

Slavkova, M. "Roma Pastors as Leaders Roma Protestant Communiies." - In: Đorđević, Dr. (ed.) Roma Religious Culture. - JUNIR (Niš), 2003, 168-177.

## **ROMA PASTORS AS LEADERS OF ROMA PROTESTANT COMMUNITIES**

In the present article we will try and explain some of the main tendencies in the development of the religious processes associated with Roma evangelism in Bulgaria, as well as the place and role of the pastors as leaders for the Roma Protestant societies. It is necessary to specify that the main and external, in this case, manifestations of Evangelism, (external because these are tendencies which do not characterize a single church as a local subject), are not characteristic for Bulgaria only but can be observed in all parts of the world where Gypsy groups are being baptized. There exist numerous and diverse reasons for the adoption of Evangelism which depend on the way of life within the group. At the same time, separate individuals point out different personal motivations explaining how "God opened their hearts for them to let him in", as a kind of miracle or miraculous healing. Conversion to Protestantism as a process has features, which are common for all Gypsy communities notwithstanding the political, cultural and social conditions of life.

The leading role of the Roma pastors finds its manifestations in several spheres - the religious life of the group (connected with the church and divine service), its social, everyday, and cultural life. This means that after the conversion into Evangelism, the Gypsy community tends to change its previous lifestyle thoroughly, thus organizing it in accordance with the local church and the pastor.

In the following text we will introduce **Roma Protestantism**, conceptually, and analyze some particular manifestations of the above mentioned tendencies.

### **Roma Protestantism**

As historically developed tendency, Roma Protestantism is defined as mass conversion of the Gypsy groups to Evangelism in Europe and America. Defined as process, it is the specific way of acceptance of certain religious models by the *Roma*, these models' assimilation by their specific ethnic culture and system of values, until they start

functioning with their own forms. This means that *Roma* accepts the main dogmas of Protestantism although in their specific environment they attain different aspect and meaning. The specific features of the Roma Protestantism find manifestation in all spheres of the life of the believers and their groups, and especially with the Gypsies those features are more discernible and more easily analyzable in their cultural system, although with each different group they might show various facets.

Chronologically, Roma Evangelism in Bulgaria began its spread in the early 1900s, initially covering the territories of Northwest Bulgaria (the towns of Bercovitsa, Montana, Lom, Vidin and adjacent villages) and the capital city, Sofia. The process of appearance of new church bodies has been going on till the present moment, covering the whole territory of Bulgaria. As a result of the efforts of the Western Protestant stations (mainly American and English pastors) for dissemination of ‘the word of God’, a whole network of Roma religious societies have appeared, creating, in turn, their own function models. In the course of time these communities develop as independent prayer houses, headed by Roma pastors. The bigger ones have a better organized structure with pastors, advisors, deans, treasurers, church choir, evangelizers etc. (Lom, Sofia churches and others).

The task of estimating the overall number of the Roma churches is a difficult one, because of the constant increase and separation of religious communities lead by spiritual leaders, and the formation of new churches. Different Roma pastors quote different information about the number of temples in Bulgaria. According to the pastor of Bulgarian Holy church in the town of Razlog (Southern Bulgaria), there exist over 400 Roma communities and churches. This, of course, is unofficial information, and their number is practically much higher, because the pastors can estimate the number of believers within their denomination only, not being in direct coordination with the others. Totally different information gives R. Zanellato (Zanellato), a member of ‘Gypsies and Travellers International Evangelical Fellowship’, who says that there are 130 churches and 85 Roma pastors. In both cases the information is unreliable because this data is a matter of personal statistics and does not have official character. We must, once again, point out that the appearance of Roma churches is not a unique Bulgarian phenomenon, and that our country is part of the overall tendency of the development of the phenomenon Roma Protestantism, with all the relativity of this term in Bulgarian might hold.

The propaganda among the Gypsies in Europe began as early as the middle of the 19c. (mainly under the leadership of the Biblical Society in London), whereas its mass spread among different Gypsy and other groups (*Manuš, Sinti, Roma, Gitanos, Kalo, Yeniš, Travellers* etc.) in the 50s (Acton, 1979: 289-295; Williams, 1984: 49-51; Williams, 2002).

### **The Roma Church**

Before we explain the meaning of the Roma church, it is necessary to explain the use of the terms - community, church, and prayer house/ temple. Throughout the text, those will appear as synonyms because the believers themselves always call the place they meet for services a church although the community might be from 3 up to 400 people, without a church building and a full-time pastor. In this case we have chosen this interpretation, although it is more correct to treat them terminologically, where on the basis of certain indications (number of members, own building, developed hierarchical structure etc.) we call the religious congregation with the definition we consider appropriate, community, church etc. (for more detailed information on the scientific definition of the religious community as cult, sect, denomination or church see Đorđević, 1998). On the other side, the term 'church' itself has a triple meaning. It is interpreted as institution (very often the Roma church plays institutional role within the frames of a regulated environment, without the need for it to be officially accepted as Roma church), as prayer house/temple, where people meet for services and prays, and very often it might mean Christian gathering of *Roma* held usually at homes e.g. community.

The Roma evangelical churches belong to (e.g. officially registered) three main branches of the Protestant church. The first is considered traditional because it has functioned on Bulgarian territory ever since the 19c., and has at present an established church structure with a network of churches all over the country. Here belong the Congregationist, Methodist and Baptist churches. The second branch includes the Pentecostal church and the churches which have evolved from it, namely Bulgarian God's church, United God's church and their subdivisions: New Generation (formerly known as Rema church), United God's church of Providence, Christian church "Sion" and others.

We can also classify here different local subdivisions like “Life and Light” (Sofia), God’s church “Vetil” (the town of Lom, Northwest Bulgaria), Bulgarian God’s church “Agape” (Rakitovo, Southern Bulgaria), United God’s church ”The Source of Life” (Semchinovo, district of Pazardzik, Southern Bulgaria) etc. These churches are treated separately because of some existing differences in the way the service is held, which otherwise are lacking with the traditional one: rhythmic movements during service, falling into trance and glassolalia (the state of speaking unknown divine languages). The Adventist church comprises the third branch of the Protestant church in our classification. Unlike all the other churches, the Adventists do not consider themselves Evangelists, and do not take part in the organizations of the other denominations. We do not classify here religious societies such as Jehovah’s Witnesses because their influence on the *Roma* is not yet consistent and does not result into the creation of new independent Roma churches. However, we should point to the fact that they have had an increasing number of followers in the region of Razrag, the Northeast of Bulgaria, and Kjustendil, the West of Bulgaria etc. Belonging to one or the other branch of the Protestant church defines the way the services are held, behaviour during the sermon, and often behaviour in society. Very often the Roma churches are set one against the other on the basis of their denominational belonging. There are contradictions among the preachers, which are the result of the fight for superiority and the distribution of the spheres of influence within the regulated religious environment of the *Roma*. Officially the Roma churches are not institutionally unified, but there have been tendencies showing attempts in progress. According to the status of the United God’s church, any local church, which manages to collect twelve churches under its leadership, may organize its own subdenominational structure. One of the pastors in the Northwest of Bulgaria has managed to organize the necessary number of prayer houses but his idea is to register it as an independent denomination. Another interesting tendency is the meeting of Roma pastors of different God’s churches in Bulgaria, organized at the end of June and the beginning of July 2002 in Sofia. The purpose was to create an independent denomination structure of the Roma God’s churches in the country, represented by their preachers. That would facilitate the contacts with religious organizations and churches from Western and Central Europe. The territory of the country should be divided into parts: Northwest, Southwest, Northeast and Southeast Bulgaria, which would have their

coordinators. This structure is registered as NGO – ‘Association of Roma pastors’ with ideal purposes and has the status of legal entity. All this comes to prove the growing authority of some Roma preachers who wish to regulate part of the evangelical churches in the countries and exert influence on certain religious territory. In September 2002, and in January 2003, suggested by one of the members (believer/ Evangelist, *Rom*) of the ‘Catholic Relief Services’ American organization, head office in Sofia, several seminars were held under the motto ‘Church and Parent Presence in Education’. Pastors from all over the country were invited at the seminars (only members of United God’s church, Bulgarian God’s church and the Pentecostal church, and their subdivisions), representatives from different NGOs and experts from the Ministry of Education and Science. The organization of the seminar proved the increasing awareness, among some believers and pastors, of an existing community, sense of partiality, which go beyond their own church. The idea for these meetings is to help arouse the interest in education among the Roma families, which would result, in the long run, in Roma participation in the life of a civil society on equal terms. The hidden motive of conferences of this sort is the obviously strong position of the pastor for the religious community. Undoubtedly, the influence of the spiritual leaders has grown tremendously, which enables them to act upon and govern members of the churches, and help solving urgent problems, such as the education of Roma children.

As we can see from these examples that the dynamic development of the religious processes is characteristic only for the churches of the charismatic trend in Protestantism (these are all prayer houses registered with the Pentecostal church). With the so-called traditional trend of the Protestant church and the Adventist churches, those processes are not so evident and clear-cut, because of the conservative structure (hierarchy) of the churches and organizations.

Roma churches can be found all over the country and are formed among various Roma groups. The geographical distribution of the churches is quite uneven, and they differ considerably in their concentration throughout the regions. This bears direct connection to the ethnocultural characteristics of the Roma groups (degree of reticence of the group, extent to which Protestant religion has penetrated, appearance of new churches), missionary work in the respective region etc. For example in the Northwest of Bulgaria the

missionary work of Western preachers at the beginning of the 20c successfully leads to the formation of a number of Roma societies and churches. At present, in the regions of Lom, Montana and Vidin a great part of the Gypsy population are Protestants, the religious processes are prominent, and can be analyzed. In the district of Rousse, the North-east of Bulgaria, at present especially active among the *Roma* are Bulgarian God's Church and United God's Church of Providence. Their missions are specially designed for work with the Roma groups of *Burgudjia* (gimlet-makers), *Lingurara* (i.e. spoon-makers, also called "Kopanari" i.e. trough-makers), *Millet* (i.e. people) and others. More specific is the case of the *Kardarasha* group. Protestantism there penetrated quite late and they tend to form their own churches (there are two Roma Kardarash churches in Bulgaria - in Sofia and in Rousse, Northeast of Bulgaria) for several reasons: unstable social position of some of the members of the group, ambition to gain personal authority and prestige or under the influence of the mass spread of evangelism in next-door Roma communities (Erolova, 2003: 284-290) and so on. Which denomination the respective newly formed Roma church would belong to, depends on which Protestant mission the first missionaries they are belonged to.

Protestantism as a movement unites different Roma communities (*Erlia* e.g. local, *Djorevci*, who have a preferred Bulgarian identity; *Xoraxane Roma* (e.g. Muslims); *Dassikane Roma* (e.g. Christians); *Vlaxichki/ Vlaxorja*, *Kalajdjia* [the tinsmiths], *Millet* etc.) in a confessional community, regardless of their traditional belonging in the name of the one and only God, Jesus Christ (Liegeois, 1999: 85-88, for details). Adopting Evangelism for a religious doctrine is a way to find place in the general structure of the macrosociety and to adapt to its parameters. Protestantism has also the advantage of not existing as an adapted element of the culture of the prevailing population, as well as functioning with its own models and conceptual forms. This means that evangelical culture was not adopted under the influence of the Bulgarian majority, and the *Roma* are one of the main adopters of this religion in the process of its spread in Bulgaria.

The Roma church has created an original form of religious as well as social organization, which regulates interaction among the members and directs their social behaviour. In this sense it is an institution although it has not been accepted by the Bulgarian society as Roma Church. Control is administered by the influential and

authoritative figure of the church preacher. He is an object of reverence and a lifestyle model to be followed by the Roma believers. It is often the case that the services are attended by people from other ethnic communities, living in the vicinity of the religious cult place. Most often the Roma churches are situated in compact Roma settlements and neighbourhoods. There may be several prayer houses within one neighbourhood, all in confrontation, because of the struggle for distribution of the religious Gypsy space. This confrontation takes place on the level of pastors who manage churches from different Protestant denominations. So, if in the neighbourhood there are Baptist and Pentecostal communities, the confrontation occurs on the basis of differences in preaching and behaviour during divine services (the Baptists prefer silent service whereas the Pentecostals fall into trance and speak “unknown” languages). The temples belonging to the same denominations try to keep good relationship and sometimes organize joint religious conferences, with the purpose of evangelization (e.g. attracting new followers) and solving different problems from the life of the community. On the other side, organizing such seminars emphasizes the authority of the church pastor, especially if there are guests from foreign Protestant churches. At this point we just not forget that one of the main characteristics of the Roma church is the constant process of segmentation, e.g. the separation of new religious communities with the initiative of the pastors. This phenomenon is also part of the tendency of the increasing influence and authority of the preachers among the Gypsy community.

### **The Roma Pastor**

So far in the expose we have generally outlined the importance of the preacher. Here, we will try and explain why the spiritual leader takes such a distinguished place in the life of the Roma Evangelical auditorium. Most often in the Roma Protestant prayer houses all posts in the hierarchical structure are taken up by Gypsies. It's characteristic for those Evangelical churches that they do not function with the full clerical staff typical for the other Protestant temples. The managing staff of the churches are pastors (officially accepted as such if married and ordained by higher institution), presbyter (may hold the main rituals in the temple, without the right to ordain other people) and preachers (leaders

may have this status on condition they are not married and do not have religious education). The education question among the Roma preachers is very interesting. Part of them have religious education, a several-month-long course or Higher Protestant college, while others don't have the necessary qualification but that doesn't stop them from functioning pretty well as pastors and leaders of churches. There are cases when the preacher is illiterate but has managed to learn by heart the passages from the Bible, and due to his rhetorical skills and authority among the community, has managed to hold the post for a long time. Having authority does not necessarily entail old age for the preacher (unlike the authority distribution within the Roma group [as structure], where age is one of the major prerequisites). There are churches and communities where the pastors are quite young (between 25 and 40), and the congregation can comprise different generations of believers (depending on what age the converted accepted Evangelism). When in one neighbourhood there are several churches, the older Roma Evangelists prefer going to the temple they had their christening in, are accustomed to going to, and last but not least which they are connected with in terms of tradition (e.g. their parents used to go to the same prayer house). When segmentation processes are present, when the authority of one of the churchgoers has gained prominence, the younger believers usually side with him and accept him as a new spiritual leader (for more detailed analysis of the connection between the preacher respect and Evangelism see Gay y Blasco, 1999; Gay y Blasco, 2000: 1-22).

The financial remuneration at some churches is provided by the Head Office of the denomination (for example with the Baptist temples), while at others, by the religious community. During each service people put different amount of money (to their own estimate) in an envelope, which is delivered by the attendants to the preacher (in part of the churches in the Northwest of Bulgaria.). Leaders of churches can be deans but most often they are the main assistants of the pastors. The posts in authority in the Roma prayer houses are taken by men but there are churches in Bulgaria run by women, for example God's Church of Providence in the town of Viatovo (Northeastern Bulgaria), United God's Church 'The Source of Life' in the village of Semchinovo (Southern Bulgaria) and others. Female management of the temples is not unique phenomenon, because Protestant church as an institution grants women the right to run prayer houses. Usually the Roma temples function only with a preacher without having a developed hierarchical structure and the

leader is always called pastor although not being ordained for one. He can have an assistant or assistants - deans who are related to him (usually his sons or brothers). There are also cases when the main assistant is his wife, who is usually called by the believers 'pastress' (United God's Church in Hristo Botev housing complex, Sofia; in the Bulgarian God's Church in the town of Sandanski, the Southwest of Bulgaria). If there are other posts in the temple they are taken by people who are closely related to the pastor. In this case we talk about the existence of family churches. It is not unusual sometimes that the clerical authority be handed down to the next generation - from father to son or grandson, from father-in-law to son-in-law (in the first Roma church in 1930, in the town of Lom, the Northwest of Bulgaria). In this case the church authority is distributed through the traditional institution of kinship relation.

An important part of the religious service of the spiritual leader is the sermon. Within the framework of the temple it combines the religious person and the rhetorician. The sermon should be directed to the congregation and be adapted to the type of congregation (young/ old, male/ female). Interpretation on texts from the Bible is connected with urgent problems of the community (their everyday questions, social questions or questions referring to the whole minority group, *Roma*, for instance. The influence upon the congregation during sermon is achieved by the emotional behaviour of the pastor, his ability to emphasize the most important moments in the prayer or his ability to stay humble and win respect by his wisdom. The preacher's main task is to instruct the laity through texts from the Bible. He preaches that it is bad to steal, cheat, use magic. The preacher emphasizes the harm of drinking: "Do not get drunk on wine but on the Holy Spirit" says part of a sermon in the United God's church in the town of Rousse, the Northeast of Bulgaria. The spiritual leader explains to the *Roma* that they shouldn't marry in haste, Gypsy-style, but take time and get to know their partner well (part of a sermon in Bulgarian God's church in the town of Sandanski, the Southwest of Bulgaria).

In the church temple the preacher is part of the community (he is *Rom* and has the same social problems) and alongside with that he is a spiritual leader, his emotion and respect exert strong influence on the mood of the laity in the prayer house. The authority of the pastor increases if he publishes books on religious topics (these are his own thoughts combined with passages from the Bible) or if his church produces religious musical

products (audio, video cassettes, so far no CDs), and these products are in *Romanes/Romany*.

There is also a slight tendency that the religious leader might try and control the private lives of every member of the community. Lead by their religious leader, the religious community is one of the active centers, which models the public opinion in the neighbourhood or the settlement. The formation of this opinion is achieved by silent control over the members of the community, which is exercised by way of traditional bonds between the members of the Roma group, and the participation in the almost daily prayer. We can give numerous examples of how the pastor wields influence and control over the everyday life of the community. He becomes a model of righteous existence, his personal life is considered worth following (if the preacher has strong authority in the society, his mistakes are not usually discussed and most often they even stay unnoticed) and his opinion is always respected. For some period of time at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s the Tinchevist doctrine (its name comes from its founder, Stoyan Tinchev from Dolni Dubnik, the North of Bulgaria) became popular. This movement sprang up and developed in the 20s of the 20c., and it preached for the dependant role of women in the church and in society. The man as head of the family must have dignified behaviour. This movement became popular with the Roma churches in the town of Lom (Northwest of Bulgaria). A considerable part of the youngsters are attracted by the new religious ideas and the charisma of the spiritual leader and try to emulate his behaviour. Like the pastor they wear dark clothes, beards and moustaches. The young girls go to church as the pastor commands, with their bodies and heads covered, no make-up and they follow this model in their everyday life. When young people enter the age when they start looking for husbands and wives (15-20 years of age) they stop attending public parties, because other boys and girls there are dressed too lightly, drink alcohol; or maybe because their whole day is taken up by church activities (attending services, evangelization in the neighbouring villages and towns). This leads to avid confrontation between the young generation and their parents, who consider their children old enough to make a family rather than dealing with the church deeds all day long. The pastor exercises indirect influence on the other members of the neighbourhood/ settlement mainly by collecting means for a number of purposes. At some big religious holidays like Christmas, Easter,

after the festive divine service is over, the pastor and his assistants go about the houses in groups with informal leaders. During the rounds they sing religious songs in *romanes/Romany*, and the hosts give the believers money or sweets as gifts. In one of the Baptist churches in the town of Lom after the 90s of the 20c new religious holiday was created called the 'thanksgiving day'. The pastor of the temple organizes a special service with prayers and songs. At the service the believers bring different gifts for the temple and after the service those gifts are auctioned among them, with the purpose to financially assist the prayer house. The creation of such forms of assistance among the Gypsies is an adequate answer to the economic instability in the society and helps preserving significant for them (in this case the church) forms of culture.

We must point out that the preacher of the Roma church controls and directs the behaviour of the believers in the society as well, influencing their public conscience. He influences spheres which at first sight have nothing to do with the church, for instance, electoral activity of the believers, their political choices, and their professional occupation and so on. The church and the pastor are connected in an interesting way with the identity demonstration among the different Gypsy groups. This role of the Protestant temple, lead by the pastor, is connected on the one side with the cultural function of the church, which tries to unify the evangelical model in a uniform system, and on the other, it plays an important role for the contemporary ethnical and religious awareness of the Gypsy groups. The church and the pastor create a cultural system, which is religious and social, on the basis of which all Roma communities identify themselves as 'believers' (evangelists) outside their traditional family kinship ties (e.g. although they belong to the groups *Burgudjia*, *Lingurara*, *Vlakxichki* etc.) Their ethnical self-identification as Gypsies/ *Roma* (with the members of most of the Evangelical prayer houses), Bulgarians (the *Djorevci* group in Hristo Botev living complex, Sofia), Turks (the *Millet* group in the Northeast of Bulgaria). Sometimes the church and its pastor might cause changes in the ethnical self-identification pattern. Parts of the *Djorevci* group in Sofia seem more inclined to consider themselves Gypsies/ *Roma*, but superior than all the rest who are non-Protestant. The same tendency for Gypsy self-awareness can be seen with the *Kopanari* group in the Northeast of Bulgaria, abandoning the old identification model of 'Romanians' on the basis of the Romanian dialect spoken there. There is the two-level identification pattern with the Roma

evangelists, with the first place always marked by their belonging to the Roma church, hence the confessional community is set against the non-Protestants (disregarding the ethnical origin); then second comes the family origin where the dichotomy is on group level e.g. their own group is considered standing higher than the rest of the groups. There are exceptions to this, of course, the *Kardarasha* group always place their family belonging first and then the religious confessional type (even if evangelists).

At the present state of the ethnoidentification processes with the Roma groups, there are some interesting tendencies. Under the influence of the pastor part of the group register according to their ethnical belonging. For example, the pastor of one of God's churches in the town of Lom applied for registration of a church with the name 'Independent Roma Church in Bulgaria'. Quite the same is the case in the district of Rouse (the Northeast of Bulgaria), where a pastor from the *Kardarasha* group tries to legalize the existence of a church called 'Bulgarian God's church - Roma'. These examples come to show that the religious processes with the *Roma* are constantly and dynamically developing and can lead to specific cases of identification through the church as an institution.

The Roma church as an institution has marked a lasting presence in the traditional cultural system of the Roma groups. We will provide some examples here, without going into details. On holidays like *Bango Vassilii* (14, January) or *Baro ges* (st. George's day, 6, May) the pastor of each church advises avoiding blood offering because that contradicts the accepted code of Evangelism (Jesus does not accept blood sacrifice). Within the family cycle of holidays (birth, wedding, funeral) the pastor takes over the functions of the Orthodox priest or the Muslim priest. He is the main figure during rituals (he is the honoured guest at the house of a newborn, he performs the divine service when older boys and girls are being christened [there are cases when little children are christened with the Methodist and Congregation churches], the pastor performs the wedding ritual of the new couple, the pastor serves at funerals (for more detailed information on the calendar and family holidays of the *Roma* in Bulgaria, see Marushiakova and Popov, 1993:167-200).

In the conditions of Roma Protestantism the pastor is a universal figure which embodies the role of the spiritual leader (in the church and at services) and the leader whose respect is determining in the everyday life of the believer and his participation in the society (to be a righteous person, who has fear from God, not to commit sins, to be a social

individual with correct and moral conduct). Within the frames of the Gypsy groups the pastor aims at creating a new universal Evangelical model, which can be called an original Evangelical culture. The pastor is becoming the main ritual figure in the calendar holidays of the families as well. The spiritual authority of the Roma pastor is in direct connection with his personal qualities of a leader, rhetorician, and teacher and last but not least, his charismatic personality (about the charismatic personality see Weber, 1992). In this concluding paragraph we will use Richard Glize's words (Williams, 2002) who says that Roma Protestantism signals 'the possibility of a new cultural promise', e.g. the need of the Roma Protestantism to stand in contrast to the society and the authority of the non-Gypsies/ *Gadje*, thus creating the institution of the Roma church lead by its pastor.

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