pp. 219-220.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române ...2022*, p. 190, 193.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

⁷⁷ Cerasela Voiculescu, “Nomad Self-Governance and Disaffected Power Versus Semiological State Apparatus of Capture: The Case of Roma Pentecostalism”, in *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2017, p. 204; Ioan Popoviciu & Salomea Popoviciu, “Liderii Religioși...”, p. 132; Natanael Bițiș, “De la marginalitate la normativitate. Convertirea unei comunități rome la pentecostalism” *Revista română de sociologie*, Serie Nouă, XXVIII, Nr. 3–4, 2017, pp. 249–269; Sorin Gog, “Post-socialist Religious Pluralism: How Do Religious Conversions of Roma Fit into the Wider Landscape? From Global to Local Perspectives”, *Transitions: Nouvelles Identites Rom en Europe Centrale & Orientale*, p. 103; Alina Bîrsan, “Romii căldărari din

to diminish the effectiveness of neo-Protestant approach and writes that the cultic rigors of the Romanian Orthodox Church generally drove the Romanies to display an “antagonistic attitude”⁷⁸ towards the clergymen. The alleged uncompromising attitude of the Orthodox priests to provide services on demand that would satisfy the credulous beliefs of the Romanies, specifically at different ceremonies such as the baptism and the burial rites⁷⁹, is presented as a sign of strength, an avowal of some dogmatic Orthodox truths that cannot be negotiated and/or subordinated to the customs shared by an ethnic group.

The Orthodox Roma priest recognizes that behind the religious conversions to neo-Protestant churches, a process of ethnic assertiveness and articulation of a trans-national identity has been taking place. Undeniably, it may provide the converts with a platform to manifest social and political agency and contribute to individual and collective emancipation⁸⁰. Nevertheless, Căldăraru disagrees that this widely acclaimed outcome can be regarded as a veritable progression in spiritual terms. Repeatedly, he expresses doubts about the process of “so-called spiritual awakening or [shows reservations whether this] form of religiosity is grounded on sincere declaration of faith of the new adepts, if it is really followed by assumption and living according to the prescripts”⁸¹. Determined to undermine the consistency of the conversion as undertaken by the confessional rivals, Căldăraru puts the term in inverted commas. To make his point, he even assigns to the “evangelization” undertaken by the neo-Protestant missionaries a negative connotation “because it touches and alters the judgment of the targeted persons, [...] while inculturation, in case it does not touch the dogmas, [...] affects the freedom of choice”⁸². In essence, the process of conversion to neo-Protestant churches is disparaged as a mere brain washing operation⁸³ of the superstitious and otherwise religiously erratic Romanies.

Situating himself above the people he claims to represent, Căldăraru shares the opinion that the Romanies’ religious representations and practices are more likely to be described as a

Verești”, in *Romii – povești de viață*, (eds.) Mălina Voicu, Claudiu D. Tufiş, Bucuresti, Fundația Soros România, 2008, p. 37, 40.

⁷⁸ M. Căldăraru, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române...*(2022), p. 215, 218.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 213.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 187.

⁸¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 164.

⁸² *Ibidem.*, p. 167.

⁸³ Dragan Todorović, “From Missioning to Proselytism (Conceptual Differentiation, Historical Survey and Indications of Future Perspectives)”, in *Evangelization Conversion Proselytism*, (ed.) Dragan Todorović, (Ysssr / Kse / Punta, Niš, 2004), p. 23.

combination of dualism, pragmatism resulting from nomadic lifestyle, the supernatural and the belief in witchcraft and the solax – a form of solving the ingroup discords by appealing to divine justice⁸⁴. Predictably, what Căldăraru calls superstitions beliefs, most of the secular Romani voices have cherished to be religious manifestations and elements denoting a particular type of spirituality rooted in the *Romanipen* ethos. However, the actions and the narratives of the younger or elder Romanian Roma intellectuals are practically delegitimized. They are considered to be unrepresentative for the communities which Căldăraru considers to embody the very essence of the “authentic” Roma and constantly mentions in the micro-community focused sections of his book. Moreover, the strength of the argument of the other intellectual Roma elites participating in knowledge production are suspected for a potential vicious intent. Allegedly, their understanding and actions contravene to the traditional values of the Roma people they claim to be representing at the level of official national or international political and educational institutions. On this line, the perennialist narrative building on the Indianization of the religious profile of the Romanies is to some extent refuted by Căldăraru who suggests that the bookish explanations delivered by the co-ethnic intellectuals have little relevance for the religious beliefs and the confessional affiliations of the ordinary members of the ethnic group.

Overstating the representativity of the coppersmiths from his own parish, Căldăraru claims to have an authentic, grass - root access to the spiritual needs and the religious life of the Romanies. Therefore, he feels entitled to make definitive statements. He points out that the most profound expression of the coppersmiths’ religiosity is grounded in the dualist interplay between *bibaxt* and *baxt*⁸⁵ and in other religious manifestations they have been actually only imitating. According to Căldăraru, what “regrettably” stands out in the case of the coppersmith sub-group and of the Romanies at large, is a “serious incapacity to understand the authenticity of the Orthodox spirituality”⁸⁶.

A recurring idea in Căldăraru’s demonstration is that the preference for a nomadic life-style could have caused the allegedly inauthentic affiliation of the Romanies to the traditional religious institutions and, in particular, to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Căldăraru concedes that one can recognize, at the most, a religious syncretism, in which “the religious borrowings were validated also by

⁸⁴ M. Căldăraru, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române...*(2022), pp. 245-246.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 244.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

the prerequisite to adapt, a necessity that is intrinsic to the condition of nomadism”⁸⁷. Else said, “by not giving up a nomadic way of life, it was impossible for [the Romanies] to internalize the institutionalized form of Christianity”⁸⁸. Unfailing to the thesis in which nomadism seems to be the cause of all the alterations and inconsistencies in religious matters⁸⁹, Căldăraru considers that for the Romanies the “Orthodoxy is contextual, and the contact with the church is conditioned by a very immediate need”⁹⁰. The solution he is envisioning is formulated in post-enlightenment perspective. He considers that only the renunciation to the cultural ethos would facilitate a “drawing near to the Orthodoxy”, an option which should be regarded as a convenient sacrifice since it would facilitate the “coming out of the darkness of ignorance”⁹¹. In this line of argument, the Orthodoxy, devotedly defended by Căldăraru, appears to be the only true spiritual and religious way. In case the Romanies would show eagerness to follow this spiritual path, this would imply that an internal cultural purging shall be initiated. Until that point would be actually reached, Căldăraru can only assert that “from religious point of view, most of the coppersmith Romanies are on the stage where human kind had been at the time when the Savior came to this world”⁹². For the moment, Căldăraru prefers to highlight the existence of a structural tension between the Romanies’ culture and spirituality and the set of dogmas of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

In a covert but artful manner, the Romanian Orthodox Church is discharged by the guilt of being indifferent and exploitative in relation to the Roma. On the contrary, the Romanies end up being blamed by a mendacious relation to the religious institution to which the majority Romanian population has been affiliating for centuries. At the same time, the neo-Protestant churches are suspected to act superficially and their missionary work among the Roma communities could be indirectly suggested to represent the convenient meeting ground for two religious scammers.

In order to give strength to his opinion, Căldăraru makes use of any argument at hand and even goes quoting the surveillance reports of the Securitate agents during the communist regime. These sources elaborated by a repressive police apparatus are uncritically treated as valid and convincing references because they are consonant with his own biased thesis. Outrageous as this might seem, even the atheistic enemies of the church/(es), are acknowledged to have

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 244.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 244.

collected hard evidence that can confirm the “formal religiosity or, better called, the declarative religiosity of the coppersmith Roma”⁹³. Somehow following the rhetorical paths pursued by the adversaries of the free religious practices from the communist period, the Orthodox Roma priest and theologian infers that, basically, all the religious affiliations of the Romanies are sheer mimics.

At a more specific missionary level, even though Căldăraru struggles to dismantle the pretense of truthfulness from the side of the neo-Protestant Roma converts, the rightful servant of the main religious actor in Romania, ends up admitting that there is something valuable to be learnt from the approaches and the experience of the religious competitors. In this respect, Căldăraru expressed his confidence that “the Roma priest is «a gate» to the entrance in the church”⁹⁴ of the Roma people. Therefore, he conditioned the authentic and successful missionary activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church amongst the present day Romanies by the willingness of the ecclesiastical institution to promote and take advantage of the ethnicity of the priest who, ideally, should be similar to the ethnicity of his parishioners. In the article published beforehand in the theology journal “*Altarul Reîntregirii*” and later on in his book, Căldăraru presented an entire record of the steps taken, during post-communist times, to ordain Roma priests in parishes in which the majority of the population was Roma.

The combative and partisan discourse that dominates Căldăraru’s research reveals long term biases very similar to those visited by the Romanian Orthodox Church during the interwar times with respect to the religious minorities. They do not only remain in use but add up to the long established perception of the religious otherness of the Romanies. It is to some extent bewildering, to learn that such biased external perceptions can be shared by a post-communist young Roma clergyman involved in the process of knowledge production dedicated to the Romanian Romanies’ religious affinities and affiliations.

Although, demographically speaking, Căldăraru belongs to the young generation of Roma intellectual elites, his publications can hardly be seen as an act of writing back, since he deliberately avoids and utterly contests the narratives advanced by his co-ethnic colleagues. As an ethnic Roma and a truthful servant of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Marius Căldăraru expected that his engagement in the knowledge production about the Roma religious profile and their affiliation, would enable him to debunk the agenda of morally and eventually spiritually corrupted academic peers. Be them secular

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 246-247.

academics or ministers of minority neo-Protestant churches, in the majority of the cases, they have shown an antagonistic attitude towards the main religious actor in Romania. In order to denounce their blaming public outcry, Marius Căldăraru prefers to adopt the mindset and the discourses professed by the Gypsolorists who for centuries wrote that the Romanies lack truthfulness in religious matters and only formally affiliate to some communities of faith. Similar to the ill-famed Gypsolorist knowledge producers, Căldăraru prefers to highlight the inconsistencies and/or the superstitious or the pragmatic - exploitative approach of his ordinary co-ethnics. These conservative and biased arguments constantly resurface in the texts published by the Romanian Roma Orthodox parish priest and theologian, attesting the consistency of institutional racism and the disempowering burden of bigot modes of thinking.

3. Conclusions

In general, the analysis of the in-group produced texts indicate a certain tendency to politicize the topic of religious affinity and religious affiliation of the Romanian Roma. This leaning is explainable by the fact that the debate on this matter has been increasingly intrinsic to the empowerment and self - assertiveness of the Romanian Roma intellectual elites in post - communist Romania. It is important to remember that the pitches and the pathways followed by the new generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals display the potential to weaponize the knowledge production on this matter. In the process, the dominant religious actor in Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been turned into a target. Specifically the acknowledgement of its part-taking in slavery of the Roma makes the Romanian Orthodoxy vulnerable to such public reproaches. This inglorious past is used to symbolically and rhetorically justify the ongoing reaffiliation of the Romanies to neo-Protestant churches.

Already the first generation of post - communist Romanian Roma brought evidence on the cultural relevance of Romanipen ethos in shaping Romanies' spirituality and eventually pre-conditioning their religious affiliation. Therefore, the concern displayed by various religious actors to this peculiar cultural-spiritual heritage is assumed to be determinant for the readiness of the Romanies to select between a traditional or neo-Protestant church. Nevertheless, the turns and the nuances the narratives have acquired are influenced by personal, generational belonging, institutional insertion and the political agendas served by each Romanian Roma intellectuals at the moment when they chose to participate - in a reasonable or emotional manner - in the knowledge production. This confirms the action of the intersectionality principle. It has the capacity to reveal the

mechanisms standing behind structural inequalities and also puts to test the thresholds of agency.

As illustrated, some Romanian Roma authors regard the phenomenon from a certain distance, while others plunge deep into the topic, turning it into a main lane to start and eventually build an academic career. A certain fluctuation in tone stands out. If a first generation found it conformable to accommodate the Romanipen to the religious background dominating in Romania, a young generation has chosen to confront the national hegemon religious institution. Most voices belonging to the young generation of Romanian Roma intellectuals don't consider it to be an ignominy to publicly blame the traditional religious actor for disregarding the spiritual needs of the ordinary Romanies and for indirectly participating to dehumanizing them. To these contesting and moral contenders, the Romanian Orthodox Church tried to answer back through the voice of a Roma ethnic who, in many respects, assumed a subaltern position. He not only struggled to defend the main religious actor in Romania, which he devotedly serves as a parish priest, but also embraced the Gypsolorist discourses. In re-writing back, he has purposely delegitimized the relevance of the arguments of his Romanian Roma peers.

Taking seriously the societal and institutional anti-Gypsyism has granted that the "pariah syndrome" narrative would achieve a new level of loudness. It is visited mostly by the secular Roma intellectuals in an attempt to unveil and denounce that religious biases and social injustice has been proliferated by the traditional religious actor (i.e. Romanian Orthodox Church). In response, the conservative opponents disregard their importance and make use of any meagre arguments at hand to downplay the victimary arguments. As a common tactic, both sides seek to highlight the moral flaws or the deflection from a generic Christian tenet of the opponent which would claim to be "truly" making sense of the religious profile/affiliation of the Roma people. Recognizably, in both situations the participation in knowledge production involves an assumed subjective, militant and even quarrelsome standing.

Looking at these narratives from outside, one can state that both sides are trying to grasp how the Romani ethos might be incorporated in the dogmatic background of each confession and how this undertaking would have consequences with regard to the social integration of the Romanies. Unfortunately, the debate is at the moment too passionate to allow the sides to sit at the same table.