

THE GOOD LIFE

DESCRIPTORS OF CHANGE IN ROMA PENTECOSTAL COMMUNITIES IN SERBIA AND CROATIA

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Abstract

Studies in specific geographical contexts have shown that the spread of Pentecostalism's influence on Roma communities is twofold: it is linked to social change, including a rise of education levels, literacy, decrease in crime, better relationships with the majority culture; and it is also instrumental in the fostering of a “trans-national” identity and revitalization of their respective Roma identities. However, Pentecostalism cannot be considered a formula that intersects with a Romani community with consequential predictable results— in fact, in Southeastern Europe, Romani Pentecostalism is growing at a much slower rate than that of its counterparts in Western Europe and in places such as Romania and Bulgaria. Further, in the language of researchers, NGOs, and the European Union, success is often measured in the appropriated terms of neo-liberal vocabulary: integration, development, and modernization.

In view of these circumstances, through what lens and with whose vocabulary should change and transformation be understood and measured? This paper discusses both the ideal and the current reality of change in Roma communities through the voices of Roma Pentecostal leaders in Croatia and Serbia—with

the aim of defining human flourishing and change through the perspective of the Roma.

Introduction

Pentecostalism in Roma and Gypsy¹ communities in Europe began in the 1950s and 1960s in places such as France, Spain, Bulgaria, and Romania. Within the last twenty-five years it spread into countries in Southeastern Europe—namely Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania and Greece, which have smaller and newer churches. A study on Romani Pentecostalism named it as one of the “foremost religious orientations amongst Roma in Europe and beyond.” Although the Roma in Europe are Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim, based on the rates of conversion, Pentecostalism among the Roma will soon outgrow adherents to other Christian traditions and other religions.²

The story of Roma Pentecostalism cannot be explored without the larger context—the long and complex history of the Romani and related groups in Europe. Although there are historical accounts of the Roma having a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding cultures—their trades valued as needed skills—there is historical evidence for ill feeling toward the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe by the sixteenth century, with a view of them as “alien” or “other.”³ Under the auspices of various empires, the controlling powers tried to force Roma populations to fit into the mainstream of societies—at best through forced assimilation and at worst through violent means including enslavement and death, culminating in the targeted extermination of Roma during the World War II.⁴ Today, although there are a percentage of Roma active in all levels of political, social, and professional engagement, it remains far too small of a percentage in the estimated ten to twelve million Roma in Europe. Particularly in Eastern Europe, the majority of Roma groups retain higher levels of poverty, lower education levels, and higher unemployment than the surrounding majority societies. In addition, deeply embedded stereotypes still largely shape cultural attitudes.⁵

However, speaking about the Roma as a monolithic entity is problematic in any sense, because it ignores the heterogeneous realities

of Roma groups existing in different contexts.⁶ In terms of Pentecostal research, this is also true—one cannot explore the growth of Roma Pentecostalism without careful attention to context, different emphases, and themes. Therefore, the central question, “How is Pentecostalism impacting Roma communities?” must be explored in specific areas, but in dialogue with the larger context of Roma Pentecostalism. In view of Roma history, careful attention must be paid regarding one’s epistemological framework for research. Is it driven by a questionable concept of “ethno-national homogeneity” in Europe’s nation states?⁷ Is it measured by a neo-liberal development agenda?

Approaching this question requires contextual studies of Roma perspectives on identity, mission, and their place in the global church, since opinions will vary according to regions, countries, or Roma groups. By understanding their vocabulary of change and transformation in conversation with both the wider research on Roma Pentecostalism and missiological studies, Roma Christians can contribute to global Christianity in a unique and significant way. This study draws from current anthropological, sociological, and missiological studies on Roma Pentecostalism to present themes from various contexts. Drawing from five years of primary research including participant-observation, interviews, and informal conversations, this study presents leadership perspectives from Croatia and Serbia. With the view of describing human flourishing and change through the voices of Roma Pentecostal leaders in Croatia and Serbia, their vision will then be discussed in light of current realities.

Overview of Roma Pentecostalism

History and Impact

Roma Pentecostalism first made its appearance in France in the 1950s at a time when countries in Europe were still rebuilding from the previous decades, both materially and spiritually. At that time, the memories of concentration camps for many Gypsies were very fresh.⁸ In the same period, a “Gypsy Awakening” began in France after a healing and conversion of a Manouche family. Under the leadership of Clément Le Cossec, it eventually spread to different Roma groups

or tribes. Le Cossec began the Gypsy Evangelical Mission (also known as *Vie et Lumière*). Roma leaders were trained, missionaries were sent out, and key advocates were found in different countries so that these “movements” spread to fifty countries in fifty years. This movement has a large international reach—a branch of the International Light and Life Mission is the Gypsies and Travelers International Evangelical Fellowship (GATIEF), which works in twenty-four countries in America, Asia, Australia, and Europe.⁹

When the French Romani missionaries arrived in the United States in the 1970s, they found that there was already a movement of English Romanichal Pentecostals. In the 1970s and 1980s, churches were planted that were chiefly Romani in membership.¹⁰ In Bulgaria during the 1940s and 1950s, Pentecostalism spread slowly, but after 1989 in both Bulgaria and Romania, rapid growth took place.¹¹ This is not a uniform movement, but rather “movements.” Exact numbers in many locations are hard to come by, but in places like France and Spain, Roma Christians number at least over a hundred thousand (in Spain, over 200,000).¹² In places like Romania and Bulgaria, Roma Christians number in the tens of thousands; in Hungary and Slovakia, in the thousands. Some of the movements are completely independent—having their own theological and mission training schools, while others are under the umbrella of denominations within the country. To make the story more complicated, with the growing economic crisis in places such as Romania and Bulgaria, Roma have traversed over to Western Europe looking for work and started their own churches in places such as England and Germany.¹³

Sociological and anthropological studies in specific geographical contexts have shown that the spread of Pentecostalism in Roma communities can affect multiple areas. It is linked to social change ranging from a rise of education levels and literacy to a decrease in crime and domestic violence and an increase in the status of women, and better relationships with the majority culture. It can also contribute to the fostering of a shared identity (across group/tribal lines) and restoration of pride in their Roma identity.¹⁴

There is a substantial lack of research on Roma Christianity in the disciplines of religious studies or global Pentecostalism. However,

Atanasov's 2008 PhD thesis concludes that amidst Bulgaria's unraveling socio-economic situation, Gypsy Pentecostalism is resulting in the revitalization of individuals, families, and communities in various degrees: "This has been evidenced by the raising of moral standards, deliverance from addictions, lower crime rates, better education, more honesty in business, more opportunities for employment—a significant social lift."¹⁵

Why Pentecostalism?

Research on Roma Pentecostalism has grown considerably in the last decade. Early studies, such as Patrick Williams' on French Gypsy Pentecostalism in the 1990s, identified conversion to Pentecostalism as a move toward autonomy—adopting the "values" of the *gadje* (non-Roma) under the guise of religion preserved their autonomy. In addition, he understood it as an outcome of urbanization—and also a remedy to drug addiction, violence, and alcoholism.¹⁶ Since this early study, other perspectives have emerged. For example, Pentecostalism is seen as a means of empowerment.¹⁷ In Štěpán Ripka's study on Roma Pentecostalism in Czech Republic and Slovakia, he notes that this empowerment is for Roma to "change their values" and "participate in society," but not to fight the prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.¹⁸ However, he may have narrowly defined what "fighting prejudice" looks like. Some Roma pastors feel that the majority culture must first see the change in Roma individuals and communities, and then the relationship will change.¹⁹ Acton claims it is actually a new way of engaging with state authorities, since its authority lies outside the state.²⁰

Deprivation theories have been used to describe the rise of Pentecostal movements, focusing on the link with poverty, migration, and racial segregation.²¹ Podolinska's substantial research on Roma Pentecostalism in Slovakia argues against this view, saying that deprivation theory is incomplete. The religiosity of Roma prior to conversion is complementary to Pentecostal praxis, and "identity-construction and the motivation for fulfilling spiritual needs" should warrant as much consideration as the notion that Pentecostalism is filling in the gaps caused by ethnic and socio-economic marginalization.²² In fact, Cantón-Delgado's research in Spain shows that conversion is higher among the less-marginal groups.²³

Another view is that Pentecostalism results in the revitalization of identity, considering this faith either as an effective “vehicle of Romani ethnic identity” or as a “new kind of diaspora,” resulting from a new belonging in God’s family.²⁴ Many testimonies recount the acceptance of God’s love which was transformative. Embracing an identity as a son or daughter of God has replaced a sense of shame with pride and dignity.²⁵ On the other side, in some contexts, ethnic distinction is still preserved between different Roma groups and between the *gadje* and Roma.²⁶

Although this is not emphasized in the literature, my research conducted relates how miraculous healings, visions and dreams play a significant role in the growth of Pentecostalism. This can be seen both on an individual as well as on the corporate level, which in turn becomes a catalyst for widespread revival. Pentecostal Roma pastors argue that the emotive nature of Pentecostalism is important, connecting with the people on a deep level.

Indeed, if anything, this brief summary of Roma Pentecostalism illustrates that it cannot be considered a formula intersecting a community with consequential predictable results. Studying different contexts and diverse perspectives reveals the Roma as a “complex set of communities that challenge the hegemony of categorizing people into ethnicities” and the spread of Pentecostalism as a “number of different revivals” rather than a single story.²⁷ Pastors and individuals differ on numerous points: their opinion and relationship to the *gadje*, their attitude toward other Roma groups, their concept of mission and church, language usage in church, strict gender codes such as female head coverings, and the issue of dancing in church. Yet such differences should not mute the fact that in the last fifty years, a “discourse has emerged with its own parameters, which is greater than any one particular embodiment of it and its leaders are aware of this.”²⁸

Roma and Pentecostalism in Southeastern Europe

Socio-economic Context

Southeastern Europe is a context which has often struggled against the control of mighty powers, been subject to numerous wars in the

twentieth century, and is currently besieged with political and economic problems. Many Roma in Croatia and Serbia talk fondly of former Yugoslavia, because they generally experienced greater economic and social security. Like other Yugoslavians, most Roma had steady jobs or ways of making income. However, this could be not sustained after the collapse of state socialism, and many Roma did not have the education or higher job skills to pursue other options. Today in Apatin, Serbia, for example, interviewed Roma contrasted their previous work in the factories to their current one: eight hours of physical field labor earning the equivalent of \$8.50 a day, collecting scrap metal to sell, or their own small business such as buying and selling chickens.²⁹

The Roma were not primarily in the political conversation of the European Union (EU) until the 1990s. Even then, until 2000, the conversation was mainly about their westward movement from Eastern Europe. At that point, the focus shifted to their rights as a minority in their home countries, and this became a “conditional requirement for achieving the ultimate goal of EU membership.”³⁰ Southeastern Europe has participated in several large-scale EU and non-EU projects concerning the Roma. This included the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-15), which targeted the areas of education, employment, and health and housing. In 2011, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 was adopted.

Progress reports from these initiatives have been grim, however, even in the midst of the general socio-economic crisis experienced by the Western Balkans. In fact, recent studies indicate that, despite decades of the EU working towards improving infrastructures, “the overall picture is still bleak and the Roma populations in the Western Balkans continue to face discrimination in almost all spheres of life.”³¹ A substantial percentage of Roma in the Western Balkans live in deep poverty, facing lack of education, social protection, health, housing and employment. The poverty rate is 36 percent, as compared to 11 percent among non-Roma.³² In other words, there is a marked difference between the programs, legislation, and language at a higher state and political level in contrast to the reality in the communities themselves. The EU can *disseminate* its norms as a precondition to membership, but these have not shown to actually transform the situation at a grass-roots level.³³

Religious Context

Pentecostalism in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro does not have big movements and large churches as compared to elsewhere, even with neighboring Romania. Most Croatians would identify as Catholics, and most Serbians would identify as Orthodox. Particularly after the wars in the 1990s, national identity is tightly intertwined with religious identity. Consequently, often evangelical churches such as Baptists and Pentecostals are considered sects by the dominant church traditions. For Croatians and Serbians, evangelical churches are small and slow growing.

The exception to this was a revival in a Roma community that began in Leskovac, Serbia. In the 1970s, Serbian Pentecostal pastor Mio Stanković prayed for a Roma woman who was healed. This reoriented his perspective to begin a “mission-within-a-mission” to the Roma in his Serbian majority church. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a sudden outpouring of healings and miracles caused a growing number of Roma to come to church for prayer and healing. By the mid-1990s, one meeting multiplied to three in a day to accommodate all the people. The church split in 2005, and at that time it had grown to 1000 people—one tenth of the total Roma population of the city. In the late 1990s, in partnership with an organization from England, the church began to train church planters, and seven churches were planted throughout Serbia. Although not all the church plants succeeded, the movement continues to grow. In 2015, it was estimated that there were eight larger churches and eight house groups of 20–40 people each. In addition, as of 2017, there are several other Roma Pentecostal churches and home groups unaffiliated with this particular movement in Serbia.³⁴

Croatia has not seen this kind of rapid growth, but in 2010, leaders from Leskovac visited and encouraged a Roma couple in Eastern Croatia to move forward with their vision to minister to their people. Like Leskovac, a woman’s healing was instrumental in forming relationships within the Roma villages in Darda, Croatia, and the couple planted the first Roma church in the fall of 2012. The church remains small (around 30 adults), but has become more multicultural including several Croatians, Dutch, and Americans, although the majority is Roma.

Roma Leaders on Human Flourishing or “The Good Life”

As part of my research, a series of short questions were asked of ten Roma church leaders in Croatia and Serbia from both urban and rural areas.³⁵ Even from such a relatively small area, interpretations of being Pentecostal varied. One claimed that it was because of the gifts of the Spirit, it “would be hard for a Roma to be Baptist.” Another group of leaders said that Pentecostalism is a good fit for Roma because they are very open to the spiritual world. Another emphasized the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit. Yet, another said he was just evangelical, despite a beliefs and praxis usually associated with Pentecostalism. One remarked it was because the gospel came to him through the Pentecostal church: “If I was converted in the Baptist church, I would be Baptist. I am not connected to Pentecostals or anyone else, but connected to Christ.”

The central questions were these:

1. How would you describe “shalom” or “a good life” in a Roma context in Serbia or Croatia?
2. How do you define ‘change’ in an individual and in a community?
3. What things in a Roma community need to change for this to happen?
4. What, if any, is the church’s role in helping the relationship between Serbians and Croatians and Roma? Has this improved in your community?

All agreed that nothing is possible without God’s initiative, that God changes the person, not organizations, programs, or the EU. One interviewee put it this way:

When the person is changed, they change their surroundings. When God changed me, then through me he changed my family . . . our opinions, customs, etc. When we accept Jesus, Jesus is the one who says what to do. We don’t need to tell people what to do . . . how to dress, how to talk, etc.³⁶

The Good Life in a Roma Context

When pressed to describe this change, especially what a “good life” would be, the responses varied, albeit with certain common themes.³⁷ Z. Bakić described change in the areas of “speech, way of life, [and] way of acting.” He says that God changed his own perception of life, work, and marriage. Đ. Nikolić pictured a “Roma neighborhood” that would no longer be as typically expected, but would be a “normal” street. The Roma would now be considered as the other national minorities in Croatia, living according to the rules of society, having good relationships with neighbors. He remarked, “I think we need to adjust to Croatians,” although his wife vehemently disagreed, arguing that actually far more Croatians were guilty of similar things, but were not subject to a social stigma.

B. Nikolić spoke of decent housing, proper homes with water and electricity so that the kids could go to school clean. The theme emerged of having skills to participate in modern life. Subotin said, “We need to enter modern times and not live like 200 years ago.” He went on to describe the good life as “pride in earning one’s own income, good health, good relationships with non-Roma.”

Raimović, Š. Bakić, Vladica, and Kamberović agreed that the good life would mean change on several fronts.

- Socio-economic: Decline in criminal activity, increase in education, birth of businesses, increase in reading, and integration with other nationalities;
- Family: Mutual respect in the families, peace and patience, decrease of abortions, and women’s equality respected;
- Spirituality and Church: Pastors discipling next generation, spiritual growth, more prayer, growing general awareness and changes of worldview.

What, Then, Needs to Change?

Several themes have emerged in the process of field research. For example, education of both adults and children is a prominent theme.

A community leader spoke that part of the challenge is helping the Roma community to accept that education can improve the life of people in the community.³⁸ A pastor related that recently his own son was not doing well in school. Thus, he took him to visit some very poor Roma families who work constantly to barely eke out a living. “Do you want to do this your whole life?” he asked his son. B. Nikolić spoke about the challenging slow rate of improvement in attitude among girls and young women in the community, with whom she was working for the past five years. “In church, we have about twenty girls who are in school, but only three are going to high school. It is not a drastic change, but God is slowly changing things.” Subotin related the steady change in his community where more value is now placed on education: “Eighty percent of youth are now in high school and starting to think more about the future. Beginning to feel less shame, their parents are proud that their children are getting a diploma. This is something new.” Many expressed their desire to see Roma occupy influential positions in society as lawyers, doctors, politicians, and educators, and not just the lowest paid jobs in society.

This relates to the critique of “mindset” which many leaders referred to. How would this critique be manifested in everyday life? The first is moving from a day-to-day focus to one taking the future seriously. This relates to all areas from health (preventive health measures vs. emergency) to spending or saving one’s paycheck or social help. The second is the creation of awareness within the people themselves about what needs to change in order to be good neighbors. For example, one pastor said, “Educate them on other ways of living. Show them pictures of different ways of living so they can recognize having a garden in the yard instead of disorganized piles of scrap metal to sort and sell for income.” The third is demonstrating true change by showing love to each other, giving to others generously, and looking at life positively. The fourth is discouraging the tendency toward early marriage, as Đ. Nikolić said, “I wish more pastors would speak out against this.” There are other specific things related to “entering modern society,” such as helping people complete their personal documents, legalizing houses, receiving health education, more adults going to school to read and write, and encouraging women’s rights. There has also been an emphasis on economic

uplift: fighting poverty with more employment and encouraging more entrepreneurship.

Discussion

According to Cantón-Delgado, it is easy to frame the interpretation of Roma Pentecostalism through language that adheres to the goals of the state, studying it only in terms of “integration” or “social benefits.” Roma Pentecostalism, she argues, represents “the expression of a non-secular process that can bring (and is in fact bringing) alternative forms of political/cultural affirmation through unexpected ways.”³⁹ For example, in Northern Europe and in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, spreading Christianity and morality among the Roma was linked to initiatives such as sedenterization, and “reforming the Gypsies” to make them useful citizens. These impulses led to attempts to “purge” children from their Gypsy culture by separating them from their parents into charity schools and forbidding the speaking of Romani.⁴⁰

This “cultural affirmation” through an experiential acceptance of God’s love is a key element in terms of holistic transformation. Roma in Croatia and Serbia tend to be more open to spiritual conversations and the spiritual world in general than the majority cultures around them. It is not unusual to hear about a vision or dream, the interpretation of which is often received as a message from God.⁴¹ Church leaders concede, however, that growth and change is slow and tedious. This is expressed by Z. Bakić, “I have been here for twelve years and change is slow. People will convert and [be] baptized, but the change is slow. People are not yet ready for leadership.” In Leskovac, the significant changes emerged slowly after three decades. They include a reduction in crime, fewer young marriages, a higher percentage of kids going to high school, decreasing domestic violence and fights between households, and better relationships with the Serbian authorities.

In Croatia, Đ. Nikolić feels overwhelmed with the complexity of problems and questions how he can have influence: “I never did, but now I must think about these things. I see them as a huge problem and I feel very small to do anything about it.” This response

is understandable due to the layers of social, economic, cultural, and political complexity. The Roma “have been forced to occupy marginal spaces on the fringes of the dominant social and economic systems” and, therefore, developed “the craft of living under the conditions of resource scarcity.”⁴² This may sometimes mean doing something against the law. For example, suppose that a household, living in sub-standard conditions, is stealing electricity in order to have light. The church cannot merely state that “this is a sin” without addressing the situation around it.

Because of this ongoing complex reality, Roma Pentecostalism cannot be viewed apart from its relationship with its wider social context. In reality, in spite of the vision and desire of most Roma leaders for holistic transformation in their communities, the extent of transformation is correlated to the wider population. In other words, a change can progress only so far before hitting a “glass ceiling” of restrictive attitudes by the majority.⁴³ These attitudes can either surface blatantly or lurk in subtle forms, shaping non-verbal responses and general orientation.

In the same survey all the leaders except two⁴⁴ claim that very little improvement has been made in the relationship between Roma and the majority culture, and this is both a measure of the “good life” as well as a barrier preventing the “good life.” In fact, they are keenly aware that discrimination they face is not only from society but also from the wider church. “Although all cultures do bad things, we are sealed forever with certain stereotypes,” Đ. Nikolić said. He made a specific reference to the connection always made between Roma and witchcraft. Subotin’s social action towards both Serbians and Roma is well known by the municipality in which he lives. Therefore, the authorities support his projects. In the other communities in which he works, things are much more difficult because they do not know him. Recently, he tried to take a group of couples out for dinner as part of a church-sponsored marriage course, but they were refused service from two restaurants as soon as they walked in.

Sometimes it may be fear, based on past experiences or expectation of prejudice, which prevents someone from interacting with the majority culture.⁴⁵ For example, B. Nikolić was recently trying to facilitate prayers for all the nations in a children’s Sunday school. They

reacted strongly against this idea, because, they said, people are always cursing them for being “gypsies.” Thus, they did not want to pray for them.⁴⁶ That being said, facing fear or expectation of prejudice is much more daunting if one is in a harshly vulnerable position in society.

In addition, as referred to in the earlier literature, Christian Roma can also have an attitude of ethnocentrism toward other Roma groups and the non-Roma. The fear and prejudice on all sides is a serious barrier to transformative mission: “For both the Roma and the *gadje*, these perceptions, assumptions, constructed images, and certainly racism erect complex, mutually reinforcing barriers of isolation and separation that present a serious challenge to the church’s participation in God’s mission in Central and Eastern Europe.”⁴⁷

The church plays a key role in facilitating transformative relationships and community development, and this role is recognized even by non-religious authorities. The two churches in Leskovac both relate how the government recognizes the changes in the surrounding Roma communities and the influence of the churches. As a consequence, they began to consult with the churches and their leaders regarding various issues concerning the Roma. Alijević told of a turning point when he and a Roma civic leader met the Serbian mayor. According to him, “The mayor said that whatever is the need concerning the Roma people, he would consult with me [pastor] rather than the Roma leader, because the people will more likely listen to me.” Đ. Nikolić states, “We need to break our prejudices first and change ourselves, not our neighbors . . . but there needs to be some life together, common life together. It is necessary that people trust each other.”

The leaders from Croatia and Serbia (as well as other of Southeastern Europe) desire that their church is not just for Roma. Alijević notes, “It is not good to look on who is Roma, Serbian and Croat, because God’s word is the same for all. . . . We have a very good fellowship with our Serbian brothers and sisters, and sometimes non-Roma are serving in our church.” Further, many hold the idea that God intends to use the Roma to bless the other nations. The three-year-old grassroots movement, Roma Networks, connects Roma leaders and ministries from around Europe. Its common refrain has become “Roma for the nations.” Academic studies have described such an impulse as

“symbolic inversion of persecution.”⁴⁸ This concept is nothing new in the biblical narrative and missiological conceptual paradigms, the “least” becoming the catalyst and showcase of God’s power and mission taking place from the margins.

Significantly, the founding board of Roma Networks includes a Roma pastor from Serbia and a Croatian woman who serves in a Roma church in Croatia. Their vision of transforming Roma communities emphasizes, among other things, God’s reign over ministry territorialism and reconciliation between Roma and non-Roma. The most recent conference in March 2017 highlighted the importance of unity as a witness for the gospel. If this kind of missional vision grows along with the number of Roma Christians in Southeastern Europe, albeit slowly, modeling reconciliation as a paradigm for mission may well serve as the most compelling witness of the gospel to all the nationalities in the region.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In light of the slow growth of Roma Pentecostalism in these countries of Southeastern Europe, set amidst the challenging socio-economic and cultural realities, Roma leaders speak of both the needs and potential for ministry as part and parcel of their view of transformation. There is a spoken need for both missionaries and tools that can speak to the multivalent community issues and train new leaders, as the needs far outweigh the workers. This spoken need, however, has its own challenges, even as in the last ten years, the Roma have become a more popular mission field for Western organizations. One pastor recently spoke of the growing problem of organizations offering money and resources without proper investigation or relationships. Such mission practices, based on the organization’s agenda rather than on felt needs, create dependencies, jealousies, and bad practices.⁵⁰ Sometimes, Roma leaders feel that their communities and people are used as pictures and headlines to gain financial support or prestige for another organization.

Even good intentions can hide a paternalistic stance of “what needs to happen to fix the community.” This orientation is not really different

from centuries of attempts to force the Roma into complying with the “symbolic image of how ‘proper citizens’ should organize their social and economic affairs.”⁵¹ In terms of mission, knowledge of this complex history as well as the past mission legacy of “Christianizing and civilizing” in cross-cultural exchanges is critical.

In other words, an awareness of both language and framework for the concept of mission and transformation is important. Schreiter argues that the “ministry of reconciliation is a spirituality rather than a strategy.”⁵² In an intensely relational Roma context, a spirituality of reconciliation grows most naturally in the soil of constant relationships over time. Roma Pentecostalism in Southeastern Europe is really just beginning. How the global church engages with some of these considerations could determine how it will influence and be influenced by this phenomena.



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Notes

1 The groups of people I intend to refer to when I use “Roma” (which has been adopted for public discourse after 1989) can differ according to how people understand boundaries and markers of identity. These groups of people can be quite diverse, and may differ according to country and context. Sometimes, the way a certain group identifies itself is at odds with how the majority culture or even how academics identify them. Romani people are thought of as an ethnic group with their own language, while Gypsies may be Romani or a related ethnic group including Gypsies, Roma, Sinti, “travellers,” Gitano, Dom, Lom, etc. In this paper, I use Roma (and sometimes Gypsy when the historical context requires it) in the broadest sense, to refer to groups possessing related sociological indicators (which may include language, a shared experience, shared sense of history, some common culture) and/or who self-identify as Roma, Romani, or Gypsy. David Thurfjell and

- Adrian Marsh, eds., *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014) 8.
- 2 David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh, "Introduction," in Thurfjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 7.
- 3 David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) xvii, xviii, 35.
- 4 Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, "Historical and Ethnographic Background: Gypsies, Roma and Sinti," in Will Guy, ed., *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001) 33–53.
- 5 Štěpán Ripka, "Pentecostalism among Czech and Slovak Roma: The Religiosity of Roma and the Practices of Inclusion of the Roma in the Brotherhood in Salvation, Autonomy and Conversions among Roma in Márov" (a PhD dissertation, Charles University in Prague, 2014) 88; Michal Ruzicka, "Unveiling What Should Remain Hidden: Ethics and Politics of Researching Marginal People," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 41:2 (2016) 161.
- 6 Manuela Cantón Delgado, "Stigma and Ethno-Genesis amongst Pentecostal Gitanos in Spain," in Thurfjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 75–88.
- 7 Marsh and Thurfjell, "Introduction," in Marsh and Thurfjell, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 13.
- 8 Elin Strand locates it in this historical moment, arguing that its growth "met a need for spiritual rehabilitation following the suffering and losses of 1939–1945." Elin Strand, "'One Scattered Race like Stars in the Sight of God': The International Gypsy Evangelical Church," in Thurfjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 109–26. Régis Laurent refers to the Gypsies that were in Nazi concentration camps and were now in a country still inhospitable to them. Régis Laurent, "On the Genesis of Gypsy Pentecostalism in Brittany," in Thurfjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 31–40.
- 9 Le Cossec, who is non-Roma, eventually became known as the "Apostle to the Gypsies." Laurent, "On the Genesis of Gypsy Pentecostalism in Brittany," 33, 39. René Zanellato is the current international coordinator and founder of mission work in Russia and central Asia.
- 10 Thomas A. Acton, "New Religious Movements among Roma, Gypsies and Travellers: Placing Romani Pentecostalism in an Historical and Social Context," in Thurfjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 26. See also René Zanellato (GATIEF@orange.fr), "G.A.T.I.E.F 2014 Worldwide Report, Life and Light Mission" (2014).
- 11 Magdalena Slavkova, "'Prestige' and Identity Construction amongst Pentecostal Gypsies in Bulgaria," in Thurfjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 60; Sorin Gog, "Post-Socialist Religious Pluralism: How do Religious Conversions of Roma Fit into the Wider Landscape? From Global to Local Perspectives," in A. Boscoboinik and F. Ruegg, eds., *Transitions: Nouvelles identités rom en Europe centrale & orientale* (Brussels: Université libre de Bruxelles, 2009) 93–108.
- 12 Manuela Cantón-Delgado, "Gypsy Leadership, Cohesion and Social Memory in the Evangelical Church of Philadelphia," *Social Compass* 64:1 (2017) 76–91.

13 For example, a Roma migrant church in Luton, England is made of the Rugul Aprins [Burning Bush] movement from Toflea, Romania. This is the place where a revival began in the 1990s and resulted in 80 to 90 percent of the village converting to Christianity. Roma Pentecostals from Lom, Bulgaria have four “daughter churches” in Germany. However, these examples are not particularly missional outside their own Roma group.

14 Veselin Popov and Elena Marushiakova, “The Relations of Ethnic and Confessional Consciousness of Gypsies in Bulgaria.” *FACTA UNIVERSITATIS - Series Philosophy, Sociology, Appropriation and Social Psychology and History* 6 (1999) 81–89. Melody J. Wachsmuth, “Roma Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges, Opportunities for Mission, Modes of Significance,” in Corneliu Constantineanu, Marcel V. Măcelaru, Anne-Marie Kool and Mihai Himcinschi, eds., *Mission in Central and Eastern Europe: Realities, Perspectives, Trends* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2017) 555–56. For example, a qualitative and mapping study commissioned by The Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences on Slovakia, see Tatiana Podolinska and Tomáš Hrustič, “Religion as a Path to Change? The Possibilities of Social Inclusion of the Roma in Slovakia” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010). On Bulgaria: Miroslav Atanasov, “Gypsy Pentecostals: The Growth of the Pentecostal Movement among the Roma in Bulgaria and Its Revitalization of Their Communities” (a PhD dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008).

15 Atanasov, “Gypsy Pentecostals,” 273.

16 Ripka, *Pentecostalism in Slovakia*, 40.

17 Thurffjell and Marsh, “Introduction,” in Thurffjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 11. Agustina Carrizo-Reimann, “The Forgotten Children of Abraham: Iglesia Evangelica Misionera Biblica Rom of Buenos Aires,” *Romani Studies* 21:2 (2011) 161–76.

18 Ripka, *Pentecostalism in Slovakia*, 80, 81.

19 Melody J. Wachsmuth, “Separated Peoples: The Roma as Prophetic Pilgrims in Eastern Europe,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37:3 (2013) 145–50.

20 Acton, “New Religious Movements,” 29.

21 Thurffjell and Marsh, “Introduction,” in Thurffjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 15.

22 Tatiana Podolinská, “Questioning the Theory of Deprivation: Pentecostal Roma in Slovakia,” in Thurffjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 89.

23 Cantón-Delgado, “Gypsy Leadership,” 3.

24 Acton, “New Religious Movements,” 23; Cantón-Delgado, “Gypsy Leadership,” 9.

25 The author’s interviews and conversations with individuals and church leaders from Romania, Serbia, and Croatia (2013–17). Also Cantón-Delgado, “Gypsy Leadership,” 8.

26 Johannes Ries, “The Cultural Dynamics of Romani/Gypsy Ethnicity and Pentecostal Christianity,” in Thurffjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 127–40.

27 Thurffjell and Marsh, “Introduction,” in Thurffjell and Marsh, *Romani Pentecostalism*, 11.

28 Acton, “New Religious Movements,” 30.

- 29 Interviews and conversations by author in Apatin, Serbia, March, 2017.
- 30 Murat Önsoy and Zeynep Arkan Tuncel, “The Case of the Western Balkan Roma: A Litmus Test for Normative Power Europe? *Hacettepe University Journal of Economics and Administrative Sciences* 35:1 (2017) 52.
- 31 Önsoy and Tuncel, “The Case of the Western Balkan Roma,” 41–65.
- 32 Different bodies conduct these reports. For example, the *Roma Inclusion Index 2015*, Human Rights Watch, Council of Europe, and European Commission.
- 33 Önsoy and Tuncel, “The Case of the Western Balkan Roma,” 57.
- 34 Several articles and accounts have been written about Leskovac, including an interview from Else Stanković: <http://www.rollinghills.org/Websites/rollinghills/files/Content/2452995/SerbiaWEB-2012.pdf>
- Also, see Wachsmuth, “Roma Christianity,” 559; Melody J. Wachsmuth, “Missional Reorientation—God’s Mission as the Intersection of Surprise and Constancy,” *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 7:2 (Zagreb, Croatia, 2013) 209–20.
- 35 The responders include: Đeno and Biljana Nikolić, interview by author, Darda, Croatia, March 14, 2017; Aleksandar Subotin, interview by author, Kucura, Serbia, March 18, 2017; Erman Salković, interview by author, Zemun, Serbia, March 28, 2017; Miki Kamberović, Šerif Bakić, Rama Raimović, Vladica Idic, email reply to Interview Questions, March 24, 2017; Zvezdan Bakić, Interview by author, Apatin, Serbia, March 19, 2017; and Selim Alijević, email reply to Interview questions, April 5, 2017.
- 36 Interview with B. Nikolić.
- 37 Interview details are found in note 35.
- 38 In March 2017, I was in a Romanian-speaking Roma community of 5000 people. My cultural guide was a young woman who was twenty years old and attending a university in a large city. She was the only person from this community who had gone on to higher education, but some people disapproved of this. My hosts told me, “I think this is not good that she keeps going to school.” Their priority value is on closeness of family. In this community, pursuing education past the eighth grade or to high school is viewed negatively, particularly as it takes her away from her family and postpones her own marriage and family.
- 39 Cantón-Delgado, “Gypsy Leadership,” 12.
- 40 Strand, “One Scattered Race,” 113, 114.
- 41 In the numerous interviews I have conducted, visions and dreams can play a key role in conversion, or as a message of comfort and love, a warning, a “redirect,” or even condemnation. Church leaders in the past have discussed the necessity to “test these messages” to ensure that they are from God and align with the teaching of the Bible (Wachsmuth, “Separated Peoples”).
- 42 Michal Ruzicka, “Unveiling What Should Remain Hidden: Ethics and Politics of Researching Marginal People,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 41:2 (2016) 160.
- 43 For example, a person can have the appropriate level of education but have trouble obtaining a job when the employer sees he or she is Roma.

44 One pastor said that the relationship between Serbians and Roma was better because the Serbians in his area were now as poor as, or poorer than, the Roma, but the Roma had more survival skills in this particular economic climate. Another pastor said things were much improved.

45 Attitudes of prejudice can be difficult to quantify or qualify. For example, a young Roma woman, a trained hairdresser, told me that she cannot get a job because she is Roma. In truth, she has not tried. However, this ambiguity is set in the context of my own observations of the deep prejudice (through actions and comments from the majority) as well as listening to numerous Roma accounts of direct prejudice. On the other hand, occasionally someone tells an account of an open reception when prejudice is expected.

46 Using Gypsy with a lower case “g” indicates an insult.

47 Wachsmuth, “Roma Christianity,” 565.

48 Laurent, “On the Genesis,” 36, 37.

49 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 399.

50 Zvezdan Bakić, Conversations with author, Apatin, Serbia, March, 2017.

51 Ruzicka, “Unveiling,” 147–64.

52 Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants*, 393.