

CHAPTER TEN

THE ROMA AND CONVERSION
TO PROTESTANTISM:
AN EXAMPLE OF SOUTHEAST SERBIA¹

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Introduction

The Roma are a multi-religious and multi-confessional people living in the Balkans who have lost their authentic native faith on their historical path, embracing the religion of the majority. In Serbia they are the successors of Christianity and Sunni Islam,² but their traditional Christian or Islamic religious-confessional being has been seriously disturbed by the influence of Protestantism, with lasting implications for their identity (Đorđević 2009). Reluctance and mistrust used to be indicators of the behaviour of official religious structures and church dignitaries of various proveniences towards Roma as believers. The problem lay in the disinterest of church institutions and high priests, those that the congregation looked up to. Orthodox churches and the Islamic Religious Community never established specific bodies for preaching amongst Roma,³ while the local clergy kept away from Roma ghettos, where

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² There are Shia Islam Roma in Niš and several places in the south of Serbia (Đorđević & Todorović 2009).

³ Only Catholics have the Special Board for the Care of Roma, and the care of migrants is organized since the Second Vatican Council, institutionalized in the Code of Canon Law (1983). It states that the host country is obligated to assure

everyday activities took place. Driven by the expressed lack of care, the confessional brethren looked down on them at prayers in churches or religious processions, sometimes even with outbursts of religious intolerance (Todorović 2007). A qualitative step forward was not made until a more active presence of the Protestant worldview was established in the last two decades of the previous century, first in Bulgaria and Macedonia, and more recently in Southern Serbia. The local Protestant churches have proved to be well-organized communities, with elaborated mechanisms of integration and inclusion of members into the life and practice of the church, strong social and material reasons for conversion and attachment, and the concept of non-national communities which advocates equality and brotherhood (Đorđević 1987).

Protestantism and Roma

The spreading of Protestantism in Serbia represents a complex and far-reaching phenomenon. A decade and a half ago, the “modern religious and spiritual supermarket” (Barker 1999, 52) introduced religious pluralism and the need for coexistence and acquaintance with traditional and non-traditional religious structures in the Serbian society. Believers and non-believers were all of a sudden overwhelmed with various religious worldviews, slowly becoming the objects of increased influence of minority, primarily Protestant, religious communities. Into the religious area of Serbia, especially its southeast parts, where traditional religions and confessions were predominant (Orthodoxy, Islam), “small religious communities”—Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, Methodists, Mormons—entered in a three-fold fashion:

- (a) Through evangelization (among religiously uneducated and spiritually hungry individuals, who cling from the state of non-believing to one of the numerous possibilities offered on the religious “market”)
- (b) Conversion (of traditional believers whose belief is confined to practicing few of the religious rites of their “forefathers,” i.e. baptisms, weddings, funerals)
- (c) Proselytism (“buying of souls” among the ardent believers of traditional religions whose knowledge of their own religious tradition and rituals

migrants and Roma the rights to their language and spiritual heritage. Finally, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People recently passed the Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Roma (2008). For more on the attitudes of church dignitaries and representatives of Romani elite as believers, see Živković, Todorović, Jovanović & Đorđević (2001).

is regularly followed by the well-developed religious consciousness of the basic postulates of faith) (Todorović 2009).

Sociologically speaking, they are using the dissatisfaction with the lives of people in the modern society and the flaws of the main religious communities, which are not sufficiently dedicated to genuine spirituality. The obvious “void in the soul” of the contemporary person is skilfully filled by none other than the Protestant religious organizations through their teaching, spontaneous piety and forms of collectiveness where one can experience human closeness and spiritual peace. The variety of reasons that favour the conversion of Orthodox believers, Catholics and Muslims to Protestantism can be systemized into four groups: socio-economic, theological, cultural and political. Following the suggestion of the renowned Serbian sociologist of religion and Romologist Dragoljub B. Đorđević: “There is no more urgent business for sociologists of religion than the study of Protestantization of Roma ... since this phenomenon is so complex, far-reaching and determining that it comprises everything that the modern sociology of religion should deal with” (2007, 145).

The research undertaken was into the process of Protestantization of Roma, that is into the newer process of massive inclusion of the Serbian Roma into small religious communities of Protestant provenience, particularly in the territory of southeast Serbia.

Methodology

The research was conducted on a sample of sixty baptized believers of Roma ethnicity belonging to several Protestant religious communities in the territory of southeast Serbia (Christian Baptist Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Adventist Church and Evangelical Pentecostal Church). The sample also encompassed fourteen Roma and non-Roma leaders of the above religious communities, and six religious leaders of the majority religions (Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community). The data was collected using the in-depth interview method on the basis of a standardized procedure with Roma believers and non-Roma and Roma leaders of Protestant religious communities in southeast Serbia. The interviews were conducted between December 2008 and March 2009.

Protestantism in Southeast Serbia

Sharing the fate of their brothers and sisters throughout the Balkans—where the representatives of traditional churches, and public opinion

supported by common stereotypes and thorough ignorance, have referred to them most often as “sects”—members of small religious communities have mainly retreated into closed, tight circles comprising a few believers, only sporadically raising their voices in the last half a century in the public life of Serbia, merely as objects of outbursts of religious intolerance. That is how old (at least five decades) the history of Protestant religious organization in the south of Serbia is (Todorović 2010). Leskovac is the heart of that movement. In the early 1950s, Mrs. Vera Davidović, an Evangelical Christian believer, came with her husband from Belgrade to Leskovac. A decade later, two sister communities emerged from that common core of believers: the Evangelical Pentecostal Church and the Christian Baptist Church.

Baptists in the South of Serbia

The missionary spiritual work of Baptists in this region started in Leskovac in 1964; today, the community gathers in Deligradska street in the vicinity of the post office and the fire station. Around 1970, they were joined by certain believers from Niš who were gathered into a religious community in 1980 by Čedo Ralević, retiring for health reasons from the position of full-time missionary worker in Macedonia. As a recognized religious community, the Christian Baptist Church in Niš has existed since 1985 and managed a charitable organization called “Love The Neighbour.” In Bela Palanka is, as far as it is known, the only Roma Baptist community, led by Bojan Kurtić. In Šainovac near Doljevac, there is a group of thirty Roma children and teenagers, with whom the elders from Niš have worked devotedly for a number of years. In the town of Prokuplje, and in nearby Berilje, there are several friends of the church among the Serbs and Romanian Roma, and even the first baptized believers. There are also several Serbian families of believers in Pirot.

Adventists in the South of Serbia

The Christian Adventist science was first preached in Niš by literary Evangelists and colporteurs from Novi Sad in 1920 (Đurišić 2009). The first church was formed in March 1923 and regular Saturday and Sunday services began, later moving to the house of prayer in 21 Seventh of July street in 1948, which was refurbished and renovated in September 1975. Through the activity of the believers of the church in Niš, two new churches were accepted into the sorority of Southern District churches: the church in Prokuplje in 1994 and the church in Pirot in 2004. The

humanitarian organization “Adra” is a recognizable symbol of Adventists in Niš.

In Leskovac there is also a Christian Adventist Church in the vicinity of the former Health Dispensary. For years the believers of Serbian and Roma nationality gathered together in it until the Roma established their own community in Vinarce, near Leskovac, in 2000. Most often, local village Roma come to town.

The situation is similar in Vranje. Above the bus station, as early as the end of the 1970s, there was also a building where believers gathered before moving close to where the post office is located today. In the Roma mahala⁴ in Vranje, the Roma Adventist Church was built in 2004 to make it more accessible to Roma believers who found it difficult to travel to the centre of the town. Adventists have also existed for several decades in Donje Brijanje where a church was raised in the backyard of Života Mirković, where mostly local Roma and those from other neighbouring villages gather. In Dragovac, a village near Bojnik, Adventists have a beautiful new building where Serbs and Roma gather from the local area.

Jehovah’s Witnesses in the South of Serbia

The believers of the Christian religious community of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Niš gather into two Assemblies, Niš-South and Niš-North, organizationally connected to the area to which Vranje, Leskovac, Prokuplje, Aleksinac, Kruševac, Zaječar, Bor, Negotin and Kladovo also belong. Baptized members and friends have had the opportunity to meet twice a week in the Kingdom Hall in 3 Skopljanska Street since 2005. The preaching service in the streets of Niš is performed by brothers and sisters of Serbian and Roma ethnicity. Assemblies of Jehovah’s Witnesses also exist in Leskovac (in the unpaved part of Dubočica Street, next to the Trade School) and Vranje, while there are praying groups in Aleksinac, Prokuplje, Bojnik and Pirot.

Pentecostals in the South of Serbia

The first Evangelical Christians in Leskovac, apart from the above-mentioned Vera Davidović, were the married couple Mitković, Ćirilo and Miroslava, with Ćirilo later becoming the first pastor in Leskovac. In 1964, a building was purchased in 22 Maksima Gorkog Street while an old pre-war villa was also acquired in the early 1980s, which was the family

⁴ Mahala is an area where Romani population lives.

house of tradesman Dimitrijević at number 21. At that time another building in Lebane was bought. The old number 22 building served for Roma worship before a tent was set up in the “Slavko Zlatanović” quarter, a donation from the French Roma Sinti, well known across Europe as the “Church under the Tent.” In 2005 the church was divided into the Protestant Evangelical Church “Community of Roma” and the Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church “Light.” Since 2007 the Chinese believers have also started conducting their worship in Leskovac, and another group in Niš began its work last year.

Apart from Leskovac and Lebane, communities were also established in the surrounding villages. Today, there are groups of Roma believers, Pentecostals, in Bošnjace, Žitni Potok, Razgojna and Pečenjevce, as well as Dubovo, near Bojnik. Groups of believers worship in rented facilities in Vranje and Vranjska Banja. There are also prayer groups and missionary stations in Prokuplje, Surdulica, Vladičin Han, Bela Palanka, Pirot and Bujanovac.

The Evangelical Church “Good News” has existed in Niš since 1996, and has owned its own building at 82 Episkopska Street since 2005. As a separate community, in a mahala at the Jewish cemetery in 11 Mramorska Street, the Protestant Evangelical Church, the Spiritual Centre “Community of Roma,” functions with around thirty baptized believers and around one hundred sympathizers.

The Impact of Protestantisation amongst Roma in the South of Serbia

Observing Orthodox and Islamic Customs

The current relationship between Roma believers in Adventism and among Jehovah’s Witnesses was of interest in line with the palette of previous syncretistic habits rooted in Orthodoxy and Islam. As the interviewees stated:

You can become a Jehovah’s Witness when you have accepted those tenets in your heart ... Nobody knows about it as I haven’t told anyone, but I have accepted it in my heart, and then I started to act like that, and I started to live like that. Now, when you see those changes, you are publicly allowed to announce that. And that’s it, all in all, the baptism is a public commitment to God.

(P. D., 58, Jehovah’s Witness, Žitkovac /Niš/)

Everything is rejected. Look here, we're not doing this because we want to be exclusive; we're doing it because we're listening to God's wisdom. For example, if I'm not celebrating my saint's day today, I'm practically putting that money in my pocket; I'm saving. Because today, for example, one saint's day costs around 200–300 Euros, it can't be organized with less than that, and that's the minimum. But, if I quit celebrating my saint's day, I will simply save some money, be able to buy something for my child for those 300 Euros, or I'll provide sustenance for myself for the next couple of months with the 300 Euros. That is the wisdom that God is passing on to us through His words in the Bible. That's why we're giving up on that. In fact, the roots of those holidays and customs lie in the pagan times, and that's why we have given up on all of it. Because there's a verse in the Bible that says that God will destroy the false religion and all of those belonging to it.

(Z. S., 35, Jehovah's Witness, Vranje)

We have no holidays. We don't celebrate anything; only when a child's having birthday, we celebrate it in the church. There are no saint's days, no George's Day. There is nothing. Our holiday is Saturday. We go to the church on Saturday; that's when we rest; that's when our community with God is the greatest. We have it every day, but that is a special day when we meet with God, with our closest in the church. Otherwise, we have no other holidays.

(S. A., 50, Adventist, Niš)

Adventists celebrate the seventh day each week. And, that's their holiday, the biggest and the only one because that's the holy day according to the Scripture out of all other days. It has nothing to do with some months or some years. It only says that God created everything in six days and that the seventh day is the resting day, and that He sanctified and blessed that day.

(M. Ć., 48, Adventist, Vranje)

Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses are small religious communities with firm moral and religious standards. The "researchers of the Bible" are known for not celebrating any private, state or religious holidays, except for observing the Lord's Supper once a year. For the "Sabbath worshippers" only the sixth day in the week bears the halo of sanctity. Therefore, both of them reject the celebration of Christ's birth and resurrection, considering them non-Biblical relics. The same relation stands for other holidays in the religious cycle of the Orthodox and Muslims (celebrating the saint's day⁵ and visiting relatives and friends

⁵ Getting acquainted with the set of questions considering the religious practice of present believers before the new religious choice, almost all of the interviewees

during religious processions, observing Ramadan and Kurban Bayram, circumcision of children, performing prayer five times a day, and so on). For example:

Christmas and Easter are celebrated. We make dinner for Christmas, and the godfather brings a cake to our place. That's our deal. He's supposed to bring the cake over on, for example, George's Day or Vasilica. I told him: "Listen, godfather, I go to church and believe in God," and he goes to church now too ... Those holidays are most important to us, and we don't except any other. And it has been so to this day.

(D. D., 29, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

The same as in Orthodoxy. But, we have activities respecting the significance of Christmas as a holiday. Children gather, Christmas songs are sung, there's a programme that shows things through plays, singing, choir songs, recitals, some specific citations are told from the Bible. For example, about the birth of Jesus Christ. So, all those events from the Bible are taken out, and we have a really nice gathering, but all in the grace of God. No eating and drinking! Maybe a glass of juice, or a piece of cake. If a woman, for example, if my wife can do it, there's no obligation: she'll make a pie, a cake, and bring it with her, but it's no obligation.

(Č. K., 50, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

Yes, they're celebrated in church. In the family, we buy fruit for Christmas and put it on the table. For Easter, we watch the film "Jesus" in the church, pray and dedicate that day to God. There are organized celebrations of Christmas and Easter in the Union Hall in Leskovac. Roma come, but Serbs come also, they take a look, ask what's with the ruckus, etc. It has an effect on them, and we should be doing that more often in the centre of the town. That way more people would come to the church

(N. K., 15, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

The birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ represent unique holidays in the majority of Christian confessions. In Orthodoxy and Catholicism these are usually days of resting, when one exchanges gifts with their dearest (even over-indulging in food and drink). For Evangelical believers from Leskovac, such a profane celebration, burdened by commercialization and

stated that the celebration of one or more saints was a common practice in Roma homes. This did not imply observing the saint's day according to the Orthodox principles, but a regular celebration of the date in one's family history closely related to a survived illness or survived accident. The saint's day bread and meal were usually prepared, without lighting the candles or inviting the priest. This practice was abandoned after the conversion to Protestantism.

consumerism, represents an illusion of religiosity, since it lacks the establishment of a personal connection with God. That is why they insist on the genuine religious context:

- (1) Private family celebration with food that is eaten during the fasting period
- (2) Congregating in the church, in the presence of other brothers and sisters.

Thus, for example in the “Union Hall” in Leskovac, ceremonies dedicated to celebrating Christmas and Easter have become common in the last few years, including the performance of the youth choir, drama section and children’s group.

Observing Traditional Roma Holidays

For centuries, the Roma people outside of Protestantism have preserved their own cultural identity from disappearing by nurturing the specific, so-called Roma holidays (Vlasuljica, George’s Day, Bibija). This former cornerstone of “Romaness” has been losing its importance with the conversion to Protestantism, although not with the same intensity and scope among the members of certain religious communities (Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, on one hand, and Baptists and Pentecostals on the other). The interviewees stated:

Yes. Especially Christmas, now that we are believers and all. And Easter. Then, George’s Day and Vasilica. They’re celebrated also. I already spoke to Čeda about it. I asked him to show me in the Bible. When he showed me in the Old Testament that lambs were offered, then it was much clearer to me, and I think that it is not anything bad to do it on that day ... I mean, not some excessive celebration, but that’s for that.

(D. M., 34, Baptist, Niš)

No. But there are some customs that are retained. We don’t condemn it, as God says: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” We will always call for them not to do it, but the decision is still their own. Whatever one does, one day one will come unto God ... The biggest problem is, for example, when George’s Day or Vlasuljica are to be celebrated, and they don’t butcher that day, but three or four days prior to that. Not a lot of people are doing that, but there are some who are neither on this side or that side.

(M. B., 18, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

... I'm gonna be honest with you now. We keep turkeys every year. You know, we keep turkeys. But we don't bring that "badnjak" at all. We butcher those turkeys ten, fifteen days before Vasilica, we butcher them, slaughter them, and put them in the freezer there. And as I've told you, that is the dinner that we eat.

(K. A., 50, Pentecostal, Vranjska Banja /Vranje/)

We've given up on everything, both Vlasuljica and St. Nicholas. We don't celebrate anything except God! But, for example, we buy a lamb, but we butcher it three or four days before George's Day. Before the George's Day, we're not making a sacrifice, we know that ... And, we eat it immediately. Selim comes, we sit and talk ... It means nothing to me. And, while they're doing it, we praise God in the church.

(A. D., 62, Pentecostal, Bošnjace /Leskovac/)

It is celebrated. For example, my child wants to visit his uncle. And now, he says: "Daddy, they have, and we don't," and what is that, and why? That is how it's celebrated, but without the cake, without candles, not like the Orthodox do.

(N. A., 37, Pentecostal, Prokuplje)

In Roma homes where all family members have been imbued with the spirit of Protestantism, the new religious and social discipline is observed. Adventists and Witnesses excel in their effort to leave the world behind them and adopt the newly proclaimed lifestyle, utterly in line with the strict Biblical tenets, where there is no place for old celebrations. However, lonely and isolated believers, lacking support from their families and the surroundings, find it hardest to persevere. Although willing to practice self-restraint in the secular areas of life, the power of the traditionalistic collective forces them to participate, even if only mechanically. A significant position is occupied by women who have been organizing the ceremonies from the cycle of customs since ancient times, and since then they have carried the burden of obeying the authority of man without objection.

Evangelical Pentecostals, contrary to Adventists' or Jehovah's Witnesses' demands for a fundamental change of the direction of life, express the skill which has helped them to achieve such an explosive progress in almost all corners of the Earth—accommodation to local tradition or culture of the given ethnicity (Đorđević 2009). They: (1) encourage converts to follow the pious behaviour and demand fuller understanding of church principles, but (2) do not insist on the momentary break-up with the sinful habits and vices since they are aware that many would fall off the chosen path in that case, without reaching the full range of religious experience. The Bible

teaches that “everything is allowed, but not everything is beneficial,” and it is up to believers to try and stick to that principle. It is not easy to shake off the centuries-old habits from the *mahala*, especially those upon which the cohesion of the centuries-long survival of Roma is based, and put on a “new suit” overnight. It is hard to explain to crying children why there is no honking of geese, gobbling of turkeys and bleating of lambs in their backyards, and it is rather rude to welcome guests, even random passers-by, for “Gypsy New Year” and “George’s Day.” Thus, a compromise has been made, *modus vivendi*, until all conditions are met to break off the shackles of the past and new hosts arrive with new tendencies—*kurban* is modestly observed several days before the official date, and the children are not refused an encounter with at least a number of events, all with the aim of not participating in the central celebration.

The Evangelical elders do not indulge in fiery invitations from the pulpit, calling upon a crude separation of believers from their family circles to undermine the inherited authoritarian patterns and reasoning. On the contrary, they teach, especially young women, to respect the reputation of their husbands and fathers-in-law, but also strive to free them from the inner prejudice towards the “new religion”; that is, they invite them to visit the well-attended worship themselves, “under the tent” or a firmer roof, any which way. Pentecostals know that they can expect the full effects of missionary work only with the second or third year of converts, children and youth who will pass through the entire machinery of religious work, from pre-school and teenage classes to distributing religious literature in mahalas during the days of evangelization.

Observing the Rites and Beliefs from the Pagan Cycle

Incantations against bad luck, dousing heartburn, fortune-telling and palmistry, predicting the future from cards or various beans, throwing spells and charming are all ancient symbols of the Roma identity, especially for female Roma who perform these tasks in the form of a craft, for money or goods. Respondents from Protestant Roma homes have all denied any connection with such phenomena since they have come to know Christ.⁶ Pentecostal children are brought before the Lord only a few days after birth while the elders pray for their health.

⁶ Nenad Durmišević, a Pentecostal leader from Bošnjace near Leskovac, was exceedingly surprised to learn that one of the sisters, a former follower of the Christian teachings, once known for incantations against bad luck, accepted some worried parents with a child in their arms into her home, begging her to perform

There are also no stories of fairies, witches, vampires and other supernatural beings, along with the telling of good and distressing dreams, relics of yore, used to make the long winter nights shorter and scare children into staying at home. There is also no kurban (animal sacrifice) being offered,⁷ nor are Roma or non-Roma cult places visited, as used to be the case.⁸

Children's Education and Marriage

The stereotypical image of education of successors dominant among older believers is incomplete elementary school. The youth are aware of the need to raise the education to a higher level. By acquiring and using the language of the majority they qualify for reaching recognized social positions, but also for performing actual roles in the religious communities of tomorrow (religious teachers, evangelizers, etc.). The endurance of patriarchal patterns of the regulation of sexual and marital relationships in the family circle was also observed:

Never. How can I advise an immature child in the 21st century to marry early, bring him a wife and make it a normal family? I'm fighting as much as I can to eradicate that.

(M. B., 61, Baptist, Gornji Komren /Niš/)

We won't give such advice. When she feels she's mature enough to take on the responsibility of a life in marriage, let her do it then. I wouldn't advise her to do it at the age of seventeen. We have the obligation, as parents, to raise that child, to support her to finish school, and then, when she becomes a mature person, to marry. Not when she's fifteen or sixteen as it happened to us. That was our disaster.

(S. B., 37, Jehovah's Witness, Taskovići /Niš/)

her ritual against stomach ache. However, she immediately repented for it, Nenad recalled joyfully, asking him to pray for her to never do that again.

⁷ Vesna Demirović from Vranjska Banja remembered how a man working in Germany caused a disturbance among believers, holding a feast and performing the ritual sacrifice of a ram on his doorstep, having promised to do that after a dream prophecy concerning him producing a male heir. She, and the rest of the believers from the mahala, did not attend the celebration, despite being duly invited.

⁸ Perica Kurtić from the Leskovac mahala Podvrce spoke openly of the fact that, for almost three decades, tenants brought earthenware with water and a candle on late Thursday afternoons to a corner in the family house designated as a tekija. Once he converted, deacons and pastors from the church prayed above that spot, and he threw all of the props in the river.

I wouldn't. My opinion is, for example that he should finish secondary school, have necessary conditions for life and then marry. It all depends on the children, how motivated they are to study.

(P. K., 38, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

No. I tell that to my daughter; she's twelve. It used to be a custom to get married at thirteen, fourteen and fifteen. I tell her at least when she's eighteen or nineteen. She firstly has to finish school. At least primary school, and if I have the means, I will send her to further schooling.

(D. D., 32, Pentecostal, Vranje)

Underage boys and girls marrying early represent a sore in the general emancipation of Roma, alongside discontinued institutionalized education. The tradition of an imposed norm concerning physically mature but socially and psychologically unready teenagers entering into marriage, often with no free will, is observed more and more as a social anomaly, regardless of its integrative role in the Roma past. The opinion that a subordinated role of women is cemented with their lives potential reduced to giving birth, bringing up children and doing housework, can today be found everywhere. The newly-adopted religious view offers a different perspective to believers when it comes to evaluating customs and legal norms, namely: not supporting premature marriages; seeing no difference between male and female children, and condemning the practice of contracting, buying or kidnapping the bride. The protective relationship towards heirs in their early youth is predominant, with a wish for providing them with an opportunity to enjoy childhood, alongside regular schooling and acquiring at least minimal education. The knowledge of practical crafts, as potentially secure financial sources, is found to be most adequate. Believers at a young age are particularly critical towards the relics of ancient habits in the present, and they represent the offspring of the profiled religious relationship towards unwanted social behaviour. However, the upper limit for entering into marriage is in most cases connected with the completion of the secondary school, i.e. reaching adulthood. The choice of the heart is accepted in the selection of the spouse. Christian science teaches that sexual intercourse prior to obtaining the holy secret of marriage is considered as adultery, letting young people know that risky sexual behaviour may lead to health complications, but also to moral stumbling and a poor reputation in the community.

Wedding Customs

Wedding customs in the Roma community vary, and are strongly intertwined with the tradition. For example:

When I organized it, we were Christians. We took only one day for our son's marriage. Then, we went to the town hall to set the date, to register, and when that was done we went to the town hall where a speech was given. After that, we usually go to the Kingdom Hall, there's a Biblical speech given, and then we go to a restaurant and mingle. Naturally, we have lunch and some barbeque, alcohol is given only as much as it is decent. Guests are dressed in suits as you saw them in the Kingdom Hall. That's how they looked at the wedding. We call friends and relatives to be present there, even though they're not believers. My relatives were there, my cousins, my family and my friends, and they had a chance then to see how we do it. It was a unique opportunity. They liked it; the music was good, and everything was okay.

(T. V., 57, Jehovah's Witness, Leskovac)

Well, I organized the wedding when my daughter was getting married. We organized it without any alcohol. We ate, and we drank, temperately. I didn't call that music that is used today, but the music was from Skopje, and they played spiritual songs. And that was in accord, a harmony, a great joy, there were food and drinks, there was singing, and there was the wedding in the church, bride and groom on their knees, and the priest who asked for the blessing for that marriage ... It is one thing if you enter church once in twenty years only on the day of your wedding, and another if you study the Holy Scripture every Saturday, every Sunday and every other day, are one with Jesus Christ, and He says that we are his brides, and he is our groom, that he will come for us, that we should be clean, that we should wait for his return, etc. Where you don't have that, there's no marriage, no family, and we can see what's happening to marriages.

(M. Č., 48, Adventist, Vranje)

Let me take an example from my son and my daughter-in-law. It was different for me because they were baptized in the church in Leskovac, in the tent. It was all the same; it was just that we went to Leskovac for the wedding. Yes, they were believers, but they didn't get drunk. We all drank, but nobody got drunk. There are tapes, everything was recorded, there was this ceremony that was just wonderful. They were the second couple that was wed in such a manner.

(Z. D., 48, Pentecostal, Prokuplje)

If I were to get married, if I took a believing husband, I would call all those who believe in God. I wouldn't even call my family, I would celebrate with my fellow believers. I will get married in the church and the town hall

with my husband. And after that, we will go to the tavern, of course. I would like to have God's music, I would like our brother to plays there, I would like him to play God's songs. I would love that.

(S. A., 15, Pentecostal, Vranjska Banja /Vranje/)

Wedding customs have always represented the richest ceremony in the life cycle of Roma. By conducting week-long common activities, the positions of women and men, the economic power of the family, complex relationships among relatives, and other things were presented. Entering into marriage was followed by a number of magical rites dedicated to happiness, well-being, harmony and increasing offspring. Despite the disappearance and reshaping of numerous archaic folklore elements in the clash with everyday life, the tradition has been handed down from generation to generation, and the picture of the past has been preserved among newer generations. Entering into marriage among Protestants, especially Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, represents a clear cut with the past. The kidnapping of the bride, illegal marriages, underage marriages, drinking, smoking, and reckless behaviour are rejected as immoral acts and deviations from the strict principles of being in the community with Jesus Christ. The following are insisted upon:

- (1) Additional support to a marriage recognized before a registrar in the town hall with a church marriage. The pastor blesses the marriage before God, but only if the spouses are entering into it as virgins.
- (2) Music not being too loud and secular contents amended by spiritual songs.
- (3) Decent physical appearance of the wedding guests and appropriate behaviour.
- (4) Alcohol consumption being reduced to minimum quantities (Adventists reject it altogether).

Both Baptist and Pentecostal Roma take care of their behaviour within the communities they represent so that members of other religions can make judgements of the validity of the messages delivered during evangelization on the basis of such behaviour. They are wary of alcohol and emphasize the fact that God does not ban anything, but that it is on believers to restrain from all sorts of improper behaviour and exaggeration.

Pre-funeral, Funeral, and Post-funeral Customs

Collecting in itself the ancient memory of the religious background of previous generations, the Roma culture of death has withstood the test of time and changes for the longest period. The closing of a biological cycle was marked through numerous, precisely-determined and repeated rituals while the living were reminded of their roots in Orthodoxy or Islam. It was of interest to observe whether the conversion to Protestantism produced some changes in the specific social act of dealing with death. The acceptance of Protestantism, above all the teaching of Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, carries in itself the reduction of religious obligations caused by the death of a loved one:

- (1) Dressed in new clothes, the deceased is laid in the coffin
- (2) The procession comprising relatives and friends follows him/her to the "eternal destination" and lowers him/her into the grave
- (3) As the belief in an afterlife is no longer present, a great sorrow for the deceased is considered redundant
- (4) Candles are not lit
- (5) Food is neither offered nor left behind
- (6) Graves are not marked with crosses or pyramids, apart from the basic information on the tombstones
- (7) The procession is not offered to take their place three times at the previously laid out table
- (8) There are no post-funeral meals organized.

The interviewees explain this practice in more detail:

It is completely different today. A sick person is not bothered too much. If financial help is needed, we will provide it because money is necessary in such situations. Then, there's encouragement based in the Bible, and otherwise, we talk about what is necessary. Sometimes it means a lot to a person to merely talk to someone, when one can't talk to the family. When there is a death, we of course have a casket, the person is dressed accordingly, the grave is already dug, nothing is put in the casket, like my mother put a lot of things in my father's coffin, even a radio. The family cries, even Jesus wept when Lazarus died; these are hard feelings that a man can't help. The elder gives a speech on what that person was like, what he or she did during their lifetime and, finally, based on the Scripture, comforting words are spoken and something is read. There is a special speech given for the funeral, it's nothing that was written prior to death, but the priest prepares it. There's no music. There are flowers and a wreath; we do that too. The family goes back to their house where they

live, and if someone wants to go with them they do it to encourage the family, to have a cup of coffee and to talk for a little while. There are no candles, no forty days, six months, a year; a person can visit the grave if they feel something on that day, but that's not a rule. There are no free meals.

(R. K., 42, Jehovah's Witness, Niš)

Today, in the Adventist world there is only the custom that on that day, when a person dies, the priest comes, sings a couple of songs, gives a short speech on the life of the deceased. And after that, there's a lunch and nothing else, no seven days, no forty days, no half a year, no year, candles aren't lit.

(Ž. M., 62, Adventist, Donje Brijanje /Leskovac/)

I'll tell you this. Three months ago, my grandpa travelled to that other world. When entering the house, there were no candles, only flowers. Black clothes were worn, black suits, scarves and the like, for the people, anyone who wanted it from his family. We, Adventists, do not wear black, candles aren't lit, not many things are put in the coffin and, of course, all those necessary things, meaning, seven days, forty days, half a year; we observe nothing of that. We prepare the deceased and send them on their journey with one or two or three songs if there is a bigger choir, and if not, two or three people, maybe five, sing a couple of songs, those are special songs meant for such occasions. The elder is also there, the leading church elder, his helpers, brothers and sisters who monitor everything and help when help is needed.

(G. A., 45, Adventist, Žitorada /Prokuplje/)

The family takes care of the grave, keeps it clean, and if there are no heirs, the church members take on that obligation. Visits to the grave are not prohibited, and flowers can be brought during such occasions. There is no discrimination of Protestants concerning the choice of the grave lot. The deceased are buried at the existing Roma graveyard or a Serbian graveyard if Roma and Serbs are being buried together:⁹

⁹ On the last day of February 2009, the commemoration and funeral of Miodrag-Mija Stanković, the founder of the Pentecostal movement in Leskovac and the whole of southeast Serbia, was held. The "Union Hall" was full of people who were addressed by the leading religious persons from the entire Serbia with guest delegations from several European countries and America. Neither cold weather nor melted snow could prevent almost a thousand citizens from paying their last respect to Mija. It was the author's first experience of a funeral of a Protestant believer conducted in the manner described by the respondents during the interviews.

For example, women inside and men outside. What is available is served. Elders are there, some talk of God, some of what that person was like. And, when the deceased is taken away, it is different, there's no Muslim priest to say his prayers, to speak, but the elder talks about what kind of woman she was, Christian and all, he prays for the family. He conveys the word of God to those around him. A shroud is bought, the person is wrapped in it, boards are inserted as before. Everything is the same, except there are no candles. Now people are served, while before it was for the soul. It isn't mentioned any more, it is just put on the table. You give and take freely, you don't have to say that it's for the soul of the deceased. There's a lunch after the funeral, for those who dug and the family. There are seven days, six months, but the barbecue is forbidden, which is the main thing for us. There are no kebabs and burgers. And, there are some who do nothing. And there are some who have kept something, like rich in food and drink. There are believers who do that.

(D. D., 29, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

There are no Muslim customs as it used to be: three days, a week, forty days, a year, and those enormous luncheons at those specific dates, which cost a lot, and for whom? We pay our respect to the deceased, but not in that manner ... There are no candles, but the elder comes to offer big encouragement, no matter to whom. The person is buried clothed, but again wrapped in that white stuff. Boards are also inserted, but there's no priest, no food for the soul. When we want to go, I don't take anything for food, maybe only some water or juice, for myself. There's no lunch after the funeral, maybe some juice, but there's no obligation.

(Č. K., 50, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

We were here at a funeral of a sister who was a believer. It was different. They didn't light candles, Selim was at the funeral. He did it all as it was supposed. There was no music. Candles weren't lit. Everything else was the same, wrapping in white cloth. There was some brandy, but people didn't drink, God knows why ... People were served only at the cemetery.

(K. A., 50, Pentecostal, Vranjska Banja /Vranje/)

Elementary links with Islam among former members of the Muhammad's faith, most evidently concerning the burial of the deceased, linger in Evangelical Christianity, reconfirming the stated ability of the Pentecostals to adapt to local traditions:

- (1) The wrapping of the body in ceremonial linen is retained (even though it is first dressed in clothes)
- (2) Lowered into the grave, the corpse is protected by diagonally inserted boards

- (3) Candles are not lit
- (4) If some sweets, juices or drinks are served, they are taken silently, without stating that they are intended “for the soul” of the deceased
- (5) Lunch is often served after the funeral, especially for tired travellers who have come from afar
- (6) Additional funeral meals are sometimes allowed, but an ensuing abundance is not advised—there is no barbecue of prepared burgers and other meat specialties.¹⁰

The funeral is conducted in a dignified atmosphere. As far as Adventists are concerned, a small group of believers or an entire choir may sing a few religious songs. A significant role is played by the preacher whose presence is expected. Before the deceased is taken out of the family home, as well as in the graveyard itself, and based on the Scripture, the elder provides words of encouragement and reminds those present of the second coming of Christ. This is also an opportunity to confirm the strength of faith and the correctness of the religious choice made before the non-converted, if there are such people in the audience.

Antisocial Behaviour and Inclination Toward Vices

The influence of Protestant teaching on the changes in the well-established habits from the ghettoized life in the *mahalas* was also considered, such as physical confrontation between married partners, conflicts with the police, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, enjoying gambling and drugs, and other vices:

I think it's pretty good. It's not great there are those who are still studying it, who are still not familiar enough with it, but it's good. I have a great relationship with my husband, and before I knew the truth, it was a disaster. We were supposed to split. I don't want to talk about it because we should not remember what is past, just go forward. It was very bad.

(Z. Z., 68, Jehovah's Witness, Vinarce /Leskovac/)

¹⁰ During the conversation with the Pentecostal Perica Kurtić from Leskovac, he complained about his mother, an old lady with a wrinkled face and baggy eyes, who silently listened to the conversation seated next to the burning stove. She was the only one of all the tenants still not converted. And why was that? Because she worried that there would be no one left to visit the grave of her deceased husband and bring out the gifts of food during the significant dates in the year (George's Day, Vasilica).

Well, how can I put it ... Sometimes I yell at him, sometimes he yells at me ... No alcohol, no smoking.

(Lj. Z., 45, Adventist, Vinarce /Leskovac/)

Oh, a lot has changed. If mom says something to dad, it's all said in love, not like before with all the cursing and swearing. There's a great inscription in our house: "There is no swearing in this house." A lot has changed. I can't describe how well we get along with each other, we pray, we love each other, and we love God.

(A. A., 20, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

No. Well, ok, we drink from time to time, but not to get drunk. I like to have a glass or two of wine, and that's it.

(Č. K., 50, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

My son drinks two, three beers, I drink one or two brandies. I drink maybe a brandy or two in five months.

(N. B., 61, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

No. When there's a birthday, I drink a beer or two for example, but I don't get drunk so that I would not know what I'm doing.

(I. M., 37, Pentecostal, Leskovac)

We smoke and smoke. Although we shouldn't, we still do. We smoke very often. Even though, we know it's a conscious sin now, we're committing a conscious sin.

(K. A., 50, Pentecostal, Vranjska Banja /Vranje/)

The greatest achievement in the religious Roma homes is the harmonious human relationship. Scornful looks, raised voices in conversation, mean words and swearing, and physical confrontations verging on incident have been replaced by:

- (1) An agreement between spouses on daily obligations
- (2) Decent behaviour towards the neighbourhood and relatives
- (3) Love for children, and
- (4) Family harmony producing prosperity and appreciation of the surroundings.

In the cases of need, burglaries are not an option and no crime is committed. Conflicts between certain families are:

- (1) Solved with the pastor as intermediary

- (2) Not solved through confrontations with bloody conclusions and police intervention.¹¹

Believers find it especially enjoyable when non-believing Roma meet them in the street or visit them in their homes, asking for advice on everyday situations since they have noticed a change in their reasoning and acting—faith supported by deeds speaks volumes of the correctness of treading Christ’s path.¹² Even though they deal successfully with the prevention of serious crime—gambling, drugs, prostitution, violent crime—Pentecostal leaders have their hands full of petty vices, which can be seen from the replies of the believers. Moderate alcohol consumption on festive occasions—celebrations, gatherings, weddings—are accepted with understanding, but smoking is undesirable. Pastors recognize the smoking vice, especially in the elderly, as the one hardest to fight.

¹¹ The Roma pastor Šerif Bakić proudly emphasized the following during the interview: “The number one, not only in my opinion, but also according to the Leskovac PD and the municipal structure and people in the town, is the fact that a crime has been reduced significantly, dropping substantially, as far as crime among Roma is concerned, and as far as fights and arguments are concerned. For there are eight thousand Roma in Leskovac, and around five and a half thousand in the Podvrce quarter alone, where I live ... Crime is the number one for me. I am so delighted that you can walk through the mahala today, and see groups and groups. It is in the Roma mentality for people to go out, to talk to each other, but without arguments. And even when it comes to that, it is remarkably quickly delineated so that it does not grow into a fight. I don’t want to exaggerate, but there is at least one child from each family that goes to church. It’s a great blessing, and people respect us immensely. Crime has dropped totally since I was a member of the Society of Roma when we went each year to talk with the chief of police, and he always showed us: ‘Here, every morning when I come in, there are some twenty complaints lying around: breaking and entering, motor vehicle thefts, brawls, etc. But there are no complaints against Roma any more. And I know well that since the church started influencing Roma, a lot of good things have happened here.’ That’s why I’m telling you about all those things that are happening.”

¹² Here is how Aleksandar Ajdarević, a twenty-year-old with a tempestuous past, describes the effects of change after his conversion: “As I said already, I was very problematic. But now people respect me and appreciate me more, invite me to prayers with them, something they would have never done before. I feel much better with Christ.”

Conclusion

The fact that individual male and female Roma were shyly joining the communities of Protestant believers in southeast Serbia, two or even three decades ago it was not possible to foretell that it would grow into an unstoppable, large-scale conversion in the meantime. This is particularly true in the case of Pentecostals who have almost a thousand believers, and at least a thousand more friends of the church in the above area. The Roma religious corpus, which has grown in a relatively short period of time, started worshipping separately in joint temples, and the Protestant Evangelical Church “Community of Roma” from Leskovac has already given birth to several sister, pure-Roma churches in the region. Adventists also have independent Roma prayer homes in large numbers. In them, the Roma become the majority of the above minority religions and religious communities. Serbs are counted upon, but their absence from the pews does not produce a feeling of lower value and of not being accepted within the observed religious-confessional circle.

Habits rooted in Orthodoxy and Islam (celebrating Christmas, Easter and saint’s days, i.e. Ramadan and Kurban Bayram, mutual visits with the majority population during religious processions, inviting Orthodox and Muslim priests to one’s own home, circumcision of children, praying five times a day) are entirely rejected among Roma Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses. By observing the birth and resurrection of Christ, Baptists and Pentecostals join in the celebration of unique holidays of the other two Christian confessions, albeit with much less pomp, and insist much more on establishing a private community with God (through special sermons, singing Christian songs, children’s programmes with Biblical content, etc.).

The “researchers of the Bible” and “Sabbath worshippers” turn their backs on the former unavoidable dates from the Roma past (Vlasuljica, George’s Day, Bibija). The “life according to the Scripture” leaves no space for old ceremonies. Pentecostals show much more sense for adapting to the local tradition. They encourage Roma converts to follow pious behaviour, but do not insist upon the immediate break-up with sinful habits. They teach that “everything is allowed, but not everything is beneficial,” and that it is up to the believers to try and follow that principle. Thus, until all conditions are met to break off the shackles of the past and new hosts arrive with new tendencies, kurban is modestly observed at Vasilica and George’s Day several days before the official date, and the children are not refused an encounter with at least a number of events, all with the aim of not participating in the central celebration.

Improved domestic hygiene and promotion of healthy lifestyles have transformed family relationships and harmonious relationships with relatives and neighbours, and giving up on antisocial behaviour, completing elementary school and continuing secondary education, and entering into marriage only after reaching adulthood are all measurable indicators of the progressive emancipation of the Roma from Protestant Religious Communities in southeast Serbia.

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