Mirel Bănică, *Bafta, Devla și Haramul. Studii despre cultura și religia romilor* [Bafta, Devla and Haram. Studies on the Culture and the Religion of the Roma], Iași, Polirom 2019, 468p., ISBN: 9789734655786*

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In Mirel Bănică's volumes, literature and scientific research are effortlessly woven together. Rarely do we encounter this weave of informational exactitude with the well-scrutinized, but critically evaluated sources, or with freedom of speech, but carefully articulated language, or with precise, but inviting and expressive language. B possesses the necessary tools required by his guild, but he is equally a deviser of words. He is a "socio-anthropologist of the Orthodox religion," as he describes himself in the short presentation at the beginning of the discussed volume. His numerous publications, volumes and articles appearing in our country, as well as abroad, cover a wide spectrum of meeting points between the Romanian society and the religious phenomenon.¹ This is why the author and the current volume are of such interest to a reader trained in the field of theology.

However, in the last two decades, it is only fair to say that the amount of specialized literature on Roma people in Romania has increased continuously. However, very few studies are dedicated to the Roma people's religion or to its impact on everyday life. Therefore, the volume "Bafta, Devla și Haramul. Studii despre cultura și religia romilor" is long overdue. Unlike other volumes resulting from research projects with well-determined time-frames, sometimes sterile, rather statistical – of course, required – the volume signed by B is the fruit of many years of research in the world's libraries, and also in the field, in the middle of Roma people. In his last pages, the author realises that what he has written is more of a volume *with* Roma people than a volume *about* Roma people. He uses information coming directly from numerous Roma dialog partners and reading sheets spanning a time period greater than ten years. Only then was he able to analyse the evolution, or involution, of certain contemporary phenomena related to the religious life of Roma people.

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¹ Noting a short selection: „*Locul ceiluialt*”. *Ortodoxia în modernitate* (Paideia, 2007); *Fals jurnal de căpșunar* (Institutul European, 2007); *Religia în fapt. Studii, schițe și momente* (Cluj-Napoca: EIKON, 2015); *Biserica Ortodoxă Română, stat și societate în anii '30* (Iași: Polirom, 2007); *Nevoia de miracol. Fenomenul pelerinajelor în România contemporană* (Iași: Polirom, 2014).

To me, and maybe to other readers, it would be expected that the titles related to the Roma culture and religion are weighted more towards recent developments, especially towards the phenomenon of mass conversion to the new protestant churches. Instead, B delicately approaches the intimate relationship between the Roma and the Orthodox Church. This subject is truly neglected in the specialized literature. The reason – in my opinion – is on one hand the lack of interest on behalf of the Orthodox Church towards the social theology, and the lack of interest in exploring the topic of the Roma people. In other words, the rarity of sociologists of religion in Romania. On the other hand, we must highlight the reason that has been created by the long and difficult history between the Roma and the Orthodox Church. With this delicate subject, I wish to begin the approach of the volume, somehow too dense and too rich in information for us to be able to discuss it in a short review. In this regard, the author greets us with the following affirmation:

the foreign authors' writings abound in examples of terrible punishments, suffering and torture to which the slaves were subjected. I did not make a 'collection' of these, but I couldn't help myself not to give a few examples, chosen from the many that could be given, to suggest (and show) that any research subject regarding the Roma is seldom completely objective, but it needs to consider the difficult historical substratum and the traumatic memory. (p. 120)

Through an entire chapter dedicated to the Roma slavery subject, B manages to open the discussion as documented and balanced as possible. The author notes that this subject "acquired such a polemical aura within the public space, that has begun to inspire a wide range of reactions going from rejection and negation to the most intense activism, identifying responsibility for all the current difficulties and unfulfillments of the Roma people." (p. 127) With this attitude, B brings into discussion such clear examples of abuse from the landowners and the Orthodox monasteries towards the Roma from the past centuries – however, he does not fall into the extreme of unilateral denigration of the Church. He highlights that, in fact, we still have too few details on the everyday life of the Roma living at the boyar or monastery courts (p. 128), without losing sight of the fact that the Orthodox Church, with its Byzantine rite, knows a long history of obedience to the political authorities. These have often endowed the monasteries with gifts of land and Roma workers that have been received by the clerics and used by them regardless of the Christian, evangelical spirit. Here the author intervenes with examples of clerics and documents such as the will of St. Antim the Iberian and others which prove that within the Church, in addition to the legislation of the time,

there was a special care for the Roma and their faith (p. 136). In this context, the author emphasises that the terms *rob* (bondsman) and *sclav* (slave) do not represent the same concept. He shows that, with the help of literature written by travellers in the Romanian provinces in the nineteenth century, the state law actually protected the life of the bondsman, his master not having the right of life and death over him, unlike ancient slavery and even the practice of slavery in the Western world during the same timeframe (p. 130).

B also highlights more than once the intimacy between the Roma and the landowners' courts, respectively between the Roma and the monastery courts. Therefore "the gipsy bondsmen were not a matter of importance and did not populate the collective imagination of the time. As proof, they do not appear in the exterior painting of the monasteries from Moldova as a theme of otherness. *The other one* was represented by the Turkish, Jew, Armenian, but not by the Gipsy bondsman." (p. 131)

The subject of the Roma otherness in the Romanian culture, especially from a religious point of view, is still a subject that requires new research and discussions and the chapter "*Le travail de mémoire. Biserica Ortodoxă Română, partener și țintă memorială*" ("*Le travail de memoire. The Romanian Orthodox Church, Partner and Memorial Target*") is certainly a step ahead towards this desideratum. The author correctly emphasises the Orthodox Church's lack of openness regarding this matter and quotes authors that publicly express their "sadness" on the lack of public acts of repentance from the Church and the impossibility of an open dialogue on these delicate matters. In the same time, B explains:

it is not about "blaming" en bloc, but more about a generalised discontent on the following aspect: how could they accept the bondage (and its great excesses), a divine, but also human institution, having the monopoly of preaching love and affection for the others in this transient existence? Here are just two examples. (p. 141)

The author's contribution in this direction, even though he does not want to settle things, is that he makes a discussion (more) possible. On one hand, he explains why the Orthodox Church cannot approach matters as some people or institutions nowadays would expect, and on the other hand he promotes voices of influential personalities like the historian Neagu Djuvara, or other pro-Roma activists that require public apologies from the Church for owning bondsmen. The diversity of opinions that were taken into consideration and the way that B presents things make the discussion easier for both parties. If the Church is required to show penitence, the other side is required to show an understanding of the way the Church works and a process of reviewing a past attitude could begin:

As far as the Romanian Orthodox Church is concerned, it took note of changing the memorial speech about the Roma people's condition and slavery. Only that its actions are discrete, punctual, subtle, I would say. We can't forget that, historically speaking, the Orthodoxy, generally, has its own recipe of handling the memory. *Les demandes de pardon*, so widespread in the West now, even punctual, are not very natural to it. (p. 144)

No doubt that B's book is an immense help in the reconciliation of the two parties that are in conflict with each other, or at least in creating a neutral space for discussion. As a theologian and as a priest of the Orthodox Church, I am dissatisfied as well by the low level of attention given to the Roma minority by the Orthodox Church and by everything that can be read in B's work and in other historical sources regarding the period of slavery. But at the same time, I am convinced that the volume offers unexpectedly valuable prospects for a better future for the relationship between the Roma people and the Orthodox Church.

I say this because I could characterise the volume as being not just *about* and *with* Roma, but a volume *about* and *with* Orthodox priests. Because the Orthodox Church institution, unlike any other institutional form of any church or confession, is, actually, the sum of certain people and their actions, plus the degree to which those involved are (or are not) penetrated by the Holy Spirit. B speaks inevitably about *some* priests or hierarchs of the church and offers to the public – maybe for the first time in a book about the sociology of religion – numerous interviews with priests that are involved in Roma pastoral care. The author concludes that 'the priests are the most willing to speak' about the religiosity of Roma (p. 243). Through this approach, the author opens the horizon of an invaluable source of information from people that have decades of experience with one community, that have lived together with the Roma from their parish/village. Until now, this shared knowledge was undervalued in studies and difficult to evaluate in projects limited by time and resources.

B comes to the conclusion that the "priest (*rasaj*) is the most ambiguous person, the hardest to classify and order from the foreigners' (*gage*) world. The Roma can have absolutely unpredictable behaviours, sometimes totally opposite from the person." (p. 206) Nevertheless, the author states that the Orthodox priest is preferred by the Roma people for various reasons, among them, the fact that he is married, not single. A lot more information offered by the author about the participation of the Roma people in the pilgrimages, their relationship with the cemetery, icons, cult objects, relics, lead us to believe that through the Orthodox Church ritual the Roma have

adapted their own religiosity as well as possible and made it acceptable for the society in which they have lived for centuries. The author is convinced that 'the Roma people are equally the greatest producers and consumers of popular religiosity' that the Orthodox Church has tolerated and keeps tolerating. This apparently negative detail proves itself to be positive regarding the way that the Roma manifest themselves:

The Orthodox Church has an approach strategy that is a lot gentler: it doesn't directly prohibit, but is in a permanent negotiation, subtle and discrete, with the popular religion, ending by easing and integrating its most obvious (and more violent) forms. Just like a crocodile digests its prey on the banks of the Nile, I hope that the more sensitive Orthodox readers forgive me for the Animal Planet TV image. (p. 333)

This "gentler strategy" of the Orthodox Church was, and will remain, the context within which the Roma people are themselves, in which they can live, develop, and keep traditions and mythological elements of the Roma religiosity. A lot of these traditions, songs, and specific Roma habits disappear once they convert to other new confessions, says the author (p. 403). Without making a plea for the Orthodox Church, B makes us realise that a relationship of five centuries cannot be hastily judged through today's perspective, just like the mass conversion to other confessions does not have to be looked at "in a triumphant, superficial tone." (p. 409) Beyond the success represented by the "civilisation" of the Roma through their affiliation to newer confessions in the Romanian society, the socio-anthropologist B regrets the losses "under the levelling pressure of *neoprotestant* churches and movements and modernism." (p. 437)

To conclude, the book written by B proves itself to be a collection of studies that are extremely necessary to the process of "deepening understanding of the material and spiritual Roma culture" for which the author pleads (p. 439). He helps us recognize that an intimate part of this complex process is represented by the Orthodox Church, which has huge potential to empower the Roma community. Therefore, we hope that the volume will be as well received as possible in the Orthodox Church environment, but also in the sociological and secular one because it represents a connecting bridge already created, that deserves to be studied for the benefit of all.