

Book Review: Marian Devotion among the Roma in Slovakia

Zachar Podolinská, Tatiana. 2021. *Marian Devotion among the Roma in Slovakia: A Post-modern Religious Response to Marginality*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 166 pages.

With this book, Tatiana Zachar Podolinská provides a fascinating ethnographic read dedicated to Marian devotion among the Roma in Slovakia. Podolinská is an expert in the field of Romani studies with a particular interest in the study of religiosity. She is currently the president of the Gypsy Lore Society, an international association that brings together scholars and specialists from around the world. Podolinská makes an original contribution to ethnic studies related to the role of religious tradition in modern life, examining how a minority community such as Roma copes with marginalisation. Arranged around Mary as a central figure both for mainstream Christian society and for the Roma, who are on the periphery of Slovak society, the book will appeal to historians, ethnologists, anthropologists, experts in religious and ethnic studies. It presents a well-grounded study informed by previous ethnographic and historical research and intense fieldwork. The monograph offers new material collected from 2002 onwards among segregated rural *osada*-type¹ communities and urban places among Slovak Rumungro Roma.² It employs the approach of repetitive qualitative research to provide a wider context on Romani traditional and non-traditional Christianity, and conducting in-depth interviews with individuals (mainly Romani women) to detail their intimate and personal experiences. The book reveals Podolinská as a sensitive fieldworker who is able to transfer her observations into a well-written text. This study serves as a brilliant example of how to conduct fieldwork among the Roma in the context of the current debates on ethnographic methodology.

The book explores the little-studied topic of Marian devotion within two contexts: the

revival of Romani devotion to the Virgin Mary within Catholicism and the resistance towards the adoration of Mary by the Roma within Evangelicalism. Using detailed ethnographic data, Podolinská demonstrates how by choosing the Virgin Mary as their patroness, Catholic Roma seek to move toward the centre of society. Podolinská observes the existence of altars, figures of the Virgin Mary, and images in almost every Romani home, which is clear proof of how popular the veneration of Mary is in Slovakia. Slovakian evangelical Roma experience the double contradiction of continuing to be a marginalised minority seeking their place within society, and of conversion to a non-traditional religion. However, within evangelism, Mary is in an uncertain position and the Roma seek a special place where she continues to be adored without interfering with their loyalty to the evangelical faith (see also Podolinská 2007: 60–75; 2014: 146–165; Zachar Podolinská 2019b: 284–326; 2021: 155–188).

The book is organised into four chapters, each presenting a particular sub-topic. The first chapter, “Traces of the Virgin Mary in the Modern World”, presents a historical overview of the role of the Virgin Mary in Catholic and Orthodox traditions. It scrutinises how she became a pivotal figure for those who believe in her direct intervention in the world through miracles and for those who want to raise their voice from the periphery. Broadly speaking, Mary was perceived as a powerful healer and protector both within European tradition and outside Europe, i.e., in Latin America, in the 20th century. Having devotees everywhere, she is well known, with various names such as the Virgin Mary of Seven Sorrows, in Slovakia; Our Lady of Lourdes,

in France; Our Lady of Fatima, in Portugal; Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Mexico; the Most Holy Mother of God, in Bulgaria, etc. As Podolinská discussed, the Virgin Mary is well accommodated in the modern era and became a global and transnational figure (p. 19), but preserves her local association with celestial objects, healing flowers, and miraculous springs. Mary plays a dual role, which is significant both for the official Christian Church and popular religious tradition. The total number of religious tourists to Marian places of pilgrimage in Western Europe has increased, while there was a boom in the cult of the Virgin Mary in Eastern Europe after the fall of socialism. She was symbolically incorporated into the reconstruction process of ethnically-rooted perceptions of nation-states in the post-communist region (p. 33; see also Zachar Podolinská 2019a: 16–55).

Similar to the first chapter, the second chapter, “Romani Christianity in Slovakia: Religiosity of Those on the Periphery”, offers a general overview of Romani Catholic Christianity in Slovakia as a translation of mainstream religion. That is due to the perception of Mary as a patron of the ethnically marginalised people. From the Romani point of view, God, Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are active in this world and at this time. Most importantly, Roma developed contractual relationships with God, which seems a more pragmatic way to understand religion. Religiosity is practiced more often at home with no privileged religious place or mediator necessary to communicate with God and the Virgin Mary (p. 58). Unlike Romani Evangelicalism, everything ‘religious’, as well as the adoration of Mary, may happen at home, without the need for conversation or advice from the clergy or regular discussions on spiritual topics with them. Another significant difference is home ornamentation. Romani Catholic houses are decorated with paintings, statues, tapestries, homemade pictures of the Virgin Mary or the Holy Family, etc. However, Evangelicalism

completely rejects the worship of images.

The last two chapters in the book (“Marian Devotion among the Roma in Slovakia: Ethnicised and Enculturated Mary” and “Marian Apparitions among the Roma: From the Periphery to the Centre”) are the most important among the author’s original contributions. They both have the potential to initiate discussions and provide avenues for the development of future research on other ethnographic sites. Chapter three, which is richly illustrated with the author’s fieldwork photos of domestic altars, holy corners, statuettes of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, wall frescos, etc., introduces readers to analysis of the Chocolate Mary, which is an ethnicised and enculturated figure. The study focuses on her potential for religious response to the marginalisation of Roma because she has the ability to help her devotees move from the periphery to the centre. The chapter explores in detail the many roles and functions of Mary and all rituals and practices related to her. The Roma with whom Podolinská has worked perceive communication with Mary as an intimate ritual. This communication comes from the heart through improvised prayers and words (pp. 93–94). There is a strong tendency among the Catholic Roma to the adoration of Mary, and Podolinská was surprised to find out during her fieldwork that even some wall frescos, decorating living rooms or bedrooms, are painted on request by Romani painters.

Chapter four provides an intriguing insight into the role of the growing Pentecostal and other new evangelical movements among the Roma in present-day Slovakia and presents the existing specific contradictions concerning the adoration of Mary. The Chocolate Mary appears to be in an uncertain position with the growing influence of evangelical churches focusing their missions on Romani communities and obliging them to be devoted to God (Jesus Christ). Because of the fact that the Virgin Mary is

one of the pillars of Romani ethnic identity, she becomes the first target of attack of Pentecostal, Charismatic and other evangelical movements. She is denied her potential role as an interreligious mediator and ethnic emancipator of Roma, something that may be a source of tension and may cause polarisation within Roma (p. 144). Despite this fact, Podolinská expresses her conviction that the way towards effective emancipation is with the help of Romani Mary, something that could be designed as a path that could enable the Roma to further develop their ethnic and cultural traditions (p. 147).

To conclude, the book presents a comprehensive picture of Romani Christian religiosity in the modern era and offers fresh ideas about the everyday spirituality and practices of Roma, introducing the empirical realities from Slovakia. I strongly recommend this book to all readers since it is a solicitous contribution to under-researched aspects of religious tradition and its revitalisation among the Roma.

Notes

1 *Osada* (in Slovak) is a settlement where Roma live. The word is stereotypically related to 'problematic' Roma.

2 The Rumungro Roma (or Hungarian Roma) is a settled sub-ethnic group of Roma who inhabit Hungary and Slovakia. They are the most numerous in Slovakia, with the majority being Slovak bilinguals. The appellation Rumungro Roma originally referred to Hungarian Roma but is today extended to all settled (Slovak and Hungarian) Roma.

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