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ORTHODOX PRIESTS AND THE PROTESTANT ROMA (A Bit of Empirical Research from the South of Serbia)*

INTRODUCTION

“Winding are the roads leading to Roma souls, and each and every one who claims that their souls are easy to ‘conquer’ makes a mistake at the very outset. It seems that religious dignitaries are aware of that fact, but it is solely on them to decide whether they will, as a result of their worldwide altruism, take the right road to their souls.”

It is in the nature of religious and faith groups to spread and grow stronger. Without this they are in danger of stagnation or faced with an even worse outcome, declining and dying out. Apart from all the hardship it has had in the last century, Orthodox faith has been faced with the influx of protestantisation of the population inhabiting traditionally Orthodox areas. Protestant denomination is especially appealing to the so-called national minorities.

In Serbia, especially in the south where the spreading of four Protestant denominations – Baptist, Adventist, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Pentecostal has gained momentum – the Roma are the desired target of missionary work, conversion and proselytism. If the Protestant communities are aiming at this target, why aren’t the Orthodox ones doing the same? We shall attempt to determine this by analysing the interviews with three Orthodox priests and several Protestant Roma.

IGNORANCE ON BOTH SIDES

People are often not familiar enough with, or misunderstand the Orthodox faith, which leads to its misinterpretation. This is especially true for seminary and laymen studies of the West. As sociologists of religion, we know for a fact that Eastern Christianity has received far less attention than its Western counterparts, Protestantism and Catholicism. Recent renowned handbooks in sociology (Cambridge and Oxford ones for example) only occasionally mention the Orthodox faith and Church, whereas the latest study entitled *American Sociology of Religion* (Blasi 2007) leaves it out altogether.

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This should not be confused with the fact that valuable comprehensive studies of the Orthodox faith and recognised Orthodox churches are published at regular intervals, mostly those which regard them from the seminary and historical point of view. These are the following: *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* from 2007, or a monograph by James R. Payton entitled *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*, from the same year, as well as numerous correct interpretations of the Orthodox faith by distinguished Catholics (Đorđević and Jovanović 2010b).

Protestant theologians have been trying to catch up with the factual state and present the Christian faith – which claims to be the only orthodox one – to its believers in its true light, because:

- (a) they do missionary work on “traditionally” Christian territories,
- (b) they come across it more and more in what is “traditionally” their field, and
- (c) they come across it and use it in the evangelisation of the third, neutral territory.

Truth be told, different encounters resulted in a better relationship between Orthodoxy and the so-called Old Protestantism, than between Eastern Christianity and Neo-Protestantism, which were marred by small disputes, as well as serious misunderstandings and severe conflicts. (For the purpose of softening the conflicts a book entitled *Orthodoxy, in the light of Evangelism* by a Serbian Baptist Ivica Stamenković (2010) was published, aimed at various kinds of readership, not just at those sharing the same faith – religious brothers). This book should be read by many: Orthodox believers, for they will find a lot about their faith that they do not know or have not been told, Orthodox theologians, so they would see how their faith is perceived by a “different Christian”, Catholic theologians, so that they can witness the pluralism of views on a confession their faith is fighting for the supremacy with, and sociologists of religion, so that they would find empirical evidence of religious experience which they would be unlikely to encounter by sticking to their science (Đorđević 2011).

Orthodox theologians, to put it bluntly, do not know much about Protestantism and are afraid of it, which is inconsistent with the historical instances of mutual cooperation. They not only shy away from, but reject Neo-Protestantism altogether – especially American denominations, labelling them openly as cults; they openly fight against it and wish it would simply cease to exist (Đorđević and Stajić 2011). However, Orthodoxy is doomed to coexistence with Neo-Protestantism from United States to Australia, Russia to South African Republic, and all the way to South Serbia.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS ABOUT THE ROMA

As their brethren scattered around the globe, our Roma are degraded in most of social subsystems: economy, legal and political spheres and culture. We hold that outbursts of xenophobia and racism, although skilfully veiled, are fully expressed and harmful in the cultural field in its broader sense (culture as a narrower concept + education, means of mass communication, religion...).

The position of the Roma in the religious field is especially delicate, even more so due to the fact that all sorts of hostilities towards them should have died down by now – which is not the case. It might be that the attitude of the majority people (Serbs) and major national minorities (Albanians, Muslims, Hungarians, Croats) is crucial for the attitude towards Roma as believers. Maybe it is the nature of religi-

ous (Christianity and Islam) and confessional systems (Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism, that is, Sunit Islam and Siit Islam), or is it religious structures that should bear most responsibility? Having examined the first two reasons in our other books and papers, we present the reader with the outline of *the dignitary opinion about Christian Roma* (Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Adventists and Pentecostals) and Muslims (Sunit Muslims). The starting point is the following: if the dignitaries of our religious communities cherish a 'sensible' attitude toward Roma believers, there is a chance of improving the attitude of the surrounding and the majority believer groups. It is from this assumption that a possibility for the growth of intercultural practice arises, thereby entailing the elimination of religious intolerance. In that way both religious and confessional acceptance of Roma on the part of ethnic and religious majority would result in a large-scale tolerance, that is, integration. They would become our neighbours indistinguishable from ourselves except for the colour of the skin, which stands for a sort of anthropological and cultural advantage.

Now, We would like only to quote some of the typical excerpts and analyze in the outline the interviews on the Roma as classical believers granted by five dignitaries of our religious communities (Đorđević and Todorović 2000).¹ The interviewees were: Hamdija Jusufspahić (H. J.), the Belgrade mufti, Andrija Kopilović (A. K.), Ph. D. and provost of the Theological-Cathestistic Institute of Subotica Bishopric, Lazar Stojšić (L. S.), the then president of the Evangelical Union of Serbia, Rađša Antić (R. A.), Ph. D. and the then president of the Executive Board of Christian Adventist Church, and Irinej (V. I.), the bishop of Niš.²

All dignitaries, in keeping with the recent democratic changes in Serbia, expect a better treatment for the church from the newly – formed republic and federal Governments. The representatives of Adventist and Evangelical churches express their opinion in a conciliatory tone, as is appropriate for such great and widespread religious communities.

The greatest number of Romani believers is among the Ortodox and the Muslims, there are few of them among Roman Catholics, and their number among Adventists and Evangelical communities is constantly increasing.

A. K.: "Accordingly, I maintain that their inner religious being is very strong, yet they are weak when it comes to religious practice. Or, as we put it, they are not regular believers. They adjust to religious customs as such in order to make them their own.";

H. J.: "I teach my Romani believers that they migrated to this territory as Muslims; they originally came here as Muslims. We Muslims from this area and Muslims from Bosnia and Hercegovina, both Bosnians and Albanians, we adopted the religion from Turks and Roma. Therefore, they are not bad people. In my opinion, they used to be the best believers.";

R. A.: "There are believers among Serbs who join the church and leave it after a short period of time, but there also Roma people who have always been there and who are good believers.";

L. S.: "When they adopt Christianity, the Romas significantly change their way of life. If they are the Romas converted many years ago, the aforementioned change is more apparent. Of course, we come across certain problems regarding the practice of religious customs, which are very simple for us, Evangelical believers.";

V. I.: "Not only the Romas, but each and every man who is only a declarative believer and a member of our Ortodox church, and each and every man whose faith is reduced to a mere celebration of his/her Patron Saint's day – which is usually the case – is not a good believer."

¹ See the book containing integral interviews *Roma Souls* (Живковић и др. 2001).

² The Patriarch of Serbia since last year.

The dignitaries emphasise the equality between the Romas and the other believers. However,

V. I.: "I think that it is high time that population acquired the cultural features and I hold that both the Church and the society commit an unpardonable sin by not investing more effort in cultivating that population.";

A. K.: "I have also experienced very pleasant moments with them in their simple way of life, in such an almost clan – like way of thinking. In my parish, there is no difference between the Romas and other people. They are not marginalized.";

L. S.: "Christian Romas are looked upon with scepticism by their non – Christian compatriots, and the rest of the church members treat the newly – converted Romas in the same fashion as well. Such situation lasts until newly – converted Romas prove they have become sincere and loyal believers by adopting a new lifestyle. After a while, however, one can tell whether a man is a true convert or not."

Bishop Irinej and A. Kopilović put the stress on Romas' liberty to choose where to be buried; Mufti complains of the lack of parcels in which burials could be carried out according to religious regulations; R. Antić insists on burying in exclusively common urban and rural cemeteries, and L. Stojšić notices:

"In certain regions there are the so called separate Romani cemeteries, that is, remnants of Muslim cemeteries in which the Romas are still buried today, be they Muslims, Ortodox or Protestants."

The Bishop states he has not heard of any examples of the intolerance between the Romas of different confessions.

Mufti says: "I have not noticed anywhere that sort of antagonism, but even if there is any, it is not unnatural, and it occurs all around the world between those who understand religion and those who do not.";

L. S. claims: "However, in rural regions Ortodox believers sometimes are more suspicious more than Roman Catholics. When Muslim Romas are being converted into Christianity, it is Muslims who grow distrustful.";

A. K. asserts: "As a matter of fact, there occurs a shift from the religious towards the national, and the intolerant group excludes the other group, believing that a man from that other group has denounced Romani religion, which, to tell you the truth, does not exist in Europe as an independent Romani religion."

Catholics, Ortodox, and Muslims still assume an unfriendly attitude towards minor religious communities – they call them sects and convict them of aggressiveness and forcible conversion. Such attitude is accounted for by the low level of religious education and poor social condition (this especially goes for Roma). Protestants stress the fact that the conversion of the Romas is not such a large – scale process as believed, and that when it does occur, it means a voluntary conversion from one religious community into another one, first of all due to a more acceptable and intelligible Christian teaching.

Only Roman Catholics have the Special Committee for caring about Roma.³ ("On the top of the Church in Rome there is a separate Section for the pastoral of the nomads, Romani nomads. And our bishopric has the Committee for Catholic Roma headed by Marko Forgić, msgr., who is a delegate appointed by the bishop to take ca-

³ See *Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Roma* (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People 2008).

re about the pastoral and Roma. At the former Yugoslav Conference, the bishop of Đakovica was charged with taking care about Roma on the whole ex – Yugoslav territory. Catholic church, therefore, has a separate sections and a separate pastoral for Roma in a bishopric, and it does take care about them.” /A. K./)

Religious dignitaries agree that the translation of religious sacraments and performing certain religious rites in the Romas language may contribute to the creation of religious identity of the Romas of a given confession, yet they point to the need to standardize their language, as an important prerequisite leading to the removal of linguistic barriers between Roma from different regions. None of the dignitaries disapprove of specific expressions of some Roma religious feelings, which are in contrast to their actual confession. The mufti explains this phenomenon: ”It is easier to fight against religion than customs.”

Although they have not said much about the Romas as adherents of two great world religions and their confessions, the religious dignitaries obviously think that the Romas could be ‘good’ church believers, devout Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants and Muslims.

IGNORANCE ON BOTH SIDES – ORTHODOX PRIESTS AND THE PROTESTANT ROMA – IS THIS REALLY THE CASE?

Orthodoxy in south Serbia is not only doomed to coexistence with Neo-Protestant Serbs, the national majority, but also with the growing protestantisation of the local Roma, who are well on the way of outnumbering all other peoples and minorities in the “third branch“ of Christianity. Their conversion has been massive ever since the last decades of the previous century, with no indications that this trend will cease any time soon, if ever. Group conversions to Pentecostalism are also quite common. Local Pentecostal Roma communities, such as the one in Leskovac – the famous “church under the tent“ with several hundred believers – led us to justifiably rename the conversion from protestantisation to pentecostalisation (Đorđević 2005).⁴

Whatever the truth, the fact remains that the so-called small religious Protestant communities have greater success amongst the Roma than the Serbian Orthodox church. *Their success is in direct proportion to the interest of the Serbian Orthodox Church for the overall integration of the Roma people.* And SOC is represented by its priests in the field, which means that the whole situation heavily depends on *the behaviour of the Orthodox clergy.* This is how the Roma from Southeast Serbia perceive it and what they think of it: ⁵

HAVE YOU EVER TURNED TO PRIESTS FOR ANY RELIGIOUS RITES?

BAPTISTS

“No, no. You see, to be honest, we had our doubts about the priests. See, this is where we live now. We have always lived away from everyone else, at the outskirts of the village. Whatever we needed, we asked from our Serbian neighbours. None of the Roma from Gornji Komren has ever asked anything from a priest. They were only called in for the family’s patron saint celebrations, funerals, baptisms and celebrations of the

⁴ You can read more about this in Dragan Todorović’s PhD thesis entitled *The Protestantisation of the Roma in Southeastern Serbia*, which is soon to be presented at the Faculty of Philosophy – University of Belgrade.

⁵ Parts of interviews conducted by D. Todorović in 2009 and 2010 for his dissertation.

village patron saint. No other connections existed. We were distrustful due to our seclusion, we thought they were priests of the Serbs.”

Milovan Bećirović, 61, Baptist, Gornji Komren (Niš)

“No.”

Nefiza-Dragana Bekirović, 39, Baptist, Bela palanka

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

“As far as I know, my family hasn't. They've never come either. Judging by what some people say, when something happened to someone, they would go to church to light a candle. Some still do it, but it was certainly more common in the past than it is now. When someone has a bad dream, when something bad happens or someone is ill, then it's a sort of a superstition, belief, they light or turn the candle.”

Zenko Saitović, 35, Jehovah's Witness, Vranje

ADVENTISTS

“If I remember correctly, if anyone had a problem, an illness, which called for a prayer, they would ask a priest to pray to God, but I'm not really sure, I'm not familiar with these practices. It has never happened in our house, no one has been seriously ill or bed-ridden for so long that they would need to turn to a priest for healing. There have been no other reasons to do this either.”

Boban Tošić, 35, Adventist, Gornji Matejevac (Niš)

“We were completely discriminated against, as if we didn't exist. You know what they said? You have, they said, eaten your cheese church. I remember going to Stopanje with my husband, before we became Adventists, it was Saint George's Day, and there was this custom in which you circle three times round the church, and then I heard my husband ask for a crucifix to be placed on him, and they said: 'No, you don't belong to any religion, you are not entitled to that'.”

Nerija Ajdarević, 58, Adventist, Vinarce (Leskovac)

HOW DID THEY TREAT YOU? DID THEY COME TO YOUR DISTRICT?

BAPTISTS

“No, not that I can remember. If I understand correctly, being in my sixties, it was every Orthodox believer's duty to go to church, priests considered it our duty and didn't think it was up to them to invite us or anything.”

Milovan Bećirović, 61, Baptist, Gornji Komren (Niš)

„Priests came only for the family's patron saint celebration, to cut the bread and nothing else.”

Nefiza-Dragana Bekirović, 39, Baptist, Bela palanka

“No, they only came for festivals or to cut the bread and not on other occasions. Or when we arranged for a baptism, and couldn't go to church, they would come to our house, perform the baptism and that was it.”

Milenko Mirković-Miško, 44, Baptist, Berilje (Prokuplje)

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

“They came to the village, but not to Roma houses, if I remember correctly. They come here, bless the water, but they never come to us.”

Saša Bakić, Jehovah's witness, Taskovići (Niš)

“I have no recollection of any priest coming to us. Erm, at that time, the priest would come to our house and then my mother would tell him that we did not celebrate; he used to go from house to house at the time.”

Perica Demirović, 58, Jehovah's witness, Žitkovac (Niš)

“Priests never made the first step to help with anything that has to do with religion.”

Zenko Saitović, 35, Jehovah's Witness, Vranje

“Well, no one ever came. I don’t know what to say, maybe they thought the Roma were Muslim, that they would have difficulty accepting some Orthodox things, related to Orthodoxy. They considered the Roma Muslim, no need to confuse things.”

Trajče Veselović, 57, Jehovah’s witness, Leskovac

“Let me tell you how it was. My father lived in Medvedja, and we had an imam there, and he might have taken some of the children to him. But, when we came to Pusta reka, there wasn’t an imam there. There were priests, but we weren’t of the same faith to have them talking to us. The situation was similar with other Roma people.”

Zimka Zekić, 68, Jehovah’s witness, Vinarce (Leskovac)

ADVENTISTS

“No, we lived together with Serbs, there were two Roma families there, my father’s and his relatives’. Priests never came to our house. I only have a memory of my grandma, who had something to do with them, and that’s it. My dad didn’t celebrate anything afterwards. To tell you the truth, I have no idea how they treated the Roma in their district, since I have never lived in the district, but here with Serbs.”

Slavica Asanović, 50, Adventist, Niš

“No, they didn’t, but there was this priest, Toma, who was like a friend to us. He loved our family and grandma and grandpa respected him. He still phones occasionally, we have stayed in touch. He hadn’t invited us to church until we converted to Adventism, but now it’s too late.”

Anita Simić, 29, Adventist, Niš

“They used to pay us visits. The previous priest, Rade was his name, he came to every house, just to visit, he even came to Roma houses. I don’t remember how he behaved when he came to our house, I probably wasn’t there, I was at work, I didn’t see him. We had a few priests. There was this Blagoja, I vaguely remember him coming to our house, apart from when he came for the patron saint celebration, he was a sort of a family friend, since he was influential in the entire village. Blagoja, erm, Blagoja is in Pantelej now. Rade the priest came to see us often, but God forgive me, he’s not here now, so it’s no use talking about it, but I didn’t like his behaviour. When he came once when I was at home, don’t know if it was to cut the bread or to bless the water, someone remarked that he charged too much, saying: ‘You used to take as much as we had to give, but now you have set prices’. And since we are musicians, he replied: ‘Well, you make money by playing the lute, guitar, violin and what not, and this is how we make money! You are the same – you play your flute, you ask for a bag of flour.’ Somehow, I didn’t like what he was saying, he should have been calmer, more docile, merciful and polite, and he wasn’t any of these....”

Boban Tošić, 35, Adventist, Gornji Matejevac (Niš)

“Priests never came to Roma houses. Not because they weren’t interested, but because the Roma didn’t go to church. Here, we pray to God and we go to church, and then the priests visits us, our priest, and we talk to him. I don’t know if anyone still goes to the Orthodox church.”

Zoran Zekić, 28, Adventist, Međa (Leskovac)

“What I said is that they only went to priests for holy water, to baptise their children there. I’ll be honest with you. Orthodox priests at the time had the same attitude towards the Roma as everyone else. Poor, wretched, why would they come to us to do anything, you need to pay the priest, they won’t come for free. This is the reason priests never visited the Roma. They were extremely poor, they had only one room to live in, two at most. If they had two, they kept flour and wood in one and slept in the other.”

Života Mirković, 62, Donje Brijanje (Leskovac)

“No, never. Where I used to live, they would visit only the Serbs, and never the Roma.”

Biljana Demirović, 50, Adventist, Dragovac (Bojnik)

“They only came for the money, and they never invited the Roma to church. They never asked whether we had the Bible in the house; until recently they asked no one about the Bible, let alone the Roma.”

Zoran Rušitović, 44, Adventist, Kosančić (Bojnik)

“If I can speak frankly, I will tell you how it was at the time. One day, the priest who was supposed to bless the bread, and every Roma knows the part of the Bible which says that they should not charge according to this commandment. However, the priest charged so much, that people didn’t have enough money for food and living expenses afterwards. I’m talking about the Roma households. And then everything got out of control, so that the Roma don’t have any purpose or cooperation with them. However, the Serbs found out what the priest had done to the Roma, and they started ignoring him, so that even to this day they don’t call priests in Dubovo, regardless of the patron saint and other celebrations. For, a priest is not supposed to charge according to the laws of the Bible.”

Goran Afirović, 45, Adventist, Žitorada (Prokuplje)

PENTECOSTALS

“Priests never came to our district.”

Časlav Kadrić, 50, Pentecostal, Leskovac

“No, no, no. They never ever came. On 9 April we used to go to Kumarevo, that was it, nothing else.”

Nazif Bakić, 61, Pentecostal, Leskovac

“No. Maybe the priests themselves offered it, but they never accepted it. Do you know what they based their decision on? Here, and not just here, I heard it was also true for some other places, priests drink and talk nonsense, which is completely out of place. Maybe they would have accepted it, but seeing those priests and such bad behaviour, I can’t tell for sure. They came, they socialised, but they didn’t accept anything at all, they laughed at priests. They didn’t want any encouragement from the priests.”

Alisa Tončić, 33, Pentecostal, Leskovac

“No, never. Since I was born and as far as I can remember, never. Neither did imams, nor anyone....”

Ivan Maksimović, 37, Pentecostal, Leskovac

“No. They never came. Even today, to my knowledge, these people are nowhere to be found. They don’t come to my house to tell me the word of God, to convert me, so I can come to church. You need God. They never came. Not even when my family was celebrating, for example, they could have come, they know we celebrate. But they didn’t. I don’t know whether we called them, whether my family called them.”

Šerif Asanović, 45, Pentecostal, Vranje

“Not as far as I can remember. If you saw a priest walking down the street, you’d say ‘hello’, and that was that.”

Kadira Asanović, 50, Pentecostal, Vranjska Banja (Vranje)

“Clergy, priests? To my knowledge, they never came. I am quite sure they didn’t.”

Demir Demirovski, 32, Pentecostal, Vranje

“Unfortunately, they didn’t. Even if they came, they only called on their friends. When it comes to my family, they only came as friends, not as priests, not to tell us about God or teach us anything. I can still remember how they used to threaten us when they came. They threatened us that they would call a priest to chop off our ears with scissors if we misbehaved. And when they came, the first thing they would ask was whether we had money. Ok, this never happened with my family, but I heard it on several occasions. They would ask: “Do you have any money to have the house blessed?”. Or: ‘I’ll bless the house now, but when you bring the bread, make sure you bring the money too. Otherwise, I won’t cut your bread’.”

Siniša Cvetković, 29, Pentecostal, Vranje

“I don’t know how much the children mingle. I’ll tell you something, there are instances, but they’re very rare, of children hanging out together when they’re out of school. It would be so much easier if the population was mixed... Children don’t learn Serbian in the ghetto. And there are so many smart, apt, clever children here, who could go to good schools. And they go to special schools because they can’t speak Serbian. I blame the parents. Why? It is their duty to prepare their children to speak both Serbian and Romani. If, God willing, I have children one day, I will teach them Serbian first, because they will need it more. And they will certainly learn Romani in the family.”

Vesna Demirović, 39, Pentecostal, Vranjaska Banja (Vranje)

DID THEY USE THEIR VISIT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVITE YOU TO THE LITURGY?

ADVENTISTS

“It never happened that a priest who came to us recommended that we read the Bible, and he never told us anything from the Bible. He only came to bless the water, cut the bread, sing something we didn’t understand, pray for every individual family member and in the end take the money. He never said: “Here, read something from the Bible.” I was a child at the time, but I remember when he used to come, we were all there and he never said a word about it.”

Anita Simić, 29, Adventist, Niš

“No. We didn’t have a copy of the Bible at home, until I went and asked for the truth. I would be lying if I said he came to invite us to the liturgy. His behaviour was very formal. That’s why I’m looking for my version of truth, which I wasn’t able to get from them. But I will give you a different answer to the previous question: I did go to the liturgy. I did what the priest told me to, we all did it in our ignorance, he didn’t even open the Bible to quote from it. To this very day, he sings, they say ‘amen’ and that’s it! He never talks about Christ, who is the centre of our faith, the priest does not talk about Christocentrism. He talks about patron saint celebrations and saints; it’s true that he mentions Christ, but Christ should be the basis, like a foundation is when you build a house. This is why my heart didn’t flutter when the priest was preaching... However, the priest said something I found offensive. He told my father when my uncle Ilija died and he came to commemorate the first forty days after the funeral, and he had heard about me and asked how I was doing. And then they asked him something, to which he probably replied: ‘Eh, he’s probably going to sacrifice his daughter, that’s what they do, they’re like a cult!’ He, the spiritual leader of the village, who is supposed to teach people, should not be allowed to say such things! I don’t know what gave him the right and courage to say such a lie! A lie it is, I gave life to my child! I never got married, I didn’t bring anyone to be her mother. It’s not like I am incapable or anything, that I can’t get married, I could easily do it tomorrow, it’s just that I cannot ensure a mother who would nourish that child. So, I make sacrifices for my child, do everything to please her; I would never sacrifice her, God forbid! This is what my family told me he said, and I feel awkward going there to ask him what he meant by that and whether he even said it in the first place. I suppose he would deny it, since I don’t think he sticks to the seventh commandment. As for his wife... My daughter told me, she teaches catechism at school.

And through catechism my daughter noticed many truths that I told her. ‘Daddy, she tells us the same things you do’, were her words. An that husband of hers, the priest, only cares about patron saint celebrations, the bread, candles... ‘She’s expecting Christ just like you are’, my daughter tells me. She’s attending catechism classes. When they were given a choice between two elective courses, civics and catechism, I told her to choose catechism so she’d learn something about God. In Solomon’s tales it is said: teach your children while they’re young, so they wouldn’t go astray later on....”

Boban Tošić, 35, Adventist, Gornji Matejevac (Niš)

And how do Orthodox priests see their neighbours, the Roma?

HOW ARE THE ROMA, AS BELIEVES, GENERALLY TREATED BY THE REST OF THE ORTHODOX/ISLAMIC BELIEVERS? IS THEIR PRESENCE IN CHURCHES/MOSQUES DESIRED? DO YOU GLADLY PERFORM RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND CELEBRATE FESTIVALS WITH THEM? FOR, THERE ARE CERTAIN CLAIMS THAT THE ROMA CANNOT BE GOOD BELIEVERS, THAT THEY'RE NOT CONSISTENT IN THEIR FAITH AND DO NOT PRACTICE THE CEREMONIES, ETC.

“SVETA JOVIĆ (protopresbyter stavrophore, the head of the Orthodox Cathedral in Leskovac): There are no Roma believers in our parish. However, the situation is different in the neighbouring villages, in Grdelica, Lebane and Vlasotince. These are the principal places where they got converted. Orthodox names are rare here, they give names known only to them, Muslim or whichever, even though generally they do not know which faith they belong to, I stand firmly behind my words when I claim this. For, they celebrate Vlasuljica, Saint Basil the Great, Saint George, I see that they're buying turkey now. At the same time they invite imams over, not all of them, but some certainly do. Or in 90% of the cases they perform funerals without anyone present, and put the crescent moon and star on their graves, on tombstones. Practically, they do not know which religion they belong to. I'm talking about the Roma living in cities now. However, I know for a fact that in Lebane they all have Serbian names, as well as in Vlasotince, where they celebrate Orthodox patron saints; all of them have been baptised in Orthodox churches in these areas. So, generally speaking about the town of Leskovac, they are not Orthodox here. But it was by their own will that they got isolated here. No one is forbidden from coming to church here. But their habits and attitudes towards the religion itself have contributed to this. In the end, it is easy to talk to literate people and prove some things to them. But if someone is ignorant and inert, you cannot allow them to... There was a very striking case of this little boy who used to push his invalid granddad around in his wheelchair. His name was Demir, he's a young man now. When he was younger, he used to stand at my gate all the time and ask for something. And we used to give him all the time, money to buy bread, cheese, salami, anything, five, ten dinars, as much as we could afford to give. Whenever he saw me in the parish, I always gave him something. One day, he was grown by then and our relationship had changed, he sees me and says: 'Give me 50 dinars', he wasn't asking for change anymore. And I say: 'Demir, you're grown now, it's shameful for you to go around begging, you can now chop wood for people, you can do many things.' He replies: 'I'll beat you up.' 'You should', I reply, thinking to myself that I would never allow for that to happen, but I still say: 'You should beat me up', since I invested into someone without any regret for doing so. It is obviously, as I had told him earlier, a bottomless pit. Whatever you invest into it, judging also by what the municipality has invested, attitudes in life do not change... We are still not giving up on plans to build a church near the Spiter graveyard in the next 10 years, and this is where their transit is, leading either left or right. But all this will be done primarily because of the need for a church, because of the graveyard, and not for the purpose of getting closer to them. We don't have a problem with this, but there were problems with the local indoor swimming pool here, where all people would leave when the Roma came.”

“LAZAR BARAC (protodeacon, appointed by the archbishop at the Holy Great Martyr Procopius' Church since 1982): They are well accepted. You know that priest give communion after the liturgy, well no one went away here because a baptised Orthodox Roma was in front of them in the line, no one said they didn't want to use the same spoon just because a Roma had used it before them. All people are brothers in Orthodoxy, we have a lot of African black people who are Orthodox as well. Faith goes beyond nations, our Lord did not say: 'May only Serbs come to me', so it makes sense that the Church should teach people that they are brothers. The Roma are very superstitious, Serbs regard them as equals.”

ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ (the rector of the Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral in Vranje since 1994): There are no problems and there have never been any. There are no differences, I have never noticed any animosity. Unfortunately, in Serbian Ortho-

doxy there are many who belong to the Church only by the power of baptism, and who do not live in accordance with their faith in everyday life. That's why there is no zealotry on the part of many of the Serbian believers. However, neither them nor the true believers show any signs of animosity towards the Roma believers."

DO YOU SPREAD EVANGELISM OR QURAN IN ROMA DISTRICTS ON THE TERRITORY OF YOUR PARISH? DO YOU EVER INVITE THE ROMA TO ATTEND LITURGIES/PRAYERS AND CATECHISM CLASSES AND DO YOU PERFORM CERTAIN CEREMONIES IN THEIR HOUSES? IF NOT, PLEASE SAY WHY.

"SVETA JOVIĆ: Personally, I don't. And no one else has done it, because they left no space for it, they weren't interested. All that is politicised to the maximum. The state too only visits their districts before the elections when they give them some flour."

"LAZAR BARAC: Unfortunately, we have never done this. It might be our mistake that we didn't do missionary work amongst the Roma. The situation was similar with people from Bosnia, those who were at some point forced to denounce Orthodoxy, we didn't lend a helping hand afterwards and we didn't say: 'You are my brother, you were forced to do this, it's all right now', no – we called them 'converts'. Even Njegos wrote about the persecution of converts."

"ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ: I have a few households that want to practice Christian faith more and more, those are some of the baptised families. They invite me to bless the water before the patron saint celebration, at Easter, they show great respect towards priests, I can honestly say, even more than Serbian families. They have the will, but I noticed that they are not consistent in it; sometimes they come to the liturgy, but they fail to come regularly. Some of them try to read from the Bible occasionally. And the reason behind this is the Pentecostal cult, which made them read the holy books more... When I see them in the street I often tell them that it would be good for them to get baptised, I explain to them what baptism means, but it usually ends in their promising to do so or saying that they will think about it and come, which they never do. I don't think they have a firm attitude towards religion, any given one."

DO YOU EVER VISIT ROMA HOUSEHOLDS FOR PURELY HUMANE REASONS, TO SEE HOW THEY ARE DOING AND WHAT'S BOTHERING THEM, I.E. IF THERE ARE ANY CONCRETE WAYS IN WHICH YOU COULD HELP THEM?

"SVETA JOVIĆ: No. I have to admit this: I have an aversion towards all that, precisely because they are irresponsible, dirty, squalid. They put you off, when you walk down their street, through their district, especially in the summer, there are foul smells coming from everywhere. And it might be a sin if, I am talking from my own standpoint here, if our church embraced such a scruffy, dirty and smelly bunch. And imagine yourself standing for an hour next to such people, that would be the end of it, you would simply turn your back and leave without any second thoughts, and even change your opinion of the church itself.

As a man, a priest, as someone who... for Christ we were all equal. The Old testament distinguishes between Greek people, Jews, slaves and masters, but he said: 'But I tell you, from now on nobody is more beautiful or better than anyone else, there are no Greeks and Jews, no slaves and masters, all stand equal before Christ.' But they became isolated of their own will and they don't want to be integrated into the society. I believe, hearing what their representatives in the government are saying, that they are trying in vain...I mean, it's all viewed from the side, it's all based on nationalism... A few months ago there was a fight in the prison in Leskovac, do you remember that? The fight was between the Roma and the Serbs, but it wasn't publically talked about so it would not be revealed that it was on the national basis. They are very aggressive. Even those who don't have anything, they have been informed that they can always defend themselves by claiming that their rights are being violated, because they are Roma, which is complete nonsense. Because they build what they want without a permit, no permits are asked from them, they don't pay any living expenses, anything. All this thanks to the occasional elections, when they vote and give a certain percen-

tage of votes to whoever, this is what they get. Everything else, I say, I may be small and insignificant to give my judgment, but I believe that any attempt... Because, we have a few teachers, apart from that Bakic guy, we have another one in a polytechnic school, Tane Kurtic is his name. One of our priests here, whose daughter was in his class, wanted to beat the living daylights out of him, because he was keen on tormenting his daughter at school at all costs. They are very aggressive, those who went in for politics, for business, they are very aggressive, very rude. I'm not saying, there are both good and bad amongst our population as well, but they are on a very low intellectual level, they don't have anything to use for thinking.

They are guided by their instincts, when they're hungry they ask for something to eat, that's when they beg, ask, steal, same thing happens when they're thirsty, and nothing else matters. It's as if they are a bit backward in a way, they minds are not broad enough, that's what their life philosophy is like. If they have some bread, 200 g of salami, a bottle of beer, there, they spend all summer in front of the grocery store close to my house. They don't have money for anything they need, but they have to buy a six-pack of beer, and then when they drink it they become loud and talkative and that's their life. And now we should come and offer them guidance, I think it's Sisypus' work and doesn't lead anywhere.

There, that is my personal opinion, but also the opinion of the Church when it comes to taking any action. It might be a good idea to build a Roma church, but then again who would do something like that..."

"LAZAR BARAC: Those who are religious have great respect for the priests. I think it's even easier for them to accept the things I tell them than it is for Serbs. And they like to ask a lot of questions, is this right, is that good. They ask about the dreams they had, they dream about something and they come to venerate icons, and they ask where different saints and icons are. There has to be some logic there, God certainly gave them soul which yearns for God, and the fact that we don't know how to approach them, that we're bad at missionary work, that's our problem. And there have been no appeals to us from above to go to their homes. And so we don't visit them often.

They understand religious issues. For example, if someone doesn't what to hold the candle at a funeral, they just step away, they don't get in the way of those who do want to, there is understanding, tolerance. I had an opportunity to go to Roma households where half the people were unbaptised, Muslims. And they didn't mind this, even though they never told me why half of them were Orthodox, and half weren't. There are cases where they become blood brothers, and they know they cannot do this in church if they're both not baptised and they respect this."

"ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ: Well, I live close to their district, I see them all the time, some of them I know well, we talk about many different things. Most of them have hard lives, but things have changed for the better in comparison to how it was twenty, thirty years ago, when I was a child. Some of them made some money in the meantime, they live better, or some of their relatives work abroad, so they managed to help them improve their living standard. There are many musicians amongst them, Roma musicians from the south are quite famous, they have a special gift for music, song and dancing, and they really do it with passion, I have to admit that."

WHAT SHOULD YOUR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY DO TO BE JOINED BY A GREATER NUMBER OF THE ROMA?

"SVETA JOVIC: Nowadays everything boils down to material things. Having in mind that our church is faced with the crisis as well, this is normal, like country, like church; our church cannot offer much at the moment. The material aspect is the primary one, there's nothing else."

How about going to their districts and offering the word of God more often?
I'm sure they don't have any idea what that is."

"LAZAR BARAC: Missionary work, that's where we have failed. People living next to us, who should be our brothers, we neglect them. Nowadays we're sending missiona-

ries to black peoples' countries, and we do not see people living in our neighbourhood. We didn't offer our hand, we didn't say: 'You are our brothers', for Christ didn't die only for this priest or that, he died for an unbaptised Roma as well.

I wouldn't know why we did thus. There were times when it was forbidden to perform baptism at people's homes, we weren't allowed to go to funerals in times of communism. If a mother brought her child in for baptism, for example, other parent's permission was asked as well. A priest would perform the ceremony as quick as possible, charge what he had to in order to make a living, and withdraw to the church, he wasn't allowed to do missionary work."

"ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ: Not in our parish, but I know a lot has been done by Bishop Irinej of Backa in Novi Sad, the liturgical book has been translated into Romani and priests were appointed to perform ceremonies in Romani. However, I'm not sure all this yielded any results. There was initial enthusiasm in the Roma population, but it soon died down, and I haven't heard anything about them continuing to build this 'house of spirituality' on the aforementioned foundations ever since.

Orthodoxy primarily revolves around liturgy, it is a way for Orthodoxy to spread outwards, faith is best presented through liturgy, it's more about the gospel principle 'come and see', just like our Lord said to the Apostles, and not so much about doing missionary work amongst people. It's not that we don't invite the Roma, or explain to them what this means, it's just that there's no response. The Roma are primarily occupied with secular life, material problems. Existential struggle is their number one problem. They also have this mentality of living for today only, it has been prevalent in them for decades, they don't feel the need for a deeper, spiritual life. Maybe if there was an Orthodox priest who has been canonised, and if he was willing to live actively amongst them, not just next to them, maybe he would be able to make some significant changes."

Yes, winding are the roads leading to Roma souls, and each and every one who claims that their souls are easy to 'conquer' makes a mistake at the very outset. It seems that religious dignitaries are aware of that fact, unlike pastoral priests who should be spreading their word amongst the believers, and who should have understood that it is up to them to choose the right path to the Roma soul. The Protestant Roma know Orthodox clergy far better than the clergy knows the Roma. What is even worse, Orthodox priests – not all of them, of course – are still prisoners of stereotypes and prejudices relating to the Roma.

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