

**Gypsy Pentecostals:
The Growth of the Pentecostal Movement
Among the Roma in Bulgaria and its
Revitalization of Their Communities**

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March 2008

Abstract

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Gypsy Pentecostals is a ground-breaking study of the Pentecostal movement among the most marginalized ethnic group in Bulgaria – the Roma, more widely known as ‘Gypsies.’ This phenomenal movement started about fifty years ago, but it has seen its greatest growth in the recent years of the Post-Communist period. It has transformed the Roma communities in positive and constructive ways and advanced their integration into society. The dissertation is a thorough analysis of the movement and the first scholarly text on it written from the perspective of a Pentecostal missiologist.

The text reviews Roma history, which is a fascinating story of migration, oppression and survival in spite of great diversity. The mysterious culture of the Gypsies is featured as a complex mosaic of music, folklore, private justice, taboos, and spirituality. The historical relationship between the Roma and Christianity is explored in detail as one of both conflict and attraction. Roma Pentecostalism is reviewed as a worldwide phenomenon, demonstrating the Holy Spirit’s work among marginal peoples.

The Pentecostal movement among the Bulgarian Roma was the main focus of the thesis. The significant developments in the history of that movement until the present are described. The writing gives a detailed analysis of the dynamics contributing to its

phenomenal growth from the perspectives of several fields of study: theology, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and missiology. The ways the movement has transformed Roma communities, culture, and identity in Bulgaria are reviewed. There is a first attempt to articulate a contextual Gypsy theology with its background and important themes. The dissertation concludes with suggesting possible areas for future research and giving useful recommendations for the movement's future development.

This work was the result of both library and field research. The field material was gathered by travel, participation in worship services and special conferences, and conversations with multiple observers who brought a variety of useful perspectives on the movement. I learned first-hand what it is like to love and worship God as a despised Gypsy. The experience was valuable and enriching to me, not just as a scholar and a minister, but also as a committed Christian.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation, entitled

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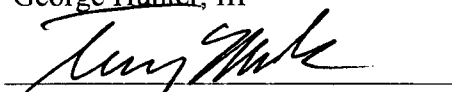
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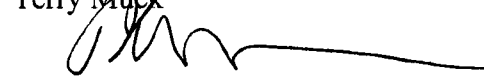
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A Dissertation

**Presented to the Faculty of
Asbury Theological Seminary
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**In Partial Fulfillment of the
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Doctor of Philosophy in Intercultural Studies**

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

As I shared my research interest with Dr. Thomas Acton, Professor of Romani Studies at the University of Greenwich, I received the following email reply, which points to the main issue raised in this dissertation:

I am also interested in Bulgarian Romani Baptists who I visited in Lom. As a Baptist myself, I really fell in love with them, and had a wonderful day there, but I have to ask myself – how come the Romani Pentecostals started in Brittany in 1951, and are now spread all over the world, while Romani Baptists started in Lom in 1923-24 and that is where they still are? (Acton 2006).

Introduction

Nadezhda

On the south side of the city of Sliven near the train station there is a secluded quarter, called “Nadezhda.” Surrounded by a high wall, it is one of the most populated neighborhoods in Bulgaria inhabited by ethnic minorities. Over 23,000 people live here on a relatively small area of land. The wall protects casual travelers from noticing the shocking reality inside. It hides a world different from the rest of the country, a world of misery that seems ugly and embarrassing to many Bulgarians.

Inside the wall perimeter on the narrow streets, which are in bad condition, the most important sight of this neighborhood is encountered - people, many, many people. They are of darker complexion and speak a different language. Even when speaking Bulgarian their accent is quite different and charmingly inappropriate. Many of the men are unemployed and can be found idling the streets on a nice day. They might be playing cards, backgammon or chess, or simply socializing in the local café over a drink. Women are often sitting around talking and catching up on daily gossip. Their appearance might be ragged, but very colorful. They may be washing clothes, doing some small trade or engaging in other activities to make ends meet, because their single goal is survival. Many children are playing on the streets barefoot and with little clothing; they would fix their eyes on you, especially if you are an outsider, and start yelling: “Hey uncle, give us some coins or candy!” Many of these children are not in school and cannot read or write.

There are three groups of people living in Nadezhda. The Turks occupy a significant part of the quarter – they mostly speak Turkish and profess Islam. The

Musical Gypsies are people of prominence – a number of famous musicians came from here. The poorest people in Nadezhda are the “Naked Gypsies.” They occupy a smaller section of the quarter yet are in greater numbers. Their streets are not paved, their houses are unfinished and over-populated – in some cases up to 10 people live in a single room in unsanitary conditions. Such poverty is more fitting to the developing world than to a new member country of the European Union. Most ethnic Bulgarians never come to Nadezhda, because they dislike the Gypsies, also known as *Roma*, and are uninterested in their problems. Politicians normally visit the quarter only before elections and have done little to improve the conditions there.

Sliven is known as the Gypsy capital of Bulgaria and the Nadezhda quarter is a good example of how the Gypsies live in our country. The Roma neighborhoods, often isolated as ghettos, normally attract the attention of visitors only because they are the poorest sections of Bulgarian towns and villages.

‘Nadezhda’ means ‘Hope’ in Bulgarian, but the few outside observers rightly wonder if there is really any hope here...

The People called ‘Gypsies’

The Roma people have been a significant part of the European demographic mosaic since their arrival to the continent during the Middle Ages. They have been called by different names such as Gypsies, Zigeuner, Gitanos, Heiden, Tsigani, Tinkers, Travelers, and Sinti, but *Roma* (*Romani*, *Rom*) is the name they officially prefer to be called (Hancock 2002:xvii). The exact number of the Roma population is unclear. Some

sources estimate it to be about 12 million worldwide (Hancock 2002:xvii), but others, counting the Gypsy tribes of India give much higher numbers (Kennedy 2001:6).

The Roma emigrated from North India about one thousand years ago. The largest numbers are presently found in Europe and the Americas. There are many different Roma groups, but they all share a common background, language, genetic make-up, and customs (Hancock 2002:xx). Even though traditionally the Gypsies have been nomads, a great number of them have become sedentary for various reasons (Duff 1965:17).

“For centuries, the Gypsies have been the object of much fascination and little understanding”(Sutherland 1975:ix-xi). There are many stereotypes about them and their lifestyle: On one hand, there are the positive romantic stereotypes portraying them as simple children of nature associated with campfires, violins, and travel. The negative sinister stereotypes, on the other, describe them as thieves, vagabonds, beggars, and fortune-tellers. Even in children’s literature, the myth has been perpetuated:

My mother said that I never should
play with the Gypsies in the wood;
If I did she would say,
naughty girl to disobey
(cited in Ridholls 1986:41).

Because of their unique lifestyle, the Roma have for centuries been victims of prejudice, racism, and oppression:

...their exodus out of India 1,000 years ago and their astonishing history of persecution: enslaved by the princes of Romania; massacred by the Nazis; forcibly assimilated by the communist regimes; and most recently, evicted from their settlements by nationalist mobs throughout the new “democracies” of Eastern Europe. Whether as handy scapegoats or figments of the romantic imagination, the Gypsies have always been with us...(cited in Fonseca 1995:back cover).

One impressive fact about the Roma is their ability to survive and adjust in the midst of great adversities. Like the Jews, they have been able to largely preserve their

distinct and diverse cultural traditions against all odds. They have built various mechanisms of ethnic survival, which remains a priority in their social agenda. In Eastern Europe they still battle poverty, illiteracy, poor health, and discrimination.

Roma research for a long time was “considered as not real anthropology in the anthropologically uninteresting Europe” (Tsankova 2006b:18-19). This trend has changed in the last century as a number of scholars have taken interest in studying the Roma, their history, language, and culture. This academic field is officially called “Roma Studies” and offered in some prestigious institutions of higher education.¹ In Eastern Europe it was not seriously undertaken until after Communism² (Dimova et al 2004: 53).

My Gypsy Experience

Growing up in Sofia, Bulgaria, I did not have much interaction with the Roma, but was familiar with them as a major part of Bulgarian citizenry. The term “Tsiganin,” by which the Roma are referred to in Bulgaria, gave me associations with both the ethnic group and the negative labels attached to it: dirty, thieves, and beggars. Having been interested in music as a teenager, on the other hand, I was exposed to the Gypsy musicians and impressed with their talent and virtuoso musical skills.

My closer involvement with the Roma began after my Christian conversion in 1990 and my subsequent call to ministry. As I began traveling with preachers around the country ministering in evangelistic services, I realized that God’s power was particularly manifest among the Roma. My early mentor, whom I regard as a spiritual father, was the Rev. Pavel Ignatov, former Bishop of the Bulgarian Church of God. He was a key figure in the Bulgarian Protestant Movement who sensed the divine apostolic call to reach the

Roma population with the gospel. As I participated in evangelism, leadership training, and distribution of humanitarian aids to the Roma quarters, I felt the heart of Christ for them. I have witnessed firsthand during these 18 years how this ministry grew and had a profound impact on these poorest communities in my country, bringing about social change and cultural revitalization. I feel privileged now to have been part of history in the making. The Pentecostal movement has transformed the Roma quarters in Bulgaria as no government institution or charitable organization could.

Having sensed the divine call to pursue a doctoral degree in Intercultural Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, I thought it would be important to study in depth this poorest of all European ethnic groups and reflect on my years of involvement with them. During my first semester at Asbury in the fall of 2003, I was sitting in the Church Growth class as Dr. George Hunter III shared an interesting story. The Romanian Baptist leader Vassili Talos, realizing that “Gypsies matter to God,” was inspired to start actively evangelizing them. The impressive account was a personal confirmation to me that the Roma were one of the main reasons I had found myself in the small town of Wilmore, Kentucky where Asbury is located. My research topic was settled. I realized the need to write a good academic text on Roma Pentecostalism, which interprets the movement from the perspectives of theology and missiology.

I personally have an affinity with the Roma and feel quite at home in their *mahali* (quarters). Thus, I can associate with these traditional nomads who for centuries have lived for the moment, because tomorrow is not guaranteed to anyone. As I was doing my field research last summer I felt humbled when my Bulgarian Roma friends asked me to

serve as Vice-Chairman of their Pastor's Association. They accepted me as one of their own and called me: "Parno Gajo, Romano Ilo" (White *Gajo* with a Gypsy heart).

Chapters Summary

The first part of the study (Chapters 1-3) introduces the research project, and gives useful information about the Roma and their historical relations with the Christian faith. It primarily draws on literature and less on field data.

This opening chapter (1) gives an overview of the dissertation, including a general introduction and background information, statement of the problem, research questions, definitions of terms, methodology, theoretical framework, and review of literature.

Chapter 2 surveys the history and culture of the Roma people. Then it gives specific attention to the history of Bulgaria and how the Roma fit in it. It also explains the cultural and social specifics of the Bulgarian Roma.

Chapter 3 discusses the history of Roma engagement with Christianity from the Middle Ages till the present. It also reviews the present status of Roma relations with Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Then it introduces Gypsy Pentecostalism as a worldwide phenomenon with a 50-year history.

The second part of the text (Chapters 4-8) focuses on the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria and draws primarily on the findings of my field research there:

Chapter 4 reviews some important historical developments of the movement. It explores the key places and persons related to the movement's beginnings, growth, and consolidation. It also gives an update on its current status in Bulgaria.

Chapter 5 discusses the various dynamics and factors for the movement's growth. It explores the multiple reasons (theological, psychological, sociological, contextual, and cultural) that have contributed to the movement's phenomenal growth.

Chapter 6 describes the revitalization the movement has brought to the Roma ethnos in Bulgaria. It demonstrates how it has affected their family life, morality, and cultural traditions. It shows how Pentecostalism has become the key to their renewed sense of identity and their integration into the larger society.

Chapter 7 makes a pioneer attempt to articulate a contextual Roma theology. It introduces its background sources and some of its distinct themes, drawn from Roma preaching, prayers, conversations, and songs.

The last chapter (8) summarizes the research and offers some useful conclusions, as a result of the study. It suggests several areas where future research would be necessary and appropriate in order to expand the available knowledge on the Roma Pentecostal movement. Then, it gives some strong recommendations, which are aimed at helping the movement grow more and improve its ministry effectiveness.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is that there is a lack of sufficient information and adequate understanding of the history, growth, and impact of the Pentecostal movement among the Roma, particularly in Bulgaria. This movement has not been studied through the scholarly perspective of missiology. Its phenomenal success deserves a detailed and thorough missiological analysis that is accurate, academic, and practical.

Research Questions

The study has attempted to answer several important questions, which have given focus to the research and have directed the collection of data:

1. What are the important aspects of Roma history and culture?
2. What is the history of Christianity, particularly the Pentecostal movement among the Roma? What are the important developments of that movement in Bulgaria?
3. Why are the Roma attracted to Pentecostalism and what catalyzes the growth of the movement? Are the Roma Pentecostal churches indigenous and to what degree?
4. Has Pentecostalism revitalized the Roma communities and culture? How has it done this? What important changes has it brought about in the Roma communities?
5. What are the sources and the important themes of the contextual theology of the Roma Pentecostal Christians in Bulgaria?
6. What are some possible areas for future research that could result from this study? How can the movement improve its ministry effectiveness?

Definitions of Terms

The definitions of several key terms brings clarity to the research:

Roma, Rom, Romani, Romanes. The term *Roma* refers to the distinct people group or groups who migrated from India in the Middle Ages and were dispersed around the world. They call themselves *Romani* or *Roma*, which comes from the word *rrom* for “man” or “person” in their language known as *Romanes* (Dawson 2002:3). Often *Romany* or *Romani* is used as the adjective referring to the “Roma” in English literature. The name “Roma” was adopted officially at the First World Romany Congress in 1971 to

refer to all Gypsy groups around the world. Often they identify themselves by their specific group or *vitsa* (tribe) name. In Bulgaria the term “Roma” began to be used on a larger scale after the fall of Communism in 1989.³

There are many Roma sub-groups in Bulgaria, which call themselves by a number of different names, but they mainly fall under three distinct group divisions: Jerlii, Kalderashi, and Rudari (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:110-113).⁴

Gypsy. This is the oldest and most common term outsiders have used to refer to the Roma. It was a misnomer given in the Middle Ages by the Europeans who assumed that the Roma had originally come from Egypt. It has pejorative connotations, however, because of its association with the negative stereotypes enforced by literature and popular opinion (Hancock 2002:1-2). The phrase “Gypsy job” in Bulgaria refers to a job poorly done.⁵ Other names given to the group by outsiders are *Tsigani*, *Cigano*, *Gitanos*, *Zigeuner*. The traditional and most commonly used name identifying the Roma in Bulgaria, as in some other parts of Europe, is *Tsigani*. This is where *anti-tziganism* (anti-gypsism) derives from, referring to the phenomenon of negative ethnic attitudes toward this group. Even though *Tsigani* and *Gypsies* are often viewed as derogatory or offensive terms many Roma consider them appropriate and preferable to the newer “Roma.” Others prefer ‘Roma,’ because it is politically correct and free of the stereotypical baggage connected to “Tsiganin” or “Gypsy.”

In the text I have used both ‘Roma’ and ‘Gypsy’ (interchangeably) in reference to the group that is the subject of my study; the cited sources use both terms often giving preference to either one or the other. Whenever I discuss various groups of Roma, I have avoided using the word ‘tribe,’ which was widely used during the “racist era of

anthropology” and have rather used ‘group’ or ‘ethnic group.’ I have tried to be sufficiently clear, because the fact that so many Roma groups exist could be confusing. Some of those groups desire to be called by their specific group name and do not even consider themselves Roma. They might get offended if referred to otherwise. Certain groups claim to be Roma, but other Roma do not identify them as such for various reasons. Thomas Acton advises: “the social construction of ethnonyms has a malleability and plasticity which we simply miss if we stick to the old racist model of ethnic groups being formed simply by division like a family tree” (2006).

Gaje, Gajo, Gajikane. This is the term the Roma use to identify members of the outside world. ‘Gaje’ (plural) is normally used as a discriminatory label of the dominant oppressive culture – the non-Roma. Just like ‘Gentile’ is to the Jews, ‘Gajo’ (singular) is to the Roma. It protects their ethnic identity by keeping them separate from the rest of the world. Like the term ‘Gypsy’ ‘Gadjo’ could be used with pejorative connotations; as victims of prejudice many Roma also have a prejudiced attitude toward ‘the Gaje.’ Often the term is simply descriptive, but sometimes it might be even used in a respectful way. Usually, it draws a line of separation between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ In Bulgaria ‘Gadjo’ refers to the ethnic Bulgarians.⁶ The use of the term all around the world shows a strong sense of ethnic consciousness and solidarity among Roma people who feel as one great family in Diaspora. Citing my sources, I have also used terms like ‘dominant culture’ or ‘host culture’ referring to the majority populations in the countries where Roma live.

Mahala. This is the term used in Bulgaria to identify the Roma neighborhood, quarter, or suburb in a given city or village. The *mahali* (plural) are usually designated

sections of town where Roma live separately from the rest of the population. I have used the words “quarter,” “neighborhood,” along with “mahala.”

Sometimes these quarters are referred to as *ghettos*, because they isolate the Roma from the rest of the population. Generally, with some exceptions, I have avoided using this term, even though in many cases given the Bulgarian situation this might be an appropriate term, because of the seclusion of the *mahali*. The meaning of *ghetto* is:

Formerly a street, or quarter, of a city set apart as a legally enforced residence area for Jews...Customarily, the ghettos were enclosed with walls and gates and kept locked at night and during church festivals...The ghettos in western Europe were permanently abolished in the course of the 19th century... More recently, the term ghetto has come to apply to any urban area exclusively settled by a minority group. In the United States, immigrant groups and blacks have been compelled to live in ghettos, not so much by legal devices as by economic and social pressures. (Encyclopedia Britannica: Ghetto).

Pentecostal Christianity. The Pentecostal movement broke out in the beginning of the 20th century. The Azusa Street Revival of 1906-07 in Los Angeles is identified as its main starting point.⁷ After a century of phenomenal growth it is currently the fastest growing religious movement in the world and, after Catholicism, the second force in Christianity with over 500 million adherents⁸ (Synan 2001:450). Pentecostals believe the movement is a restoration of early Christianity as seen in the New Testament. The Charismatic renewal began in the 1960s as a renewal movement in mainline non-Pentecostal denominations. It has much in common with Pentecostalism, but is yet a distinct movement.

The distinctive features of the Pentecostal movement are the following:

1. The baptism of the Holy Spirit with the initial outward physical evidence of speaking in tongues, according to the movement's typical interpretation of Acts 2:4. This

issue distinguishes Pentecostals from Charismatics who, even though practicing the spiritual gifts, do not view tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism (Synan 2001:396 and Burgess et al 1988:1).

2. Divine healing and the other gifts of the Holy Spirit like prophecy, words of knowledge and wisdom, discernment, working of miracles, faith, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. They are listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and Pentecostals believe they should be practiced by Christians today as they were in the Early Church. Prayers for healing are an especially significant part of Pentecostal worship services.

3. Emotional worship and free expression of praise to God: clapping, dancing, loud charismatic prayers, shouting, rapid bodily movements, and corporate prayers. Pentecostal services are quite ecstatic and expressive. The songs and prayers engage the whole person. Even though there is order in the services, Pentecostals want to allow the Holy Spirit to move without being limited by human programs.

4. Holiness. Descending from the Holiness movement Pentecostalism has lifted up holiness as God's standard of living for His people. This is reflected in a sanctified life with a clean heart - free from the power of sin. Even though the specific standards vary among the different Pentecostal groups, most of them believe that the inward relationship with God would be reflected by one's outward conduct, dress, attitude, and ethics.

5. The premillennial second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the belief that Jesus Christ will come again before the Millennial Kingdom. Pentecostals have a sense of eschatological urgency, which drives them to fulfill the Great Commission of evangelizing the world. They are committed to reaching people for Christ.

The main distinctions of Pentecostals in Bulgaria are similar to those worldwide: speaking in tongues, greater freedom in worship, healing and miracles. These elements make the Pentecostal tradition different from that of other Protestant (evangelical) groups like Methodists, Baptists, Congregational, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Nazarene.⁹

When discussing the Roma movement in Bulgaria, I often refer to ‘evangelical’ or ‘Protestant’ churches in general, without specifically mentioning Pentecostal, but this is appropriate in the context of my research for the following reason: Most secular researchers, which I cite, do not make any distinction between these two categories, accurately placing the Pentecostal churches within the evangelical family. I can assume that in most cases, unless stated otherwise, they refer to Pentecostal groups, because the latter are in fact the majority (85%) of Bulgarian Protestants. Also when I do mention Pentecostal churches, I do not mean to exclude other Christian traditions, but am simply trying to stay within the parameters of my research.

Methodology

In order to gather the needed research information, I drew on personal experience and used several important methods of data collection.

Personal Experience

Having had an active ministry among the Bulgarian Roma for over 17 years, I am a reflective practitioner of evangelism, discipleship, and social service to this ethnic minority. This gives me the authority to discuss the Roma Pentecostal movement not only as an observer, but as a participant as well. Therefore, in the collection of data and the

writing of this text, I was drawing from my personal experience, and not from field research alone. That experience was complementary to my research.

The fact that I am a Pentecostal myself and have worked closely with the Roma believers has formed some personal subjective biases. In order to compensate for my biases, I used a variety of outside sources. Those include Roma researchers who have observed and evaluated the movement and persons I interviewed who are not part of the movement, but have interacted with it in various ways. Their biases, caused by their lack of experience, have been compensated by sources from within the movement.

Field Research

The data was collected through a variety of methods: interviews, statistical data, participant observation, books, and articles.

In order to gather some data about Gypsy Pentecostalism as a world phenomenon I made a field trip to Bucharest, Romania. I also visited Roma churches in Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Charlotte in the United States. I met with French, German, and Macedonian Roma believers in Bulgaria.

My field research was mostly done in a number of cities in Bulgaria with large *mahali* representing various Roma groups: Sofia, Lom, Vidin, Samokov, Kyustendil, Razlog, Stara Zagora, Sliven, and Yambol (see map). I visited a number of smaller towns like Rakitovo, Perushtitsa, Simeonovgrad, and D.Bania, and villages like Kovachevtsi, Aprilovo, and Krupnik. The collection of the field data took a period of six months.

In order to develop my field notes I listened and observed carefully when I was in a worship service, conversation, discussion, or interview with informants. I took very

detailed field notes of my participant observations and interviews. Sometimes I recorded them during the interview process and at other times afterwards from memory. As a result I collected six notebooks of field data. In order to manage my subjectivity in the research environment I interviewed people who were not part of the movement and even those who were critical of it. I recorded the insights as they were given, without personal revision or modification. As I analyzed the data, I divided and classified the various units of information under the different categories laid out in the chapters of the dissertation.

Interviews

I conducted many interviews with the following groups of people:

1. *Pastors and church leaders.* These were the key leaders in the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria. The research was coordinated with the “Association of Roma Pastors, Churches, and Fellowships” – an interdenominational group committed to advancing God’s Kingdom among the Roma. I also interviewed church leaders from other ethnic groups who have had significant involvement with this ministry.

2. *Roma believers.* These were both Roma people who had been part of the churches for years and recent converts. I acquired information about their conversions, their continual spiritual journeys, and their involvement in church ministries. They were of diverse backgrounds: young and old, men and women, educated and uneducated. This helped me to identify how the Pentecostal movement has impacted the various layers of the Roma community.

3. *Outside observers.* I interviewed several people from outside the church circles who had good insights on the Roma and their churches. These meetings proved very

useful to my research as they provided the observers' perspective on the movement and its effects on the Roma *mahali*.

4. *Roma scholars*. In order to produce a text that would pass the scrutiny of the Roma Studies field of academia, I consulted periodically with established Roma scholars. At the National Ethnographic Institute and the Clement of Ohrid University of Sofia, I had discourse with several Roma scholars like Elena Marushiakova, Vesselin Popov, and Magdalena Slavkova. I also had some email correspondence with two of the biggest world experts on Roma studies: Dr. Thomas Acton from the University of Greenwich, London, UK and Dr. Ian Hancock from the University of Texas, Austin, United States. Those consultations strengthened the scholarly credibility of my dissertation.

Participant Observation

Spending time in the Roma neighborhoods, I observed the life of the people and their environment – that helped me feel the spirit of the *mahala*. I observed the Roma Pentecostal church services and ministries. This gave me a good understanding of their worship patterns, group outreach ministries, evangelistic meetings, and social services. I concentrated on the specific data relating to my research questions and theoretical framework. I observed ethnographic information such as number of people in the services, ratios of gender and age, socio-economic status, group participation, and factors for bonding. The specific parts of the service were observed such as the content of sermons, songs, teaching, music style, testimonies, prayer requests, the use of languages, the invitational process (altar calls), and fellowship gatherings.

I attended meetings of Roma believers that exemplified various aspects of their ministry and church life such as: minister's conferences, youth gatherings, women's

meetings, evangelistic campaigns, and social ministry events. I critiqued these findings in order to make recommendations, which would help the movement produce greater growth and community impact in the future.

Numerical Data

The available demographic data enabled me to know how many Gypsies live where and how their numbers were growing. It helped to locate possible areas of revitalization - reflected in lower crime rates, more children in schools, longer life expectancy, social lift, discontinuance of certain ethnic folk practices, and improvement of the self-image of the Roma.

The church data revealed which churches were really growing, especially by conversions, and which had better retention rates. The ecclesiastical bodies studied were the major Pentecostal churches in comparison to other non-Pentecostal ones. The exact numerical data was difficult to obtain, because often numbers are inaccurate and many Roma churches do not keep membership statistics, but from comparing sources, I was able to reach some estimates. The numbers are significant, but my study focused more on analyzing the quality and the growth dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Four scholarly theories helped me make sense of the collected data:

1. *Church Growth* by Donald McGavran and George Hunter.
2. *Indigenous Church* by Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and Melvin Hodges.
3. *Revitalization Movements* by Anthony Wallace.
4. *Conversion* by Lewis Rambo.

Church Growth

Several theory clusters delineated from *Understanding Church Growth* by Donald McGavran, pioneer of the Church Growth school of thought, were helpful in studying Gypsy Pentecostalism. As a church growth phenomenon it seems to correspond with the characteristics of a 'people movement,' defined as a process in which a particular people group experiences a massive conversion to the Christian faith. An ethnic group is reached for Christ only when there arises a movement that is viable, indigenous, and evangelizing (McGavran 1990:221-230).

'Social networks' working through web relationships are instrumental in catalyzing Christian movements. The conversion of family members, relatives, and friends provides a supportive environment where the new convert can grow as a Christian. People become stronger Christians if their whole families convert and join the church; they are no longer afraid of ostracism, because they have joined the new religion of their own people. This preserves the unity of the group (family, clan, tribe). The Roma ethnic consciousness and social structure have been studied as a bridge for the dissemination of Christianity (McGavran 1990:243-247).

The 'church-planting' aspect of the Church Growth theory was helpful in analyzing the history of the various Roma congregations and identifying the dynamics of their growth process. The study of the multiplication of congregations among the Roma is important for understanding this as a nationwide movement. 'Proliferation growth,' a term employed by George Hunter, takes place when a new congregation is planted for reaching a specific people group. I have investigated the proliferation of churches, large and small groups, and various care and outreach ministries.

McGavran deals with the concept of 'Receptivity of Individuals and Societies' viewing certain people and groups as 'ripe for harvest.' Church growth does not take place evenly among various people groups: some are more receptive than others to believing the gospel and committing their lives to Christ. Various factors contribute to the receptivity of certain people groups. Christian missions should be sensitive to the Spirit, discerning God's *kairos* of visitation to these populations. They should concentrate their efforts accordingly on reaching such receptive peoples more than the resistant ones. McGavran says that Pentecostals have received some criticism for their preoccupation with the masses, which have been more characteristically responsive than the classes (1990:203). George Hunter's *To Spread the Power* fleshes out the factors for people's receptivity to Christianity's message. The factors that make the Roma receptive to the Pentecostal version of the Christian faith have been carefully studied. Important catalysts for growth from McGavran, which I have engaged in the analysis, were 'revival' (1990:133-143) and 'divine healing' (1990:150).

The 'homogeneous unit' principle was helpful in understanding the growth dynamics of the Roma movement; it states that people like to become Christians without crossing barriers, even though conglomerate (mixed, heterogeneous) congregations might be effective in central areas of larger cities, considered melting pots¹⁰ (McGavran 1990:163-165, 261). This issue also relates to the indigenous nature of the movement.

The 'redemption and lift' concept (1990:209-213) was helpful, because it identifies a phenomenon that has been observed in Bulgaria. The concept refers to the fact that as people come to faith in Christ, they are often lifted to a higher status economically, socially, and educationally and their self-esteem is raised. It can have a

positive contribution to their Christian witness. In many cases, however, it becomes a hindrance, because the social lift may cause the individuals who have experienced it to distance themselves from their communities. Thus these individuals' effectiveness as witnesses of the good news to their people is lost and church growth is halted.

Indigenous Church

It would be important in this analysis to evaluate the indigenous nature and characteristics of the Roma Pentecostal Movement.

The Three-Self Theory

Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson first developed the Indigenous Church principles in the 19th century as a reaction to the paternalistic attitude of colonial missions. Venn in Great Britain, and Anderson in the United States, were two mission executives who arrived at the principles separately from one another. Anderson came up with the idea that mission should be “the scaffolding while the indigenous church was the edifice.” Venn believed that as the national churches emerged the mission society should “work itself out of a job,” which process he called “euthanasia of a mission.” Venn and Anderson came up with the three-self principle, defining true indigenous churches as self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting (Newberry 2005:96-98).

Melvin Hodges, an Assembly of God missionary to Latin America, developed these principles further and applied them to Pentecostal missions in his book *The Indigenous Church* in 1953. William Smalley's critique of the three-self theory in his article “Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church” is appropriate as it brings a balanced perspective on the subject of indigeneity. Smalley contends that the original

Indigenous Church theory is partly a product of Western individualistic thought (2000). The word 'self' in these principles exposes that fact. Present-day missiologists like Warren Newberry propose that more 'selves' be added to the three, such as: self-theologizing, self-missionizing, and self-care/social action (Newberry 2005:110-113). So this theory is very helpful in missiology, but with needed refining and nuance.

I have explored the indigeneity of the Roma movement in the light of the Three-Self indigenous theory. I have also begun the discussion on other indigenous areas of service in the movement, introduced by Newberry and other contemporary missiologists.

Contextual Theology

Self-theologizing relevant to the cultural context is an important step in a growing and maturing indigenous Christian movement. Newberry emphasizes the importance of national churches developing their own theologies, which has not been encouraged until recently. Theologies deviating from the Western paradigm were often viewed in the past as suspect, syncretistic, or heretical. That attitude is now called 'theological colonialism.'¹¹ (2005:112).

The Roma Pentecostal movement is at a stage of maturing as more Roma ministers receive theological education. I have made a pioneer attempt in this text to articulate a contextual Roma theology with its relevant themes.

Revitalization

Anthony Wallace coined the term *Revitalization Movements* and studied the dynamics in the development of such phenomena. The theory was initially articulated and

explained in the seminal 1956 article “Revitalization Movements: Some Theoretical Considerations for Their Comparative Studies.”

Revitalization Movements

Revitalization happens when a society has deviated from “accepted norms,” because of dissatisfaction with their worldview. In such periods of “cultural dislocation” a leader emerges to propagate a new way of engaging the culture. The changes offered are often radical and cause opposition. But in time the innovation is successfully diffused and even the more passive members accept it. Thus, a “new religious culture” is formed, which impacts the value system and behavior of the group. The main point in revitalization theory is the need for people “to find a dynamic equilibrium in which they may achieve mutual harmony and dreams of a new tomorrow” (Burnett 2000:256).

Revitalization movements often occur among oppressed groups of people in need of a different worldview, which can give them a greater satisfaction in life and better coping skills. They may have different beliefs and cultural nuances, but their basic structure is the same. Wallace proposes five stages that these movements go through:

1. *Steady State*. People have ways to meet their basic needs within their own culture. They are able to manage problems and reduce stress to livable levels.

2. *Increased Individual Stress*. The culture is affected by changes like natural calamities, political upheavals, oppression, sickness, and poverty. The anxiety pushes people out of their comfort zone into a new course of uncertainty.

3. *Cultural Distortion*. People lose their sense of meaning in life and many turn

to addictive lifestyles. The rigid members of the society do not want change, but the more flexible ones seek new ways to reduce the tension. The society may be destroyed or assimilated by another one if this process is not stopped.

4. *Revitalization*. Often a “prophet” emerges who provides a better explanation of life and offers new possibilities. He/she calls for breaking with the old destructive habits and gives a new meaning for life with action and purpose. When a great number of followers are attracted, willing to change their lifestyle, revitalization takes place. That may happen through religious, political, or social movements.

5. *New Steady State*. If successful, the movement reduces the stress, provides hope and a more meaningful existence, and becomes part of the social order. It is organized institutionally by appointing leaders, erecting buildings, and creating a system of funding. Many religious movements have brought about social and cultural transformation (Hiebert et al 1999:348-51).

Since 1956 Revitalization Theory has gone through some evolution and refining. In the article “What is Revitalization?” Michael Rynkiewicz summarizes its history since Wallace’s original essay (2005:2). The more recent texts make the theory current and relevant. *Revitalization and Mazeways* is a new collection of essays summarizing Wallace’s important works on revitalization, explaining the role of religious and political movements in the process of culture change. The text challenges scholars’ thinking on revitalization and engages various academic fields in its study (2003). *Reassessing Revitalization Movements: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific Islands* by Michael Harkin (ed.), makes structural modifications of the theory, moving it from the abstractness of Wallace’s original and making it sufficiently attentive “to the unique

texture of cultural and historical circumstances...” (2004:viii). These texts widen the understanding of revitalization and present the process as more dynamic and flexible than the one introduced in Wallace’s essay of 1956. Presenting a number of good case studies and new ideas,¹² they demonstrate that not all revitalization movements are static or bound to the confines of the original theory. They also apply the theory to Christian missions. Thus, refining and improving the ‘aging theory’ (Harkin 2004:67), these writings in fact revitalize ‘revitalization.’

Pentecostalism has been studied here as a revitalization movement, which has brought about spiritual renewal and a worldview shift in Roma culture.

Renewed Identity

In my research I investigated how Roma identity typically is changed and redefined after their conversion to Pentecostal Christianity. Several texts were helpful to this study. *Symbolic Interactionism* by Joel Charon gives a detailed discussion on identity formation in the context of social interaction. *The Rhetorical Career of Cesar Chavez* by Hammerback and Jensen, especially the chapter on *Reconstitutive Discourse*, was useful in demonstrating how rhetoric can go beyond persuasion and cause people to embrace a new self-image (1998:44-61).

Conversion

The book *Understanding Religious Conversion* by Lewis Rambo is a good systematic study of religious conversion and culture change, which thoroughly examines the steps and the factors involved in the process. Its holistic approach studies the phenomenon in light of several fields – psychology, sociology, anthropology, and

theology. It discusses both the commonalities and variations in religious conversion using interviews with converts in order to evaluate the process. The book is descriptive rather than prescriptive and views conversion as a process rather than an event (1993:1-6).

Rambo explains the different types of religious conversion: apostasy, intensification, affiliation, institutional transition, and traditional transition. He also discusses the motifs of conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalism, and coercive (1993:14-15). The outline of the book reviews several important aspects and stages explaining how conversion takes place:

1. *Context.* The context has always been an important factor in religious conversion. Conversion never happens outside a particular cultural and sociopolitical context. Besides the national dimension context also has a personal dimension. Poverty, migration, and exposure to a religious community usually make people more vulnerable to conversion. The marginalized groups in a society are often the earliest converts of a religious movement (Rambo 1993:33-36, 80).

2. *Quest.* Are the converts active agents or passive recipients of the process? Passive conversions often produce nominal believers. Many conversions are active, even though they have generally been viewed as passive, according to Rambo (1993:58).

Rambo gives an interesting overview of the “availability” factors in this chapter – structural, emotional, intellectual, and religious. The new faith should be somewhat adaptable and compatible to the old family structures, emotions, worldviews, mentality, and religion. If the new religion is extremely different or radically opposed to the convert’s original one, then he/she is not likely to become a stable follower (1993:60-63).

3. *Crisis*. Rambo discusses the importance of a crisis experience in the conversion process, which might have been caused by life's circumstances or by the Christian witness. There are a number of catalysts for crisis: mystical encounters, near-death experiences, illness and healing, external crisis, and pathology. True conversion requires and will often happen in a crisis situation (1993:48-50).

4. *Interaction*. In the interaction stage the new converts become integrated in their new religious society. Rambo gives four dimensions of interaction: *relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles*. The bonding between the group members takes place by the *relationships*; the *rituals* provide a personal identification and connection to the new way of life; the *rhetoric* gives the hermeneutic meaning and guidance to the convert; the *roles* get people involved as they receive special responsibilities within the group (1993:108). These are all very important factors in the interaction process, because they help the individual become grounded in the new religion. If Christian discipleship is to be successful it should include all these four dimensions of interaction.

5. *Commitment*. The commitment stage is the time when the potential converts make the decision to dedicate their life to the new religion, with which they have been confronted (Rambo 1993:124). They become convicted of sin and decide to make a radical shift by accepting the grace of God by faith in Christ. Rambo distinguishes between inner and outer commitment, respectively called "surrender" and "testimony" (1993:131-2, 137). Both of these aspects are important in New Testament salvation (Rom.10:9-10). Christian converts should be encouraged to testify publicly of their private conversion experience.

6. *Consequences*. The consequences of conversion, according to Rambo, are personal, sociological, theological, and historical. The potential converts should carefully consider how their conversion may affect their lives. The consequences could be: a relationship with God, a relief from guilt, a sense of mission, the joining of a new community – a total worldview shift. Active witnessing is an important consequence, which demonstrates the relevance and effectiveness of the new religion.

Rambo's holistic approach was helpful in studying the dynamics of Roma conversion to Pentecostalism and necessary for the detailed analysis of the movement's growth and development.

Review of Literature

There was a wealth of literature related to the subject. Texts on the Roma have been written in many languages, because of their presence in countries around the world. These sources helped construct the cultural setting in which the Pentecostal movement has seen such an unprecedented growth. They were valuable for learning about Gypsy history, worldview, and culture, but caution and discriminatory judgment had to be used, because of the subject's nature.¹³ This review presents the sources, which made a significant contribution to my research and the major insights distilled from them.¹⁴

One of the older sources on Roma culture is the autobiography of the famous evangelist Gypsy Smith published in 1901 in London. *We Are the Romani People* (2002) by Ian Hancock, a descendant of British Romanichals, is a basic textbook on the Roma. It provided valuable insights in regard to the history and culture of the ethnos, and informed the introduction to the study. *The Gypsies* (1992) by Angus Fraser was helpful

to the sections of the dissertation that reconstruct Roma history. *Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture* (2001) by Walter Weyrauch (ed.) is a collection of essays that provide insight into Roma culture, specifically examining their private legal and judicial system. *The Gypsies* (1987) by Ian Yoors is a classic novel-type text telling the personal story of the author who left his well-to-do Belgian family and traveled with a band of wondering Gypsies for ten years sharing hardships and good times. It tells the real story of an “extraordinary people’s fascinating culture and their never-ending struggle to survive as free nomads.” It conveys the spirit and complexities of Gypsy culture in a beautiful way “that transcends stereotypes and analytical flatness” (1987: Book Cover). Yoors provided some enlightening thoughts on Roma life and psyche. *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (1975) by Anne Sutherland is the first ethnography on the Roma in the United States; it focuses on the issues of Roma adaptation and survival in a progressive technological era. Besides giving specific information on Roma culture, Sutherland was also very helpful in describing some of the specific issues a field researcher has to deal with in studying the Roma. *The Wind on the Heath: A Gypsy Anthology* (1930) compiled by John Sampson is a collection of quotes on the Roma from Shakespeare, Cervantes, Borrow, Wordsworth, Hugo, Pushkin, and many other great writers of the past. It provided some good quotes from famous classic authors, which gave the dissertation an artistic touch.

Journal articles were helpful in providing more information about the Roma in general. The *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* and the *Patrin Web Journal* were useful sources dedicated to Romani culture and history. They raise awareness of the Roma

continuous struggle for dignity and freedom. They include articles from around the world and links to other good sources including documentary films and tapes of Roma music.

Sources on Roma religion gave me a greater understanding of the spiritual mindset and worldview of the Roma. “Romany Religion” (2002), found in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* by Jeffrey Kaplan and Bron Taylor (eds.), and “The Image of the Gypsy in German Christendom” (1996) by Gilad Margalit are examples of such good articles, germane to my research. They also provided good information on the historical interaction between the Roma and Christianity.

There were several good articles that describe the engagement of the Roma by the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant branches of Christianity. The ‘Roman Curia’ website offered some documents, which reveal the serious recent initiatives of the Vatican in regard to Roma outreach. Mindy Bricker’s article “Orthodox Church Ordains Romany Priest” (2003) describes the story of David Dudas who recently became the first Roma Orthodox Priest in the Czech Republic. The autobiography *Gypsy Smith: His Life and Work by Himself* (1902) and the biographical information about G. Smith given in Sue Staley’s *Great Soul Winners* (1926), helped me to retell the story of the first Roma Christian preacher known to history. The articles in *Evangelist*, publication of the Bulgarian Baptist Union, in the early part of the 20th century, gave me insights about the history of the first Roma church (claiming to actually be the first one in the world) and the early stages of Roma evangelism in Bulgaria.

There are a number of articles on the subject of Roma Pentecostalism, but the books and dissertations are few and mostly published in recent years.

There are some useful texts on the Gypsy Pentecostal movement written by participants in it. *My Adventures With the Gypsies* (1991) by Clement Le Cossec describes the apostolic work of the author among the Gypsies – starting in France and going around the world. Le Cossec shares his personal experiences and describes the movement’s interesting dynamics and idiosyncrasies. In *Traveling Home* (1986) Joe Ridholls tells the story of the movement. These writings helped me introduce the readers to Roma Pentecostalism as an international movement.

The Charisma News reports “Unparalleled Revival Touches Europe’s Gypsies” (2002) by Thomas Dixon, briefly lifts up the Pentecostal revival among the Gypsies in Western Europe as a spiritual move not experienced by any other group in the region. “Christian Outreach to Romany in Central and Eastern Europe” (2002) by Frank Dawson describes ministries answering God’s call to reach the Roma. These articles provided insight on the current status of the movement in Western Europe and the way it has launched an international outreach to Roma people. *Gypsies in Madrid: Sex, Gender and the Performance of Identity* (1999) by Paloma Gay y Blasco is an excellent ethnography on the Spanish *Gitanos*. Much of it deals with the Philadelphia Church movement, which is very strong and influential among the *Gitanos*, transforming their morality, family, and community relations.¹⁵

The *Pentecostal Evangel*, monthly publication of the Assemblies of God has a number of articles on the growth of the Pentecostal movement among the Gypsies in France, the United States, Germany, and other parts of the world. Starting in the 1960s these articles were helpful in tracing the history of the movement worldwide. The website of the *God’s Gypsy Christian Church* (www.lachurch.net), a fellowship of Pentecostal

American Rom, was one of the Internet resources that contributed to my research. “The Social Impact of the Rise of Pentecostal Evangelicalism among American Rom” (1988) by Ellen Sato was a useful article on the Roma movement in America. It helped me draw some parallels between the Roma movement in Bulgaria and that in the United States. Besides their historical value, these sources also helped me establish some of the common patterns and challenges of the movement.

Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement (2007) by Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori is a valuable new source on the Pentecostal movement. A result of four years of field research, the text offers great insights on the holistic ministry carried out by thriving indigenous Pentecostal congregations in the developing world.

There are some valuable materials specifically on the Roma in Bulgaria. *History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (1994) by David Crowe gives a good overview of Roma history in Eastern Europe, focusing on the prejudices and oppression against them. One chapter focused particularly on the history of the Roma in Bulgaria. In *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics* (2001) Zoltan Barany explains the dynamics of their unfortunate social and economic predicament. It was helpful in analyzing the context of the Bulgarian Roma and discusses their major social problems. *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey* (1995) by Isabel Fonseca is a journalist’s account of the author’s encounters with Roma in Eastern Europe that makes a vivid description of their situation. It gives an observer’s perspective on Roma life and manners in Eastern Europe including Bulgaria.

Unfortunately, during the Communist times Bulgarian academia did not produce many texts on the subject, because the People's Government policy toward the Roma was total assimilation. In the years after 1989, however, there have been many good books and articles written on studying the subject. Special credit should be given to the research of Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, anthropologists who have devoted many years to studying the Roma in Bulgaria. Along with a number of good articles, their coauthored text *The Gypsies in Bulgaria* (1993) offers a detailed overview of the history, life, and traditions of the Bulgarian Gypsies and dispels the almost half a century of academic darkness of the subject. Marushiakova and Popov's writings informed my text specifically on the history, cultural and social situation of the Roma in Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian Gypsies: Life, Psychology, Culture (2006) by Boiko Mizov is a valuable source on the Roma in Bulgaria addressing many questions in a comprehensive way. Traian Popkochev's *Social-Pedagogical Profile of the Roma Family* (2004) offered insights, distilled from autobiographical stories, on the effect of the evangelical faith on the upbringing on Roma children. *Just a Way of Life* (2004), prepared by a group of researchers, consists of the verbatim answers of randomly selected Roma folk from Sofia and Kiustendil, to a number of questions, without any analysis or editions (except minor ones) of the researchers, thus giving a chance to the Roma to speak for themselves. It contains a number of references to the Christian faith that have been useful to my study. *Gypsy-English/English-Gypsy Dictionary* by Atanas Slavov and *Gypsy-Bulgarian Dictionary* by Jashar Malikov provided basic knowledge of the Romanes dialects spoken in Bulgaria. They were helpful in understanding much of the Roma songs and some of the conversations during my field research.

Recently defended theses of colleague researchers were also useful. Magdalena Slavkova, an anthropologist, has done extensive research on the Gypsy evangelical believers in Bulgaria; her field studies have resulted in several articles and a dissertation on the subject. “The Gypsies in the Protestant Denominations” (2000) by Maria Dimitrova, and “The Roma *Mahala* in Kazanluk” (2003) by Evgenia Dolapchieva provided excellent material for my study. The research on the Kazanluk *mahala* has been repeatedly used in the text to demonstrate the movement’s dynamics and its effects on the Roma communities.

Scholarly writings on the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria, written by evangelical or Pentecostal scholars, are very rare.¹⁶ The contributions of researchers from outside the evangelical community were helpful, however, because:

1. They have given me additional insights about Roma communities in various parts of the country, thus complementing the insights of my own field findings.

2. They have provided additional data, which interprets the movement from a secular perspective. Thus they informed my own research and helped me to analyze the movement more objectively without the evangelical bias.

The literature review gave the subject new light and inspired me to seriously undertake the challenge of field research. It also helped me to identify unanswered questions, the gaps in the scholarly community’s work on this subject, and the problems that had remained unsolved beyond the superficial level.

Conclusion

This research was an exciting experience for me and I hope it will be of help to readers. *Gypsy Pentecostals* was an attempt to produce an academic text on the movement among the most marginal group in Bulgaria that would be both scholarly and accurate. It utilizes scholarly theories that have never been used before in analyzing this movement. I hope the text will offer a fresh perspective on the subject, useful to the fields of missiology, theology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and Roma Studies.

The few previously written dissertations on the subject have been produced by researchers who are outsiders to the movement. This one, however, was written from the perspective of an insider to Pentecostalism and one, even though gajo, who has been involved with the Roma believers for years. Seventeen years ago I was converted to the Christian faith in a Pentecostal fellowship. Since then I have been fully Pentecostal in doctrine and ministry. I have observed the Roma movement firsthand and have taken part in its development and growth in Bulgaria.

This text was also necessary, because it affirms evangelical scholarship, which has been accused on numerous occasions of academic provincialism. For example Elin Strand, apparently speaking from a modern secularist perspective, considers the evangelical interpretations of Gypsy Pentecostalism as less than scholarly, because of their emphasis on conversion, the power of the Lord, messianic motifs, and transformation. "It would be unreasonable to subject evangelical literature to methodological scrutiny, since neither the contributions nor their aspirations are of an overtly scholarly nature" (Strand 2001:12-13). I hope to demonstrate that an insider can be effective in analyzing the movement in a way people like Strand cannot.

My research and writing were a challenge, but also very rewarding, not just as a contribution to academia, but also to the Christian ministry among the precious Roma people. God's grace and my passion for the subject helped me endure the challenges associated with Ph.D. work. The work was exciting, because it gave me an opportunity to know better the despised and neglected people whom over the years I had come to love.

CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE WITHOUT A LAND

In the archives of Petko Karavelov, Prime Minister during the early years after Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire, an interesting document is found.

Dated June 4, 1884, it was an official authorization letter signed by 46 Gypsies, Bulgarian citizens from villages in the Oriahovo region:

Through this letter, signed by us, we authorize Duro Mutafov from the Malorad village to intercede on our behalf before every legal official in power in the Principality, to present our poor economic condition and request the government to grant us land that we can work in the villages where we live, or in one designated area, as the government would consider it appropriate. In regard to this question, the authorized person, mentioned above, is obligated to act on our behalf before every legal authority, with full and unlimited rights. We sign this letter for confirmation.

This request definitely came to the attention of Karavelov since it made it to the Prime Minister's archives. There is no further information whether there was any action taken on it or whether these Gypsies remained without land.

The story repeated itself over a century later. In the early 1990s, after the fall of Communism, when the Bulgarian Gypsies came to the Post-Communist governments to request land, they were turned down. The explanation was that since land was being restituted to the families of original owners, there simply was none left for the Roma. The leaders of modern Bulgaria ignored the section of the law, which allowed such land grants to citizens who did not own property. In the new democratic time, as many state productions were discontinued and thousands of factory workers laid off, the Gypsies were the first to become unemployed; so in the rural areas they needed land to secure their own survival and to take care of their children (Andreevski 1992).

These historical incidents illustrate effectively the plight of the Roma people who, having traveled the world for a millennium, are indeed a nation without a land.

Roma History

The Roma people have a fascinating history of migration, struggles and survival.

The Indian Origin

During the first five centuries after the Roma arrived in Europe, scholars knew little about their origin. They were called “Gypsies,” because some assumed they had come from Egypt. Others thought, because of their darker skin color, that they were related to the Muslim Saracens or Turks who had invaded parts of the continent. There was an apparent lack of serious scholarly interest in the Gypsies. They were viewed more as a challenge to European governments than to the academic community of the time.

This changed in the 18th century when a Hungarian student at the University of Leiden met some students from India and noticed the similarities between their language and the one spoken by the Gypsies he had known back home. Following this initial lead in 1776, linguists began to seriously research the subject and established the Roma’s Indian origin. That was the beginning of Roma Studies (Hancock 2002:2-3).

‘The true history of the Gypsy race is in the study of their language’ said Alexandre Paspati, a linguist, in the late 19th century. The comparison between Hindi, Sanskrit, and Romanes reveals that the language has Indian origins. The way the language of the Roma has evolved helps to trace their history of migrations. As the Gypsies learned to speak the languages of their host countries, Romanes, which is an oral

language, experienced convergence and modification. The common language factor has helped the Roma preserve their cultural identity in spite of centuries of adversity and oppression (Fraser 1992:1-15).

The early history of the Roma is obscure, because they did not leave any written records of their migrations. Researchers have had to make sense of much conflicting evidence. The language, oral traditions, non-gypsy sources, and Roma customs have been clues to unraveling this mystery (Duff 1965:56).

James Harriott, a British army officer, published an interesting story from the Persian Book of Kings (*Shah Nameh*), written by the poet Firdausi in the 11th century. According to the story, in the 5th century the Indian King Shankal gave 12,000 musicians as a gift to his son-in-law Bahram Gur, the Shah of Persia to entertain his subjects. After a year Bahram Gur sent them away and they kept traveling. Having been confirmed by other writers the story has been established as a historical fact (Hancock 2002:5). The Arab historian Hamza tells the same story in about 950 A.D. Firdausi told the story in his 1010 national epic in the following way (in the original version the name *Luri*, Persian for 'Gypsy' in the Middle East, is used to describe the group) (Fraser 1992:33, 35):

Thereafter he sent letters to each arch'mage, Gave clothing to the mendicants, and asked: 'In all the realm what folk are free from toil, And who are mendicants and destitute? Tell me how things are in the world, and lead my heart upon the pathway toward light.' An answer came from all the archimages, from all the nobles, and the men of lore: 'The face of earth appears prosperous, continuous blessings are in every part, save the poor complain against the ills of fortune and the Shah. "The rich" they say, "wear wreaths of roses in their drinking-bouts, And quaff to minstrelsy, but as for us they do not reckon us as men at all. The empty-handed drinketh with no rose or harp." The king of kings should look to it.'

The Shah laughed heartily at this report, and sent a camel-post to king Shangul to Say thus: "Oh, thou monarch good at need! Select ten thousand of the Gipsy-tribe, both male and female, skillful on the harp, and send them to me. I may gain mine end through that notorious folk.'

Now when the letter came to Shangul he raised his head in pride

O'er Saturn's orbit and made choice of Gipsies, as bidden by the Shah who, when they came, accorded them an audience and gave each an ox and ass, for he proposed to make the Gipsies husbandmen, while his officials gave them a thousand asses' loads of wheat, that they might have the ox and ass for work, Employ the wheat as seed for raising crops, and should besides make music for the poor, and render them the service free of cost. The Gipsies went and ate the wheat and oxen, then at a year's end came with pallid cheeks.

The Shah said: 'Was it not your task to plough, to sow, and reap? Your asses yet remain, so load them up, prepare your harps, and stretch the silken cords.'

And so the Gipsies now, according to Bahram's just ordinance, Live by their wits; they have for company the dog and wolf, and tramp unceasingly (cited in Sampson 1930:17-18)

This accounts for the first group of known Gypsy-like immigrants that left India, but many have wondered where they ended up. Early 20th century scholars like Ralph Turner and John Sampson believed that the Gypsies started as one group of immigrants and divided into three. Those that remained in Syria, Jordan, and Israel, are currently known as *Dom* or *Dombari*. Another group has been discovered in Armenia called *Lom* who also speak an Indian-like language. The third group ended up in Europe and became later known as the *Rom* (Hancock 2002:5-6).

The conclusions of more recent research including Indian scholars are that the Roma ancestors actually began leaving India after 1000 A.D. They were an altogether different group from the *Dom* in the Middle East who likely originated from Bahram Gur's musicians (Hancock 2002:6-7).

The mystery of the Gypsy origins has been unraveled in recent times by the means of modern genetic research. The project conducted by a team of medical researchers from several prominent world universities and published in the *American Journal of Human Genetics* in 2001 gives strong DNA evidence that links the European Roma groups with India. Even though due to genetic mutations there are still some ambiguities in regard to "the origins and relatedness of Romani populations" and the

specific Indian groups from which they may come from, the Y-Chromosomes haplogroup findings clearly point to the Gypsies' Indian origins (Gresham et al 2001).

In regards to the original identity of the Roma ancestors in India and the reasons for their departure, there are several theories:

1. The Roma ancestors were from the Indian pariah (outcaste) groups at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, according to earlier European scholars. As "untouchables" they performed work that caste Hindus considered "degrading and disgraceful" such as "fakirs and fortune-tellers, animal-trainers and traders, dancers, singers, instrumentalists, acrobats and wandering hawkers, herbalists and metal-workers." The ancient religious laws of Manu condemned all these occupations. Their low social status may have caused them to migrate westward in order to look for a better life. The evidence for this theory is that the Gypsies still do this type of work in the countries where they live (Duff 1965:60). Heinrich Grellmann, early Roma scholar in Germany, proposed that the original Roma were poor and did the same menial jobs as their descendants in Europe. They came, according to Grellmann, from the Shudras - the lowest level of the Hindu caste system (Hancock 2002:4).

2. Other scholars suggest that the Roma descended from a militia force group called the Rajputs formed by the Hindus to resist the Islamic Invasion (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:3). They were from a higher warrior caste and well prepared for battle, but lost the war with the Muslim invaders at the time. This hypothesis places the ancestors of the Roma in the higher Indian society as Kshatriyas or Jats. The wandering Banjara tribe of India who claim to be descendants of the Rajputs, believe they are connected to the Roma in Europe. Hancock provides some recent genetic and cultural evidence to support that

claim (2002:13-14). There has been much debate, however, on this theory. Looking at the linguistic evidence in India one cannot find sufficient support for it, according to Fraser, because Banjari does not have much similarity to Romanes (1992:26, 35-37).

3. The major departure of immigrants who became the ancestors of the European Roma, most scholars agree, happened in the 11th century and was caused in part by the Muslim invasion of India. The succession of raids led by Mohammed of Ghazni between 1000 and 1027 for the purpose of spreading Islam into India, brought about the death of thousands and much destruction in the northern parts of the subcontinent (Hancock 2002:13-14). The havoc and starvation caused by these invasions could have been the final reason that pushed the Roma into leaving their homeland (Duff 1965:60-63).

Medieval Travels

The westward spread of Islam delayed the Roma migration to Europe by several decades. The first Byzantine record of their appearance in the Empire is dated 1054. It was during their extended residence in Byzantium that the culture and language, known as *Romani*, enters the historical record (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:3). The Balkans became the second home of the Gypsies. The fact that they began appearing in Western Europe around the 15th century means they had lived mostly in the Balkans for about five centuries. Their cultural formation was greatly impacted in this long period (Marushiakova and Popov 2000:7). The Roma minority generally constitutes a higher percentage of the populations in the Balkan countries than in Western Europe.¹⁷ The number of Greek words in *Romanes* is second only to those of Indian origin (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:3).

The earliest account of Roma presence at the gateway to the Balkans was recorded in the late 13th century. A document from Constantinople, dated 1283, referred to taxes collected from “the so-called Egyptians and Tsigani” (Hancock 2002:15).

At the time of the Roma arrival in Europe, the Ottoman Turks were taking over the Byzantine Empire politically and militantly spreading Islam. Some Europeans mistakenly thought that the newcomers were related to the Turkish invaders. The French and the Germans called them “Saracen.” The Dutch called them *Heiden*, meaning “heathen,” because they were characterized as non-Christians. The name *Tsigani*, which remains until the present, comes from the Greek word ‘atsingani,’ meaning the ‘do-not-touch’ or ‘hands-off’ people. The Byzantines gave this name to the Roma, because they seemed to keep distant from all others (Hancock 2002:1). This might also refer to the ‘untouchable’ status of the Roma ancestors in the Hindu caste system.

The Roma were well received in Europe at first, but their strange customs and closed society became a reason for their isolation and mistreatment by host nations over the centuries (Lundquist 2000). They were then wilder, but practiced some of the same occupations as they do today: smiths, musicians, and fortune-tellers. Their nomadic travels in a Europe without borders took them rapidly to a wide variety of locations.

At first the Gypsies had received a period of grace, because they possessed papal letters of protection,¹⁸ but later became unwanted foreign visitors. When the European authorities detected some of their unacceptable behaviors like stealing and swindling, they took precautionary measures against them. By the end of the 15th century the Roma had lost their privileges in many of the European countries and in the next three centuries stricter and stricter laws were passed against them. The rulers of Europe wanted to chase

these strange dark wanderers away from their territories as imposters. The Gypsies, however, were often able to avoid punishment by hanging or torture by secret escapes when they felt threatened (Yates 1966:74-75).

Throughout history the non-Roma have attempted to assimilate, destroy, or control the Roma. Having just taken their country back from the Moors, the Spanish issued laws against Roma dress, language and customs (Lundquist 2000). King Philip IV denied their existence as a separate ethnos insisting that they were just Spaniards who spoke a “made-up artificial language” (Tsankova 2006b:18-19).

The French expelled the Roma from Paris in 1539. The threat of death caused them to leave England in 1563 (Lundquist 2000). England actually passed a law in 1596 that made it a capital crime to be “one of the race of people calling themselves ‘Egyptians.’ That law was repealed in 1792 and a more romantic image of the Gypsies, inspiring admiration, began to be constructed. A century later, however, an old notice board was found at the entrance of an English village with the following text:

All persons found wandering abroad, lying or lodging, or being in any barn, outhouse, or in the open air, and not giving a good account of themselves will be apprehended as rogues and vagabonds, and be either publicly whipped or sent to the house of correction, and afterwards disposed of according to the law, by order of the magistrates (Yates 1966:75).

In the 15th century the nobles of Hungary and Romania forced many Roma into slavery, because they needed laborers for their large estates (Lundquist 2000:1). The Roma had been working for these feudal landlords for a long time and had become closely connected with the lands. When the owners began selling land to one another and to the monasteries the Roma were prevented from leaving, because their labor and skills were in demand. The policy toward them shifted from “limited fiscal dependency upon the Romanian princes to an unlimited personal dependency on the big landlords of the

country, the monasteries, and the boyars.” Thus, Roma slavery was legalized in the principalities of the northern Balkans – they became possession of the wealthy land-owners. Basil, called ‘the Moldova Wolf,’ came up with a code dating 1654, which gave certain freedoms in the treatment of slaves; the Roma who raped non-Roma women were punished by death whereas the non-Roma for the same offence against Roma women were not punished at all (Patrin/slavery). In 1818, a law in Wallachia decreed the Gypsies to be “born slaves” (Hancock 2002:21).

The industrial revolution and the social-economic changes around the world made slaves a liability. By the end of the 18th century slavery was extinct in Transylvania and half a century later it was abolished consecutively by the Moldavian (1855) and the Wallachian (1856) General Assemblies. The Roma obtained full “legal freedom” in 1864 under Prince Ioan Couza – just two years after the creation of Romania as a unified state. About 600,000 Gypsy slaves were emancipated and the word “tsigan” was no longer used synonymously with “slave.” Unfortunately, according to Hancock, there was not much done for the education and social integration of the slaves who had been freed. “Instead, it was their former owners who were paid by the government for their loss” (2002:23-26).

Even though the Roma were treated harshly in the Middle Ages, they somehow managed to survive. Lacking formal education they seemed to outsmart their persecutors. In the following passage of his novel *La Gitanilla de Madrid* Miguel de Cervantes pointed to the Gypsies’ natural intelligence:

‘And whence do you know so much?’ said one of the cavaliers.
 ‘Are you not aware,’ said Preciosa, ‘that there are men who do not learn, yet know all? I am of their number; so are all the Gypsies, men and women. Our mind is different from yours; our understanding makes us older than our years. We sail over strange seas, and turn to a pole-star unknown to you; for since it is by our skill and our industry that we live, we are proficient in them from the cradle. Frankly confess, have you in your life seen a silly Gypsy man or a simple

Gypsy woman? Cast your eyes on these young girls, my companions; they do not speak, and from their silence you would take them for statues; but they are artful damsels, and farseeing, whose wit might outmatch your wisdom. Of a truth there is no Gypsy girl twelve years old who does not know more than a Spanish lady of twenty-five. A little dexterity,' she added smiling,' and a little of the black art teach us in a year what the rest of the world do not learn in half a century.'

(cited in Sampson 1930:124)

In the 19th and early 20th century there were places where the Gypsies were treated in a more respectful and sympathetic way – allowed to live in their caravans and camp around Europe. In the 20th century the mania of persecution against them was revived. The Europeans attempted to once again “integrate them and make them against their will conform to the standard way of life of the *gaje*” (Yates 1966:75).

The Holocaust

The greatest tragedy in known Romany history was the Holocaust. The Roma call it “O Baro Porrajmos” meaning “the great devouring,” because many humans lives were devoured in it; “porrajmos” is considered a bad, ugly word, because of that ugly memory and some Roma are hesitant to pronounce it openly (Hancock 2002:34).

The terrible acts of genocide against the Roma during World War II, however, had been in the making for a long time before the Nazis came to power. Ever since the Roma arrived in the German lands centuries earlier, they had experienced severe discrimination. Their oppression and persecution had been enforced legally and supported academically. German scholars considered the Roma and Jewish people inferior beings and labeled them “the excrement of humanity.” Even Charles Darwin wrote in 1871 that these two ethnic groups were not “culturally advanced.” In reference to the Roma, Richard Leibich, coined the phrase “lives undeserving of life.” By the late 19th century Chancellor Bismarck enforced anti-Roma laws and decided that if caught

breaking the law they should be punished “especially severely.” In the first half of the 20th century, the Roma were banned from entering parks and public baths, and sent into work camps. Romany criminality was considered a genetically transmitted disease. This belief did not take into consideration the fact that living in isolation some Roma often had to revert to stealing in order to secure their survival (Hancock 2002:35-36).

Only months after Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of the Third Reich, a law was issued, which included the phrase “lives undeserving of life.” The persecution of the Gypsies equaled that of the Jews in motives and methods. These ethnic populations simply “were selected because they existed.” The National Citizenship Law in 1937 declared Roma and Jews to be second-class citizens and took away their civil rights. A decree was soon issued by Himmler called “The Struggle Against the Gypsy Plague.” The Jews and Gypsies were called “vermin” and “disease” and were not recognized as part of humanity. The propaganda machine of the Third Reich attempted to desensitize the general population to Nazi ethnic cruelty (Hancock 2002:35-38, 51).

The Gypsies were the only other population, beside the Jews, which was targeted for extermination on racial grounds in the Final Solution. The Nazis wanted to create a “Gypsy-free Europe;” Roma annihilation was part of their plan to eradicate “worthless life.” On behalf of the Office of Racial Hygiene Mr. Johannes Behrendt stated: “All Gypsies should be treated as hereditary sick; the only solution is elimination. The aim should therefore be the elimination without hesitation of this defective element in the population.” The first Holocaust act of mass murder took place in Buchenwald in January of 1940 where 250 Roma children from Brno were gassed; “they were used as guinea-

pigs to test the efficacy of the Zyklon-B cyanide gas crystals that were later used in the gas chambers” (Hancock 2002:42).

The Nazis even targeted Romani-like people, because they were not willing to take any chances of polluting the German population with Romani blood. “A person with one Jewish grandparent was not affected in the Nazi anti-Jewish legislation, whereas one-eighth ‘gypsy blood’ was considered strong enough to outweigh seven-eighths of German blood – so dangerous were the Gypsies considered” (Hancock 2002:41).

It has been difficult to determine the number of Roma destroyed during the Holocaust. The “porrajmos,” according to Hancock, brought about the elimination of about half of the Roma living in the parts of Europe under Nazi occupation (2002:34). Many Gypsies were executed and shot in the fields of Eastern and Southern Europe of whom no records exist. While the research on the Jewish Holocaust relies on censuses taken before and after the war, since the Gypsies were rarely included in national censuses during that time, it is not possible to produce the exact numbers on the basis of such demographic data. According to recent scholarly reports the number of Roma Holocaust victims could have been up to 1.5 million (Hancock 2002:47-50).

After the war, Germany did not take any responsibility for the crimes against the Roma people. The Roma had no representatives giving testimony at the Nuremberg Trials and have never received war reparations as an ethnic group. The United Nations did nothing to help them after the war. There was not even one Roma representative on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council until 1987 (Hancock 2002: 48-50).

Most people have neither been aware nor interested in this part of the Holocaust. The Roma themselves did not want to remember this part of their history. Hancock cites Kenrick who gives a good summary of how the Gypsy Holocaust is remembered:

While in the camps, the Gypsies had been unable to keep up their customs...concerning the preparation of food and the washing of clothes. They solved the psychological problems by not speaking about the time in the camps. Only a small number of Gypsies could read or write, so they could not tell their own story. But also they were unwilling to tell their stories to others, and few others were interested anyway. In the many books written describing the Nazi period and the persecution of the Jews, Gypsies usually appear as a footnote or small section. (2002:49)

Presently, there is much neo-Nazi activity in Eastern and Central Europe that makes the Roma primary targets of racial violence (Hancock 2002:48-50). Certain political leaders in Bulgaria once again began using the old Nazi term "Gypsy criminality." Obviously, the lessons of the Roma Holocaust have not been learned.

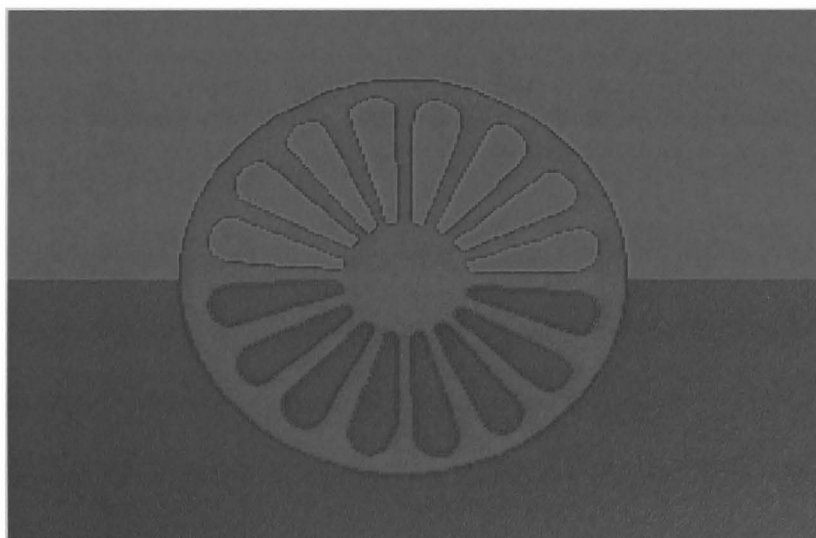
Toward Roma Nationality

During their earlier history the Gypsies did not recognize themselves as a nation, but rather as an ethnic group with multiple sub-groups and local clans. Europeans, however, have viewed them as a monolithic whole. Their common origin, language, and history of oppression have made them begin recognizing themselves as one people. The common term that has emerged for them 'Roma,' meaning 'people,' signals a 'new collective identity.' They have developed a sense of historical consciousness and misfortune (Fonseca 1995:276). Thus, in recent decades the Roma have indeed come to view themselves as one people.

There have in fact been those who had a desire to have a Roma nation-state. The Kwieks, a family of Gypsy Kings from Eastern Europe spoke for such a homeland during

the 20th century. Michael Kwiek II wanted to create a Roma state in the Ganges valley in India. Janusz Kwiek wrote a letter to Mussolini in 1937 requesting that the fascists allow the Roma to be settled in North Africa between Somalia and Abyssinia. These dreams were crushed by the Nazis and the *Barro Porajmos*. After World War II, Vaida Voivod a Romanian Roma living in France emerged as a leader and his uttermost desire was to found a country named Romanestan to serve as “a territory, which would serve as a refuge in the event of persecution.”

Many Roma organizations and unions were organized around the world. About 23 of them merged together into a transnational one - the World Romani Committee. That Committee organized the first World Romani Congress in 1971. At that Congress, according to Hancock, “the use of ethnic labels for our people which are of non-Romani origin such as Gypsy, Zigeuner, and Gitano were condemned.” The delegates selected the term “Roma” as their official identification. They reaffirmed as emblem for their people “the green and blue flag ... embellished with the red, 16-spoked chakra.” The traditional Roma song “Dzelem, Dzelem” by Zarko Jovanovic was adopted as the Roma anthem. (Hancock 2002:118-120).



*I walked, I walked on long roads, I met happy Roma
 O Roma where do you come from, With tents on happy roads?
 O Roma, O fellow Roma...
 I once had a great family, The Black Legions murdered them
 Come with me Roma from all the world For the Romani roads have opened
 Now is the time, rise up Roma now, We will rise high if we act
 O Roma, O fellow Roma... (Roma Anthem).*

Many Roma delegates from around the world attended the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. There they signed and delivered a petition, which requested the United Nations to recognize the Roma “as a non-territorial nation with a seat and voting rights in the UN General Assembly.” (Hancock 2002:122).

Roma Culture

The Gypsies, seemingly immune to progress, live in an everlasting Now, in a perpetual, heroic present, as if they recognized only the slow pulse of eternity and were content to live in the margin of history. They are in constant motion, like the waving of branches or the flowing of water. Their social organization is forever fluid, yet has an internal vitality. The inner cohesion and solidarity of the Gypsy community lies in the strong family ties, which are their basic and only constant unit. The larger groups of family units, the horde, they call the ‘kumpania.’ It remains highly mobile, constantly scattering and regrouping as the old relationships and alliances shift, as new patterns of interest develop. They keep in touch with each other through a web of secret contacts... Oral traditions survive only through strong genealogical awareness; their memories do not extend beyond four, or at best five generations, limited to those ancestors a living person still remembers – and at his death these ancient ones are forgotten, since no one else has known them alive. There are no mythical or legendary heroes, no stories about their origin, no need for any justification of their worldwide nomadism. (Yoors 1967:5)

When speaking of Roma culture and worldview over-generalizations should be avoided. There are many groups that identify themselves with the Roma and a number of Roma-like groups that choose not to self-identify as ‘Roma’ or ‘Gypsies.’ According to Thomas Acton, “there is not on a priori line which determines which ethnic groups we

should include in Roma history and which not.” The complex history of the Roma has caused them to adapt to various worldviews and lifestyles (Acton 2006). All Roma have a strong sense of group identity. They are family oriented, respectful of the elderly, and careful to observe certain traditions (Lundquist 2000:1). Their flexibility, adaptability, and sense of self-preservation have helped the Roma survive as a people group.

Even though the Roma have a common origin, culture, and language, there are many different group divisions among them with distinct names such as: Kalderash, Machwaya, Lovari, Churari, Romanichal, Gitanos, Kalo, Sinti, Rudari, Manush, Boyash, Ungaritzza, Luri, Bashaldé, Romungro, Xoraxai. They are divided in clans, often called ‘vitsas.’ There is not one group that can be referred to as ‘the one true Roma’ (Hancock 2002). The Roma groups and sub-groups are too numerous to list. Some are bigger and more well-known than others. They differ from one another and from country to country. There are even groups who identify themselves as Roma, but do not speak the language. Certain cultural customs may be observed by some Roma groups, but not others.

The Roma have truly had great influence on European arts with the music, fortune-telling, dancing bears, and caravans. Entertainment has been a main line of business for them. Also traditional Roma occupations have been blacksmithing, metal work, trading, peddling, healing, and various crafts (Lundquist 2000). The Roma love for many colors is evident in every Gypsy camp and *mahala* (Demirev 2004:2).

The Roma contributions to the European cultural heritage are numerous. They have been the inspiration for great poems like ‘Gypsies of the Steppe’ by Pushkin and novels like *La Gitanilla de Madrid* by Cervantes. The lovers of opera cannot forget the famous *Carmen* by George Bizet – the story of a Spanish *Gitana* who captured the

affection of both Don Jose, a military sergeant, and the Toreador Escamillo. The Roma *flamenco* is a popular dance in Spain. The Hungarian composer Franz Liszt was greatly influenced by Roma music; he identified the ‘Gypsy scale’ similar to certain oriental and Indian scales. Hancock gives a list of European music compositions that have been inspired by Roma music and culture: “Brahms (*Acht Zigeunerlieder*), Coleridge-Taylor (*Gypsy Suite*), Dvorjak (*Ciganske Melodie*)...Haydn (*Zigeunertanz*)...Ravel (*Tzigane*)...Sain-Saens (*Gypsy Dance*)...Verdi (*La Zingara*)” (2002:126).

There are also a number of famous musicians, singers, and actors who were either Roma or of Roma ancestry. Charlie Chaplin, the well-known comedian, came from the Romanichal Smiths on his mother’s side; he learned much from the time spent with Roma and his ‘tramp’ character was modeled after the way Roma life was perceived (Hancock 2002:129). Usin Kerim was one of the first Roma poets in Bulgaria. His first book *Gilja la Cehratar* (Songs from the Tent) was published in 1955. Esma Redjepova from Skopje, Macedonia, probably the best known Roma singer, was nominated in 2002 for a Nobel Prize by the International Romani Union. Ivo Papazov, a Turkish Roma from Bulgaria known also as *Ibriama*, carries many international awards and is officially recognized as one of the best clarinet players in the world. Papazov began his career playing at wedding celebrations around Bulgaria, where many couples arranged their wedding dates according to his busy schedule (Hancock 2002:134-135).

The Religion of the Roma

Earlier scholars assumed that the Roma were not followers of any particular religion, because they had no temples, sacred texts, or priests; ethnographers had not been

able to draw conclusive evidence on this matter in the past because of the closed nature of Roma society. Sources disagree on the question whether Roma original beliefs were monotheistic or polytheistic. It is clear, however, that most Gypsies are intensely religious and exemplify spiritual strength and enthusiasm in matters of faith, regardless of their official confessional affiliation.

One's spiritual batteries can only be recharged by spending time in an all-Romani environment – in the normal course of events, in family homes. It is in the area of spiritual and physical well-being that the Indian origin of the Romani people is most clearly seen. (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:3-5)

The Roma's Indian origin presupposes that Hinduism is at the root of their religion. The centuries of separation from India have caused them to lose the awareness of their connection with it, but the influence of that ancient religion can be seen in their customs, spirituality, and worldview. Since *Romanes* is a derivative of Sanskrit, many words of the old Vedic language have been adapted to the Christian faith. The trident of Shiva, called *trishula*, has become the Romani word for the Christian "Cross." In *Lomavren*, language of the Armenian Gypsies, *trusul* means both "church" and "priest." The Romanes word for Lord is *devel*, which comes from the Sanskrit *devata* (deity). The Roma believe in the law of retribution called "prikaza," meaning that nothing happens by chance or accident. The origin of this belief can be traced to the Hindu *karma* – the law of cause and effect (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:4-6). The ancient Hindus considered Manu, the prince of wisdom, the father of humankind, and the first man of earth. Gypsies see themselves as created by God and descendents of Manu. The word "manush" is the Roma word for "man, human" (Kabuli 2004:77).

The Gypsies have traditionally adopted the religions of their host countries while at the same time maintaining their folk beliefs and practices. This has brought about a

great deal of syncretism in the Roma communities (Patrin Web Journal 2000). They have not been as concerned with the dogmas of various religions, but with the social function of their religious beliefs (Pamporov et al 2001:14).

The existence of a Creator *Devel* is an important belief for the Gypsies. He is the one who brings blessings for people and their families. The ultimate goal is eternal life while life on earth is a simple transition, full of suffering and struggles. Divine providence will make the Gypsies free and give them children and health (Study 2000).

The Roma term *bezeh* means ‘sin’ in both theological and practical sense. This term is also used to in reference to ‘wretch, sinner, poor one.’ To Gypsies “stealing, lying, adultery, murder, and domestic violence” are sins (Pamporov et al 2001:16).

The Roma have had historical interactions with some of the major religions:

Christianity

The Roma have had a long and complex history of interaction with the Christian faith that will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

Judaism

A popular belief among Roma is that they are descendants of a lost tribe of Israel. The famous British preacher Gypsy Smith said:

Eighty of every hundred Gypsies have Bible names. My father was Cornelius, my brother Ezekiel. My uncle Bartholomew was the father of twelve children, to every one he gave a Scriptural name – Naomi, Samson, Delilah, Elijah, Simeon, and the like. Fancy having a Samson and a Delilah in the same family! Yet the Gypsies have no Bibles, and if they had they could not read them. Whence, then, these Scriptural names? Do they come down to us from tradition? May it not be that we are one of the lost tribes? We ourselves believe that we are akin to the Jews, and when one regards the Gypsies from the point of view of an outsider one is able to discover some striking resemblance between the Gypsies and the Jews. (Smith 1902:3-4)

This belief is inspired in part by the Roma’ need to rediscover their historical

and religious significance as a people. Even though both groups have lived as dispersed and marginalized minorities around the world, there is little evidence to substantiate an ethnic link between them. “Unlike the Jews, they share neither a Messianic visionary cult nor the consciousness of a great historical past”(Yoors 1967:5).

The few Roma who profess Judaism, do so mostly as a result of marrying a Jewish spouse. During World War II there were several documented marriages between Jews and Roma in a concentration camp close to Serbia, which became known as the “marriage camp.” There is not much information on how many of these mixed couples survived the Holocaust (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:10).

Islam

The Roma did not have much Muslim influence when they departed from India. The early Roma ancestors considered Islam the religion of the enemy. There is not much linguistic impact from Arabic or religious Persian in Romanes. In the Balkans and Turkey there are thousands of Roma Muslims who had converted during the five-century rule of the Ottoman Empire (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:3). Islam is presently a powerful influence on the Bulgarian Roma and is usually mixed with magical and animistic practices.

Folk Practices

The Gypsies preserve their cultural identity and continuity by a complex system of “protective screens”, which often make reality opposite of the appearance. Their main common bond, besides the ancestry, is the mystic Romani language (Yoors 1967:6).

The family ties dominate the structure of Gypsy culture. The Roma have traditionally been organized in family and patrilineal clans that proceed up to five

generations from the patriarch. Often enmities that exist between individuals are perpetuated in the families and carried from generation to generation (Study 2000).

The Roma's inherent religiosity is reflected in their folk beliefs and practices. They have faith in supernatural powers, use of omens, and curses. This is often played out in the use of various charms, talismans, amulets, and crosses, believed to prevent misfortune and bring health. These practices might be different in the various Roma groups, but animism has always been an important factor in their culture. The Roma have been notorious for possessing supernatural powers to help people find love and fortune. The practices of both healing and fortune-telling are based on belief in magic, even though many outsiders consider them scam and deception (Weyrauch 2001:51).

The Purity Code

Many Roma groups have a traditional code with elaborate customs for maintaining ritual purity. They make strong distinctions between 'pure' (*vujo*) and 'impure' (*marime*) behavior and are known for their regulations of cleanliness.¹⁹ Violation of the community rules and taboos causes pollution. The class distinctions in these groups are based on the degree of adherence to the code (Patrin Journal 2000).

Gypsy women are considered clean from the waist up and unclean from the waist down, because of menstruation viewed as the flow of blood without injury. They wear long skirts, which are only supposed to be touched by their husbands. They also cover their legs with blankets when sitting unless they are wearing the traditional skirt. Roma women should not pass in front of a man or between men, but should go around in order to avoid infecting them. Pre-pubescent girls and older women who do not menstruate, are placed in a different category, because they do not present a threat of contamination and

are free to interact socially with men (Patrin Web Journal 2000). The code seems unfair to women, but it also gives them power as the potential source of pollution (Vanyusha).

The Indian purity code can also be seen in the culinary behavior of the Roma. They do not consider food clean if it has been stored for hours. For that reason they do not prepare meals in advance and there are no leftovers (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:8). They carefully wash all food products before cooking them and avoid eating food prepared by *gaje*. They carry their own knives and utensils when traveling (Vanyusha).

The purity code emphasizes the appropriate use of water. Washing and bathing are done in running water, because stagnant water is considered unclean. Dishes, clothes, and hands should not be washed in the same water. Women's clothes should be washed separately from men's. If washing is done in a river the lowest level of the stream is for washing the clothes of menstruating women while the upper ones are used in this order: cooking and drinking, bathing and laundry, and watering the horses (Patrin 2000).

Many Roma girls marry around 12 or 13 years of age. The parents arrange the marriages thus establishing an alliance between families. A bride-price is usually paid by the groom's family to the bride's in order to make up for the lost help and to guarantee that the girl will be treated well by her new family (Lundquist 2000). Most Gypsy girls are virgins at the time of marriage; their chastity is tested during the marriage ceremony.

Roma avoid contacts with *gaje* considered a source of pollution. This belief is also rooted in Hinduism (Lundquist 2000:). The purity code is a means of social control and maintenance of group unity. Similar practices can be found in many other societies, which are under constant outside threats (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:6). The remedies for pollution are different in the Gypsy community, depending on the degree of defilement.

Minor offenses can be forgiven while serious ones are severely punished, the worst punishment being expulsion from the group (Patrin 2000). The code has helped the Roma preserve themselves ethnically over centuries of oppression and marginalization.

Fortune-Telling

The image of the Gypsy woman with a crystal ball and tarot cards is very common. Books and websites have been dedicated to the subject of Gypsy magic and fortune-telling. This is a traditional practice brought from India, which could be done everywhere and does not require much equipment. This skill gives the Roma a degree of control and protection, because it makes the *gaje* dependent on their spiritual counsel and afraid of their spells. Even though the Roma are famous for this practice, not all Roma groups read fortunes (Hancock 2002:103-104).

The famous European alchemist and physician Paracelsus held Gypsy magic and chiromancy in high esteem; he said much could be learned from old Gypsy women about black magic and healing. The public demand for their supernatural powers has continued till the present. In the 1950s the German Press reported some people in rural areas asking Gypsy women to pronounce a blessing on their finances (Margalit 1999:78).

Fortune-telling in the Gypsy community is traditionally an occupation for women. Young girls are taught to read fortunes at an early age. This is practiced on the streets, in special parlors, at fairs, flea markets, and other public events. Traveling Gypsies in America tell fortunes in the places they pass; they are careful, however, to avoid running into local police or invading the territory of another clan. Gypsy families would often operate fortune-telling concessions while traveling with carnivals (Sutherland 1975:86).

For most fortune-telling Gypsies the practice has simply been a source of income over the centuries. They normally do not practice fortune-telling among themselves, but only for the benefit of *Gaje*.²⁰ This has caused people to doubt their magical powers (Weyrauch 2001:51, 190). The members of the fortune-telling Machwaya Roma group in the United State are well aware that their magic is a hoax (Mitchell 2006).

There are numerous forms of Gypsy divination and fortune-telling using palms, crystal balls, stones, coins, beans, coffee, and sticks. They are often dependent on the context and the environment. Tarot cards are one of the most popular methods and there are many ways of card reading (Buckland 2001:100-110).

The good Gypsy fortune-teller knows a great deal about psychology. She looks for clues in regard to what pleases the client. Much of the “successful” Gypsy fortune-telling is accomplished through careful observation, experience, and artifice, rather than through real magic (Buckland 2001:98).

The host countries often view this traditional occupation of Gypsy women as swindling. Some nations have reacted by banning it, but that is usually not strictly enforced. The United States legal system has recently taken steps for the accommodation of Gypsy practices; some American courts have justified fortune-telling practitioners if they could prove that they had no criminal intent (Weyrauch 2001:50-51)

The *bujo* (bag) practice in various forms has been used in fortune-telling. The customer is told to sew a significant amount of cash in a pillow or a cloth as part of the ‘magic’ prescription for solving a specific problem. Then the fortune-teller skillfully switches the bag and takes the money. Roma who practice it, however, have to stay on the run and cannot maintain a local fortune-telling business. When the FBI cracked down

on the *bujo* in the United States, the number of frauds significantly diminished (Sutherland 1975:87).

Healing

The Roma have traditionally preferred to deal with the problem of disease and cure within their own community. They often attribute diseases to evil spirits, which are countered and removed supernaturally. They have developed a complex belief system with many rules and rituals dealing with disease prevention and cure. The Gypsy healers and herbalists are usually women, often the same ones who tell fortunes for the *gaje*. They receive this folk knowledge from their mothers and grandmothers (Sway 1975:48).

There are some superstitious methods of prevention and cure. Shaking a young tree has been considered one of the ways to lower fever, assuming that the fever is transferred from the sick person to the tree. Another method, used for the same purpose is the drinking of powdered portions of certain animals dissolved in spirits with the accompaniment of a chant. The carrying of animal bones or insect parts is a way of preventing various diseases (Patrin 2000).

Many of the herbal cures, used by Roma women, have actual medicinal value. Having lived outdoors as nomads for centuries, the Gypsies have gathered a tremendous inventory of natural remedies from plants and minerals. This gives credibility to their herbal methods of medical treatment (Sway 1975:48).

Legal Structures

The Roma often have autonomous legal structures based on oral traditions or group rules. They exist underground and act independently from the official legal system in the country. Roma private laws and customs have served as defensive mechanisms to

secure the survival of Gypsy culture with its values and traditions. They help the Roma to keep themselves separate from the *gaje*. They are secretive in their private lives, language, and social institutions. The purity code, which deals with sexuality, gender, and the body, is fundamental to Roma law (Weyrauch 2001).

In various Roma groups the court is called “Romano kris” and settles disputes on matters of law and customs. The *kris* operates through coercions based on magic (Yoors 1967:6). The worst punishment is expulsion from the community (Lundquist 2000).

The Roma in Bulgaria

Even though the Gypsies have lived in Bulgaria for centuries, little is known about them beyond the stereotypes. There is much talk in the public sphere of the “Gypsy problem,” but the discussion is superficial, because most people lack knowledge of this ethnic group with its specific social structures and cultural traditions. The Bulgarian public and governmental institutions need to understand the problems of the Gypsies before they can take effective steps toward their solution. Such knowledge is necessary for resolving the deepening ethnic crisis in Bulgaria (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:7).

The Gypsies in Bulgaria are an ethnic group that historically is connected to the other European Gypsy groups. They have been an important part of Bulgarian economic, cultural, and social life since their arrival into the country over six centuries ago. In spite of assimilation attempts in the past, the Gypsies are still a significant and growing segment of the country’s population. As in most other countries, they have been victims of discrimination for centuries (Bennett 1992:40). The historical journey of the Bulgarian Gypsies has been somewhat better, however, than that of their kinfolk in other countries.

They did not undergo severe persecution like the ones in Western Europe between the 15th and the 18th century. They were not subjected to slavery like those in the areas of Wallachia and Moladia, north of Bulgaria (Tomova 1995:8). They were also saved from mass murder during the Holocaust.

Bulgarian History and the Roma

In order to understand the context of the study, it is appropriate to review the history of Bulgaria and the Roma's place in it.

The Glorious Past

The Republic of Bulgaria is located in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula. The country borders the Black Sea on the East, Serbia and Macedonia (formerly republics of the Yugoslav Federation) on the West, Romania on the North, Greece on the southwest and Turkey on the southeast. The country is divided in North and South by the Balkan mountain range, also called "Stara Planina" (Old Mountain). The Danube River Valley makes up most of north Bulgaria. The southern part mainly consists of the mountains of Rila, Pirin, the valley of upper Thrace, and the Rhodoppi Mountain range. Presently, the capital is the city of Sofia, located in the western part of the country.

Bulgaria has a very interesting history and a rich cultural heritage that go back over 13 centuries. The country's territory was the home of the ancient Thracians during the times of the Persian Empire and the Golden Age of Greece under Alexander. Two centuries later the land came under Roman occupation. During the decline of the Roman Empire it became a habitation of Turkic and European people groups. The Slavs of Southern Europe settled in the Balkans in the fifth century A.D.

The Bulgarian state was founded in 681 A.D when Bulgar tribes coming from the northeastern Ukrainian steppe invaded the Danube valley. Having defeated the Byzantine troops, the Bulgar armies led by Khan Asparuh conquered the land and subjugated the Slavic people living there.²¹ The Bulgar noble princes became the dominant aristocratic caste and ruled over the Slavs. The first Bulgarian Kingdom was one of the most powerful states in Eastern Europe dominating the Balkans from 681 to 1018 (Frucht 2000: 92-93).

The Romans and the Byzantines competed for political and cultural influence over the young Balkan state. Byzantium won when, under Prince Boris I, Bulgaria accepted Orthodox Christianity and established a Bulgarian Orthodox autocephalous church in the 9th century. Having converted to Christianity, Bulgaria also became the fruitful soil for the spread of the Slavic Scriptures, developed by Cyril and Methodius and brought to Boris by their disciples. From Bulgaria the Cyrillic alphabet and writings were taken to Russia and the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe.

Under Simeon the Great, son of Boris, the Bulgarian Kingdom became an Empire, which ruled over the peninsula. Simeon's rule brought about a "golden age of artistic and commercial expansion." After Simeon the First Bulgarian Kingdom experienced a period of political decline as foreign invaders like the Magyars and the Russians, attacked the country. Even though Bulgaria saw a territorial expansion under King Samuel, his troops underwent a devastating defeat by the Byzantine armies of Basil. The ruler of Byzantium blinded the Bulgaria soldiers, leaving every hundredth one with a single eye to lead them home. At the sight Samuel had a heart attack and died. History gave Basil the title "Bulgar-slayer." Shortly afterward, in 1018 Bulgaria fell under total

Byzantine control. The Crusaders passed through the country during this period and devastated the land.

The time of Byzantine bondage lasted until 1185 when two noble brothers Asen and Peter led a rebellion, which brought about once again an autonomous Bulgarian state.

The Second Bulgarian Kingdom expanded at the expense of the weakened Byzantium and by the middle of the 13th century it occupied the territory from the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea. Bulgaria experienced a period of great territorial expansion and national prosperity under Ivan Asen II, but the feudal system of the Middle Ages caused an economic decline for the state (Curtis 1993:20-24).

During the 11th century the Byzantine chronicler referred to a people called *Atzinganoi*. That was probably the origin of the popular Bulgarian name for the Roma – *Tsigani* (Crowe 1994:2). (Many Bulgarian Roma claim that the name *Tsigani* is a combination of the names of the two great rivers of India – Indus, also called *Sindhu*, and the *Ganges* – the area of their assumed origin).

They are mentioned again in the in the historic records in the 13th century as “fortune-tellers, ventriloquists, and wizards...who are inspired satanically to predict the unknown.” Over the next few centuries there were a number of references to ‘Gypsies’ while the Ottoman Turks slowly took over the Byzantine Empire. Sources during this time referred to them as “Egyptians” – actually a misnomer used because some of them lived in parts of Greece and Cyprus known as Little Egypt (Crowe 1994:2).

As the Ottoman Empire expanded their power in the Balkans, there emerged more and more references to ‘Gypsies’ in Bulgaria. *The Life of St. Barbarus*, a Bulgarian text in the 14th century refers to “Egyptians” living in large numbers” near the Albanian coast.

In 1378 Tsar Ivan Shishman gave to the Rila Monastery several villages of *Agoupti*. These were some of the first known Gypsy settlers in Bulgarian lands (Crowe 1994:2).

Under the Ottoman Empire (1396 - 1878)

The Bulgarian resistance lasted several years, but could not hold back the powerful imperial invasion. Bulgaria fell completely under the Ottoman Turks in 1396 and was absent from the world map for nearly five centuries (Curtis 1993:20-24). The period between 1396 and 1878 is known in Bulgarian history as the 'Turkish yoke.' It was mostly a time of cultural darkness and national suffering. Bulgaria lost both its political and ecclesiastical independence, and its noble class was annihilated. Many Bulgarians were forced to accept Islam, especially in the southern part of the country; the present-day Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) are their descendants. The Bulgarian peasants became serfs under the Turkish landowners.

This period interrupted Bulgaria's development as part of European civilization, separating it from the progress of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The state was firmly established on the social principles of the Koran. All state and religious structures were mercilessly destroyed by the Turkish conquerors. The Bulgarians had no legal, political, or religious rights, but were reduced to the status of *rayha* (flock) as non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire. All land belonged to the Sultan, and was distributed according to feudal principles. The Christians could not hold any important offices. Thus Bulgarians suffered the worst discrimination in European history. One Muslim's word was honored over a dozen Christians' in a court trial. Among all the heavy taxes, the Bulgarians were forced to pay a "blood tax," meaning that a male child would be given over to the Muslim authorities to be reared in the spirit of Islam.

The Bulgarian national spirit, however, remained strong through this time of oppression. There appeared guerrilla-type groups around the country, called *haiduti*, which attacked the Turkish local authorities in order to help their fellow Bulgarians. As the Empire's central authority was weakened by military defeats of European nations, the Bulgarians seized the opportunity to stir a movement of National Revival in the 18th and 19th centuries. The writing of the *History of the Slavs and Bulgarians* by the monk Paisii of Hilendar woke up the Bulgarian patriotic consciousness and inspired national education. In 1870 the autonomy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was reestablished after the centuries-long Greek clerical domination supported by the Sultan (Encyclopedia Britannica: Bulgaria).

The Turkish government placed the Gypsies in the lowest class of Ottoman society, because of their lack of "visible permanent professional affiliation." They were often pressured to either move out or take on more useful occupations. The Turks needed them, however, to perform some of the least dignified and most demeaning jobs in the Empire. Since they had no living quarters the Gypsies erected some temporary housing beyond the city limits to return to after work. Those were the first Roma *mahali* (Crowe 1994:2-4).

Even though they suffered discrimination, the Roma were a significant presence in Bulgarian towns and villages. The Turks divided them into two groups: nomadic Muslims and settled Christians (Crowe 1994:2-4). Those that settled practiced various crafts to earn their living while the traveling ones were often used to spread important information. The Gypsies also filled the social roles of fortune-tellers, herbalists, healers, and witch-doctors (Tomova 1995:8).

There was only one Ottoman official appointed to collect taxes from the Gypsies, because of their secluded status. The Porte did not allow any other official to be involved in Gypsy affairs nor to cause “any injustice or oppression upon them by demanding more than this my Imperial decree specifies.” A number of Gypsies under the Ottoman rule converted to Islam in order to raise their social status and receive government protection. The ones who became Muslims experienced certain tax relief and were more privileged than the Christian subjects of the Empire. The Ottoman regulations were responsible for the settling of traveling Gypsy groups in the Balkans. The Porte attempted to end their nomadic lifestyle in order to make them regular taxpayers (Tomova 1995:8). The conversions to Islam impacted some of their dialects (Crowe 1994:2-4). The five-century rule strongly integrated Islam into Roma culture. Today about half of the Bulgarian Roma profess Islam. There are also many Gypsies with Turkish names who are not Muslims.

Political unrest, social upheavals, and labor shortage necessitated a land reform in the Empire in 1834 and many Bulgarians were given land. “These difficulties enhanced the prospects of land ownerships, and, with the exception of those in the northwestern part of the country, most peasants were able to acquire land. The ready availability of land helped temper any serious social tension within the Bulgarian villages. However, to the landless Gypsy, Bulgarian tolerance had limits” (Crowe 1994:5).

Two British authors Clair and Brophy, who had resided in Bulgaria during this time, published an interesting document in 1869 called *A Residence in Bulgaria: Or Notes on the Resources and Administration of Turkey*. It contains an account of the life of the Gypsies in the village of Derekuoi near Varna. They were nominal Muslims who did not attend mosque. Very clean, living in smaller homes than the Bulgarians, these

Gypsies spoke both Romanes and Turkish. Their occupations were “begging, basket-making, tinkering, and forging iron.” The foreign observers refuted Bulgarian claims that the Gypsies were thieves, and described them to be as honest as the Bulgarians. The Gypsy women engaged in trade and received money from villagers who were afraid of their power to cast spells. The men stayed at home working with pots and pans, copper, and iron. The children took the livestock to pasture.

A significant insight offered by this document is that the Muslims in the village treated the Gypsies better than the ethnic Bulgarian Christians did. The latter’s hatred toward the Gypsies was expressed by exploitation, lower wages, and higher prices for food. When the Derekuoi villagers decided to rid themselves of the Gypsies, instead of telling them to leave, they burned their huts in the Gypsy quarter (Crowe 1994:5-6).

During the Bulgarian National Revival in the 19th century, the anti-Gypsy prejudices became stronger, especially against those who had converted to Islam. In a decree the new Bishops of the Bulgarian Orthodox church in the 1860s called it “a great sin to give alms to a Gypsy or an infidel” (Crowe 1994:7-8).

During the uprising of April 1876, the Bulgarian revolutionaries in the village of Klisura accused the local Gypsies of treachery. After searching Gypsy homes they found weapons, paraffin cans, and a Turkish *zaptie* (policeman) hidden. The Klisura Gypsies admitted that they had conspired to set the village on fire and seek help from the Turks in nearby villages. The rebel leaders immediately executed the Gypsies who were suspected to be part of the conspiracy (Crowe 1994:8).

The April Rebellion was defeated by the Turks and ended with much bloodshed. Even though unsuccessful, it attracted the attention of the world media. After the Great

Powers of Western Europe Britain and France showed reluctance to intervene in the conflict, Russia decided to act unilaterally to defend its Slavic brothers. The Gypsies fought gallantly in the Russian-Turkish War taking part in the decisive battle for the Shipka Pass in August of 1877 (Crowe 1994:9). The troops of the Tsar Alexander II eventually drove the Turks out of Bulgaria and the High Porte signed the San Stefano Peace Treaty on March 3, 1878, giving Bulgaria partial independence. There were many more hurdles to be overcome on the way to full sovereign nationhood (Encyclopedia Britannica: Bulgaria).

National Consolidation, Capitalism, and Wars (1878 – 1944)

The newly liberated Bulgaria had no modern political and cultural institutions to help its government handle internal and foreign affairs. The creation of such institutions was a very painful process and was done at great costs. The country stood in the shadow of greater European powers and was manipulated by their interests in the region. Even though a progressive constitution was created, confirming monarchy as the system of government, the young state battled frequent changes of government and ruling policies. Bulgaria remained an agricultural nation by tradition. Having eliminated Ottoman feudal landownership, the new government gave the Bulgarian peasantry a chance to buy land at low prices or even take it freely, since many Turks had left. This process created the system of village land ownership. The heavy government taxation for land dealings, however, caused many to undertake crafts or various trades in the cities.

The rise of Capitalism in the West required rapid industrialization. Between 1878 and 1887 thirty-six major factories were opened. This brought about a new class of industrial workers, which displaced the artisan and peasant classes. The hard labor

conditions made Socialism attractive to the urban poor; in 1891 Dimitar Blagoev founded the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party, which later became known as the oldest Communist Party in the world.

The Gypsy population remained on the margins of Bulgarian society. The political upheavals during this time caused some Roma to leave the country for Britain and the United States. Others were less bothered by the unrest and took an active part in the new Bulgarian society. There were Roma workers in one of the first post-liberation factories – the textile mill in Sliven where the Roma population numbered 1,074 in 1874. Laws were issued, however, that restricted Roma cultural expression. The ethnic *mahali* were outlawed but continued to exist. Gypsy nomadic travel was banned; thus, Gypsies from other countries were prevented from entering Bulgaria. This caused tremendous obstacles to families whose occupations required traveling; it also divided Gypsy families who were scattered throughout the Balkans. The new laws even prevented Gypsy clans from moving from one part of Bulgaria to another.

It is difficult to be certain of the number of Gypsies in Bulgaria during this period. In the census of 1880, over half of the Roma population identified themselves as Muslims, and citizens of the Ottoman Empire, in order to avoid being drafted into the Bulgarian Army. In the early 20th century a number of cities mostly in North Bulgaria (Pleven, Razgrad, Ruse, Shumen, Turnovo, Varna, Vidin, Vratsa), but even Sofia and Samokov, had no official records of any Gypsy populations. In just a decade Roma were settled there in great numbers (at least the number of people claiming Roma identity grew significantly). The subsequent decline of some of these numbers shows that the new laws were not strictly enforced and some Gypsies went back to traveling (Crowe 1994:10-13).

Since Bulgaria was coming out of a five-century Ottoman oppression, ethnic problems naturally followed. The Gypsies were treated with a great degree of tolerance, because both the treaty of Berlin and the Turnovo Constitution of 1879 gave significant religious and ethnic protection to Bulgaria's minorities. Overall, in spite of some disenfranchisement and anti-nomadic laws, the state was relatively tolerant toward the Gypsies. In 1906 Ramadan Ali brought Gypsy leaders together to make a petition demanding equal rights from the National legislature, but they were all turned down.

One major national policy toward the Gypsies during this period was education. In 1905 only about 3 % of the Roma in Bulgaria were literate – their nomadic lifestyle, suspiciousness of the *gaje*, and strong prejudices had hindered education. With the new policies their literacy tripled in the next 3 decades (Crowe 1994:10-13). Bulgaria actually was the very first country in Eastern Europe to establish schools for the Roma in the 20th century (Barany 2002:88).

This was a period of major wars. The Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War I (1914-1918) under the leadership of King Ferdinand, brought Bulgaria two national catastrophes and deprived it of important territories (Curtis 1992:24-26). During the Balkan Wars much of the Turkish population of Bulgaria was pressured to leave the country for Turkey. The Gypsies, especially those of Muslim confession, were trapped in the middle of this ethnic clash and many joined the departing Turks.

The treaty of Neuilly of November 1919, which penalized Bulgaria for its siding with the Germans in the First World War, had a clause under section IV which demanded that the national government would “assure full and complete protection of life and liberty to all the inhabitants of Bulgaria without distinction of birth, nationality, language,

race or religion.” All people who resided on Bulgarian territory were to be considered citizens and given “full civil and political rights” (Crowe 1994:15-16).

One early Gypsy activist was Shakir Pashov, who published Roma literature, and between 1923 and 1934 organized Gypsies for social, educational, musical, theatrical, and political activities. Their efforts, however, were confronted with “derision and prejudice.” The Roma remained on the very bottom of the Bulgarian social scale. “Most of Bulgaria’s road-sweepers and hangmen, for example, were Roma, positions also held by Gypsies earlier during the Ottoman era.” Even though the Roma population grew in the 1930s, with the rise of fascism and National Socialism in Western Europe many Gypsies began hiding their ethnic identity (Crowe 1994:16-18).

Bulgaria’s King Boris III attempted to maintain neutrality but, being in the German orbit of influence, he eventually joined the Axis in 1941. Bulgaria’s three-year relationship with the Third Reich was very uncomfortable (Crowe 1994:16-18). During the Holocaust the Bulgarian Roma were under the special protection of the Monarchist Government. Boris III saved both the Jews (50,000) and the Gypsies in Bulgaria from Nazi ethnic cleansing. No Bulgarian Jews were deported to the death camps despite pressure from Germany. Gypsies were also in a much better position than those in neighboring lands. The Third Reich Minister to Sofia called Bulgaria a “peasant nation” and said regretfully: “The mentality of the Bulgarian people is lacking in the ideological enlightenment which our people enjoy. Having lived all their lives with Armenians, Greeks and Gypsies, the Bulgarians see no harm in the Jew to justify special measures against him” (Fraser 1992:268)

The conflict of interest between the Allies during World War II brought about the events, which turned Bulgaria over to Stalin who was successfully building a Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe (Curtis 1992:24-26). The invasion of the Red Army enforced a new regime on September 9, 1944. The Fatherland Front, a pro-Soviet puppet government, established a Communist dictatorship in Bulgaria, which lasted 45 years.

The People's Republic (1944 - 1989)

During the Communist Regime, Bulgaria was the country in closest allegiance with the Soviet Union, and the Warsaw Pact member most dependent on Soviet help. Bulgaria's totalitarian government followed strictly the policies of Moscow in all aspects of state life – from industry and economic policies to art and literature.

All production both agricultural and industrial was placed under the centralized control of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The Party, equated with the state, seized all the finances and properties of the country. Between 1947 and 1958, the People's Government undertook an aggressive collectivization reform forcefully taking the land from the peasants to create Cooperative Farms. The centralized economic planning focused on investing in industries at the expense of agriculture. The five-year plans failed to seek realistic goals in production and to increase output. The heavy industries had no incentive for greater production, because of state subsidies and control. The Zhivkov Government (1956-1989) called for economic reforms, but restricted by the centralized socialist system, they failed to advance the country economically.

In foreign policy, Bulgaria closely followed the Soviet Union. The hostilities with the West were imitated in the relationships with the European NATO countries. Zhivkov easily sacrificed the improved relations with the West by giving full support to the Soviet

invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979. Bulgaria also followed the Soviets in helping developing nations with national initiatives for social liberation.

The regime significantly improved health care and education, which were freely provided to all citizens. The main goal of the strong education emphasis was to bring Marxist theory to most Bulgarians and influence the intelligentsia. Thus, the Communists promoted literacy and expanded all forms of education rapidly. There was mandatory training for all children and adults. The teachers and textbooks, however, strictly, followed the party line. Basic health care was provided for all the citizens of the country in regional clinics and state hospitals. "Under the socialist health system, indicators such as average life expectancy, infant mortality rate, and physicians per capita improved steadily between 1947 and 1989" (Curtis 1992:xxx-xxxii).

Bulgarian socialist scholars claimed that Gypsies lived miserably during the Ottoman period and the Monarchy, but after the revolution of 1944, they became "cultured, advanced, and educated," and were given equal citizenship rights, that prejudice was gone and assimilation was gradually taking place (Bennett 1992:41).

Truly, in the first four years after the September 9th takeover, the Bulgarian Gypsies experienced a cultural 'renaissance.' In 1946 the 'Cultural Enlightenment Organization of the Bulgarian Gypsies' was established. Theater 'Romen' was founded in Sofia, which included Cervantes and Pushkin in its repertoire. The leaders of the Gypsy minority started a newspaper called 'Romano Esi' (Roma Voice), later replaced by 'Nevo Drom' (New Way). All Gypsies were required to subscribe to this paper, which glorified the Communist Party and its positive revolutionary impact on the Roma community. Shakir Pashov along with several other Roma leaders won seats in the Communist

legislature and were appointed as Party secretaries around the country. In Sofia a Gypsy school was established which, in four years, had 500 pupils in enrollment. The People's Government combated racism and pledged to make significant improvements to Roma life, integrating them into the country's economic and political circles. It tried to take the necessary steps to stop the process of Gypsies identifying themselves with the Turkish minority in the country (Crowe 1994:20-21).

In 1947 Bulgaria adopted a new constitution modeled after Stalin's Soviet one of 1936. This caused the policies toward Gypsies to change and an assimilation campaign was launched in the 1950s. The Party felt very uncomfortable with the thousands of nomadic Gypsies who were homeless and practiced unorthodox lifestyles, considered harmful and disgraceful to socialism. Therefore, they were sedentarized and placed in isolated communities called *mahali*. Many new Roma quarters were created in North Bulgaria. The Communist Party reported that such segregated neighborhoods existed "in 160 of Bulgaria's 237 cities and in 3,000 of its 5,846 villages" (Crowe 1994:22-23). The decree of the Zhivkov government from 1958 prohibiting Gypsy travel (Barany 2002:118-119) was no different from the measures taken by other European governments for abolition of Roma nomadism. The Party even tried to integrate the Gypsies by tearing down some of their old traditional quarters and resettling them in apartment buildings. This caused a disruption in the Roma family and clan-oriented culture (Bennett 1992:41).

The government was determined to destroy Gypsy cultural identity. After the census of 1956 had revealed that the Roma in Bulgaria were 197, 865, "gypsies disappeared entirely from official statistics." The 'Fatherland Front' newspaper "stated that Front activity must be doubled and tripled in order to do away once and for all with

the harmful residue of the past in the consciousness of Turks, Jews, and Gypsies.” In December 1958, the “Izvestia” paper said: “all Gypsies without regular jobs will be ordered to work in state industrial or agricultural enterprises” (cited in Crowe 1994:22-23). In 1959 the government gave directions to the regional authorities to ensure the full employment of all the Roma. In 1962 the minority specialists decided that a segregated Gypsy school system should be created denying the rights of the Roma to an integrated education. There were several Party resolutions, attempting to “reform” the lifestyle of the Roma and “develop” their culture. The publication of the Gypsy newspapers was stopped and the Gypsy Theater - closed. In 1984 the Communists started another major assimilation campaign, which forbade Gypsies to speak their own language, play Romani music, and dance Roma dances. Thus the Roma were denied their basic right of cultural expression (Barany 2002:118-119). This process was not easy, however, because Bulgarians required Roma music at their weddings and other celebrations; that could not be displaced. The Roma had low paying jobs under the People’s government, but the socialist welfare system provided their basic living necessities (Fraser 1992: 280-281).

So the Roma were not integrated into normal social life under the Communists. The Party did not have good programs, addressing their needs for special education and integration into society. General Secretary Zhivkov considered it easier to segregate them in order to uplift the image of Roma separateness. This reinforced the negative stereotypes, which had haunted them throughout their history. The discrimination caused them to cling strongly to their clans and linguistic groups (Crowe 1994:29-30).

In their desire to obliterate the Roma ethnic identity, the Bulgarian Communist Party strongly discouraged any objective scholarly research on their history, life, and

culture. The writings of the few independent Roma scholars were censored. Only two academic dissertations were written on the Roma during the 45 years of Communism in Bulgaria, both of them strongly supporting the Party line (Barany 2002:118-119).

In my interactions with Roma around Bulgaria, I have observed that, in spite of their limited freedoms during that time, they are very nostalgic about Communism and speak with affection of Comrade Todor Zhivkov. Their flexibility and adaptability helped them to take advantage of the benefits of socialism. During that time they were all employed in state factories and cooperative farms. That was obligatory, but gave them an economic security, which is presently missing in the new democracy. Even though the Bulgarian Roma do not vote as a block, the greatest number of them, according to statistics, still support the Bulgarian Socialist Party, heir of the old Communist Party.²²

Democratic Bulgaria (1990 - Present)

The most recent history of Bulgaria began on November 10, 1989, when General Secretary Todor Zhivkov resigned under the pressure of the younger leaders in the Communist Party. These leaders did not realize that with the dethroning of Zhivkov, who had been the head of state for 33 years and symbolized the socialist system, single party rule in Bulgaria was doomed. Demonstrations for freedom began immediately and the country quickly moved toward a multiple party system.

The new democratic constitution of 1990 made Bulgaria a Parliamentary Republic.²³ The country has recently been developing as a modern democratic nation, but is still struggling with an economic crisis and corruption in the government. Bulgaria became part of NATO in 2004 and acceded to the European Union in 2007

The new democratic period gave significant freedoms to the Roma, but also created great economic hardship and instability for them. They formed Roma organizations in order to have a voice in Bulgarian political and social life. They were told by the new rulers that their oppression would be over and that “everyone in Bulgaria will be able to choose his name, religion, and language freely.” This inspired the formation of several Roma political, cultural, and business organizations, by which intellectual Gypsies have raised political awareness and started to lobby for the rights of their people. In 1990, however, the Roma were denied the opportunity to form a new political party along ethnic lines. Their other organizations were often weak, fragmented, and not well organized. They do not speak with one voice, but are “divided along political, social, and cultural lines.” The fact that there are a number of Roma dialects in Bulgaria has also created obstacles to a strong unified force to represent the Roma population. In October of 1992, the Bulgarian Roma leaders had a congress, which formed “a national lobby called the United Roma Federation.” Vasil Chaprazov, a teacher from Sliven, was elected chairman of the new organization, which he declared to be “independent and politically unaffiliated” (Crowe 1994:28-29). Presently, the Roma participate in many political parties, but the most popular among them is “EvroRoma” led by Tsvetelin Kanchev.

After 1989 the old feelings of racism and nationalism, suppressed by the Communists, resurged. The freedom of speech allowed expression of racial prejudices. There have been some serious incidents with Roma people in Bulgaria and throughout Eastern Europe. Roma houses have been set on fire, Gypsy families - beaten up, and other hate crimes committed. Violence occurred even in areas where Gypsies have lived

peacefully for a long time. They have often become the scapegoat for the socio-economic problems in the country (Fraser 1992: 289-290).

Nationalist and Neo-Nazi organizations have voiced extreme views against the Roma in recent years. At the end of 1993, several major Roma groups met in Sliven and requested that the Bulgarian government “ban all fascist parties and organizations.” They were especially concerned with Father Gelemenov, an Orthodox Priest and a leader of a nationalist party, who expressed extremist views against the minorities. Gelemenov said in an interview that Bulgaria should place the Gypsy and Turkish minorities under subordination. The Roma criticized the media for giving a platform to people like Gelemenov to air their racism (Crowe 1994:28-29).

The media does not present the Roma in a good light and fuels hatred against them. The National Movement “Ataka” formed in 2005 has aired some serious anti-Roma rhetoric, which is popular among significant segments of the Bulgarian population.

Even though Bulgaria has been an example of ethnic tolerance in the Balkans for many years, the majority of the country’s Roma still live on the margins of society as victims of discrimination and miserable living conditions. Bulgaria’s international image is tainted by the poverty, illiteracy, and unequal opportunities of its Roma population.

The Bulgarian authorities and legislature need to adopt newer policies, which would help meet the special needs of the Roma population. That should be a demonstration of respect for their unique traditions. The government should also undertake “a serious campaign to combat prejudice against them.” Until that happens it would be difficult for the Roma to play a major role in the new democratic state and will have to find other ways of solving their complex problems (Crowe 1994:29-30).

Specifics on the Bulgarian Roma

Even though the Roma of Bulgaria belong to the global Gypsy family, they have specific characteristics and problems, particular to the country's context.

Demographic Information

The Gypsies are spread all around Bulgaria, but their demographic concentration in relation to the total population differs significantly from one place to another. All Bulgarian cities have a population of *tsigani* and most of the villages have at least several families, with the exception of some mountainous areas (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:127).

Determining the exact number of Roma in Bulgaria is not an easy task, because there are discrepancies in the censuses taken in recent years. For example in the 1992 census the people that officially identified themselves as Roma (Gypsies) were about 313,000. According to data provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the same year, however, their number was 553,466 (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:93-95).

The report of the National Statistical Institute after the most recent census in 2001 gives the following information about Bulgaria's main ethnic groups (www.nsi.bg):

<u>Population by ethnic group:</u>	
Bulgarians:	6,655,210 (83.9%)
Turkish:	746,664 (9.4%)
Roma (Gypsies):	370,980 (4.6%)
Total population:	7,928,901 ²⁴

The inaccuracy of the censuses is due to the fact that many of the Bulgarian Roma choose not to self-identify as such, which is their constitutional right. A number of them identify themselves officially as Bulgarian, and many of the Turkish-speaking Roma – as

Turks. Such refusal of Gypsies to be identified as 'Gypsies' or Roma is common in Eastern Europe. That is clearly seen in recent census results from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania. After comparing all the data during the many years of extensive field research, Marushiakova and Popov arrived at the approximate number of 800,000 Roma. That makes Bulgaria the country with the highest percentage of Roma – about 10% of the total population (1993:93-95). During the last 15 years this number has grown.²⁵

Cultural Idiosyncrasies

Since most Bulgarian Gypsies do not possess land, they rarely grow their own food except in some of the village areas. They have mostly practiced Roma traditional occupations like: music, horse trade, bear training, entertainment, acrobatics, blacksmithing, woodwork, sieve and comb making, baskets, shoemaking, wage labor, and fortune-telling. Music has been a common occupation for many Bulgarian Gypsies; Having learned the folk repertoire of Bulgaria, Gypsy musicians are indispensable at weddings, baptisms, and other celebrations. Occupying a low place in society, Gypsies do much of the janitorial work in the country – street and railroad cleaning. In recent years there have been Gypsies who have taken on more respectable jobs such as teachers, clerks, lawyers, journalists, and government officials. As experienced survivors, the Gypsies are very adaptable on the job market. They often change jobs or may work several in order to provide sufficient income for their families (Bennett 1992:41).

The leaders of the Gypsy ethnic minority have traditionally been men. Although some of them may refer to themselves as 'kings,' their power is not hereditary, but rather comes from their reputation, wealth, and social status. Public opinion is a main source of

social control. Whenever a conflict between Gypsies occurs it is often settled through mediation within the group or through the council of elders. They rarely seek help from the government, because they usually feel they are treated unfairly in legal battles (Bennett 1992:41).

In regards to religion, the Bulgarian Roma have traditionally been divided between Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam. "Gypsies do not tend to be devout followers of any one institutional religion, but rather practice an eclectic folk religion that combines Muslim, Christian, and pre-Christian customs" (Bennett 1992:42). Thus, a great degree of religious syncretism has existed among the Gypsy communities. In recent years, researchers have taken note of the fast-growing evangelical movement among them (Marushiakova and Popov 1997). Pentecostal Christianity in particular is a rising factor in the religious life of the Bulgarian Roma as well as of the Gypsies around the world

Roma Group Divisions in Bulgaria

The Gypsies in Bulgaria are not a monolithic homogenous people. They all belong to the Roma population, but have many group divisions and subdivisions. The Gypsy groups may be identified as "Roma," by their special group name, or by the name given to them by others. According to Marushiakova and Popov, the Roma in the country can be divided into three major groups with many sub-groups under them:

1. *Jerlii* or 'sedentary Gypsies.' They are descendants from the first Gypsies who settled in Bulgaria during the Ottoman period. They practiced basket-making, stove-making, and various other crafts. Many good musicians are Jerlii.

The Jerlii are divided into two main groups:

a). Dasikane Roma (Bulgarian Roma). They like to be associated with the ethnic Bulgarian population and celebrate Christian holidays.

b). Horohane Roma (Turkish Roma). Some of them prefer to be identified as part of the Turkish ethnic minority even though they are conscious of their Roma background (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:110-111).

2. *Kardarashi* (Kalderashi). Formerly travelers, they came from Romania, Moldova, and Transylvania during the ‘Kalderash invasion’ in the last part of the 19th century. They were forced by the Communist government in 1958 to settle. They live mainly in villages and smaller towns. Smaller numbers can be found in bigger cities living among the general population. They have not formed their own *mahali* (neighborhoods) and have a higher social status.

The Kalderash Roma have a number of sub-groups that practice various occupations like gold and horse trading, copper-making, and fortune-telling (only done by women). The two main groups of Kalderashi are the *Lovari* and *Kalaijii*.

The Kalderash distance themselves from the other Roma, regarding them to be of lower status. Endogamous and with strong ethnic consciousness, they have their own organs of tribal legislation, government, and a tribal judicial council (*Meshare*) for the purpose of social control (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:112-113).²⁶

2. *Rudari*. This third widely spread group of Gypsies in Bulgaria are also called *Vlasi* or *Vlashki Tsigani* (Gypsies). They are traditionally Eastern Orthodox, like the Kalderash, but speak an old Romanian dialect. The Rudari have two main subdivisions:

a). *Lingurari* (also called “lzhichari” and “kopanari”). They are engaged in the production of wooded artifacts – spoons, wooden pots, and spindles.

b). Ursari and Maimunari (Bear and monkey-trainers). These Gypsies still live a nomadic life traveling during the warm seasons making money by entertaining the population with their dancing bears and monkeys. The Rudari are mostly endogamous and can be observed all around the country (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:112-113).

Attitudes Toward the Gypsies

Marushiakova and Popov identify three models, representing the attitude of Bulgarians toward the Gypsies, which have existed for the last century, especially since the time Bulgaria gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878:

1. *Traditional model*. The Gypsies are part of Bulgaria and its traditions, but are of lower status. There is a friendly neighborly relationship, but yet a condescending attitude toward the group. Most Bulgarians fall into this category. They accept the Gypsies, but see them as less developed and second-class citizens. The Bulgarian terms *tsiganin* (Gypsy) and *tsiganska rabota* (Gypsy job) have become pejorative. In an old Bulgarian dictionary, authored by Naiden Gerov, the second definition of *Tsiganin* (Gypsy) is “a lying, dishonest person.” The traditional model is expressed when people speak positively of certain Gypsies by saying “these you really cannot tell from the Bulgarians” or “they do not act like Gypsies;” thus, Gypsies who are given a positive evaluation are considered exceptions to the rule. This is the traditional stereotypical talk, expressing subconsciously an air of superiority. People might say: “The Gypsies living in our hamlet are not bad people, but Gypsies in general ...” (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:212-215).

2. *National Model*. This model was developed during Bulgaria’s national revival and fight for independence from the Turks in the 19th century. It is divisive and carries an

extremely negative attitude toward all ethnic minority groups, speaking in terms of “we” and “them.” This model was revived after the fall of Communism and is becoming more dominant in Bulgarian society. In times of economic crisis, like the present one, minorities are often a needed “scapegoat” for social ills. Unfortunately, this is a deformed model and ugly in its rhetoric. It identifies the Gypsy people as a threat to Bulgarian national identity. The media and certain political elements have been raising their voices against the “*tsiganization*” of Bulgarian culture emphasizing the negative aspects of Gypsy culture, presence, criminality, and otherness. These biased characterizations support the negative attitudes toward the Gypsies and fuel ethnic hatred. Even though the Communist ideals were equality and emancipation, the Party was determined to assimilate the Gypsies and solve the “national problem” by employing and integrating them into Bulgarian society²⁷ (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:213-215). The most extreme recent version of this national model is expressed by some of the Neo-Nazi groups that appeared in Post-Communist Bulgaria and inspired by the *Mein Kaumf* rhetoric desire to create a “pure Bulgarian nation.”

3. *The Democratic model.* This is the least popular model calling for respect of the human rights of the Gypsies as an ethnic minority. It calls for their integration in the macro-society as totally equals to others, at the same time allowing them to retain their cultural and ethnic characteristics. Presently, this is the weakest model as a social position in Bulgaria and the least supported by others besides the Gypsies themselves. The “Gypsy Problem” should be addressed and resolved. The government needs to have a specialized policy on national and local levels in regards to the Gypsies, but such does not exist. There is no strategy for the solution of the serious problems of the ethnic

minorities in Bulgaria. These problems will not be solved, according to Marushiakova and Popov, by simply replacing the term *tsigani* (Gypsies) with *Roma* or by joining the European Union. The model of relationship between the ethnic Bulgarians and the Gypsies would be the “litmus test” for the maturity of our nation (1993: 216-218).

Main Problems of the Bulgarian Roma

The overall situation of the Roma communities in Bulgaria does not present a pretty picture. Very popular among them is the model of “learned helplessness.” They often complain about being poor, uneducated, unemployed, and without means to feed or clothe their children, because of discrimination. They feel others are hostile against them, simply because of their ethnicity. The general Bulgarian population, on the other hand, believes there is a double standard whereby the Roma are undeservedly tolerated and given a special “oppressed” status (Dimova et al 2004:95).

The Roma community in Bulgaria indeed has a number of serious problems, which keep them on the lowest level of the social scale. These problems are interconnected and remain a great challenge to the Roma and to the country.

Poverty. Field researchers agree that the Roma are the most marginalized group of people in Bulgaria and the poorest segment of Bulgarian society. This has been the case with the Roma in all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. There might be individual Roma or families that are wealthy, but the majority of them are extremely poor. According to the World Bank report, they are the poorest people group which is most likely to fall into poverty and stay in it. They mostly live in pitiful conditions in crowded homes without inside bath or toilet. They can be identified with a poverty culture and a “day to day” life philosophy - “without plans for the future, they are

capsulated in a small social circle, with permanent social isolation and self-isolation” (Dimova et al 2004:53, 68). One Roma man from the Filipovtsi quarter in Sofia says: “In the beginning of the 21st century we have no telephones. The cable for the neighboring village goes through here, but they have not hooked us with phone lines” (Petrova et al 2004:79). Many Roma depend on miserable social security funds to make ends meet.

Education. Many of the social problems of the Roma are connected to their lack of education. The average Roma is not motivated to attend school beyond the level, which is required by law and does not have a high school diploma. Most Roma do not value formal education or are discouraged to pursue it, because of family situations, school attitudes, and state policies. Many Roma families do not choose to invest their time and money into long years of education for their children. They cannot afford to provide the proper clothes and school materials necessary. Since the parents have not had much education themselves, they neither give encouragement to their children nor are able to help them with their studies. The parents often encourage the child to start a job at a young age in order to help the family survive the harsh economic realities of Bulgaria. Thus, these children become absorbed by the hardships of the *mahala*.

Gypsy children often face discrimination by teachers and peers in a mixed school environment. As Romanes speakers they often have a hard time understanding their instructors and are scolded for their accent. Gypsies who decide to go to school later in life are humiliated, because they are much older than their classmates. There are not many educated Gypsy teachers to train them in their own language and there’s a lack of Roma textbooks.²⁸ As their culture is ignored, Roma children do not have much to identify with and this hinders the education process.²⁹ Roma youth are also reluctant to

study, because they are not sure if they would find professional realization after graduation (Barany 2002:133). Illiteracy is even high among Roma adults.

Unemployment. Most Bulgarian Gypsies who worked state jobs under Communism were laid off after 1989. When the Communist cooperative farms were dissolved and the land restituted to the original owner families, the Gypsy farm workers lost their jobs. Their unemployment rate is currently many times higher than that of the majority population. For example in 1992, 76% of the Bulgarian Roma were officially unemployed, even though many had non-official jobs. In the rural areas and the communities where the Roma are majority, their unemployment is almost universal. Their low education, lack of specialized skills, isolation, and the prejudices of employers often leave them without good employment opportunities (Barany 2002:174). Roma often work as freight-handlers at railroad stations or janitors. More respectable jobs for them are those of musicians, singers, and entertainers.

Health. The unsanitary conditions and the limited access to proper medical care have had a tragic impact on the health of the Roma minority. The findings of the research team led by sociologist Ilona Tomova, which conducted 1,844 extensive interviews with Bulgarian Roma, were very disturbing. The ghetto environment makes them susceptible to various diseases such as gynecological illnesses, cancer, tuberculosis, diseases of the kidneys, liver, gastric system, and intestines. Addiction to alcohol and nicotine are high among them. Abortion is their main contraceptive method, which, done in unhygienic ways, creates other serious illnesses. Their unhealthy diet causes malnutrition, anemia, and dystrophy; the use of discarded meat by Roma has led to food poisoning, serious

illnesses, and even death.³⁰ The number of physically handicapped and mentally retarded people is much higher among the Roma than among the average population of Bulgaria.

Out of the Gypsies Tomova interviewed, 26% said that if someone became ill in their family, they would not seek medical care (Barany 2002:176). They often disregard the symptoms of illness and value those who, like ascetics, bear pain without seeking medical attention (Tomova 1995: 34-35). The news media often reports outbreaks of disease in Roma neighborhoods. During the summer of 2006, there was much talk about the hepatitis epidemic in the *Stolipinovo* Roma quarter of Plovdiv.

Crime. The crime rate among the Roma in Bulgaria has been relatively high.³¹ One third of all the criminals that the Bulgarian police arrested in 1992, were Roma. They were proven responsible for 37% of all the solved crimes in the country in 1994. In a nationwide survey, 18% of the Roma respondents said: “since the state does not take care of us, we have to steal” and 33% said “stealing is a pardonable sin if there is no other way to feed our children.” The crimes committed by Gypsies in integrated areas get much media attention and deepen their isolation from the rest of society. Traditional Roma leaders are often caught in some criminal activity, which sets a bad example for the Gypsy population. The number of violent crimes committed by Roma rose drastically in the years after the fall of Communism.

In Bulgaria, 88% of group rapes in 1994 were committed by Roma and, according to prosecution service statistics, eight out of nine murders and burglaries and 15 out of 16 robberies. According to one 1992 report, Bulgarian Gypsy pimps ran a prostitution ring of ethnic Bulgarian girls aged 12 to 14 who were abducted, gang raped, and psychologically crushed before they were forced into streetwalking. (Barany 2002:181-183)

As a result, the Roma have become a significant number of Bulgaria’s prison population; for example, 70% of the inmates of the women’s prison in Sliven are Roma.

Disadvantaged Children. There are many homeless Gypsy children in Bulgaria. This problem is partly caused by the fact that the Roma birth rate has been much higher than that of the majority population. Traditionally, Roma marry very young and are not concerned with birth control. Gypsy girls might even marry at 12-13 years of age. In Lom, a city located on the Danube River with a large Roma population, a Gypsy woman of 38 gave birth to her 22nd child in March of 1998, having had one every year since she was 15. She and her husband were unemployed and lived with 17 of their offspring in a house without electricity and running water, while the other 5 were in orphanages. Gypsies often want to have more children, because they receive government subsidies for each one, which brings more income than the low-paying jobs. Thus, the child benefits from the state become a motivator for this uncontrolled birth rate.

The situation with Gypsy children has become worse since the end of Communism, because social services have been cut back. Many families abandon babies, because they are unable and/or unwilling to care for them. In the 1990s, foreigners adopted many Roma children. Most Bulgarians, desiring to adopt a child, do not want to adopt a Roma; so hundreds of Roma children are not fortunate to find a good home. Some of them live in underfunded state orphanages with insufficient supervision. Many others live on the street and at railway stations. Barany says that one of the most troubling sites he ever encountered was the Gypsy children living at the Sofia Central Train Station (2002:177-178).

Discrimination. Antigypsism has existed in Europe ever since the Roma arrived there and is still very prevalent today. Recently, the phenomenon has become the subject of serious scholarly research. The University of Hamburg, Germany has established an

Institute for Antiziganism Research. I had the privilege in October 2005 to attend their annual meeting; there I met many scholars, Roma activists, and advocates for Roma rights, including members of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe.

The subject of Antiziganism is very complex to discuss in a few sentences, but deserves a fair overview, because it is a key to understanding the Roma people.

The article by Peter Ivanov “Gypsy Carriage on the Way...But Who Knows Where To?” published in the *Ataka* paper in August, 2005, is a good example of blatant anti-Roma propaganda. Even though lacking in scholarship, it is effective in airing extremist ideas in the spirit of political populism and demagoguery:

At present there is an exceptionally deep and wide process of *tziganization* of the nation. Even though this process is the most obvious, demographic, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual phenomenon, which is taking place on our territory, it is the most covered up and hidden one. That is because it is simply part of the common tendency of debulgarization and destruction of our country, which is beneficial to a number of Balkan and non-Balkan groups.

Ivanov continues to list the stereotypes and labels about Gypsies: sloth, selfishness, irresponsibility, disrespect, thievery, lying, violence, traditional criminality, greed, filthiness, and brutality. Ivanov contends the negative traits are part of their nature. Says Ivanov that the Gypsies do not steal just because they are hungry, as they claim. “The stealing of the Gypsies is part of their very nature and lays at the basis of their traditional lifestyle. Because of their Gypsiness even the wealthiest and most satisfied Gypsy would not have any reservations about stealing” (Ivanov 2005). Ivanov obviously does not rely on any sources for his information, but on populist propaganda and racial stereotypes. Of course, the idea of “Gypsy criminality” as part of their genetic make-up is not anything that Ivanov or Bulgarian nationalist politicians have invented. As we saw earlier this term was used by the Nazi propaganda in order to justify acts of mass murder.

“Contemporary society has the means to change the way of life of any ethnos and socialize them, and thus alter positively their moral and psychological idiosyncrasies. There are numerous examples in the United States with the Blacks and Indians” (Ivanov 2005). Obviously, Ivanov does not have much knowledge of the situation of Blacks and Native Americans in the United States. From my personal experience, I can say that America still has a long way to go in order to solve the problems of its ethnic minorities.

Ivanov speaks of wealthy Roma who pay thousands for their brides and live in luxury. Unfortunately, he does not nuance the fact that these individuals mostly represent one of the Roma groups in Bulgaria, the Kalderashi, which account for a small segment of the Roma population. In conclusion Ivanov blames the Bulgarian tolerance for the reason “our thieving and imposing Gypsies” get away with so much (Ivanov 2005). The article does not deserve more commentary, because it represents scholarship at its worst. I doubt that Ivanov has spent even a day in a Roma neighborhood for field research. The article does not offer any solutions to the plight of the Bulgarian Roma, but simply breeds an attitude of dislike toward them in a spirit reminiscent of Nazism. In another section the same paper recommends that the Roma return to India.

Some high government officials in Eastern Europe have also shown this kind of negative attitude toward the Roma. The Central Committee of the Communist party of Romania once reported that Gypsies “lead a parasitic way of life, refuse to work, and live in precarious conditions...resist hygienic and sanitary steps...and refuse to take part in activities for the welfare of society.” One former premier of Slovakia, Vladimir Meciar, in a public speech considered it “necessary to curtail the extended reproduction of the

socially unadaptable and mentally backward population...if we do not deal with them now, they will deal with us later” (Fonseca 1995:280, 293).

Clearly there are many problems with the Roma community in Bulgaria, and to simply blame them all on discrimination is quite a passive and ineffective approach toward their solution. Many Roma whom I have met are very critical of certain elements in their community and desire change as much as the *gaje* do. The most effective solution to these problems has been offered not through the government, but through God’s move of revitalization and transformation, which will be discussed later.

“To a large degree the Anti-Roma complex is due to the fact that the Roma are seen as potential or real doers of antisocial or criminal acts.” The main problem with the crimes of the Roma is that they have been on a low ‘street’ level and are quite visible to the public. There are crimes, which are much more serious and on macro levels, but are more subtle and hidden (Dimova et al 2004:98).³²

Conclusion

The Roma are one of the most misunderstood and mistreated people groups on earth. Ever since their arrival to the European continent, they have been oppressed, marginalized, despised, and still considered outsiders. They have been unwanted wherever they have gone, enslaved, tortured, killed, or simply ignored. People in the past have predicted their disappearance as a race and culture. They are, however, still there - alive, well, growing in number, and not going away. Their perseverance and survival against all odds as a perpetual minority is, without any doubt, one of the greatest miracles of history. The famous preacher Gypsy Smith once said:

Like the Jews, the Gypsies have in a wonderful way preserved their identity as a race. Their separate existence can be traced back for centuries. Throughout these long years they have kept their language, habits, customs, and eccentricities untouched. The history of the Gypsies and their tongue has baffled the most laborious and erudite scholars. We can be traced back until we are lost on the plains of India, but even in these far-off days we were a distinct race (Smith 1901:6).

They have built various cultural mechanisms to secure their survival. The *gaje* have usually approached the Roma with negative stereotypes. When they develop a relationship with them, however, they do see them as normal human beings simply trying to make the best out of a bad situation. Anne Sutherland, who after living with Gypsies for a year wrote the first ethnography on American Roma titled *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans*, in her opening remarks shares a profound revelation:

...one of the problems with focusing on internal social relations is that the Gypsies must constantly counter negative stereotypes in their contacts with the outside world. These stereotypes often show Gypsies to be disintegrating, demoralized, illiterates, and thieves. To the contrary, I found them to be intelligent, flexible, and resourceful survivors (Sutherland 1975:ix-xi).

In Bulgaria the situation is very similar. Our governments have not engaged the problems of the Roma effectively even though there has been much talk of integration. The various charitable organizations have contributed little to improve the Roma situation. Settled after traveling for centuries most Bulgarian Roma still do not possess land of their own. Most cities have their *mahali* (Roma quarters) often referred to as 'ghettos.' They are usually not legalized and thus missing from the city's architectural plans. The Roma may own houses, but normally have no ownership of the property their houses are on. Therefore, to this day they remain people without a land.

Cities have fallen and empires passed away,
 Earth's giant forms waxed hoary with decay,
 Since the lone people mid our moors and glades
 Looked heedless round, as on a world of shades!
 By German streams, through England's good green woods,
 In Spain's deep vales, by India's ocean floods,

By desert moor, huge cliff, or willow grey,
Still the dark Wanderers meet us on our way;
Amid glad homes forever doomed to roam
In lovely woe, themselves without a home!

Arthur Penrhyn Stanely

(cited in Sampson 1930:21).

CHAPTER 3

CHRISTIANITY AND THE ROMA

One day there came to Rheims a very odd sort of gentry. They were beggars and truands, strolling about the country, led by their duke and their counts. Their faces were tawny, their hair all curly, and they'd rings of silver in their ears. The women were still uglier than the men. Their faces were darker, and always uncovered; they wore a sorry kirtle about their body; an old piece of linen cloth interwoven with cords bound upon their shoulder; and their hair hanging like a horse's tail. The children scrambling under their feet would have frightened an ape. An excommunicated gang! They were all come in a straight line from Egypt to Rheims, through Poland. The Pope had confessed them, it was said, and had ordered them by way of penance to wander through the world for seven years together without sleeping in a bed; and so they called themselves penancers, and stank. It seems they'd formerly been Saracens, and that's why they believed in Jupiter, and demanded ten Tours pounds from all archbishops, bishops, and abbots that carried crosier and mitre. It was a bull of the Pope that gave them this right. They came to Rheims to tell fortunes in the name of the King of Algiers and the Emperor of Germany. You may suppose that was quite enough for them to be forbidden to enter the town. Then the whole gang encamped of their own accord near the Braine gate, upon that mound where there's a windmill, close by the old chalkpits. Then none of the folk in Rheims could rest till they'd been to see them. They looked into your hand and told you marvelous prophecies – they were bold enough to have foretold to Judas himself that he should be pope. At the same time there were shocking stories told about them – of child-stealing, purse-cutting, and eating of human flesh. The wise folks said to the foolish ones: "Don't go!" and then went themselves by stealth. It was quite the rage. The fact is that they said things enough to astonish a cardinal.

Victor Hugo

Notre Dame de Paris

(cited in Sampson 1930:19-20).

There is a famous European legend about how the French Roma first accepted Christianity. Sarah, a Roma woman living on the Rhone River, was leading a group of metalworkers when she saw a boat sinking with three women saints in it: Mary Salome, Mary Magdalene, and Mary Jacobi – the three Marys who comforted Jesus in his last hours on the cross. Having been prepared for this moment in a dream, Sarah stepped into the water and threw her cloak, which became a raft; thus the three saints reached the shore safely. They rewarded her by making her a Christian and their servant. This story provided the background for the honor of Saintes Maries de la Mer on the Mediterranean Coast of France – a major religious pilgrimage that the French Gypsies traditionally observed between the 24th and 26th of May. Gypsies often make such pilgrimages to churches and in honor of saints. These religious festivals give them the opportunity for social gatherings (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:3).

Historical Encounters

The historical interaction between the Roma and Christianity is very interesting. Even though they have lived among Christians for many centuries the Roma have always been marginalized and overlooked by the Church. Presently, among the European Roma there are Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Muslims as they have generally followed the religion of their host nation (Patrin Web Journal 1996).

The first encounter of the Roma with Christianity was in Anatolia, which was Armenian-speaking at the time. The Romani words for “Easter” and “godfather” are Armenian and represent fundamental concepts of the Orthodox faith. The Roma realized that, as outsiders in the Byzantine Empire, it would be important for them to accept

Christianity and thus be distinguished from the Muslim invaders (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:10). At first the Gypsies' conversion to Christianity was a matter of convenience. Many of them would baptize their children several times in order to obtain documents, which benefited them in their travels (Sway 1975:48).

Some early bands of Gypsies that came into Europe claimed to have visited Rome for an audience with the Pope who granted them letters of protection; these letters urged the authorities of the countries in which they traveled to be kind and generous to them, because they were on a seven-year pilgrimage of penance; Gypsy groups visiting Paris and Bologna told this story around 1422-1427³³ (Yates 1966:73-74). The Papal letters truly served to protect the Gypsy travelers till the end of the 15th century, but then their authenticity was questioned and they were exposed as counterfeit. This caused a radical change in the attitude of the Church toward them.

Between the years 1497 and 1774, the Holy Roman Empire issued a total of 146 decrees against the Gypsies (Margalit 1999:77). In 1568 Pope Pius V banished them from the realm of the Empire. Priests of the Eastern Rite were threatened with excommunication if they sanctioned Roma marriages. In many churches in Western Europe, the Roma were denied entrance and they had to listen outside through the windows (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:10). The Catholic Church was hostile to them in the Italian states and refused to give them mass. In 1635 the bishops in Portugal excommunicated Gypsies who would not go to confession on Lent. In many of the German states Gypsy children were taken from their parents in order to be baptized and raised in good Christian homes (Vanyusha). Kaiser Joseph II issued a decree in 1782,

which forced all the Gypsies in Hungary and Transylvania to go to church every Sunday, undergo instruction, and observe the Christian religious duties (Margalit 1999:79-80).

There are several reasons for the hostility of the Church toward the Gypsies:

1. They seemed to be insincere and to lack religious convictions. They were viewed as a deceptive group of people, who should be isolated from the flock, lest they cause spiritual contamination (Sway 1975:48).

2. The European aristocracy was fascinated with their ability to tell fortunes and often employed Gypsy women for that purpose. This turned many aristocrats from the Catholic clergy to the fortune-tellers for the meeting of their spiritual needs. The Church threatened to turn out people who had their fortunes told by Gypsies (Sway 1975:48).

3. The Gypsies had created problems for the medieval rulers and were denied citizenship. This caused them to travel without a legal status and practice their usual crafts: metalwork, entertainment, folk medicine, and horse trade. The Medieval alliance of Church and State did not work in the Gypsies' favor (Sway 1975:48).

4. The Church invented several theological arguments against the Gypsies:

a) The Gypsies were people of darker complexion, which in European folklore represents the devil. That encouraged the evil image given to them. Their magic and witchcraft were associated with Satan (Margalit 1999:77).

In his 1882 book *The Gypsies* Charles Godfrey Leland says:

The poor Gypsies would seem to a humorist to have been created by the Devil, whose name they almost use for God, a living parody and satanic burlesque of all that human faith, hope, or wisdom, have ever accomplished in their highest forms. All over the world this black and God-wanting shadow dances behind the solid Theism of the 'People.' How often have we heard that the preservation of the Jews is a phenomenon without equal? And yet they both live – the sad and sober Jew, the gay and tipsy Gypsy, Shemite and Arian – the one so ridiculously like and unlike the other, that we may almost wonder whether humor does not

enter into the Divine purpose, and have its place in the destiny of man. (cited in Sampson 1930:25)

b). The myth of Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew, was transferred to the Gypsies. According to this myth they were the offspring of Cain, doomed to wander as vagabonds around the earth forever (Margalit 1999:79). The sons of Lamech the Biblical character - Jabal (father of the tent-dwellers and livestock breeders), Jubal (father of harp and flute musicians), and Tubal-Cain (master of bronze and iron craftsmen) mentioned in Genesis 4:13-22, have been referred to as the ancestors of the Gypsies.

c). The Church also blamed them for being partially responsible for the death of Christ. This was based on a famous myth claiming that a Gypsy blacksmith fashioned the nails, which were driven into the hands of Christ. The Gypsies tried to steal the nails, but were only able to take off with one. This made the suffering of the Lord extremely painful. God cursed them to travel the earth and never settle down (Vanyusha).

On the eastern side of Europe there were also tensions between the Church and the Roma. The greatest example of oppression was Gypsy slavery in the Northern Balkans, present-day Romania, which lasted for about five centuries. When in the 14th century many Roma were enslaved in the principalities of the Wallachia, Moldova, and Transylvania, the Church was a major beneficiary of their labor. The *sclavi monastivesti* (slaves of the monasteries) had the responsibilities of grooming, cooking, and coaching (Patrin Web /slaves). Slavery was not combated or questioned by the Church on an institutional level (Achim 1998:96). As the times changed some people in the Romanian clergy raised voices in defense of the Gypsy slaves. In 1766 the metropolitan and the bishops of Moldova decided to discontinue the division of Gypsy families due to slave trade, because “even though they are called Gypsies, the Lord created them too, and they

should not be divided like cattle.” Toward the end of the 18th century some of the Romanian clergy expressed the need to baptize and teach the groups of traveling Gypsies that were outside the Church’s dominion (Achim 1998:47).

One of the first people who openly spoke against slavery in Romania was a minister by the name of Eufrosin Poteka. An intellectual with democratic principles, he delivered in 1827 a speech for Easter in the presence of Head of State Grigore Gika. In it on the basis of Biblical and ecclesiastical arguments, Poteka called for the liberation of the slaves. In one of his writings he had described slavery as “harmful and barbaric.”

Even when abolition laws were issued in the 19th century, the monasteries tried to decrease their losses, by hiring the freed slaves on terms that favored the Church. When the state attempted to impose measures limiting the Church’s benefits to the advantage of the free slaves, the monasteries protested (Achim 1998:96).

Catholicism

In recent years, having observed the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism among Roma, the Roman Catholic Church has devoted greater efforts to engage them. There were some Catholics who started outreach to them in France in the 20th century. Led by Pere Fleury they worked closely with Les Petites Soeurs de Jesus and expressed concern for the Roma’ “spiritual and social welfare. “Four sisters each trained as a nurse and living themselves like Gypsies in a caravan of their own, emphasize health, education, and child care for mothers” (Trigg 1968:106-107).

On September 26, 1965 a group of about 2,000 Gypsies from all over Europe went on a pilgrimage to Rome in order ask the Pope for official protection of their

nomadic way of life. They gathered in a camp at Pomezia where Pope Paul IV came to meet them. Addressing them as “Dearest Nomads” he called them “perpetual pilgrims, refugees on the road, who had now found a home in the heart of the Catholic Church.” Alluding to their sufferings in the Holocaust, the Pope gave them words of comfort assuring them that society has been gradually changing its attitude toward them; the persecution and cruelty against the Gypsies in the past would not be repeated. In his eloquent speech he lifted up their right of respect as an ethnic group. The Holy Father committed to champion for their human rights in Europe (Yates 1966:76).

A thunderstorm disrupted the plans of the Pope to celebrate mass with the Gypsies at their camp. Therefore, they went to Rome for the service and brought about a festival of color to the Vatican:

to prove their deep gratitude the Gypsies, we are told, with strumming guitars in St. Peter’s Square, with tambourines, violins and accordions, with gaily-skirted women and lank-haired men miming the Stations of the Cross in the Coliseum, with Lusillo and his troupe performing a Biblical ballet composed for the occasion, gave an impromptu serenade under Pope Paul’s window in the Vatican.

The gentle approach of Paul IV had a positive effect on the status and attitude toward Gypsies in Italy and Europe (Yates 1966:76).

Pastoral Care for Gypsies

In 1970, a few years after that meeting, Pope Paul IV established the *Pontificia Comissio de Spirituali Migratorum atque Itinerantium Cura* (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Mirgants and Itinerant People). The purpose of the Council was to study “people on the move,” evangelize them, and provide them with appropriate spiritual shepherding (Roman Curia 2003). Under the auspices of this Council was the department of Pastoral Care for Gypsies, which organized several World Congresses. Their Fifth

Congress, held in July of 2003 at the Peter Pazmany Catholic University in Budapest, brought together delegates from a number of European countries.

The final document of the Budapest Congress is impressive and demonstrates a serious effort to engage the Roma minority and renew their attraction to Roman Catholicism. Having reported on the important steps already taken, it challenges the clergy to take seriously the responsibility for this pastorate. The document calls for the undertaking of Gypsy evangelization and pastoral care with great degree of cultural sensitivity. It lifts up the problem of the Gypsy social conditions in Europe defined by poverty and marginalization, and raises a voice for their human rights. It acknowledges their right to nationality, nomadic lifestyle, freedom, education, social security, and health services (Roman Curia 2003).

The Catholic Strategy outlined in that document includes several points:

1. The Church should invest more material and human resources for this ministry. This includes the deploying of Gypsy Chaplains and educating ministers about Gypsy culture and mentality.
2. The liturgies and ministry outreach should include Gypsy cultural elements such as: music, rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages.
3. Gypsy candidates should be promoted to the Permanent Diaconate.
4. Media should be used in this ministry. Bible translations should be made in local Romanes dialects, especially for liturgy purposes. The Vatican Radio should be contacted for special programs devoted to Gypsy pastoral care.
5. The social and ethical problems concerning Gypsies should be engaged.

The Council also dealt with a major problem in need of combating, namely, the massive conversion of European Gypsies to Pentecostalism:

In connection with this reference to various Christian churches and Communities the Congress recommended that ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue be extended to the gypsy world as well, in conformity with the relevant guidelines issued by the Holy See. The Congress, however, deplored the sectarian approach harking back to Pentecostalism, adopted by certain groups professing to be Christians, and exhorts Catholic pastoral Operators to be aware of this danger (Roman Curia 2003).

Blessed Ceferino Jimenes Malla

Ceferino Jimenes Malla is the first and only Gypsy to have ever been beatified by the Pope.³⁴ Known as “El Pele” Jimenez Malla, a *Gitano*, was born in 1861 in Benavent de Sergia in Catalonia. He was baptized in the Catholic Church as an adult. In 1912 he married Teresa Jimenez Castro – they lived together for 10 years until she passed away; they had no children of their own, but adopted Teresa’s niece Pepita. Even though almost illiterate, El Pele was intelligent and became a prominent and influential man in his community of Barbastro. Trading mules and horses he became a very successful businessman and served on the city council (Patrin Web/pele.htm).

El Pele was a committed layman in the Catholic Church and became an exemplar Christian. He was a generous giver to the poor and loved nature. In the church he served as a Catechist, Eucharistic minister, choir director, and leader of rosary prayers. Ceferino was regarded as a holy, pious man, admired for his Christian charity and for his great wisdom. When around him people were “on their best behavior.” In 1926 he became a Dominican tertiary. He worked hard to improve the relations between Gypsies and non-

Gypsies (Catholic Forum Website). Also Gypsies often requested him to act as a mediator when conflicts arose between them.

Once he was accused unjustly of stealing something, but acquitted. The defense lawyer declared: "El Pele is not a thief, he is San Ceferino, patron of Gypsies." He was never deceitful in business or relations with people. Nearly illiterate, he was highly respected by the educated people for his honesty and wisdom (Savior Website).

At the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in July of 1938 Ceferino was arrested, because he provided a hiding place for a priest in Barbastro who was being dragged through the streets of town. Ceferino was offered freedom "if he would renounce his faith and throw away his rosary." His refusal led him to martyrdom for the Christian faith. On August 8th at dawn standing at the walls of the Barbastro cemetery Ceferino was executed by a firing squad. "He died clutching his Rosary and shouting: "Long live Christ the King" (Savior Website).

On May 4, 1997, about 40,000 people gathered for the Sunday service at which Pope John Paul II beatified Jimenez. In his homily the old Pontiff said:

The Blessed Ceferino Jimenez Malla sowed harmony and solidarity among the Gypsies, mediating in conflicts that plagued relations between Gypsies and non-Gypsies... It is necessary to overcome ancient prejudices that lead you to suffer forms of discrimination and at times undesirable marginalization... El Pele in his path towards sainthood must be for you an example and an incentive for the full integration of your culture in the social environment around you. He showed that the charity of Christ knows no limits of race or culture. (Patrin Web Journal /pele.htm)

At the service Bishop Giovanni Cheli, president of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant peoples, referred to Ceferino as:

...the first son of the Gypsy people recognized in a solemn way by the Church for the holiness of his life, the heroic nature of his virtues, his martyrdom for the faith. He had the wisdom and knowledge of things that God hides from the proud and the wise of this world and reveals instead to the small ones, to the humble...even the Bishop of his diocese of Barbastro, Florentino Asentio Barroso, turned to him for advice and

counsel...Ceferino was illiterate...and poor, but rich in charity which he used to help others...poor, but rich in virtue. Humble, but great in the faith. He frequented Mass and communion and loved the rosary, and it was with rosary in hand that he underwent martyrdom. (Patrin Web Journal /pele.htm)

Gypsy musicians had come to play and sing for the Pope as they celebrated this historic occasion. John Paul II, who had visited Auschwitz in 1995 and referred to it as the place of the “tragic end of our Gypsy brothers and sisters,” saw this beatification ceremony as a step toward the ending of Anti-Gypsy discrimination. The event was also an opportunity for the Vatican to raise awareness of the need for ministry to the Gypsies whom one bishop had defined as people “baptized, but never evangelized.”

At the end of the service, the Pontiff extended a kind greeting in Romanes to the Gypsy groups gathered there: Kalos, Rom, Sinti, and Manush. They later gave the Pope “an ebony stick, as a symbol of honor.” Mario Riboldi who helped promote Ceferino to beatification, is the author of the Gypsy martyr’s official biography *A True Kalo*, which has been recently published³⁵ (Patrin Web Journal /pele.htm).

Roma Orthodox Priest

There are a number of Roma Christians in Eastern Europe who attend the Orthodox Church attracted to its mysticism and traditions. Recently, in the Czech Republic, a country where Catholicism is prevalent, a young Roma was ordained to the Orthodox priesthood. According to archbishop Krystof, that event presented an opportunity for the Czech Orthodox Church to have an effective work among the Roma:

We have a lot of projects with Gypsies in the Czech Republic. We have built a Roma community with a Roma priest. It is the first time a member of the Roma community became a priest in the whole Czech Republic. For this reason it is very auspicious to

us. The Roma priest is very active and the Roma [Orthodox] community has a future there. (O' Conner 2006)

David Dudas was born on March 22, 1981 in Plzen, Czechoslovakia. In spite of his Roman Catholic background, early in life he developed an attraction to the historical and ritualistic aspects of Orthodoxy. When visiting in 1993 the St. Anna Orthodox Church in Plzen, he felt called to remain there. The priest Rev. Jan Polansky was impressed with 13-year old David, taking notice of the boy's dark complexion. Polansky thought that was interesting, because the Roma do not usually mix with other ethnic groups in the country.

The Sunday service was a Divine Liturgy that lasted two and a half hours, consisting of long chants in the Czech and Old Slavonic languages. "He stayed for the entire service. That does not happen. Children his age don't stay the entire time. It became obvious that he came to look and not to steal," said Polansky sharing his impressions of young David in reference to a common stereotype about Roma people.

After returning the following two Sundays, led by strong religious conviction, David realized that his calling and mission in life was the Orthodox priesthood. "I was lucky because there were people who accepted me and enabled me to come." David wanted to begin training for priesthood immediately, but there were no secondary theological schools in the Czech republic. So at age 15 he left his homeland and went to Neamt, Romania to study at the Theological Metropolitan Seminary. The church provided the travel expenses and he received a scholarship. David had to adjust to a new environment and quickly learned the language. Upon arrival he did not speak even a word of Romanian, but in only three months he acquired sufficient knowledge of it to begin his studies. During the five years in seminary he proved to be an excellent student.

On January 19, 2003, David Dudas, at age 22 was ordained in the St. Anna Church as the first Roma priest in the Czech Republic. He conducted his first Divine Liturgy service on February 9th at the Trinity Church in Rokycany, West Bohemia, which became his local parish. Rokycany is “a town with population of 14,619, including 800 Roma” (Bricker 2003).

Even though Rokycany is not known for a high crime rate, hate crimes motivated by racism receive media coverage there. Father Polansky of St. Anna was accused by some that he had defamed the Orthodox Church by the ordination of a Roma to the priesthood. He received numerous phone threats by skinheads after the ordination. These calls, according to Polansky, “raise the question of whether we are ready to live in a developed world, if we behave in such a way. On the other hand, people support him. He will encourage Romany people to go to church.” Rev. Dudas who is used to racial hatred since childhood and had anticipated such problems, admits they make his ministry more difficult. The adversity does not deter him, however, from faithfully carrying out his spiritual vocation, but rather causes him to be a man of greater devotion and faith. Dudas says that he draws closer to God and finds comfort in reading the Bible, refusing to allow prejudice to discourage him from pursuing his passion for ministry. “Jesus said nobody is an apostle at home. These aspects strengthen my belief and convictions that people should change. Priesthood is a fight during your entire life. A strong belief in God has kept me going,” says the young priest.

Rev. David Dudas is aware of the fact that wearing a black priestly robe and having his own pulpit does not change his ethnic identity. He has a spiritual burden for his people, the Roma - that is a major reason he was placed in that community. As repairs

of the church building were anticipated, he says: "I hope God will give us a lot of strength so we overcome everything – that we reconstruct the church, but that we reconstruct it for someone. The main objective is not to create a religious community but a spiritual Romany community." Dudas also wants to provide an opportunity for Roma people to express and celebrate their rich heritage. Part of his vision is to build a Roma cultural center where people can come and enjoy festivals and concerts (Bricker 2003).

Protestantism and the Roma

The attitude of the early Reformation toward the Roma was not much better than that of Medieval Catholicism. Martin Luther preached against the social and moral behavior of the Gypsies and denounced their fortune-tellers as liars. He said they would baptize their children multiples times in order to receive more gifts from Christian godfathers. In a sermon in 1543, Luther accused both the Jews and Gypsies that they "make it difficult for people by charging high prices, spying for other countries, poisoning the water, burning, kidnapping children, and cheating in all kinds of ways in order to cause damage" (cited in Margalit 1999:77-79).

Heinrich Grellman published a book on the Gypsies in 1783. In it he criticized the European Church, which was sending missionaries to evangelize the pagans in the remote parts of the world, but would not undertake such initiatives in reaching the Gypsies, who were in a desperate need "here in our midst" (Margalit 1999:79-80).³⁶

In the 1830s the International Bible Society in London undertook the challenge of propagating the Gospel and preparing a Bible translation for the Gypsies. George Borrow was sent to Spain as a missionary of the Society. He translated the New Testament in the

Gypsy language and wrote several books and articles, which contributed to the scholarship on Gypsies (Slavkova 2006:42). *The Bible in Spain, Romany Rye, Lavengro*, and *The Zincali* are some of Borrow's classic writings.

I have counted seventeen *Gitanas* assembled at one time in my apartment in the Calle de Santiago in Madrid; for the first quarter of an hour we generally discoursed upon indifferent matters, when by degrees, I guided the subject to religion and the state of souls. I finally became so bold that I ventured to speak against their inveterate practices, thieving and lying, telling fortunes, and stealing *a pastesas*; this was touching upon delicate ground, and I experienced much opposition and much feminine clamor. I persevered, however, and they finally assented to all I said, not that I believe my words made much impression upon their hearts...I spoke for some time in Spanish; I chose for the theme of my discourse the situation of the Hebrews in Egypt, and pointed out its similarity to that of the *Gitanos* in Spain. I spoke of the power of God, manifested in preserving them both as separate and distinct people amongst the nations until the present day. I warmed with my subject. I subsequently produced a manuscript book, from which I read a portion of Scripture, and the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed in Romany. When I had concluded, I looked around me. The features of the assembly were twisted, and the eyes of all turned upon me with a frightful squint.... (cited in Sampson 1930:108-109)

Further Borrow said the *Gitanas* used the translation he made of Luke's Gospel in Spanish Romany and published in 1837, "as a charm to bring them luck in their thieving expeditions" (Sampson 1930: 341).

Frieda-Zeller-Plinzer was an important missionary to the Gypsies in Germany. She had a special love for them and called them the "brown folk". Even though she supported the doctrine of 'national elevation,' Plinzer cared for the Gypsies. She ministered to them even after the Nazis had incarcerated them during the Holocaust. Her active missionary work continued until the 1950s (Margalit 1999:77). In 1958 the "International Evangelical Gypsy Mission" was established in Switzerland and had a monthly publication called *The Gypsy Friend* (Slavkova 2006:43).

British Gypsy Missions

In 1916 the Scottish Committee, an interdenominational mission group, began to organize evangelistic services for the Scottish *travelers* and give them humanitarian aid. This ministry was eventually taken over by the Church of Scotland. Later, evangelist William Web who had worked with the Scottish mission established the “British Gypsy Gospel Mission,” actively evangelizing the Scottish Tinker Gypsies; he was diligent in learning all their names and visiting them in hospitals, prisons, farms, asylums, and military camps. In 1960 Web opened a small facility where *tinkers* could gather for services; he preached and taught strongly against smoking, drinking, going to theaters, and other secular entertainment. Other important missionaries to the Gypsies in Britain were Alma Bruce also known as ‘Romany Rye’, ‘Gypsy’ Williams, and Will ‘Dromengro’ Smith (Trigg 1968: 82-91). Those of them like ‘Gypsy’ Williams who practiced social services were popular among the Gypsies; Romany Rye’s neglect of such activities deprived them of the opportunity to see any practical use in Christianity.

There were several major problems with these missions:

Prejudiced Attitudes

While the Romantic era generally considered Gypsies faultless children of nature, Victorian Christianity, which rejected common grounds with Romanticism, generally viewed them as totally depraved creatures. The 20th century missions followed this earlier position and embraced the popular stereotypes of Gypsies as poachers, thieves, swindlers, and miserable outcastes, who were incapable of being good citizens.³⁷ “It was inconceivable for most people to think of the Gypsy as a reasonably law-abiding citizen, much less a converted Christian.” As did the average rural folk, the Church continued to

have a low view of the Gypsies. Very few actually cared for their welfare, while others considered the cause too esoteric and were often “mildly amused by the thought” (Trigg 1968:94-95).

For that reason it was hard to raise support for this missionary venture; the Gypsies were condemned as hopeless and many considered it a waste of money and effort to try reaching them. At the same time it was easier to get mission funds for remote and exotic group of natives like “the aborigines of Newfoundland, because they were neither idolized in the popular mind nor made to appear totally depraved.”

Whenever the missionaries’ evangelism of Gypsies was successful, the local parish churches were reluctant to accept them and take the responsibility for their physical and spiritual care. The Gypsies’ nomadism prevented them from becoming regular members and their visits to church services were seen as a distraction. This made much of the mission’s effort futile. “The biggest problem for an evangelical ministry is to incorporate Gypsies into the religious life of the parish” (Trigg 1968:98).

Cultural Insensitivity

Evangelists did not know the Gypsy people and their lifestyle, culture, language, native beliefs, or moral code. Their interest was limited to the Gypsies’ spiritual welfare, and they did not try to develop individual relationships with them. Because of their intolerance for the Gypsies’ otherness, the mission often was simply an attempt to make them accept *gajo* culture:

At times it seemed that evangelists were more anxious to eliminate Gypsy culture than they were to make Christian conversions. Such an approach of course, was based on the firm conviction that the Gypsy way of life was little more than a life of self-indulgence and sinful misery. By definition their way of life was thought to be contrary to Christianity. Crabb, for example claimed that if Christians did their duty, there would cease to be Gypsies. (Trigg 1968:106-107)

One London Missionary said in reference to Gypsy customs such as gambling, drinking, and playing the fiddle: "If such are the homes, and such the practices of Gypsy life, how impossible it is for them to live Christian lives...If Christians, they must cease to be Gypsies, for Christianity and Gypsyism can never agree." (Trigg 1968:106-107)

The Gypsies constant movement made it difficult for missionaries to give them good religious education. Since their livelihood depended on their traditional nomadic lifestyle, the Gypsies did not consider it evil. Most missionaries did not want to understand that and often encouraged them to become sedentary, because their life of freedom and happy irresponsibility was unacceptable. Sutherland and Wilson were two exceptions; they considered the legal system unjust and believed that the Gypsies should remain nomadic if they so chose. So there were some missionaries during this period who successfully built bridges with the Gypsies and became their advocates to the world opposing their oppression by the *gaje* (Trigg 1968:106-107).

Unfortunately, most missionaries in Britain missed the opportunity to use the positive Romantic image of the Gypsies and their culture, with its love for color and ritual, to present them Christ. Their apparent attitude of superiority was experienced as offensive and disrespectful, thus undermining their effectiveness. By refusing to engage Gypsy culture, the missionaries placed unnecessary stumbling-blocks to evangelization. To the Gypsies Christianity was presented as contrary to their way of life. The conservative Fundamentalist teachings and legalistic moral standards presented God to them as a "legalistic moral tyrant who could be easily displeased with the slightest human offence" (Trigg 1968:99-102).

It was considered a success in Britain that most Gypsies got baptized and started taking communion. Even though the Gypsies were impressed with religious symbols, they often did not fully understand the essence of the faith. Illiteracy made it impossible for them to read the Bible or Christian literature. They were impressed, however, to hear preachers speak at such great length from a book full of “meaningless” symbols. It actually became a charm - small Bibles or pocket New Testaments were used in fortune-telling; the seers pretended to read the future from it even though they might have been holding it upside down. Little crosses symbolizing persecution were also important to Gypsies, who often wore them for luck or decoration. One mission advantage during the revivalist era was the fact that the Gypsies’ emotional nature was engaged and found freedom of expression (Trigg 1968: 99-109).

Gypsy Smith

“I’m God’s messenger from the Gypsy tent. And it’s the message that is important, not the messenger” (*Quotes and Notes* 2007).

One of the most famous and loved evangelist of all time was a British Gypsy by the name of Rodney Smith. He was the first Roma preacher known to history. Born in a tent and raised in a Gypsy camp, Rodney was the fourth child of Cornelius Smith and Mary Welch. For many years he did not even know his birthday, because the British Gypsies were illiterate, and kept no hospital records. An aunt of his found out years later that he had been born on March 31, 1860. “I discovered I was a year younger than I took myself to be” (Smith 1902:1). Rodney “grew up as wild as the birds, as frolicsome as the lambs, and as difficult to catch as the rabbits” (Smith 1902:10).

An event that deeply affected young Rodney and eventually resulted in his spiritual awakening was the early loss of his mother. Laying on her deathbed in the wagon, suffering with smallpox, Mary Welch was given the salvation message by her husband Cornelius who was not even converted at the time yet; he told her what he'd once heard from a chaplain: "You can have salvation by faith in Christ, because he died for sinners." Then Mary began singing a Christian song she had heard many years ago:

I have a Father in the promised land,
My God calls me, I must go
To meet him in the promised land.

She prayed for God to forgive her sins and save her soul. Then she no longer was afraid to die. The Holy Spirit beautifully orchestrated this event and brought things to memory so that Mary Welch was prepared to meet the Lord (Staley 1926:149-151).

Rodney started working with his father selling wares. As a "mischievous" young boy he proved to be very smart and successful at that trade.

He [my father] earned his living by making baskets, clothes-pegs, all sorts of tin ware, and re-caning cane-chairs. Of course in his unconverted days he "found" the willows for the baskets and the wood for the clothes-pegs. Gypsies only buy what they cannot "find." My father had inherited the occupation from many generations of ancestors. He also pursued the trade of a horse-dealer, a business in which gypsies are thoroughly expert. What a Gypsy does not know about horses is not worth knowing. The trade is one in which tricks and dodges are frequently practiced. (Smith 1902:7-8)

Cornelius was not really happy feeling the burden of spiritual conviction on his life of "fiddling, drinking, and sinning." His two brothers felt the same way – they were illiterate, had no knowledge of the Bible, and needed deliverance and salvation. Without a preacher, the Holy Spirit had convicted them of sin and they went to London to hear about God and the Word. At that time there was no ministry making serious efforts in evangelizing the Gypsies (Staley 1926:152).

Rodney witnessed his father's conversion to the faith in a revival meeting at a London Christian mission. "His burden was gone, his heart was light." With a face shining with joy, Cornelius told everybody: "I am converted, I am converted." His children saw a great difference in their father – tenderness, love, and a Christian character that was a great testimony to all who knew him. Very soon Cornelius began organizing prayer meetings in the camp where the Gypsies lived. As the Holy Spirit moved, most of the family and those living in the camp repented and believed in Christ. They erected a tent, which was called: "The Gypsy Tabernacle." Mature Christians came twice a week to give the Gypsies instruction and encouragement. The three brothers worked during the day and held evangelistic services at night, singing and playing. They were called "The Hallelujah Fiddlers" (Staley 1926:156-157).

Young Rodney was affected by the radical conversion of his family: "I had seen the transformation scene if I had not felt it, and in my heart there was a deep longing for the strange experiences which I knew to be my father's." Then Cornelius took the boy to Bedford where they visited the house of John Bunyan. As Rodney observed the monument of this great hero of the faith and heard his story, he wept desiring to find the same Jesus Bunyan had found.

I had got it into my mind that religion was a thing which first took hold of the head of the house, and then stepped down in the order of ages. My heart was heavy because I felt that I was standing in the way of my sister Tilly who was younger than I. I remember one evening sitting on the trunk of an old tree not far from my father's tent and wagon. Around the fallen trunk grass had grown about as tall as myself. I had gone there to think, because I was under the deepest conviction and had an earnest longing to love the Savior and to be a good lad. I thought of my mother in heaven, and I thought of the beautiful life my father, brother, and sisters were living.... (Smith 1902:69-70)

In that moment the young teenager decided to live for Christ, but knew he needed to make his confession public. Several days later at a small Primitive Methodist Chapel

on Fitzroy Street in Cambridge he was the first to go forward as the altar call was given. When Rodney got home and announced his conversion experience, Cornelius asked how he knew. "That was a poser for a young convert. I hardly knew what to say, but placing my hand on my heart, I said, "Daddy, I feel so warm here...The date of my conversion was the 17th of November, 1876" (Smith 1902:71-73).

Soon Rodney felt called to preach, so he needed to learn how to read. "I used to get my Bible down and begin to read it, alas! Sometimes the wrong way up, in my father's tent or in the corner of a field, away from everybody. Many a time have I wept and prayed over the Bible. I wanted my heart to be filled with the spirit of it" (Smith 1902:75).

Rodney's first books were the Bible, an English Dictionary, and Eadie's Biblical Dictionary. He began to read more and more and if he heard a new word, he consulted the dictionary, which he always kept with him. He used every chance to tell people about Jesus. The first preaching experiences of the young man were in the open fields:

One Sunday I entered a turnip-field and preached most eloquently to the turnips. I had a very large and most attentive congregation. Not one of them made an attempt to move away. While walking along the road with my basket under my arm I used to go on preaching. I knew a great many passages of Scripture and hymns, and my discourses consisted of these all woven together. (Smith 1902:76-77)

Since Rodney was a great singer, his dad began using him in the evangelistic meetings. General William Booth, who knew the family, recognized the divine calling on the seventeen year old boy and took him to train for evangelistic service. Rodney spent his last money to purchase a frock coat. He took his books from the tent and his few personal belongings, and left his family to join the Salvation Army. This required a serious adjustment as the young man had to live in an apartment with people in the city.

His many mistakes were quickly forgiven, because he was a Gypsy who had only lived outdoors in a tent before (Staley 1926:165).

As Rodney became a missionary under General Booth, he developed his ability to preach and proved to be very gifted. His zeal and love for Christ was very obvious to all. While most of the other missionaries ministered indoors, Smith spoke outdoors – on street-corners and any place where big groups of people were gathered. He became known as the ‘Gypsy Boy Preacher’ and the fact that he was a real Gypsy attracted greater crowds to hear him (Staley 1926:165).

Rodney Smith’s ministry grew tremendously over the years and soon he was preaching to crowds of 2-3 thousand. There were hundreds converted in his services, including Roman Catholics who got rid of their beads as a sign of their conversion. Having become a powerful evangelist in the Salvation Army, Rodney was soon promoted by William Booth to the rank of Lieutenant. Called ‘Rodney Smith the Gypsy boy,’ he soon began to be known simply as ‘Gypsy Smith’ (Staley 1926:167-171).

Gypsy Smith was a loyal officer in the Salvation Army for about five years. He grew frustrated, however, with the uniform, the titles, the order, and never felt quite at home in the Army. Finally, over a misunderstanding in regard to the acceptance of gifts from outsiders, General Booth asked Gypsy to resign from the army. His farewell service brought together between five and ten thousand people (Staley 1926:174-176).

This unfortunate development proved to be a work of God. Even though humiliated at the time, years later Gypsy Smith would give many thanks to the act of divine providence, which freed him for worldwide ministry. As invitations overwhelmed him for evangelistic services he soon realized that this was indeed his life’s calling.

God's power was present in London where his preaching drew crowds larger than those of Charles H. Spurgeon. An eyewitness of these meetings comments:

There has been no noise, confusion, or undue excitement throughout, but deep feeling, searching power and gracious influence. The whole neighborhood has been stirred. Gypsy Smith is remarkable for simplicity of speech, pathetic and persuasive pleading, great wisdom and tact in dealing with souls. His reading of the Word, with occasional comments, are a prominent feature in his services, and done with ease and effect. In his addresses he is dramatic and pungent, while the solos he sings are striking sermons in choicest melody. He is a Gypsy, pure and simple, but God has wonderfully gifted him with the holiest elements of an evangelist, and made him eminently mighty in the art of soul-winning.
(cited in Staley 1926:176-177)

Gypsy Smith made many trips to the United States, preaching to thousands and leading many to the Lord. On one such trip, as he was getting ready to preach, one of the ministers approached him saying: "Now, brother Smith, you have a big crowd, just spread yourself." Gypsy responded: "I will do no such thing. I will lift up the cross, and try to hide behind it." In that service over 300 people fell on their knees repenting and seeking forgiveness from God (Staley 1926:181).

Smith's evangelistic ministry took him around the world. A friend of his from Glasgow told him that if he would make a world tour to hold evangelistic services, he would cover the expenses. This helped Gypsy go to Australia where he had very effective and fruitful ministry preaching not just in churches, but also in prisons and hospitals. At his departure from Australia, 2,000 people came to see him off at the boat, waving and singing: "God be with you till we meet again" (Staley 1926:185-187).

Even though Gypsy Smith had become a minister to the nations, his heart was still burdened for his own people – the Gypsies.

I had long had it in my heart to do something for my people, but the opportunity had never come to me. I could not myself undertake the responsibility of the work, nor could I very well lead the way. Still I had always hoped to see the time when some missionary would live amongst my people in a parsonage on wheels,

teaching the children, and preaching the Gospel to them and their parents. (Smith 1902:243-244)

Upon hearing of this burden, a Scotch lady told Gypsy that if he would start a mission to the Gypsies, she would give him the first wagon for a “parsonage on wheels.” That was the beginning of the Gypsy Gospel Wagon Mission (Smith 1902:245).

The gypsies care little for religion and know nothing really of God and the Bible, yet they always take care to get their babies christened, because it is a matter of business. The clergyman from the nearest parish church is invited to come to the encampment and perform the ceremony. To the “gorgios” [*gaje*] the event is one of rare and curious interest. Some of the ladies of the congregation are sure to accompany the parson to see the Gypsy baby, and they cannot very well do this without bringing presents for the Gypsy mother and more often for the baby. The Gypsies believe in christenings for the profit they can make out of them. They have beside some sort of notion that it is the right thing to do. (Smith 1902:1-2)

This pragmatic approach of the Gypsies toward religion caused Smith to be skeptical about evangelizing them. He believed they should become sedentary and forsake some of their Gypsy ways in order for Christianity to take root in their midst; Smith was impacted by the mission approaches of his time. Also his worldwide ministry did not allow him to devote more efforts to the work among his own people. The Wagon Mission, however, played a part in planting the seeds of the gospel among them.

My people have quick eyes, quick ears, and ready tongues. But for years – nay, for centuries – their hearts have been blinded to the things of God. There is hardly a race on the face of this globe to whom religion is so utterly foreign a thing. The Gypsies are slow to comprehend the plan of salvation, and even when they have understood it, they are slow to use it, because for one thing, their trade is declining; they are depending more and more on fortune-telling, and they know very well that if they become Christians that lying practice must cease. Despite these difficulties, Mr. Baker and his assistants have done good work. They have been cheered by not a few conversions, and they have done not a little to give the children some smattering of education. The manner of their life makes anything more than this impossible. However, I am fully confident that the Gypsy Gospel Wagon Mission is the leaven that will, in course of time, leaven the whole lump. (Smith 1902:245-246)

The story of Gypsy Smith is significant and truly demonstrates the mysterious ways of the Lord. God took a teenage boy from the outcaste class in Europe to preach the

message of Christ to the world. “Born in a tent, raised on a Gypsy camp, never attended school for a day! – yet he influenced the lives of millions of people for God through his powerful preaching” (Smith (1860-1947) 1901). Smith was a true evangelist carrying and embodying the message of love, truth, and holiness. His words still ring true: “The way to Jesus is not by Cambridge and Oxford, Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Socrates, Plato, Shakespeare or the poets – it is over an old-fashioned hill called Calvary” (*Quotes and Notes* 2007).

The Golintsi Baptist Church

The village of Golintsi in North Western Bulgaria is no longer on the map. That small village, later to become a quarter of Lom, was destined to play an important part in the history of Roma Christianity. There were many traveling Gypsies at the end of 19th century around the Balkans – soon after Bulgaria was freed from almost 500 years of Ottoman rule; upon their request the young Bulgarian Prince Alexander Batenberg gave a number of them permission to settle in Golintsi in 1895.

This new Gypsy *mahala* at the time lived in illiteracy, drunkenness, superstitions, and immorality. They lived in miserable conditions and labored hard to make ends meet. Dancing and singing were their main forms of entertainment.

The Golintsi Baptist Church is believed to be the first officially established indigenous Roma church in history. The history of that blessed little church began with a “stolen gospel.” Bogdan Markov, a Gypsy man, was serving at the house of a Bulgarian peasant when he found a box with many books. Among those one stood out - neatly kept and with very nice covers. Bogdan thought this little book to be of special value and took

it from the box. He immediately went to his friend Peter Punchov to boast of the theft and ask help to read the prized text. The book was the New Testament.³⁸

Bogdan and Peter began reading and meditating on the Word of Life together. They quickly improved their reading skills in order to understand the meaning of the text. Peter Punchov became captivated by the powerful message he was reading. He had never heard a sermon or a Bible lecture, but one day the Gospel message had its effect on him; as Peter cried out to God for mercy and forgiveness of sin, he felt freedom and joy. He needed to learn more about Christianity and share this great experience. Thus, the first Gypsies in Golintsi came to Christ in 1908.

In 1910 Peter Punchov joined the Baptist church in Lom where he was baptized and disciplined. Then he began preaching the message of salvation day and night to the lost souls of his community. Peter Punchov's first sermon was from the following passages: Phil. 1:1-11, Acts 17:30, and Rev.8:9; his main thought was that all people from every ethnos and tongue will confess Christ as Lord; that included the Gypsies. Having heard the message many more Gypsy people began to repent and receive eternal life by faith.

The 'gospel thief' Bogdan Markov, who had previously been a regular attendant at the Orthodox Church, began organizing evangelical meetings, making a pulpit out of boxes. The new Gypsy converts gathered in private homes and the number of believers was growing. The Lom Baptist church recognizing Punchov's passion for God appointed him to work at the Bible bookstore (Dimitrov 1924:1-3). Said Punchov: "When I heard that there is a Gypsy evangelist in America – Gypsy Smith, I said to myself: Why not have one in Bulgaria too?" (Evangelist 1920:6).

Several years of evangelistic labor in the village of Golintsi lead to the establishing of a Gypsy church with more than 30 members. These first Gypsy believers became powerful witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ. The ministry of Peter Punchov led to the conversion of 19 ethnic Bulgarians in Golintsi; they formed a separate church, of which the pastor was also one of the Punchov converts.

Peter Punchov, born in 1882 to Gypsy nomads, became the first Gypsy believer and evangelical minister in Bulgaria. His wife Boiana for a number of years was opposed to the faith – once she tore up and burned the Bible of her husband. Eventually she was won to the Lord and they became a happy Christian family. On November 11, 1923, Peter Punchov was ordained as pastor of the Baptist Gypsy Church in Golintsi. This was a great honor to this man of God who had labored faithfully to spread the Christian faith among his despised and poor, but beloved Gypsies. Punchov was well versed in the Scriptures, a logical thinker, and apologist of the faith (Dimitrov 1924:1-3).

Peter Punchov was not good looking, according to descriptions, but was a passionate follower of Christ. Without much education he was able to preach and witness to lawyers, judges, priests, merchants, scholars, students, Jews, and Turks. Peter was a very noble and humble man; people were always impressed by his progressiveness, diligence, and missionary spirit (Evangelist 1923:4).

Unfortunately, the ministry of Pastor Punchov did not continue for a long time. On September 8, 1924 the first Gypsy pastor went to be with the Lord at the young age of 42, leaving a legacy of Christian love and zeal for winning souls (Dimitrov 1924:1-3).

“The church in the Gypsy *mahala* in the Golintsi village is the seal of his apostleship and a living memorial of his tireless Christian activity. He was an example and a model for many in his life constantly fighting the good fight of faith” (Evangelist 1926:63).

After Panchov’s death the Gypsy church continued to flourish even without a regular pastor for several years. *Evangelist* reports that in 1925 it had added 14 new members - more than any other church in the Bulgarian Baptist Union (1925: 62).

Apparently in 1926 there was a conflict in the Golintsi Gypsy church. Part of the congregation wanted to become an extension of the Lom Baptist Church, while the other preferred to maintain their separate status. The vote determined that the majority desired to become a branch of the Lom Church. So they did, but were allowed to have their own services in the Gypsy *mahala* under supervision (Evangelist 1926:30).

The Baptist Gypsy outreach was expanding. The Golintsi Church organized a Gypsy Missionary Women’s Society, which had a useful ministry among the Gypsy women in the *mahala* (Svetilnik 1927:1). Peter Minkov reported in *Evangelist* that one Gypsy brother from the Reshetari group in Lom traveled 60 km (37.5 miles) on foot one night in order to be baptized in water. The Baptist church in Ferdinand (Montana) where Minkov ministered, started an outreach to the Gypsies in their area. They baptized three women from the Kalajiji Roma tribe who had previously been Muslims (Minkov 1927:9).

Rev. Peter Minkov was a Bulgarian minister who felt a burden to work with the Gypsies. From Ferdinand he moved to Golintsi taking over the pastorate of the Gypsy congregation. Under his talented leadership the church kept growing. During this time the initiative was taken to raise funds for a church building for the Gypsies. Minkov’s wife Anka was very active in this effort (Kulichev 1994:324-325). Rev. Karl Filbrant, Baptist

missionary supervisor for Eastern Europe, assured the funding for the new church.

“September 28, [1930] will be a memorable day in the history not only of the Gypsy Baptist Church, but for the whole evangelical movement in Bulgaria. On this day the only Gypsy evangelical church in the world was dedicated” (Evangelist 1930:4).

P Minkov founded The Evangelical Baptist Mission to the Gypsies in Bulgaria. The mission started publishing its own newspaper called “Svetilnik” (Lamp). Its first article lifted up the challenge to fulfill the Great Commission – preaching the gospel to all (Mark 16:15). “In this great advance of the children of God in the world, the evangelical ministry among the Gypsies in Bulgaria takes its humble place. We are glad that with the help of God we are able to do something for these creatures forgotten by people, but dear to God” (Svetilnik 1927:1).

Peter Minkov moved from Lom to Sofia in 1931 where he continued working as a missionary to the Gypsies. He assisted two Gypsy young men to go school in Austria for ministerial training – Georgi Stefanov and Alexander Georgiev. They took over the work in Lom after Minkov’s move to Sofia. Rev. Minkov helped to produce evangelical literature in the Roma language, using the Bulgarian alphabet; he translated numerous brochures, songs, which were published by the Bulgarian Broshure Society. The gospel of Mathew, and Luke, as well two songbooks were translated into Romanes (Kulichev 1994:324-325). The Bulgarian Baptist Union actively supported and funded these initiatives propagating the gospel among the Bulgarian Gypsies. They organized evangelistic campaigns using dedicated Gypsy preachers. Besides Lom and Ferdinand, Gypsy missions were started in Varna, Sofia, and the village of Akchar, Vidin region.

Several foreign missionaries came at that time to minister specifically among the Gypsies groups in Bulgaria such as Johana Meine (Evangelist 1933:8-9), Emma Herman, and Godfrid Peterson. Herman led the ministry of the first Baptist Deacon's Home in Bulgaria where Gypsy girls were taught to knit and sew (Christian Friend 1939:11-12).

These were the humble beginnings of the evangelical faith among the Gypsies.

Roma Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism has been the most successful movement in history to convert the Roma around the world to the Christian faith (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:11).

France

France is often seen as the cradle of the Gypsy Pentecostal movement. The Holy Spirit was at work simultaneously in many countries setting the stage for the movement, but France clearly played a key role in spreading the gospel among the Roma in the 20th century. Most of the French Gypsies had traditionally been Catholic, but were virtually unreached by the gospel of Christ. The revival fire among them was kindled by a remarkable story of healing that took place in the town Lisieux, Normandy in 1950.

The Miraculous Healing

Madame Duvil, a French Roma woman of the Manouche tribe, was fighting for the life of her son Zino, who was suffering from tubercular peritonitis at the young age of 20. She had sought the help of a healer woman, who was unable to provide cure. The doctors operated on Zino, but had no good news for this mother: "There's no hope, you

must face it, you're going to lose him." When the fatal verdict was given by both official and tribal medicine Mrs. Duvil was desperate, but refused to give up – "there must be something that could be done to save the boy's life," she thought.

The Sunday morning after the surgery Duvil went shopping and noticed something in her handbag - a gospel tract that was given to her months earlier. She asked the girl at the shop to read it to her. The tract was from a church nearby providing the schedule of the services and inviting people to hear the gospel. One word, however, caught the attention of the Gypsy mother and restored her hope: "healing." She immediately left the shop and rushed to the church (Ridholls 1986:28-30).

Little did pastor Alfred Gichtenaere of the Evangelical Church in Lisieux know when he was delivering his Sunday sermon that this was going to be a remarkable service with historic significance (Le Cossec 1991:9). As the door of the church suddenly opened, the preacher paused and the congregation turned amazed to see an excited Gypsy woman with a tract in hand. "My son is dying! Come and pray for him!" she cried. Regaining his composure Rev. Gichtenaere realized this was a divine appointment and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit said these words: "Your son will not die! God can do anything and can give him back to you! Where is he? We'll go and lay hands on him."

As they went back to the hospital, the staff was skeptical about this laying-on-of-hands business, knowing that the young man's condition was fatal. They appreciated the sincerity of the group, however, and allowed the Gypsies to return to Zino's room with the pastor. The doctor waited for some time after the "strange ritual" and went back for a routine examination of Zino's condition. To his great surprise, almost to the point of reverence, the doctor discovered that the young man's fever was gone. After several more

examinations the boy was proven healed and released from the hospital. The news of the miracle spread quickly among the Gypsies of France (Ridholls 1986:28-30).

Clement Le Cossec – Pioneer of Roma Pentecostalism

The movement grew remarkably under the leadership of a French Assemblies of God minister by the name of Clement le Cossec. This *gajo* pastor became the pioneer leader of the Roma Pentecostal movement in France and around the world. In *My Adventures with the Gypsies* Le Cossec describes the important events that led to the growth of the movement. His powerful ministry among the Gypsies was inspired by his deep love of Christ and passion to evangelize them seasoned with cultural sensitivity.

In 1952 Clement le Cossec met Mandz, a young man from a group of Gypsy caravan travelers who were dealing with a major problem in their church. They were happy to have known the Lord a while earlier as a result of Zino's healing. They had decided to become followers of Christ, but several pastors had refused to baptize them, serve them communion, or accept them fully as church members. When Le Cossec inquired about the reasons, Mandz answered: "Because we are not married legally at the Town Hall! It is not possible, because according to the Mayors State we must stay a month in the 'town' in order to be married, but the police chases us away, because of a law which says we must not stay more than 48 hours in the town." Then Le Cossec interceded at the county tribunal on their behalf and they were legally married. Even though Mandz did not know how to read, he held the marriage certificate and stated: "Now I have the paper, but long time ago I had a wife" (Le Cossec 1991:14).

Le Cossec was sensitive to the fact that even though the Gypsies obey the biblical law of marriage, they do not regard the legal requirements of the state. This can be

observed among Roma people in many other countries. They follow the Bible's directions: "A Man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh" (Mathew 19:5). Says Le Cossec:

This scriptural law, which in our days has a judicial form, is practiced by Gypsies in the framework of their society which has its rules and customs. Their marriage possesses an official value and had nothing to do either with the "living together" of our modern civilization. Gypsies live in communities. Their ceremonies vary according to their tribes. When there is a marriage the fact is known by all. Being illiterate they do not have any documents, but the public witness of the parents and members of the family constitutes with them the guarantee of the solemn value of the union which is a contract for life. (Le Cossec 1991:15)

Le Cossec shares some humorous stories how, during some of the big conventions later, he organized massive marriages for couples who already had children. On one occasion the son got married before his father did (Le Cossec 1991:15).

One evening Le Cossec was invited to attend a prayer meeting in the basement of a certain brother's home. After the Scripture sharing he urged the believers to focus their attention on the Gypsy brothers and sisters, and pray for them to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Gypsies knelt on the floor and suddenly Mandz was filled with the Spirit, his face shining with joy, and began speaking in tongues as the Early Church on Pentecost. The prayer continued late through the evening and several others were baptized in the Holy Spirit. During the prayer a certain brother stood up and prophesied: "I see them, they are coming on foot, with horses, in vehicles of all colors. I see the revival which is spreading like a tidal wave." After the meeting Le Cossec reminded the *gajo* believers the words of Peter to the Jews who had witnessed the conversion of the house of Cornelius: "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized, who received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47) (Le Cossec 1991:16-17).

As the Gypsy churches grew Le Cossec asked his *gajo* colleagues to send a missionary to direct the movement that was being formed. They rejected this by saying: "We have our churches. They are as welcome as anyone else." This demonstrated a lack of cross-cultural understanding. Le Cossec realized that this movement was indigenous and that it would grow most effectively only as the Gypsies continued to worship and serve the Lord within their culture. Then he felt the divine calling to undertake the duty of caring for these sheep without a shepherd. Thus, in 1958 Clement le Cossec left the church he was pastoring, giving up a good position and salary in order to commit his life to the Gypsy ministry. He was unaware that this calling would eventually take him around the world to seek and save the lost among them (Le Cossec 1991:31-32).

A key step for the movement was the selection and appointment of the first preachers. Le Cossec had organized a number of prayer groups among the Gypsies throughout France that were in need of leadership. Since most of them were quite mobile, constantly traveling in caravans, they could not stay at the same church for a long time. Le Cossec approached the Gypsy believers and asked them if there were any who they felt could take responsibility for leading the group prayer meetings and dedicate their lives to the service of the Lord. Several who were regarded as good Christians with exemplary conduct, stood up. Having counseled with them for a while, Le Cossec gave them the responsibility for the spiritual oversight of their people, committing to offer them the necessary guidance and help. They were young, nervous, and illiterate. Le Cossec invited them to stay with him where he would teach them to read and a couple of them agreed. Several days later they parked their caravans next to the Le Cossec abode. "I bought both of them a school textbook of the first class of the primary school. It was

touching to see these young men pronouncing day by day aloud, like little children, the words of the lessons. It was for me a school of patience, for I had to constantly repeat, stimulate, encourage, and continue the effort. When the moment came when they began to read a few verses, they were enthralled with the realization that they could read the word of God.” Le Cossec received criticism from a colleague minister for making preachers of people who did not know how to read. Fifteen years later as the Evangelical Gypsy movement grew, the same old friend admitted that Le Cossec was right about his efforts helping these preachers (Le Cossec 1991:24-25).

One of the important elements of the movement in France has been the annual conventions. The first one was held in Renes in 1954 where 200 caravans gathered on site. The Gypsies would stay there and have daily meetings in a big tent set up especially for that purpose. Their number grew to thousands of caravans over the years. This was a time of evangelism as the Gypsies brought their unbelieving friends and gave them opportunity to hear the gospel; water baptisms of new converts took place at the closing of each convention. The conventions also met an important social need – being always on the move the Gypsies needed time to rest and visit with family and friends. These were times of revival, spiritual encouragement and growth (Ridholls 1986:50-51). Eventually, the French Roma movement was turned over to the leadership of the Gypsies. Their organization, connected to the Assemblies of God, was named ‘Life and Light’ and Jimmy Meyer became its president.

These events marked the beginning of one of the most remarkable Christian movements in history. Having come into the continent before the creation of the nation-states, the Roma group, tribal, and family relations crossed many national boundaries.

These web relationships became the most effective means, defined as 'bridges of God' by McGavran, to spread the Pentecostal fire among Gypsies all around the world.

Le Cossec traveled to many countries in Europe to launch Gypsy ministries. Then the fire was spread to the United States and in the countries of Latin America where Gypsies lived. Le Cossec even planted Pentecostalism among the Gypsy groups in India where a Bible School was started, which trained hundreds of ministers.

The Present State of the Movement in Europe

Presently, according to the Charisma News Service, the Gypsies in Europe are in a state of revival more than any other group of people in the region. They are also instrumental for the spread of the Gospel in the countries where they live. Even though the exact numbers are difficult to calculate, according to the Charisma report, the Gypsies who have been born again are about one million (Dixon 2002).

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity (1995) reports:

25% of France's 280,000 Gypsies have become "born-again" (meaning Evangelical or Charismatic) Christians. Signs of conversion: discarded crystal balls, a move to more honest business dealings, the multiplication of Gypsy churches, and Christian stickers and symbols on Gypsy wagons. Gypsies in at least 44 countries are, and are becoming Christian.

More recent reports point to a steady growth. In France, Life and Light Fellowship claims approximately 130,000 Gypsy believers, which is a third of the Gypsy population in the country. This movement has started 210 churches in France and has trained over 1,300 pastors (Dixon 2002).

The movement has caused a powerful revival among the Gypsies in Western Europe. From France Life and Light began mission outreach in Spain where the Philadelphia Evangelical Church was registered in 1969. That is the Pentecostal Church

of the *Gitanos* (Spanish Gypsies) who are on the very bottom of Spain's social scale. Philadelphia is presently the largest Pentecostal denomination in Spain and the movement grows faster among the *Gitanos* than any other group there; that has been the case in most of Europe. The Pentecostal *Gitano* believers are also called 'alleluias' (Gay y Blasco 2004:12). They have already established about 500 Gypsy churches and sent forth 2,000 ministers. According to conservative estimates, more than 15% percent of the Spanish 'Gitanos' are born again believers (Dixon 2002).

Life and Light also estimates that 7 % of the Gypsies in England, a total of 25,000, are part of their fellowship. One thousand Gypsies in Finland are born again and part of the organization – that is 25% of the Finish Roma. In the town of Leskovac in Serbia, the Gypsy branch of the Pentecostal Church is growing rapidly. In total Life and Light has sent missionaries to 40 different countries and has established Bible Schools in three (Dixon 2002).

Jimmy Meier, president of *Life and Light*, says that the Gypsy revival in Europe is fully Pentecostal in doctrine and practice. Many critics have said there is much emotionalism and little true repentance among the Gypsies. To that Meier responds:

Biblical truth causes the Gypsy converts to change their lives completely. There is no more fighting, stealing, and drinking. We try to approach people with grace, not judging them prematurely. There have been many 'baptized sinners among us who later on were truly converted. Our love for nature, music and a life on the move does not change. We pray to keep our culture.' (Dixon 2002)

The Life and Light Fellowship has started a mission organization to work among the Gypsies in Eastern and Central Europe, called "Gypsy and Travelers International Evangelical Fellowship (GATIEF)." Its president is Rene Zanellato. Their ministry has spread among gypsies all over the world. The vision and objective of GATIEF is to "establish mission work and train Romany to lead their own people." They do this by

teaching seminars, starting churches, Bible schools, homes for children, and national Roma Christian organizations. They distribute videos, audiocassettes, and literature in Romanes. In Russia they have TV programs in ten cities and a Bible School. They cooperate with other international ministries such as: Full Gospel Fellowship of America, Cornerstone, Gypsy Christian Movement USA, Los Angeles Romany Church, and Gypsy Fellowship Trust of India (Dawson 2002:2).

This Gypsy movement is truly a powerful witness for God in the old continent, which is deservedly considered “Post-Christian.” Says Patrick Johnson:

...evangelicals in Europe exist as an “irrelevant” Christian remnant. One salient point where the movement of God contradicts this assessment, he notes, is in the “turning of the Gypsy people to Christ.” This is especially notable in Spain, which is in the midst of a cultural renaissance that has enabled Protestantism to take root and spring to life for the first time in the country’s history. And one of the fastest-growing expressions of Protestantism in Spain arises from the Gypsy churches. One wonders how, in the land of *los conquistadores* (“the conquerors”) and *Don Quijote*, this disenfranchised reviled minority has become the catalyst for this surprising movement of God (cited in Zoba 1999:51).

The United States of America³⁹

It was actually a Christian Gypsy woman from the States that claimed to have received in a vision a divine revelation of a great number of Gypsies coming to Christ. She was overwhelmed with joy when she heard the news that many Gypsies in the old continent were indeed coming to know God.

The earliest record of Pentecostal outreach to Gypsies in the United States was in Los Angeles where Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, brought large groups to faith in Christ. The Gypsies “in turn, presented to Angelus Temple a pulpit, chairs, and some stained-glass windows, which are

still in use there.” In the decades afterward there were several missionaries who worked with the Gypsies of that area (Chaplin 1976:12). There was no significant movement among the American Roma, however, until the second half of the 20th century.

In 1954 there was a small revival among the Manouche Gypsies of Nebraska. Fred Mason and his brothers were converted in that revival and began outreach to their people (Chaplin 1964:22). In 1963 Clement Le Cossec came to the United States with Loulou Demeter, an experienced evangelist, with the intention of bringing the gospel message to the American Roma. They visited with many of the Roma communities and told them of the revival in Europe. Loulou returned to the States in 1972 and based himself in Newark, New Jersey - that became an important place for the spread of Pentecostalism among the Roma in America. Loulou, a traveler himself, had to cope with the need to settle in an apartment building, but adjusted quickly and started ministering to the Roma groups. During that time in Los Angeles, another city with a large Roma population, a group of 21 people converted and were having evangelistic services.

The Home Missions Department of the American Assemblies of God embraced the challenge to reach the Gypsies in the United States. They understood the need for an active outreach to this minority. Harold Chaplin, appointed coordinator of the American Gypsy Work, having observed the Pentecostal revolution among the Gypsy population in France, had great foresight of the harvest potential in the States:

Gypsy Evangelism is wide open for dedicated ministers. Los Angeles has several thousand Gypsies. New York, according to some reports, has hundreds of thousands. Chicago has at least 5,000 Hungarian Gypsies located in one area in the heart of the city. All of our larger cities contain enough Gypsies to make up many large congregations. They represent various tribes (Chaplin 1976:12).

Understanding this challenge, the Assemblies of God Home Missions Department raised funds for this work and provided the means necessary to evangelize the Roma in

the United States. They organized conventions for Roma believers and seminars to train the emerging American Gypsy ministers.

In 1972 Derek Tipler, an English Gypsy with a university education, was added to the church. He was given the responsibility by the Wycliffe Bible Translators to translate the New Testament into the Romanes language, which was an important step in the outreach to the American Roma. There were many Gypsies immigrating to the United States at that time so the need for Bible translation was great. Ruth Morrow and her husband, who had worked with the Gypsies in Portland, assisted Tipler in the work of translation. One of the drawbacks of this work, however, was that about 90% of the Gypsies in America at that time were illiterate. They needed to learn how to read and write (Ridholls 1986:110-111), but there also was the need for ministries with alternative methods of gospel presentation.

The gospel news spread among the Roma in America quickly, because being a closed ethnic community they knew each other well. The familial and internal group web relationships were very effective in the diffusion of Pentecostalism among them. The mobility factor was also very helpful during this early stage - Gypsies who were on the move, converted and baptized in Los Angeles, testified of their new faith in Sacramento, New York, and everywhere they traveled. Thus the work grew in a similar manner as it did in the Early Church.

Several years later Stevo Demeter, who had helped start the work among Gypsies in Mexico, was preaching evangelistic services on the outskirts of New York, the city with the greatest number of Roma in the United States. The number of believers grew daily. Modern technology assisted the evangelization process; Gypsies in various cities

having heard about the work, requested cassette tapes of messages and asked Stevo to travel to their areas to give them the gospel. Le Cossec came to the United States several times to support and encourage the growth. The Roma churches in America organized conventions and conferences (Ridholls 1986:110-111).

Sam Mitchell, know also by his Roma name 'Savka,' emerged as the key leader of the Roma Pentecostal movement in the United States. Converted in New York under the ministry of Stevo Demeter, Savka went to Los Angeles to preach evangelistic services. God told him to stay in the city and start a church there. Savka obeyed the voice of God and stayed in Los Angeles where he established a vibrant and successful Roma church. This was the beginning of the first lasting work among the American Roma. Started in 1977 the Los Angeles church grew quickly and in 1983 had about 700 members. This church became the mother church for the Gypsy Pentecostal movement in the United States. In 1978 there were about 100 converts in the United States, but by 1986 the number of Roma believers in the country grew to over 3,000 souls. God spoke to pastor Savka and gave him the strategy of how to reach the American Roma with the gospel. The Lord showed him specifically where the next churches should be started and the Los Angeles congregation supported these missions. Soon there were Roma churches in Chicago, Houston, and Boston. This network grew into a fellowship known as *God's Gypsy Christian Church*, which presently has about 28 churches in major cities all over the United States. There are a number of Roma churches in the States that for various reasons have formed other fellowships and associations out of G.G.C.C., but most of them remain Pentecostal.

Like Antioch of the First Century, the Los Angeles church was a true missionary church. It sent many thousands of cassette tapes in Romanes to the Roma around the United States, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, thus taking the fire of the Holy Ghost to their people in both North and Latin America (Ridholls 1986:110-111). Presently, it supports a Bible School in Moscow preparing ministers for work with the Roma in Russia.

Along with a couple of Bulgarian Roma ministers I had the privilege to visit pastor Savka and to personally witness the success of his ministry. We were blessed to be in fellowship with this great man of God who exemplified humility and Christian love.

My parents were born and raised in America, but my grandparents came from Russia. We are Kalderash Gypsies. My family knew about God, but did not know Him personally. One day He came into my life and His truth shined upon me. I had heard gospel preaching on TV, but it was not a gospel for me until I heard it in my own language. The work was started in Los Angeles and then spread around the country among the Roma. It was effective, because it was a Roma church with Roma people, language, and ministers. (Mitchell 2006)

Teddy White, pastor of the Roma church in Charlotte, NC, shares his story:

God saved me when I was living in Houston in 1978. My father became a pastor there in 1982 and then ministered in Atlanta before he went to be with the Lord. At that time there were only three or four Gypsy families living in Charlotte, but God had told me to come here. People said: "You should not go to Charlotte, because there are no Gypsies there. I left Atlanta where there was already a strong church developed. I had no other reason to move to Charlotte except the divine call. God showed me people trapped in false religion that needed deliverance. After one year of ministry in Charlotte the church grew to about 100 members. God's Spirit knew in advance that there was going to be a harvest. Many Gypsies settled here after the church started the Roma community grew rapidly in the last few years. After four years we purchased our first building. Now there are about 600 Gypsies living in Charlotte and over 300 attend the church. Jesus said: "If I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me." We are now in our seventh year and the church is expanding and building. We have a vision to have a Bible School and reach the Roma people around the world with the gospel. There are some drastic changes in the Roma community in America. We were all Catholics by tradition, but had no knowledge of the true living God. There were many fortune-tellers whose lives were changed. Released from this bondage they became effective witnesses for God. Currently many Roma in the United States have become Pentecostal. They are attracted by God's love, and the fact that God is no respecter of person and views all people equally. The Roma have no flag, no president, no land, but we have become citizens of heaven. (2007)

The policy of the G.G.C.C. is that their ministers need to be full-time before they can be ordained by the fellowship. The full support of their churches ensures that they would be totally committed to the work of ministry. The believers in a new congregation are taught to pay tithes and offerings from the very beginning of the local church's life. Another important reason for this policy is that a number of Roma in America make their living by occupations considered less than respectable. Therefore, as pastors are fully salaried by the church, they would not entangle themselves with affairs that compromise the integrity of their ministry.

For the last four decades the greatest challenge to Roma Pentecostalism in America has been the practice of fortune-telling, primary occupation of the Machwaya tribe. The Machwayas know that this pagan practice is a hoax, but they refuse to give it up, because it brings them great wealth, sometimes estimated in millions of dollars.

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to Christianity among the Gypsies is the matter of fortune-telling. They consider this a gift from God to the Gypsy women, so it is not easy to break away from it. The trade is most lucrative, having a special appeal to the wealthy and the superstitious. And Gypsies know how to use this to good advantage, although this type of business is barred in most places by law. (Chaplin 1965: 18)

The majority of Machwaya still remain foreign to Christianity. The G.G.C.C. fellowship accepts practicing fortune-tellers as members of their churches and administers the sacraments to them, but refuses to give them any positions of leadership.

The Roma churches in the United States are mostly homogenous. This has been a primary factor for their growth. The American Roma go to church to be with their own people who speak their language and know their culture. Traditionally, the Roma in America have not had many dealings with the *gajo* except in the context of business relations. They marry and socialize mostly within their own people group. In the early

stages of the movement many Gypsies attended the *gajo* Assemblies of God churches, but when they formed their own indigenous churches with Roma ministers the movement gathered greater strength.

The Roma Pentecostal churches in America are an important place of social gatherings and fellowship. People are gradually incorporated into the faith in these churches. They are not required to radically convert and totally change their lifestyle before joining. Many regular church-goers struggle with bad habits, but the Roma ministers allow the Holy Spirit to help their sheep grow in grace and sanctification.

The expansion of Pentecostalism among the Roma in America has had a powerful and transforming effect on their culture. In the article “The Social Impact of the Rise of Pentecostal Evangelicalism Among American Rom” E.B. Sato describes the radical cultural shift that Pentecostalism has caused on the Roma ethnos in the United States.

There are several important aspects of that worldview shift, which Sato calls “Gypsy ideological change of epic proportions:”

1. Traditional Roma beliefs and taboos, centered on ritual cleanliness, purity codes, luck, and ethnic laws (*zakono*) have been abandoned. The veneration of St. Anne or ‘Santana’ has been discontinued.

2. Practices associated with the sinful world have been stopped and replaced by a new value system. Such eliminated practices are alcohol drinking, the use of tobacco or drugs, attending “night clubs, bars, discotheques, or race tracks,” gambling and lottery participation. This code of holiness conduct is in line with old-time Pentecostalism.

3. All forms of trickery are given up by committed Roma Christians. That includes lying, petty theft, and fortune-telling. Trickery, which has been a traditional source of income for Roma have been replaced by the values of honesty and generosity.

4. The previously valued accumulation of wealth and gold has been replaced by the Christian call to “lay your treasures in heaven.” Poverty is no longer seen as “supernatural disfavor.”

5. The superior status of Gypsies over *gaje*, proven by successful trickery, is no longer maintained, because Christianity teaches its followers to be honest. Also Scripture declares that all people are equal before God (Sato 1988:71-77).

The Roma movement in America, on the other hand, has affirmed and retained aspects of Roma culture, considered compatible with Christianity. Church members enjoy continual travel and large religious gatherings. Domination of men over women is maintained and believed to be justified by Scripture. The church accommodates Gypsy ‘separatism’ as its congregations have remained mostly homogenous (Sato 1988:84).

Romania

Romania is the country with the largest Roma population in Europe – over two million. They have lived for centuries in slavery and oppression. The Communist regime dominated over them and discrimination there continues to this day.

Even though the Orthodox and the Baptist churches have had an active work among the Romanian Rom, Pentecostalism has been the most successful Christian movement to bring them to the knowledge of Christ. They are attracted to the spirit-filled churches by the power and presence of God, which engage all the faculties of their being.

The Roma are not simply attracted by doctrine or nice cathedrals, but desire to experience God, to engage him with both their mind and emotions. There are hundreds of Roma congregations in Romania.

Kornel Stan – Apostle to the Romanian Roma

The history of Romanian Pentecostalism would be incomplete without the account of the powerful ministry of Kornel Stan, apostle to the Roma and main leader of the Spirit-filled Gypsies in the country. During my visit to Bucharest I was very humbled and blessed to meet the family of this great man of God who had just went to be with the Lord months earlier. These precious people received us very well and told us the marvelous story of this Roma musician called of God to evangelize and lead his people.

Kornel Stan was born in 1959 in the small town of Funtanele, about 20 miles outside of Bucharest. He was from a family of Lautari Roma who were the most famous musicians in all of Bucharest - they all played instruments and were even used as entertainers by Ceausescu's palace administration. Brought up in church by his mother the young Kornel began to study the Scriptures when he was six years old. Kornel's parents dedicated their lives to Christ and his father played music at the church in Funtanele. In this very poor Roma neighborhood the congregation met in people's homes. Kornel dedicated his life to Christ at the age of 14 and was baptized together with his mother. At that time the Funtanele church consisted mostly of old people, but they recognized that this young teenager was chosen of God for ministry; so they let Kornel read and speak from the Bible. The family moved to Bucharest to take advantage of the opportunities in the big city. Kornel served in the Romanian Navy; he wanted to get good education and pursue a secular career in order to make a lot of money. God, however, had

different plans and calling for this young man – to spread the gospel among the lost people of Romania and especially among his own people – the Roma.

When he was 22 years old, Kornel married Olympia who proved to be a very good helpmate for the years of ministry that followed. Their first daughter Sephora was born soon. In 1983 Kornel dedicated his life fully to the ministry. The anointing of the Holy Spirit came on him to read the Bible and he started evangelistic work around Romania. Both Roma and *gaje* came to hear Kornel preach, play the accordion, and sing beautiful songs to the Lord. Recognizing his gifts and talents many *gaje* invited him to minister in their churches. Kornel Stan became well-known around the country; many soon heard that there is a Roma man in Romania who is a special servant of God, full of the Holy Spirit, and a great Bible preacher. Kornel was very zealous about God's work and the believers soon recognized him as an apostle and a prophet.

An old *gajo* brother from Bucharest named Karaman who had a burden for Gypsies took Kornel and introduced him to various church leaders. Thus Kornel met Clement Le Cossec, French apostle to the Gypsies, Lulu Demeter, the president of the European Roma believers, Rev. Heizman from Germany, and the leaders of the Romanian Pentecostal Union. As a result Kornel was taken with nine other *gaje* ministers to the Bible School in Germany where he got trained under anointed teachers.

Having completed his training Kornel concentrated his ministry to the Romanian Roma and labored among them for the next 24 years. This was a difficult and challenging ministry, because the Roma had to learn about discipline and education. Kornel was their example as Paul was to the gentiles – he became all things to all men; Kornel ate and

drank with the poor simple people and was well able to communicate with both Gypsies and *gajo* on all social levels.

Kornel's primary ministry burden was teaching Roma the truth about God and leading them out of spiritual bondage as Moses had led the Israelites. Kornel made the Roma churches recognized officially by the *gajo* ecclesiastical leadership of Romania.

The leadership of the Romanian Pentecostal Union used Kornel to carry out some important and dangerous tasks during the time of the Communist regime. As many Christian materials were smuggled into the country illegally, most of them were received and hidden by Kornel. Bibles for Moscow and other Christian literature on the way to the Soviet Union was secretly transported through Kornel's family. Thus Kornel became a very important man in the ministry of the Romanian church and his influence was growing during a time of dangers and persecution.

Roma people started gathering in Kornel's home in Bucharest to inquire about the faith. Thus the Maranatha Church was established and grew quickly. Meetings were held at the house every day. The spiritual revival after the 1989 fall of Communism brought so many new people to Christ that the house had no more room. Then a prophet came from America and spoke to Kornel: "You need to build a church. God has a great work for you to do." Obeying God's voice Kornel immediately met with contractors without any money, but saw the faithfulness of God - three wealthy people gave the funds to purchase a house, which was turned into a sanctuary. The church building was completed in 1993; at the dedication Kornel was ordained as a deacon by the Romanian pastors.

As the church continued to grow they started a worship band and a discipleship program. Kornel was very skillful in identifying people's spiritual gifts and placing them

in ministry. He brought the leaders together for a Bible Seminar and appointed each one over a group of 10 to disciple them. The church still practices a chain fast where members daily take turns fasting. Prayer meetings are conducted every day at Maranatha.

Meanwhile Kornel continued his active evangelistic ministry to the Roma. Reminiscent of Steven in the Early Church he only had deacon's credentials, but his ministry was truly apostolic. Kornel's visits to the Roma villages were always greatly anticipated as celebrations; the whole village would come to hear God's Word. The *gajo* had great respect for him and many even felt uncomfortable preaching in his presence. As Kornel preached under the power and inspiration of the Spirit, the heavens were opened and God's presence came down to the point that even he could not understand how he spoke or what he said. Thousands of people, mostly living in extreme poverty, were touched by God's power, transformed, and physically healed through the preached Word. Many Roma became dedicated followers of Christ under Kornel Stan's ministry.

Kornel personally founded and cared for five Roma churches. As a leader he assisted with the ministry of many congregations, but was yet a meek and humble man, not willing to ordain ministers, because that was beyond the scope of his credentials.

Even after 24 years of active ministry the *gaje* leaders of the Pentecostal Union who had given many dangerous tasks to Kornel, were still not willing to ordain him beyond the level of deacon. Recognizing his excellent organizational and communication skills, however, they did appoint him to the Committee of the Pentecostal Union as Coordinator of Roma ministries for Romania.

With his good knowledge of English and favor with people Kornel was able to connect with various foreign organizations to help the Roma believers. He provided

support for pastors in Romania and in other countries. In the spring of 2006, he and Olympia traveled to Spain in order to establish a church of Romanian Roma there. Kornel had a vision of starting a Bible School in Bucharest where Roma believers could learn the Bible, literacy, and worship music.

Unfortunately, Kornel Stan would not live to see that vision fulfilled. On March 13, 2006, after a couple of days of stomach pain and high blood pressure, he suddenly passed away due to the burst of an abdominal aortic aneurism. This was a great shock to the whole evangelical community in Romania and a loss to the Roma ministry. Kornel was a strong man at the age of 47 and his death came as a surprise to all. The Roma Pentecostal churches had lost their pastor and apostle prematurely. Many Romanian believers said: “The light of the Gypsies went out!”

At the funeral there were about five thousand people present to honor this great man of God who gave to many the Word of life. Pavel Tipei, president of the Pentecostal Union of Romania, shared at the funeral: “What Kornel Stan accomplished for a relatively short time in his ministry, I was not able to do in 50 years. We’ll all greatly miss him.” A woman at the funeral stretched her hands up and wept for Kornel praying that God would take her too; she passed away ten days later.

Even after Kornel’s death, his evangelistic ministry continued on. Many people said: “If Kornel died that means the Lord is coming back really soon.” This caused many to repent and surrender their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. A month later the Maranatha Church experienced a powerful revival and eighty people were baptized in the Holy Spirit. Many members of Kornel’s family including his seven children received the Holy Spirit. Just like on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, after Jesus’ departure the Spirit was

poured on men and women, old and young, rich and poor. Over 50 people in Bucharest alone have repented and been baptized in water since Kornel's death.

Olympia shared some of her memories in tears:

Kornel and I went to many different places on faith. We used our means for travel and had no money to leave the children, but God provided back then and continues to help us even after Kornel is gone. We miss him so much, but the Lord has been with us through our pain. God must have considered his work accomplished and took him home. We spend many days and nights weeping and praying. There has not been a leader to replace him, but several men lead the church together now. Kornel was a good father and a good husband, very generous; he did not turn down anyone in need. People learned much from him – because he was a spiritual father to many of our Roma. There was no other Gypsy in Romania like him – humble, loving, kind, committed to the Lord and his family, great spokesman for the gospel of Christ. He was a man of prayer and lived by God's Word. He never did anything major without carefully seeking Divine guidance. A man of courage he offered hope for the hopeless and spiritual oversight to the Roma churches.

Presently most of the Roma people in Funtanele are Pentecostal believers. They have left the drinking tables and the worldly entertainment; many skillful musicians have given up the opportunity to make good money playing at weddings, because they are committed to use their talent exclusively for the worship of God. The Holy Spirit has been moving powerfully among the Roma communities of Romania. The legacy of Kornel Stan lives on (Maranatha 2006).

Conclusion

The Roma have had a very interesting and dynamic relationship with Christianity. Their inherent religiosity and adaptability has caused them to accept the Christian faith in its various historical traditions. In spite of the fact that the medieval clergy in Europe supported their ugly persecution, the Roma have never given up on Jesus Christ. In many instances their faith brought them both spiritual satisfaction, and physical and social

benefits. The most powerful movement of Roma conversion to Christ has happened in the last 50 years; Pentecostalism has touched many thousands of them around the world. The movement continues to grow among them in a marvelous way.

The description of Sir Angus Fraser of Roma Pentecostalism is stimulating:

This religious revival spread out of Brittany to Paris, Bordeaux and other parts of France, and induced a remarkable dissemination of Pentecostalism among Gypsies in Europe and the Americas, giving rise to periodic conventions, which brought together masses of Gypsies in the Evangelical Equivalent of the Catholic pilgrimages...Perhaps the disestablished character of such versions of Christianity has something to do with the way that fundamental Evangelical creeds have been sweeping communities as diverse as European and American Gypsies, Australian aborigines and Zairean pygmies. There is apparently also something in the ecstatic aspect of Evangelical faith – the witnessing for Christ – that is highly attractive to people whose traditional manner of life is in some way under threat. By its nature the Gypsy Evangelical Church makes its born again converts feel elected as special people and brings them together in social solidarity. Its baptism by immersion, emotional modes of religious expression, spontaneous testimonies and participatory style of worship, its belief in the necessity of salvation through Christ and the reality of the alternative hell, its charismatic practices, based on belief in the *charisma* (gifts of grace) of the Holy Spirit – the laying on of hands and speaking in tongues – all appear to combine to produce a ‘heart religion’ that appeals to their emotional and psychological needs. Unlike the nineteenth-century missions, its aims are not assimilation, but its impact on a committed convert’s life is none the less radical. The fundamentalist approach to the Scriptures puts a premium on literacy and education. The ideal norms ban the use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, and also gambling, cheating, lying and theft. Pagan ways have to go: bride-price is seen as compatible with the Bible (Genesis 24), but fortune-telling is certainly not (Deuteronomy 18:10-11). The ‘saints’ day festivals celebrated by the Catholic and Orthodox Gypsies have to be discarded; the traditional funeral practices and the *pomana* (death feasts) of the Rom have to be modified.
(Fraser 1992:315-316)

CHAPTER 4

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE ROMA PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT IN BULGARIA

There is information that some Roma joined the Pentecostal Church in Pernik as early as 1929 (Sabkova 2003:81). It is probable that this may have occurred in other parts of the country during the first half of the 20th century as well. For example, Velev refers to one Tatar Shanov Arifov as ‘the first Christian in Montana.’⁴⁰ This Roma brother had converted in the Baptist church in 1929, but after moving to G. Oriahovitsa, he heard the Pentecostal message from Nikola Bankov and received the Holy Ghost baptism. In 1932 Arifov returned to Montana and led his relatives, as well as many others, to the Lord; he “endured to the end of his life and passed into eternity with God” (2002:102).

The massive Roma conversion to Pentecostalism in Bulgaria, however, began in the 1950s. The movement in our country did not have any historical connections to the one in France or Western Europe, previously described, even though both began as a divine work about the same time.⁴¹

Yambol: The Fire Comes Down

The city of Yambol in Southeastern Bulgaria is the place where, for the first time, Roma believers began meeting as an indigenous Pentecostal fellowship in the 1950s. These forefathers of the movement became instrumental in spreading the Pentecostal message among the Roma in Bulgaria.

There was a Pentecostal church in town – one of the oldest in the Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches. At that time the Yambol Roma were extremely poor and unlearned, but were open to receive the gospel message. Some of the ethnic Bulgarian believers visited the Roma quarter in order to share the good news of Christ. That sparked the Pentecostal fire among this ethnic minority. The first Roma convert to the Pentecostal faith in Yambol was *baba* (grandmother) Duda, described as “an uneducated, but a wise woman.” After she had come to faith, the Roma began gathering in private homes for worship and the *gajo* believers ministered to them. “They hugged and kissed us in a warm and loving way; we were touched. They labored hard to win our people to the Lord and nothing discouraged them,” says brother Gencho, a Yambol Roma pastor, whose father Niko was one of those early Roma believers; others of that group were brother Shaban, sister Poshota, brother Hussein, and brother Ibriam (Yambol 2006).

Thus, a core group of Roma received the Pentecostal faith; as they pleaded the blood of Jesus they were filled with the Holy Spirit. During the week they worshiped in the house groups in the *mahala* and on Sundays attended the Yambol Pentecostal Church. They had an intense prayer life and experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in their meetings. The brothers Shaban and Ibriam took turns preaching in the house meetings.

These early Roma believers fasted regularly, petitioning God to give them the gifts of the Spirit. Then, a Bulgarian Christian brother told them: “God will give gifts to educated and smart people, not to you.” These poor Roma believers, however, received the spiritual gifts and viewed themselves as special people, beloved, and divinely chosen.⁴² They opened their homes for services and made great sacrifices to reach their people with the Christian gospel. They were simple people who lived in unity and were

hungry for God. They heard the full gospel message – Jesus Christ saves sinners and heals the sick. They had many experiences in which they believed God spoke to them through visions and dreams, and confirmed His Word with signs and wonders following.

Brother Shaban

In this early group of believers there was a Roma iron-worker by the name of Pavel Georgiev Pavlov, better known as Shaban. He became one of the best-known Roma believers in Bulgaria – a powerful preacher of Christianity with the gift of healing. His ministry would glorify the Lord Jesus and bring many souls into the Kingdom.

Before coming to Christ in 1947, Shaban was a very bad man; he had a serious nervous disorder and was unable to sleep at night. He even fought with knives with some of his relatives and, on one occasion, a man was almost stabbed to death, but a fatality was prevented. When he was 26, Shaban came to know the Lord; he had heard the gospel from two men, a tailor and a baker, who attended the Pentecostal Church, and also from the old sister Duda. He felt he heard the voice of God speaking to him: “I want to make a habitation in your heart.” Shaban desired the fullness of Christ and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Tinchevisti⁴³ brothers baptized him in water, but he remained a member of the Yambol Pentecostal Church (Yambol 2006).

These were hard times of persecution against evangelical believers as the Communists had just taken over less than a decade earlier. Shaban went to serve in the Bulgarian Border Police as his compulsory military duty. There he was accused of espionage because of his Christian faith, and detained in the horse barn of the base; while in the barn he boldly witnessed for Christ and was released after several days. Shaban

was a brave soldier – if danger were detected he would walk in front of his unit for cover. Some of Shaban’s military commanders heard his testimony and also came to faith.

Having been discharged from the service, Shaban resumed his work as an iron-worker; he was known for his diligence and hard work. Once during prayer Shaban saw a tree in heaven, and a hand, which touched people and brought healing. Many witnessed that God had given him the spiritual gift of healing, which would cure hundreds of people. Thus, the gospel spread among the Roma in Yambol and the region. The simple message of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit demonstrated through the healings brought people to repentance. This was understandable even for those without education.

Dafina, Shaban’s sister, shared some amazing stories:

My brother believed and God gave him the gift of healing. God answered his prayers. It was so amazing - people came sick and left healthy...I had very high blood sugar, which had deformed my mouth making it crooked. He prayed for me and God healed me...One deaf Turk came to him; he could not hear at all; as my brother prayed the Turk’s ears did a loud “Piooo” sound, and were opened... There was also one Ivanka, a *gaji* sister with seven tumors, who after having received prayer, became healthy like a new-born babe. (Yambol 2006)

There was a brother whose face was covered with sore boils to the point of bleeding. Brother Shaban was called to go to Sliven to pray for him. He [Shaban], however, took the time to pray and fast if he should go; that was his *modus operandi* – he was not led by men, but sought divine guidance in all things. When Shaban got there, he met the sick man with an ugly sore face - as black as ink. After praying, he received a word from above: “Kiss him!” Shaban answered: “I cannot do it with this heart, Lord, but give me the right heart so I would be able to do it.” Then Shaban felt great love and mercy for this suffering man; when he kissed him, the power of the Spirit came down.

Sometime later, Shaban met the man again, but could not recognize him. The man had completely recovered from the painful infirmity and glorified God.

Shaban also had the gift of discernment and would cast out devils. Once, with a group of people he was selling stock, but the trade was not successful. He discerned that a woman in the group had an unclean spirit. Together with Vati, another Roma brother, they were in fervent prayer for a day; Vati saw in a vision a “snake coming out of the woman.” Thus, this possessed soul was delivered; she was free, talking, rejoicing, and glorifying God (Yambol 2006).

Even though without formal training, Shaban was a great preacher. The Yambol believers recall that God’s Spirit would move on him to give a timely word, according to the needs of people. Shaban had conservative standards and rebuked sin openly. He did not believe any compromise should be made with the world; he was against watching TV, celebrating birthdays or Saint’s Days. The miracles and wonders were considered divine confirmations of his ministry. There were people in the Yambol Roma quarter that were healed through his prayers virtually every day. He soon became a very famous person in the area, far beyond the Yambol *mahala*. Many ethnic Bulgarians began coming for healing. There were a number even from the higher society who sought Shaban: judges, lawyers, and intellectuals. The Pentecostal faith was spread in the area.

Brother Shaban once saw another vision – a land that was ploughed; then a voice spoke to him: “Ask and I will give you!” Having shared this with Vati the latter responded: “This means that you should ask that our people would turn to God.” Thus, this humble man was raised to evangelize his people – the Roma. Without formal theological education or official ordination, Shaban had the calling and began a traveling

ministry to take Christ to the Roma. He usually took other brothers with him on his journeys and traveled on faith. Brother Ibriam remembers their ministry together:

With brother Shaban we traveled much – Lukovit, Elin Pelin, Botevgrad, Pravets, Pernik, Svilengrad, all around the country. In Sofia the militia caught us and confiscated our Bibles and songbooks. We traveled on faith and did not ask for anything. Brother Shaban trusted God to meet his needs. Whenever people gave us funds, we accepted only if we really were in need; otherwise Shaban would decline the offers. We took turns fasting as we traveled. We were blessed to see even one soul saved. God performed many miracles and wonders through Shaban. He was a man led of the Spirit. (Yambol 2006)

Many people gathered at these services. Both believers and unbelievers opened their hearts, they brought their children and other sick loved ones for prayer. They presented needs, problems, and diseases. “Without the confirmation of the Word by miracles and wonders, the devil would snatch people away from the faith and they would seek fortune-tellers or folk healers” (Yambol 2006).

This was the usual pattern, in which churches were planted among the Roma:

Someone would come from a village and receive a healing from God. Then, we were invited to their village to preach the Word. When people heard brother Shaban was in town, they wanted to come. Everywhere he encouraged the Roma to open their homes and gather regularly for prayer, worship, and share from the Bible. Thus, gradually a congregation would be started. (Yambol 2006)

Brother Shaban’s ministry was crucial to the spread of the faith among the Roma in those early days. There were other important Roma leaders that emerged at that time like brother Ibram from Zhelju Voivoda, brother Ali (Ilia) from Krushare, brother Asen from Sliven, brother Raicho from Svilengrad, brother Vasil from Topolchane, and brother Sali. Brother Kolio from Chirpan joined the movement and played an apostolic role in it; with only third-grade education, he became known as “the Walking Bible,” because of his phenomenal memory of verses from the Holy Scriptures.⁴⁴ These are some of the people who took it upon themselves to spread the good news among the Roma. All of

them at the time were lay leaders so the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria began as a lay movement. These Roma Christians cherished the Lord greatly and became powerful witnesses to others of their newly found faith. Pastor Mehmed remembers:

Many miracles and wonders happened in our meetings. We had no official structure, hierarchy, or organization, but we saw many come to repentance. As people all over Bulgaria heard about what was happening in Yambol, they wanted to come and see the revival. Thus, Yambol became the ‘Gypsy Pentecost,’ the ‘New Jerusalem.’ (Yambol 2006)

These Roma believers continued to worship in each other’s homes in Yambol until the end of the Communist Regime. Since 1989, as spiritual revival came to Bulgaria during the early transition years, the Roma have started several indigenous churches in the *mahala*, all led by Roma pastors – brother Mehmed, Ivan Georgiev, Gencho Nikov, and Dinko Ivanov. Brother Shaban died several years ago, but the fruit of his labors and prayers, as well as those of the early Roma Pentecostals are evident. The movement has expanded to most Roma around Bulgaria.

Sofia: Growth and Vision

“Churches grow as they identify *people with needs* that the church can minister to, either by (a) extending ministries already in place, or (b) building new ministries” (Hunter 1987:78). D. McGavran recommends that Christian missions be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, discerning God’s *kairos* (time) of visitation to these populations. They should concentrate their efforts on reaching receptive peoples. One national Pentecostal leader in Bulgaria had such spiritual sensitivity and recognized that the divine *kairos* had come for the most despised people in his land.

Pavel Ignatov was still a young man when the underground congregation worshiped at his house in the 'Emil Markov' quarter of Sofia. He was recognized, however, as a person called of God to do a special work for the Kingdom. Leadership of the church was gradually being transferred to him from his father Boris.

The first Roma believers began attending the meetings in Pavel's house around 1979. Gana Mitrova, a descendent from the early Roma Baptists in Lom, was one of those who joined in that early period. She shares some of her memories of those days:

When I first visited brother Pavel's house church, I was greatly impressed by a song. On the third visit God baptized me with the Holy Spirit. Both my daughter Veska and I felt something different there – power that we had never known at the Baptist Church. I was impressed that there were many young people at brother Pavel's church. This persecuted house fellowship was very lively... God was glorified through our family: I had undergone appendicitis surgery and was bleeding internally. God gave me a dream that the next day I was going home to be with my children, and He healed me. Veska had heart seizures and the doctor said she would not live, but after we prayed all night, in the morning she was playing and singing. Police would often come and persecute the Emil Markov group. Even the neighbors chased us with stones. We were persecuted for the faith and frequently interrogated. I was threatened that if I kept going to church, the authorities would not give me an apartment. At my job they intimidated both one Sabbatarian lady and me. She was fired, but I was not. (2006)

Hassan Chincheri, a famous Roma violin player, soon joined the house church at Emil Markov. Hassan's wife Mira experienced an attack of evil spirits after coming to faith and thought she was dying. Pavel went to her house to pray for her and she was delivered from oppression. The Chincheris were a wealthy and large clan of Gypsies, well known around the country. Prior to their Christian conversion they had strictly adhered to Muslim burial customs for their deceased relatives. Having converted they were not afraid to share the newly found Christian faith. Through their conversion many Roma came to faith and joined the house church, which later became the Central Sofia Church of God. While the Roma membership at 'Emil Markov' was growing, Gypsies

were also joining 'Bulina Livada,' the oldest Church of God congregation in Sofia and in close proximity to the large Roma *mahala* of "Fakulteta."

Miracles of healing were very important in this movement's growth. "One young Roma woman could not bear children. After the pastors prayed for her, God opened her womb and she had a baby a year later."

Having witnessed these events, Pavel Ignatov, who quickly rose to national leadership of the underground Church of God movement, recognized that the time of divine visitation of the Roma had come. Among the many radical reforms he initiated, one main priority was the outreach to the ethnic minorities. Ignatov was the first among national Pentecostal leaders in Bulgaria who recognized the receptivity of the Roma and led his denomination into active ministry among them. As a visionary, Ignatov had the foresight to know that with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, good strategic planning, and diligent labor, this ethnic minority would be won to Pentecostal Christianity.

The old *Tichevisti* who were the forefathers of the Bulgarian Church of God did not accept the Roma easily, but thoroughly examined the latter's sincerity of faith. These ultraconservatives suppressed the Roma believers and were reluctant to place them in ministry. Ignatov strongly felt that should change, if the Roma harvest was to be gathered successfully. In *The Bloodless Persecution of the Church*, he shares how this ministry became his denomination's prerogative:

One of the most important changes was the work of the Church of God among the ethnic minorities. In the 1980s we began an active outreach to the Roma and Turkish minorities in Bulgaria. It is difficult to pinpoint a definite starting point of this ministry or a specific decision of a church council on the matter. The Church of God leadership had not been tolerant toward some characteristics of the Roma population, mainly their inconsistency...but in the early 1980s God opened the door of the church to many of the minority people. Then, by revelation from heaven, I adopted the following principles:

1. We should not stereotype people, because of their ethnicity.

2. We should recognize and promote indigenous leaders from these same minorities for ministry among them.
3. The Church of God's success will largely depend on its attitude toward these ethnic minorities.

The active outreach to the minorities began after I was elected National Overseer of the Bulgarian Church of God in 1982. (Ignatov 2004:122-123)

Pavel Ignatov was culturally sensitive in his approach to the Roma, recognizing that they were in fact a different culture within Bulgaria and should not be subjected to exactly the same standards as the believers from the country's ethnic majority. Realizing the calling of the Christian Church to minister to the poor, he knew the success of the denomination under his leadership would be dependent on this ministry.

Pavel Ignatov was quick to put these divinely given principles to practical use. On December 25, 1983, the Church of God leadership, having received a revelation in a dream, ordained Zheliazko Milev from Simeonovgrad as pastor. Having become the first ordained Pentecostal Roma minister in Bulgaria Milev was soon appointed on the national council of the denomination and given responsibility for the Roma work. He would travel sometimes barefoot to preach the gospel and many Roma churches were planted as a result of his diligent and voluntary labor. Brother Vasil from Topolchane shared how one such church was started in North Bulgaria:

Zheliazko and I went to Oriahovo. There was only one Roma believer there who had invited us to come and share Christ. As we went to her house God led us through the Spirit; the local people received us very well even though we had told them not to worry about meals and hospitality. Brother Zheliazko played guitar and we shared the gospel. Out of the 30 people gathered there, 25 stayed. When time came for prayer, all of them repented for their sins. I prophesied to one of the brothers that he would become pastor of this new fellowship. That is how the church was started. Then they asked us to baptize them in water; we went to the Danube late at night and baptized them under the high beams of a Moskwich 8 (old Russian car). Thus, we kept the event secret in order to avoid any Communist police entanglements.⁴⁵ The next day we served them communion.⁴⁶ One person who attended out of curiosity after he had heard that many had come to faith called us to his house. Thirteen more people heard the gospel and believed there. On our way back, God told us to go through Sofia. Many were converted there. We went to many other places. Wherever God sent

us He performed miracles and many people became followers of Christ. (Sliven 2006)

In the late 1980s, the Communist police tightened its grip on the Church of God. The State Security services were determined to crush this underground movement. Pavel Ignatov, besides his active religious leadership, had raised his voice for religious freedom in Bulgaria. Therefore, he became a prime target for persecution and his family was subjected to constant threats and interrogations. In 1987 he was arrested and given the clear message that internment was awaiting him; Ignatov was going to be banished from Sofia and sent into exile where he would work in a mine for several years; he was offered to spare himself and his family from this turmoil on one condition: to make all the Roma leave the Church of God and discontinue his work with them.

The totalitarian regime considered this ministry a major threat to its power. When I was arrested in 1987, I was given an ultimatum to stop our minority outreach to spare myself from being interned. Of course, I did not agree to these terms, nor was willing to make any 'deals' with the government. (Ignatov 2004: 123)

After Pavel Ignatov was interned to the mountain village of Mihalkovo in Southern Bulgaria, the intense persecution against the Sofia church continued. The militia sealed Pavel's house in the 'Emil Markov' quarter. Previously, during such dangerous times, the underground congregation would join other official Protestant churches in the city: the Congregational, the Pentecostal, or the Methodist. At this time, however, all were afraid to accept them, because they did not want to draw the attention of the Communist Secret services. Eventually, the persecuted congregation found a haven where they could resume their services...an upper room of a Roma house in the 'Abisinia' *mahala* (officially known as 'Hristo Botev').

Ivan Georgiev, a Roma shoemaker, who had come to know the Lord a couple of years earlier, accepted the Church of God congregation in his house:

Brother Boris shared the gospel with us. My wife was the first believer in the quarter. I had kicked her out of the house, because I was initially opposed to this new faith. When our son died of tumor, I began thinking more seriously about God. In 1986 I was filled with the Holy Ghost and spoke in tongues. We had meetings in our home and brother Boris came regularly to minister and support us spiritually. I did not know Pavel; I had only seen him once at a prayer meeting. In 1988 after Pavel was interned, we prepared a room upstairs in my house and the central Sofia congregation began to worship here regularly. When they called me to the police station, I was afraid; working two jobs at the time, I put on my work uniform. The policeman said: "You gather people in your house and we do not approve of that." I said: "When I used to be a drunk and beat my wife, you did not mind, did you?" They said: "Don't get smart with us, you Gypsy! We will crush you!" They threatened to arrest me. Then I talked to some police chiefs who were higher in the department and gave them Bibles; some of them read and cried as the Lord touched them. (Georgiev 2006)

The Sofia Church of God continued its worship services in the Upper Room (as they called it) in 'Hristo Botev' until the end of the Communist Regime. God poured his grace and blessings upon this home. The services were so full that there was not enough room and many would remain standing outside. People from around the world began coming to this Roma quarter to worship with the believers (Velev 2002: 69).

Pavel Ignatov was released from exile after less than a year, because of great international pressure on the Bulgarian Communist government.⁴⁷ In the following two years, as Ignatov participated in the protests for bringing down the totalitarian rule, the Roma were beside him. On some occasions they stood between him and the brutal Communist militia. Finally, the prayers of Christian believers for freedom received their divine answer. On November 10, 1989, with the resignation of Todor Zhivkov Bulgarian Communist rule became history.

The Bulgarian Church of God came out of its illegal status and celebrated Easter, 1990, in the largest auditorium in the country. The denomination became officially registered with the government. The following several years would be a time of

tremendous spiritual harvest when many thousands of people, of all ethnic groups in Bulgaria, would hear the Christian message and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The ministry of the Church of God among the Roma grew rapidly in the 1990s. Many public evangelistic campaigns were conducted and thousands of Roma came to Christ and received the Holy Spirit. The national leadership of the church received generous financial contributions from partners around the world. For the first time ever in its history the denomination could think of constructing church buildings. Remarkably, the first two churches they ever built were in Roma *mahali* – Samokov and Ihtiman, two towns with significant Roma populations.

Brother Ilia, the first pastor of the Samokov Church of God, which since then has become the largest Roma congregation in Bulgaria, shared the following:

The revival in the *mahala* was amazing during those years. Many came as we met in people's homes, but there was never enough room. We really had to build and I prayed earnestly for a sanctuary. Then, I went to brother Pavel and God touched him. We found a good piece of property, which at the time was a dump. We prayed there, over garbage, for God to turn it into a place of worship. Our people contributed for the foundations, but the church was built mostly with brother Pavel's help. He even came to work with us on the building; certain people mocked him for building a church for the Gypsies. We often preached publicly and in the homes. Thousands were hungry to hear the Word. The church kept growing and we have had to enlarge the sanctuary three times since then. (Samokov 2006)

The fact that the Bulgarian Church of God built its very first sanctuaries (called 'prayer homes') not for its oldest congregations, but for the growing Roma constituency, demonstrated the spiritual foresight of its leadership. It also exemplified genuine Christian love for the poor and the neglected who could not repay the gift. Through making the Roma *mahali* a priority, according to Ignatov, the Church of God has prevented the potential invasion of Islam and other religious or cultic groups in these poor communities susceptible to outside influences.

National conferences were organized especially for Roma believers. More Roma ministers were ordained to serve their respective *mahali*, such as Zdravko Latinchev (Fakulteta, Sofia), Hristo Chakalov (Liulin, Sofia), Vasil Mashonov, (Mirkovo), Marko (Semchinovo), Marin Radev (Zlatitsa), Tsvetan (Aprilovo), Vasil (Topolchane), Petar Chakarov (Tvarditsa), Dimitar Chakarov (Stara Zagora), and Ilia Georgiev (Lom).

For most of the 1990s the Central Church of God worshiped in the National Palace of Culture in Sofia and had over 1,500 in attendance on Sunday mornings. Often the auditorium was so full that there were many standing. These services were grand celebrations. People came to Christ and felt a divine touch every Sunday. After several years, brother Pavel realized the need to let many of the Roma constituency begin services in their own respective quarters. Roma ministers were ordained – usually first as deacons and later promoted to presbyters (pastors). This was a very important move by the National Overseer, because the Roma movement gathered more strength when the churches became a lasting presence in the *mahali*, where the ethnos lived. Presently, there are churches in all of the Roma quarters of Sofia.

The Bulgarian Church of God, which made it a priority to serve these poorest Bulgarian citizens, has also had a great social outreach to them. The group “Women of Charity,” affiliated with the denomination, has been distributing food to over 50 poor children, mostly Roma, living at the Sofia Central Train Station (Dimitrova 2000:35-36). Ignatov’s leadership has been very helpful to the Roma Pentecostal movement over the years, and his ministry among them apostolic. Ignatov is well-known and respected among the Roma. It has been said: “Even the dogs in the Roma *mahala* know who Pavel Ignatov is.” In 1995 one of the most popular Christian magazines *Christianity Today*

published an article titled “Ambassadors to the Gypsies,” describing Ignatov’s ministry to the Roma (Harris 1995:12-13).

The Sofia story would be incomplete, however, if we do not mention the ministry of the late Boris Ignatov. Even though he lacked the charisma and organizational skills of his oldest son, the Roma greatly loved brother Boris for his humility and effective personal approach. He faithfully served the Roma churches daily and truly exemplified Christian love. In their latter years Boris and his wife Lydia kept traveling constantly by public transportation to minister to the Roma believers in and around Sofia, preaching and serving them communion. Boris was never embarrassed to eat at the tables in the Roma houses or take a nap on their couches. He treated them as equals and addressed the younger Roma as ‘son’ and ‘daughter.’ One of brother Boris and sister Lydia’s last great accomplishments was the building of the sanctuary in the Roma quarter of Filipovtsi, Sofia. They labored faithfully for the completion of that building and contributed a great portion of their life’s savings in order to see it through (Filipovtsi 2006).

On September 3rd, 2005, the ministers of the Bulgarian Church of God, after Pavel Ignatov had stepped down, elected a new Bishop – Rev. Alexander Todorov, a Roma pastor from Samokov. This was significant, because for the first time in Bulgarian evangelical history a Roma minister became the national leader of a denomination.

Razlog: Training and Consolidation

Razlog is a town in the Southwestern corner of Bulgaria, the area also known as Pirin Macedonia. Three major mountains meet at this town – Rila, Pirin, and the Rhodopi

Range. The nearby town of Bansko is a major ski resort, but also the home of the first Protestant Church in Bulgaria - the Bansko Congregational Church.

The late Dimitar Burdin was the old Pentecostal apostle of Pirin Macedonia who traveled for many years to plant new churches and encourage the believers. He was a man of great wisdom and power who had the gift to relate to the Roma and keep them in line. Brother Dimitar was assisted and accompanied for many years by his nephew Ivan Jadkov, who traveled regularly with him around the area. Jadkov carried much of the burden and responsibility for this outreach.

The first Roma believer in Razlog was sister Tsvetana Zangova. She was led to Christ by an ethnic Bulgarian woman, and, for years attended the oldest Pentecostal fellowship in the area – the group in Dobarsko and Gorno Draglishte.⁴⁸ She won several people from her *mahala* to the Lord. They would ride the bus together on Sundays and attend the house worship services in the villages. As the crowd grew bigger, it became inconvenient for them to continue traveling to church every Sunday. Therefore they began having worship meetings in their *mahala* in Razlog. The old pastors of the area, Dimitar Burdin and Nikola Naidenov, while once walking through the Roma neighborhood of Razlog, believed they heard the voice of God: “Continue to plough and sow the seed here, because I have prepared a great harvest of souls.” Thus, the Razlog church was started in the 1980s. Baba (grandma) Tsvetana was persecuted and threatened by the Communist police for having religious meetings in her house. The militia came to confiscate her Bible and songbooks, but never found them. She was even issued a yellow card (identifying the mentally ill people in Bulgaria), but still refused to give up her faith.

The first pastor of the Razlog church was Sasho Adamov, a Roma musician. There were several other Roma in town who gave up playing secular music, a very profitable business, and committed their lives to Christ. Zhivko Denchev, a talented accordion player, shared his testimony:

When I repented, the Lord told me: “You need to break off your friendship with the world, because no one can serve two masters!” Then I decided to give up playing secular music even though it brought good money. Many times since then, I have had great offers to play at secular weddings, but have always declined them. The Bania Church⁴⁹ was started by the testimony of the children; they came first and then brought their parents to the Lord. People here are strongly Orthodox; all the Gypsies have been baptized in the Orthodox Church. But they did not really know or understand the good news about Jesus Christ and the resurrection. (Razlog 2006)

The Bania Church of God is unique among Roma evangelical churches with its rich repertoire of song compositions. The Holy Spirit has given all these songs, according to Pastor Zhivko, to a few sisters in the church. They have lost count, but know that the number of songs is well over 5,000. Their lyrics are in Bulgarian, because these Roma do not speak Romanes well; their melodies are in the typical Macedonian folk rhythm style. One of the Bania songs has become like an anthem sung by many Roma churches:

Verse: My soul cries out to you, Jesus of Nazareth,
My soul cries out to you, open the holy heaven!
Chorus: Give power, give power, to your Church, Jesus!
Give power, give power, and love to us give!

The Razlog church was destined to become a very important ministry center for the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria. After the fall of Communism, the ministers of the area felt God leading them to build a church for the growing Roma congregation. The mayor of town gave them land for free, but they had no funds to build. Then Ivan Jadvok, regional overseer at the time, and the other leaders prayed for God to help them. Right after the prayer Jadvok said: “Now brothers, faith without works is dead,” and pulled all the cash out of his pocket; the brothers followed suit. They had collected an

amount that equaled 20 US Dollars. This seed of faith, followed by many miracles, resulted in the completion of a grand multi-purpose facility for God's glory.

We were in need to purchase windows and doors for the church. Inflation was high at the time, but we found a great offer at a store. We did not have the money, but signed it and made a down payment by faith anyway. If we missed it, the price would have been raised. The deadline date came and still we did not have the money. But at the time there was a humanitarian aid center, for which I was responsible. It stored clothing donated from Western Europe for distribution among our poor folk. As I was there sorting out the clothes that day, I found Swiss Franks in one of the shirts. "Hallelujah," I said, "this must be the divine provision we needed to make that payment, and it came just on time." The most amazing thing, however, was that when I exchanged the Franks to Leva (Bulgarian currency), it matched to the penny the windows and doors deal. I still have those receipts in my files. (Christov 2007)

The Roma man, who shared this story, would play a crucial role in the movement.

Assen Christov

Born in 1963, Assen Christov remained an orphan when he was five and spent his childhood in orphanages. He was a bright young man with education a great potential asset for the Communist Party machine. After his military service, Assen became a Party activist and an agent of the State Security services. One of his tasks was to help the authorities obtain information on the believers in Razlog and persecute them. Assen was married to Violeta (Vili), also a socialist. They both were atheists.

The Roma church was growing in Razlog, meeting in private homes for worship and fellowship. The growth became explosive after the fall of Communism. Assen was hostile against the evangelical believers, portrayed by the 'democratic' media as an 'American sect.' This attitude was reminiscent of Communist atheism and the antagonism against the West, which had been instilled in people's minds for 45 years. The young man continued to cause problems for the group of believers.

Assen Christov's conversion, like that of the apostle Paul, began with a painful fall to the ground. Having been in a motorcycle accident, Assen was taken to the hospital with severe injuries. There he rethought his life and realized he had no hope. Totally desperate, disappointed, and dissatisfied with himself, he lost his desire to live. Very confused, without friends or relatives, he only had pain and the support of his wife Vili at his side. He thought about death, but no doctor could tell him what happened after this life. They could not give him any good reason to live.

One night while in the hospital I had a dream: I was climbing a narrow staircase to the sky, but it did not feel scary, because I was not alone. There were many people lined on the way up. It was a great experience climbing the stairs until the moment I arrived at the "big gates;" they were shut right in front of me. I had been waiting for so long and was disappointed. Then I heard a voice saying: "It is not your time to enter but a day will come when you will enter and see everything inside." I asked if I could at least go in and take a look around. The voice responded: "There is much talk about what could be seen inside. Read the Bible and one day you will see it all." I woke up very excited and could not understand what had happened. Where was I? Had I died? Who was I talking to? I could not see anyone, but felt the presence of a person and my heart was filled with peace I had never felt before. I asked my hospital roommates, and the doctors about the Bible, but they all laughed at me. "You cannot get a Bible here. We are Communists!" I just wanted to get a Bible and read it. (Christov 2006)

The same day Assen was visited by a group of believers - the same ones he had previously persecuted. They gave him a New Testament and John 3:16 captured his attention. The young Communist was healed, trusted in Christ, and began witnessing of his 'Jesus' experience. Vili was glad to see her husband healed, but neither wanted to attend church with him nor listen to this 'God gibberish.' All of Assen's relatives thought he had lost his mind and did not want to have much dealing with him any more. Thus, he lost both his friends and his job. Upon returning home, Assen took all of the alcoholic beverages and cigarettes from his house and started throwing them away. Vili said: "Leave them! I know *you* have gone mad, but if we have guests we need to treat them right!" Said he: "No, I am a Christian and want to fully commit my home to God." When

he was pouring out the alcohol in the outhouse, neighbors approached him: “Well, we know that you are crazy, but why waste this? We will take it! Some of it is expensive stuff!” Assen firmly declined their request.

The Lord saved me, forgave my sins, gave me eternal life, adopted me, and baptized me with the Spirit. Although I did not know what had happened to me, I was so happy that I spoke in tongues for hours. Then I realized God had healed me from my disease. Hallelujah! I was happy, singing to God a new song, because of the mercy shown to me! I thank God my marriage was saved. I stopped smoking and God changed my life. Soon Vili, my wife and childhood sweetheart, having seen the change in me, accepted the Savior as well. On the same day she was filled with the Holy Ghost, speaking in tongues and prophesying. Soon most of our respective families also came to Christ.

In 1993 the Christovs went for an intensive training at a Theological Seminary of Korean Presbyterians in Moscow, Russia. Upon returning to Bulgaria, they felt the burden to dedicate their lives fully to ministry and service of their people – the Roma. Assen was ordained pastor of the Razlog Church of God; he has a vision to train Roma ministers and leaders for the growing national movement.

In 1998 the School of Christ was established in Razlog for intensive training of pastors. The School of Christ International - based out of Beaumont, Texas, with founder and president Rev. Bert H. Clendennen, provided the materials and funding. Clendennen, an old time Pentecostal preacher, taught the lectures on videotapes.⁵⁰ Over the course of several years, under Christov’s direction, the school provided intensive training for 256 ministers from around Bulgaria, and even for some from neighboring Macedonia where the movement was in its initial stages. The graduates, inspired to minister around the country, planted several hundred new churches. Even though the school was interdenominational and ethnically inclusive, the majority of the students were Roma.

For several years with the help of humanitarian organizations like the Swiss “Ethos Open Hands,” Assen brought to Bulgaria many tons of humanitarian aid to help

the poor. He received assistance for initiating agricultural activities. He also started a bakery in Razlog, which gave out free bread to people in need. There have been several newspaper articles written about Assen's social and spiritual service to the Roma.⁵¹ One such article in *24 Hours*, a national daily paper, titled "Assen – the Roma Patriarch," said:

For most people in Razlog, the 42 year old Assen Christov is just a businessman. For the local Roma, however, he is known as 'Pastor Assen' – the man who taught them to attend Sunday services, to pray to Jesus, and to abandon theft and begging. And he was accepted among them as a Messia...He personally preaches the Bible and, they say, he knows the problems of every one who has come to the sanctuary. (*24 Hours* 2005:18)

In 2002 Assen Christov became the Assistant National Overseer of the Bulgarian Church of God and coordinator for the Roma ministries of the denomination.

During the same year Assen, together with a group of Roma ministers like Stefan Kolev, Alexander Todorov, and Ilia Georgiev, founded the Association of 'Roma Pastors, Churches, and Fellowships in Bulgaria.' This is an interdenominational group organized for the purpose of cooperation to advance God's Kingdom among the Roma. It provides a means of networking, unification, and fellowship for the churches in the growing movement. Presently, the chairman of the Association is Metodi Atanasov from Dupnitsa, assisted by four vice-chairmen: Stefan Kolev from Fakulteta, Sofia, Salcho Salchev from Perushtitsa, Miroslav Atanasov⁵² – evangelist and teacher from Sofia, and Emil Kamburov from Razlog. Krasimir Malinov serves as the secretary-treasurer of the group. The main goals of the association are:

1. Active evangelization of the Roma communities in Bulgaria.
2. Education of the Roma clergy through seminars and training programs.
3. Development of strategic partnerships with churches and organizations both at home and abroad that can assist the Roma movement.

Assen Christov understood the need for participation of believers in social work and in politics. In 2004 he became a board member of the *S.E.G.A.* foundation.⁵³ During the same year Assen was appointed Vice-Chairman of the Political Movement “Evrroma,” which has the greatest following of any Roma political organization in Bulgaria. Assen, while primarily committed to church ministry, believes that the Roma also need to have a voice in public life in order to battle their hard social predicament.

In 2005 Assen was enrolled to study at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Cleveland, TN. He graduated with a Master of Divinity in 2007 and returned to Bulgaria. Presently, he continues his active ministry as pastor, educator, evangelist, and Roma activist. His wife Vili and daughter Esther support him in all of his endeavors and efforts to better the situation of his people.

Summary and Update

The Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria began in the 1950s and grew steadily in the following decades. There were many faithful believers, men and women, both Roma and *gaje*, not mentioned in this chapter, who played a part in the movement’s growth. Divine love and the Holy Spirit inspired their witness.

The substantial turning of the Roma to Pentecostal Christianity around the country took place recently, in the years after the fall of Communism. The greatest number of Roma churches were started in the 1990s; “they were being planted and grew everywhere, like mushrooms” (Salchev 2006). An important reason for that explosive growth was the total political, economic, and cultural transition in the country – from one-party totalitarian rule and socialist economics to democratic pluralism and open

market. During such times of major worldview shifts, people undergo great stress and their receptivity toward religious influences is very high. “Major economic changes, such as unemployment, underemployment, runaway inflation...and plant closings have all shaken people’s false securities and opened them to the gospel” (Hunter 1987:80). These changes affected everyone, but especially the Roma as their marginal status and economic insecurity intensified greatly. The other important factor during that decade was the new freedom, which allowed massive evangelism to take place. The Bulgarian people were hungry to fill the spiritual void created by the years of Marxist atheism.

The Roma have become the majority of the total evangelical constituency in Bulgaria⁵⁴ Most of the Roma evangelicals are Pentecostal in belief and practice.⁵⁵ They are mainly divided among three major Pentecostal denominations of Bulgaria:⁵⁶ The Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches (Pentecostal Union), The Bulgarian Church of God, and The United Churches of God.⁵⁷ There are a number of smaller Pentecostal fellowships like Christian Church ‘Zion,’ some independent, and unregistered groups that also include a high Roma constituency.⁵⁸ The Presbyterian Union of Bulgaria, more recently founded, also includes mostly Roma who are actually Pentecostal in worship.

A number of villages have Roma evangelical churches, but no evangelical churches of ethnic Bulgarians. There are not many places where the opposite is true. Presently, Roma Pentecostal churches exist in most Roma communities around the country. It is hard to find a city or a village *mahala* without Roma believers. Itinerant evangelists, Bible teachers, and foreign missionaries quickly take note of that fact.

The Bulgarian Church of God has been especially successful in reaching the Roma for a couple of reasons. First, was the visionary leadership of Pavel Ignatov who

made the Roma ministry a priority on the denomination's agenda. Second, the Church of God, having just recently come out of persecution, lacked stringent structural limitations. That made it more flexible and effective in accommodating the growing Roma movement. The Pentecostal Union, which had been established officially since 1928, had more organizational limits for that, such as: a centralized structure, a limit to the number of churches in one vicinity, and a more complicated process of pastoral ordination. So, a great number of the newer Roma churches joined either the Bulgarian Church of God or its split-off – the United Churches of God, which gave great autonomy to its local congregations. In both of these denominations the Roma are the majority.

Having said this, we should recognize that the largest Protestant denomination in Bulgaria, the Pentecostal Union, has also had a powerful ministry among the Roma. The Chairman of the Union, Rev. Victor Virchev, said:

The Roma are an easier territory, more vulnerable to the gospel, and greater attention is paid to them. With their hospitality and emotionalism, they bring freshness to the evangelical churches. Before 1990 we had mostly mixed churches; there were some Roma churches, but they were not officially registered. After the changes in the country, the Roma desired to start their own churches in the *mahali*. The oldest Roma church registered in our Union was the one in Stara Zagora with pastor Assen Raikov; Raikov was later appointed as the coordinator for our minority ministries in Bulgaria and sits on the leadership council. One third of the churches in the Pentecostal Union are Roma, which have about 7-8 thousand members. We also have thousands of Roma in the mixed churches, led by ethnic Bulgarian pastors. (Virchev 2006)

Estimating the exact number of the Roma Pentecostal believers and churches in Bulgaria is a difficult task.⁵⁹ The approximate number of Roma churches in Bulgaria is currently between 700 and 800. The majority of them are Pentecostal in worship and beliefs, while no more than 100 of them are spread amongst the Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, and Seventh-Day Adventist Denominations.⁶⁰ The number of Roma Pentecostal preachers, ordained elders, and deacons, is over 600.

Pentecostal Christianity has touched most of the Roma community in Bulgaria. At present there is rarely a Roma who is not aware of the faith. Besides the Roma in the *mahali* churches, which are mostly homogenous, there are also many Roma who attend mixed churches with ethnic Bulgarian leadership. There has never been a thorough sociological survey to inform the public of how many Roma Pentecostals or evangelicals are there in Bulgaria.⁶¹ The leadership of the Association of Roma Pastors estimates approximately 50,000 Roma Pentecostal believers in Bulgaria; this is a very conservative estimate, which most likely refers to the regular Roma churchgoers; the Roma, however, who self-identify as Protestants could be several times higher. The Roma Christian movement has become a significant force in Bulgaria, to the point where political parties have become interested in courting its leaders for votes.

Presently, even though most Bulgarian citizens have found a new dynamic equilibrium and are less open to religious conversion than they were in the 1990s, the Roma interest in Christianity has not declined. They are presently the most receptive population to the Pentecostal message in Bulgaria and the movement among them continues to grow. This has been a phenomenon observed throughout Christian history:

People and societies also vary in their responsiveness. Whole segments of society resist the gospel for periods – often very long periods – and then ripen to the good news. In resistant people groups, only small single congregations can be created and kept alive, whereas in responsive ones many congregations that freely reproduce others can be established. Unevenness of growth has marked the Church from the beginning. The common people, the Gospels tell us, received our Lord's message better than the Pharisees and Sadducees. For the first three decades of the Christian era, the Jews responded far more than the Gentiles. When Judea had been Christian for a hundred years, Philistia on one side and Arabia on the other still remained solidly pagan. (McGarvan 1990:180)

In her research for *The Ethnobarometer Working Paper Series*, Benovska-Sabkova interviewed 22 Roma. Out of those only three (!) had remained unaffected by

evangelical Christianity while two had drifted away – one man because of a drinking problem, and one woman, because “she misses the ritualism characteristic of the Eastern Orthodox Church...where she can light a candle and sense the fragrance of incense.”

...the attitude of these two [the latter] towards the Protestant churches has been shaken, but they do not declare a complete withdrawal yet. Two of those three [not affected] are a married couple, living outside the Roma community in an [ethnic] Bulgarian environment” All the other [17] informants, however, are active, even inveterate churchgoers. It would have been simplistic and untrue if we had presented the massive attendance at Protestant churches as a sort of “fad.” Religious values have seriously been accepted as innermost by about half of those converted to Protestantism...The devotion for the Protestant churches has gained even greater momentum and has become impressively widespread among the Roma. According to sociological surveys of 1994, the share of the Roma affected by the activities of the Protestant churches ranged between 12% and 15% (citing Tomova 1995:341). While the [present] interviews were taken in the Fakulteta district of Sofia, six Protestant churches were functioning there, whereas in the Hristo Botev district there were two...The fact that out of 22 persons interviewed, only three have not been affected by the conversion [process] testifies that in 2002 it has been much more sweeping than in 1992-1994. (Sabkova 2003:81-83)

Therefore, the history of the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria continues...

CHAPTER 5

DYNAMICS FOR THE GROWTH OF THE MOVEMENT

“Don’t go there!! That is where the Gypsies live!” said a taxi driver to Bill and Vicky Dalton, an Americans couple who were on a short-term mission trip to Bulgaria. While taking a walk around town, they had simply inquired about some of the local sights worth visiting. Having heard the warning, the Daltons tried to explain that they had already been to a number of Roma quarters in Bulgaria. They must have left that cab driver wondering why people would travel halfway across the world to spend time in the Roma *mahali* where even most Bulgarians are unwilling to go.

In *Understanding Religious Conversion* Lewis Rambo gives a cogent overview of the ‘availability factors’ for conversion - structural, social, emotional, intellectual, and religious. The new faith should be somewhat adaptable and compatible to the traditional culture of the group; if that faith is radically different or opposed to the converts’ original one, then they would not be as likely to become stable followers (1993:60-63).

The reasons that Pentecostal Christianity is gradually becoming the preferred religious confession of the Roma in Bulgaria are multiple and complex. Most of them are important factors for the worldwide growth of Pentecostalism in general. The Pentecostal movement’s beliefs and practices relate to Roma culture on a deep spiritual, social, and psychological level. It has connected powerfully to their worldview, engaged them holistically, and addressed their existential needs like no other movement ever has. In this chapter, both the reasons for the Roma conversion to the movement and the dynamics for its perpetual growth are identified. One Roma brother effectively summarized them:

We were closed people, marginalized, and despised; we felt overlooked and neglected. We were unhappy people who practiced fortune-telling and other evil things. The Roma are like the Jewish people – rejected by all. Our co-citizens used us for black labor. We were like slaves, but God set us free. We felt like someone is interested in us. Jesus came not for the healthy, but for the sick. God loved me, gave me his love! No one else hears us, but God does hear us even in regard to the smallest things. There is more freedom among us now. We are like the Good Samaritans – we grow and build churches. We are curious to touch, to taste, to feel. We can rejoice and celebrate freely. The Gypsy people are united people. We share the gospel more than others do. We are more sociable and are not embarrassed to talk about God. Our houses are without fences; we are like a big family so the news spreads quickly. God loves and calls all people, but our misery, and lack of material things makes us turn toward God. The Gypsy people are like the orphans in the home for children – a little love impresses them. We are joyful and noisy people. (Fakulteta 2006)

Theological Dynamics

The Roma movement has solid theological foundations grounded in both the Holy Scriptures and the culture of the Gypsies.

Biblical Foundations

The Bible demonstrates God's attitude of love and concern toward the poor and the disadvantaged. God is on the side of the underdogs, social outcasts, persecuted, isolated, and oppressed, to defend and help them. The divine instructions through Moses to the Israelites were that every seventh year the fields should lie fallow in order that the poor could eat (Exodus 23:11). The prophets spoke against the oppressors of the poor (Amos 2:7). The wisdom literature affirms: "The righteous considers the cause of the poor, but the wicked does not regard to know it" (Proverbs 29:7) (Miller 2000:25).

Jesus was committed to help those in greatest need: “They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mark 2:17).

The poor have historically been more receptive to the truth of the Christian gospel. In his Messianic declaration Jesus said:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

One of the proofs that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah was the very fact that “the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:5). The famous passage of the Beatitudes, from the Sermon on the Mount, begins with: “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). The good news is announced to the afflicted – “those who have been wrongfully treated and often reduced to wretchedness, powerlessness, and even poverty.” This is synonymous with “broken-hearted, smitten, or crushed in spirit” and relates to the Suffering Servant Israel (Isaiah 53:4-5, 19). In regard to these passages Adrian Leske says:

All express the dependent relationship of the faithful on God as they await God’s deliverance (Isaiah 40:9). This is the proclamation of the good news: the reign of God has come and it is theirs! The blessing given is that the reign of God’s love and justice has begun for them (In Farmer 1998:1270).

Because of their hard predicament and lack of alternate means of survival, the poor are more likely to turn to God in faith. “Has not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He has promised to them that love Him?” (James 2:5). This rhetorical question of James has been interpreted for decades to mean that the poor have been singled out by God to be “rich in faith.” According to Felder,

however, this text refers in Hebraic tradition to the “faithful poor” during the Babylonian Captivity in the 6th century B.C. The Jews became the special treasure of God, because they did not abandon, but rather deepened their faith in Exile. Faith helped these oppressed slaves survive this extreme test in their history. James writes this to exhort members of Christian congregations not to discriminate poor believers, because of their low social status (In Farmer 1998:1793).

The story of the Roma movement is somewhat similar to the missionary work of the Apostle Paul who went to distant lands and began preaching the gospel to the Jewish Diaspora; after they rejected it, he turned to the gentiles who were more receptive. The experience of Bulgarian evangelists and church planters proves that often the gospel message finds a more fruitful soil among the Roma than the Bulgarian ethnic majority populations. Often they would first preach to the ethnic Bulgarians, but the Roma would be more open to hear and receive.

Evangelist Ilia Milanov says:

When I was in the city of Sandanski in 1993, I tried to evangelize my own people, the ethnic Bulgarians, because I love them dearly, but did not have much success. Then God spoke to me through the Holy Spirit: “Ilia, this door is closed for Me! Go to the Roma quarter!” This is truly a fulfillment of the parable of Jesus: “The wedding is ready, but they which were invited were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage.” When the Bulgarian did not open their hearts, God visited the Gypsies and the Turks. The Pentecostals were sensitive to that divine visitation (Milanov 2006).

In addressing the early church, the apostle Paul declared:

For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised has God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are; that no flesh should glory in His presence.
(1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

These antithetical phrases express the fact that Christians have their new existence in Christ who is wisdom personified. People cannot gain the favor of God by their earthly wisdom, social status, or nobility, but solely by Christ (Farmer 1998:1606).

The fact that there are currently over 500 Roma ministers in Bulgaria is truly a testimony to the glory of God. Out of the despised, the “social lepers,” many felt the calling to become people of spiritual power and service. Mostly lacking formal education, they minister to their people under the anointing of the Spirit.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

The Roma desire a personal relationship with God. For them the gospel comes to life through experience. Evangelist Ilia Milanov made a profound statement in regard to the reasons the Roma prefer Pentecostal Christianity over other religious traditions:

I have lived in the Libyan Desert for 10 years. There is nothing more attractive to a person traveling in the desert than bread and water. The Roma live in a bigger desert than the Sahara. They are seeking the bread of life and the living water. The thirsty desert traveler is not interested in learning the chemical formula of water (H₂O), but needs to drink real water in order to quench his thirst. That is what the Pentecostal movement provides for the Roma. This is the old gospel that we preach. The day of Pentecost, when Christ's disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, was the birthday of the Christian Church. (Milanov 2006)

Milanov's words correspond well with those of the Lord Jesus Christ:

If any man thirsts, let him come unto me and drink. He who believes on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly will flow rivers of living water.” But thus spoke he of the Spirit, whom the believers in Him would receive, for the Holy Ghost was not yet given, for Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)

Jesus spoke these words on the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles. That was the closing day and a feast in itself. It consisted of “prayer for rain, a reflection on life and the uselessness of human strivings...and a commemoration of the departed.” The themes of purification by water,⁶² rain, and departure from life, pointed to Jesus' identity

as the Jewish Messiah and provoked his opposition (Farmer 1998:1474). Thus, Christ affirmed the importance of the Holy Spirit in view of His soon earthly departure.

Right before His ascension Jesus said these words: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Since these were the last words our Savior spoke on this earth, they must have been very important. On Pentecost the power of the Holy Spirit came on the apostles. Through this power the early Christians spread the gospel all around the Roman Empire and beyond. The movement that claims to have fully recovered this Christian truth began in April of 1906 in Los Angeles. In the last century the Pentecostal movement, infused by the power of the Spirit, has become the second force in Christianity with over 600 million followers. It is also the fastest-growing religious movement in the world. Out of all the factors for the movement’s phenomenal growth among the Roma in Bulgaria, no doubt the power of the Holy Spirit takes the primary place.

Inherent Religiosity

The pre-Christian Roma are religiously inclined people who value spirituality. Coming from an Eastern background, they appreciate supernatural manifestations and prophecy. Religion and religious authority are well respected and honored among them. They have a traditional interest and faith in God. There are no Roma who do not mention the name of God - *O Del* (The God) or *Devla* (Lord). Their ancestors have taught them about God and raised them with some degree of faith conscience. The evidence can be seen in Roma celebrations of holidays and rites-of-passage (Salchev 2006).

The Bulgarian Roma have traditionally been syncretistic about their religious practices often blending Christianity with Islam. They might be born in Muslim families and have Turkish names, yet claim to be Christians and celebrate Christian holidays.⁶³ The Roma religious life has also been subject to “dynamism and swift changes” depending on the identity they may prefer (Roma, Bulgarian, or Turkish). There are Roma groups, both in Bulgaria and in other countries that “have repeatedly changed their religious affiliation” (Sabkova 2003:81).

In the Pentecostal faith Roma Christians report that they have found fulfillment of their inherent spiritual longings, and a true place and meaning in life. The movement provides spiritual enlightenment and satisfaction they have found neither in Orthodoxy nor in Islam - religious traditions with long history in Bulgaria. Having realized they cannot live without God, they feel warm and secure to be part of the Spirit-filled family.

Eschatological Hope

The Roma greatly fear death, as well as spells, curses, divine punishment, and *O Beng* (the devil) who brings evil. The fear of death makes them especially insecure and willing to do anything in order to be saved from it. The faith in Christ, with its eschatological emphasis and hope, liberates them from all these fears.⁶⁴

The Pentecostal message of hope for life beyond this world is attractive to the Roma. Having always lived in the “now,” they enjoy this new anticipation of the future. They rejoice in the promises of the coming of the Lord to save them permanently from their misery and discomfort. In this life they have only seen rejection, but in heaven they would have eternal bliss in the presence of the Lord. Having never had a country or a

king,⁶⁵ their faith in Christ guarantees them the eternal citizenship of heaven. The Christian “blessed hope” encourages the Roma and helps them go through life’s hardships. They are more eager than others to be relieved from the earthly pain and suffering. “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18). In this verse Paul establishes the relationship between “present suffering and future glory.” Tribulations are useful, because they do not extinguish hope, but rather strengthen it (Farmer 1998:1588).

Supernatural Dynamics

The Roma are more interested in hearing individual stories than creedal statements. Because of their cultural pragmatism, they need to see tangible evidence and fruits of the Christian faith. They are more likely to believe in something that works, than in abstract concepts that sound good. Their culture is prone to seek supernatural manifestations, divine miracles, signs, and wonders.

Testimony

Personal testimonies of conversion and healing are a very important part of the Roma worship services. The narrative witness of transformation is the most effective method of Roma evangelism. The consequences of conversion on the individual Roma believers are radical. As they live out their faith and the positive changes are evident in their lives, their communities are also impacted. I have interviewed over a hundred Roma men and women who have been delivered from a life of crime, alcoholism, drugs, and other socially harmful lifestyles, as a result of the Pentecostal experience. In the high

context of the mahala, when a person has experienced such radical changes, everybody knows it. This is a major catalyst for church growth.

Elin Strand is critical of evangelical writings on Roma Pentecostalism and questions their scholarship, because of their emphasis on conversion and transformation:

Evangelical writers on the subject, however, have chosen to focus on the transformation that conversion constitutes. It would be unreasonable to subject evangelical literature to methodological scrutiny, since neither the contributions nor their aspirations are of an overtly scholarly nature...One must bear in mind that the discourse in these texts reflects the belief that one's life begins after accepting Jesus. As we will see later an essential part of the members testimonies consists in a condemnation of the life before conversion. When describing the Gypsy Revival, it follows that the glorious 'present' is contrasted and reinforced by disclosing the destructive 'past.' The emphasis of transformation appears to be central in the construction of a new Christian Gypsy identity. In this context, the representation of non-Christian Gypsies as drunkards and thieves cannot be characterized as racist, despite the fact that others may use such representations for these ends. (Strand 2001:12-13)

The heart of the Christian gospel as presented in the New Testament is about transformation. The Apostle Paul repeatedly told the story of how his life had been radically changed on the way to Damascus. Personal and cultural transformations are indeed important results of Roma Pentecostalism and their description should not be considered less than scholarly. There is no real Christianity without change, nor true faith without repentance. The emphasis on the transformation narrative, evident in these evangelical texts corresponds to the Roma understanding of the salvation experience. Therefore, the testimonies of changed lives are consistent with New Testament theology, even though secular researchers, lacking the experience, cannot truly understand them.

A Roma woman from Sofia shares her testimony:

My husband died and I prayed much to my Lord to find me a job. I was at the place where I rejoiced even over 20 cents. Thanks to my living Lord, my son found a job and I began working as a janitor. Now we live more peacefully. We could hardly make it before: once I got the pension, I paid off the debts and then the problem began all over again.

I profess the Christian religion I am an evangelical. Our great holiday is the birth of Christ. Personally, I honor it the most. We gather on this day and the pastor preaches to us. We express our joy at the fact that our Savior was born.

I have attended the church already for 10 years. I started going there during a difficult period in my life. My nephew that I had raised, from the time he was 6 months old till the time of his military service, was arrested because of a girl. I was very scared and worried. Then I met a neighbor who I knew was in the church. I asked her to have them pray for my nephew. Then she told me that it might be better if I myself would go. At first I was anxious, because I did not know what I was supposed to do. When I went, all of them prayed for my nephew and then he got away with a light sentence. There I felt God touching me and I came to faith. Since then I have attended church regularly.

The church changed me much. To be honest, I was a very bad woman. For the least problem I quarreled with my neighbors, yelled and insulted them. Now, thank God...I have been changed and humbled. (cited in Petrova et al 2004: 100-101)

There are thousands of testimonies like this one - how Roma individuals and families have found new life through the Christian faith.⁶⁶ Even though there are also many healing miracles in the Roma movement, the greatest miracle is that of the changed life as a result of salvation.

Meeting Existential Needs

Roma culture makes no distinction between the sacred and the profane aspects of life. Their animistic worldview includes various mystical and spiritual beliefs. Their folk practices in regard to love, power, fortune, and healing, are a response to intimate needs and problems. Roma magic, divination, herbal medicine, and contacts with nature, gives evidence to this spiritualism.

Pentecostal Christianity particularly engages this worldview, because unlike evangelical traditions with deistic tendencies, it affirms miracles and spiritual gifts.⁶⁷ Pentecostalism has been the movement most successful in engaging oral and animist cultures, because it presents a God concerned and fully involved in people's daily life.⁶⁸

Therefore, faith is not compartmentalized or separated from everyday life in the Roma community. It gives answers to questions in regard to both the ultimate and intimate issues of life. It does not teach the Roma only about theology, but it offers solutions to existential problems. This is a primary reason for the movement's growth.

The Roma are very practical about religion: "What does your religion offer for the solution of your problems?" If they can find no solution in the church, they would seek it somewhere else.⁶⁹ And justifiably so! Christianity should offer tangible evidence for its authenticity. Even though the Christian faith is not based solely on miracles, the miracles help make it credible. Jesus' miracles were a main proof that He indeed was the Christ.

Now when John [the Baptist] had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them: "Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them. (Matthew 11:3-5)

These signs demonstrate that the ministry of the Messiah is not simply to announce judgment, but to restore the reign of God on earth. The miracles are the divine proof that God's kingdom has indeed come (Farmer 1998:1291).

The Christian message has been confirmed by miracles and wonders since the time of the Early Church (Mark 16:20). Without the *miracle* of the resurrection, Christianity comes to naught! "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain and...your faith is futile, you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:12,19).

In the Roma Pentecostal churches, there are regular prayers for various needs of people and the *mahala*. After the sermons there is prayer for repentance directed toward new people in need of salvation. The Roma pastors pray for the sick to be healed, for the backsliders to be restored to the faith, and for believers to be drawn closer to God; they

offer prayers for sick children, for loved ones, for people about to undergo surgery, for jobs, and various other life trials. They have special prayers for people with family problems like spousal abuse and infidelity. Prayers are also offered for safe childbirth and for barren women to become fruitful. At the end of the year many Roma churches pray for the removal of generational and other types of curses, often brought about by magic spells. The pastors pronounce a blessing over people for the New Year. So most of the special prayers in the Roma churches are practical directed toward specific human needs. That attracts many new converts, because they are introduced to a God who is concerned with every area of their lives.

Lewis Rambo discusses the importance of crisis experiences in the conversion process. The crisis might have been caused by life's circumstances or by the Christian witness itself. There are a number of catalysts for crisis: mystical encounters, near-death experiences, illness and healing, external crisis, and pathology. True religious conversion normally requires and will often happen in a crisis situation (1993:48-50).⁷⁰

This is certainly the case with the Roma Pentecostal believers most of whom have converted to Christ and joined the faith community as a result of some major life crisis, which happened either in their personal or family lives. The discovery of the Christian faith gave them a certain measure of 'existential security.' A young woman, for example, was terribly depressed from the very beginning of her family life. The breakthrough came when she started going to church: "I had to start attending church, because there was no other option for me; my life was ruined...there was no joy for me, no comfort, no meaning in life" (Popkochev 2004: 51, 70). During my field research, most Roma believers pointed to a crisis experience as the start of their Christian journey.

Healing

Brother Kolio from Chirpan says: “the minorities [Roma and Turks] are like Thomas, they need to see in order to believe” (Chirpan 2006). Belief in supernatural healing is an intricate part of the Roma worldview, which is engaged by Pentecostal evangelism. Many Roma, including the unchurched, attend the evangelistic services for the sole purpose of healing prayers for themselves or a suffering loved one. The ritual prayer cloths and anointing oil have been very meaningful in this process. The fact that the Roma have seen many healing miracles has been a major catalyst for growth.

Physical sickness is the most common type of crisis leading to Christian conversion among the Roma. Many of them become believers after God has intervened to remove a major illness, which occurred either in their bodies or those of family members. The healing miracles have proved to them the power of God and the authenticity of the Christian faith. In many cases whole Roma families would become followers of Christ, because of one sick child.

The Roma believers view healing as an expression of divine love and favor for them. As discussed earlier their health conditions are much worse than those of the dominant population (Barany 2002:176). They have no money for medications and proper treatment. So, often the only one they can turn to for curing their diseases is God. They are grateful that Jesus suffered not only to provide forgiveness for their sins, but also healing for their bodies, as Isaiah (53:5) prophesied: “with his stripes we are healed.”

This has been a major catalyst for the Gypsy Pentecostal revival worldwide.

Speaking of the American Roma Pentecostals, Sato says:

...the fundamentalist church’s commitment to faith-healing, utilizing the power of prayers, anointing, and the laying on of hands, addresses the Gypsies’ most

urgent problem: that of physical survival. Health is a traditional concern, but today the Gypsy death rate, as mentioned above, is perceived as very high... few adults seem to reach their forties without having contracted some serious life-threatening or chronic disorder. (1988:90)

In the Pentecostal churches the Roma's inherent need for miracles is often satisfied. One of the major experiences contributing to conversion, according to Marushiakova and Popov, is physical healing (1997). That healing might have occurred before or after their faith commitment. There are Roma, of course, who have experienced a miracle, but do not become Christian disciples.

A Woman in the Fakulteta neighborhood of Sofia shared:

When our people come to church, they often pray for needs and personal problems. God moves among us! One brother threw away his cane! The Lord healed a child who had sick lungs! This sister here was deaf and dumb, and her son was also deaf, but God healed them both. My daughter's mouth was crooked, but she was touched of God and the deformity was gone! God brought many to repentance, because they see there is no other help except from God. Many of our people used to go to the Muslim priests to deal with such issues, but our God is powerful and performed many miracles here. This is all to the glory of Jesus Christ! (Fakulteta 2006)

D. McGavran considers divine healing a major catalyst for church growth:

American missionaries, who have grown up in a highly secular society, usually take a dim view of divine healing, considering it mere charlatanism. After long years of sharing that common opinion, I now hold that among vast populations, divine healing is one of the ways in which God brings men and women to believe in the Savior. Missiologists ought to have a considered opinion on the matter. They should not brush it off cheaply and easily. Administering for church growth in part means arranging the stage so that divine healing can take place. Look at the evidence of divine healing. Withhold judgment until the evidence has been reviewed. There is much more evidence than I am able to present in one short chapter. (1990:145)

There are some secular researchers, like Milena B. Sabkova who view 'miracles' as a manipulative way of "alluring" the Roma into the Protestant churches:

No matter how difficult making appraisals without systematic ethnographic "live" observations would be, some data uncover that at times there are also manipulative actions on the part of the "brothers" and "sisters." There is

information in literature about “wondrous healings”...These methods to reinforce faith require no comment, in my view. (2003:84)

This colleague researcher makes a presumptuous suggestion, defining as “manipulation” something, which in her own admission, she has never seriously researched. This is an “inexpensive” shot against the belief in miracles held by most Christians within all three branches of the faith – Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism, with some exceptions.⁷¹ I understand the reason why this scholar would make such a blanket statement: for 45 years Bulgarians were brainwashed by Marxist atheism, which includes disbelief in miracles.

Researchers should keep a couple of things in mind in order to make a fair assessment on this matter:

1. Most Roma have a good natural intelligence and cannot be so easily manipulated. Because of their closed form of society, they are well familiar with the people with serious diseases, including the invalids, in their community. Thus, a healing cannot be easily fabricated, because there are usually multiple witnesses of a health recovery unexplainable by medicine.

2. The best witnesses of “wondrous healings” are the doctors themselves, most of whom are not part of the church, and their written diagnoses. It is hard to argue with a medical document, confirmed and signed by physicians. Of course, there are stories that could be easily doubted and I have heard my share of them, but a documented miracle of healing is hard to dispute.

The following is the story of Ilia (Itso), a little boy from the Rakitovo Roma quarter also known as ‘the miracle child,’ in the words of his mother Verka Klaeva:

My child was a month old and had tuberculosis and pneumonia. As a result of the high fever he started to have spasms; because of the blood poisoning his body had turned blue. As he was put on an I.V. a vein burst in his head, resulting in hemorrhaging, which damaged his eyes. From the Velingrad hospital he was taken to the Emergency Room of the Military Medical Institute (VMI) in Plovdiv. He stayed there for 20 days without any company. When I would ask the doctors about his condition, their answer was consistent: "He is still alive, but will not recover." They felt sorry for me and said: "Whatever we could, we did, but only the Lord can heal him." I thank God for giving me the strength to pray and fast for 20 days. On the 21st day God heard my prayer and I was allowed to stay with him in the hospital. My child was dying before my very eyes, but God multiplied my faith. When Dr. Ivanov called me to his office, he told me: "Mother, you are young, you will have other children, but you do not need this one. If he ever lives he will be an invalid and will not walk." I said: "Doctor, I am a Christian. I have hope in the mercy of God and I ask you not to harm my child in any way. I believe that the Lord would heal him." I began to pray diligently before God for this Dr. Ivanov to go on a leave...In three days Ivanov went on a leave and for the next 17 days I was better able to care for my child. His health improved. The treating physician Dr. Boikinov noticing the change asked me: "Mother what have you done?" I showed him the New Testament and confessed that the Lord Jesus Christ has healed the child....

Five years later I took the child to Dr. Boeva, optometrist in the Regional Hospital, because the damage in his left eye had remained. When Dr. Ivanov had told me earlier that if the child lives, he will not be normal, I had promised him that I will take the child back in order that Ivanov could see him whole. The Lord had arranged it that when we returned to the clinic, all the nurses and doctors who had participated in the treatment of Itso, were gathered there. I asked them to listen to us and presented the child. They were all amazed. He [the boy] began to sing songs about God and quote Bible verses. When they remembered how bad his condition had been, they could not believe their eyes that this was the same child. They admitted that this must have been a miracle of God. Dr. Ivanov was very encouraged and asked us to visit him every time we go to Plovdiv. I thank my God for this miracle He performed on my son! (Klaeva 2006)

With a whole Roma neighborhood, several medical professionals, and hospital records as witnesses, this case is indisputable. I met this little boy Ilia several years ago and witnessed how only at 5 he sang songs and quoted Scriptures. He is now 11 a living testimony that the One who created the world, is also able to heal the sick. "I am the Lord that heals you" (Exodus 15:26). What Jesus did while He was on this earth, He is still doing today as the resurrected Lord: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Psychological Dynamics

The Pentecostal ministry and worship appeals in some important ways to the psyche of the Roma people.

Love and Attention

Mother Teresa, who spent most of her life ministering to homeless people and lepers in India, said: "This world is not just hungry for bread, they are hungry for love."

One of the main reasons, given by my informants, for Roma conversion to Pentecostalism, is the love they experience from Christians, and from God. The Roma believe and rejoice in their faith, because of the realization that God greatly loves them. When they study the Scriptures, they see that God loves the unlovable, the illiterate, the weak, and those rejected by the world. The Roma do not find true love anywhere else in this world. They love the Lord Jesus, because they know He first loved them and proved it by His death on the cross for them.

Having been victims of the harsh condescending attitude of the *gajo* during most of their history, the Roma are always impressed when they are treated with understanding and respect. They appreciate and are grateful when attention is shown to them. When missionary Godfrid Peterson⁷² left Plovdiv, the traveling Gypsies among whom he had ministered would often ask about him and expressed a great sense of loss: "He alone sought us out. He alone told us that even us, the poor despised Gypsies, God loved. Now there is no one to peek into our tents, to comfort us, to place his hands on the heads of our children, and to teach us about God" (Kulichev 1994:320-321).

That divine love has been shared and expressed to them by the Pentecostal churches. These churches are in the *mahali*, and the Roma movement is growing, because it has been mainly the Pentecostals who went there first to share Christ, build loving relationships with the Roma, and actively serve their ethnos.⁷³ The scholars who study ethnic minorities in Bulgaria recognize that work's remarkable success. The evangelicals, according to Marushiakova and Popov, have turned their attention to the poorest segment of the Gypsy population who are marginalized not only by the larger society, but by other Gypsies as well (1997). This has happened, because the Pentecostal and evangelical churches have attended to the needs of these most marginal Roma, discerning that the latter are actually the most receptive group among this ethnic minority.⁷⁴ The Pentecostal message of equality of all human beings has been very appealing to these groups. Even the traditional Christians among the Roma ethnos had mostly been unchurched in the past. Other religious groups have neglected them and looked down on them.⁷⁵ In the evangelical churches the Roma find what society cannot give them: true love and respect (Dimitrova 2000:67). By turning their attention to the Roma, the evangelicals have given them an opportunity to become committed followers of Christ.

People would naturally turn to a particular religious group that shows them love and attention, especially when others are neglecting them.⁷⁶ In the Pentecostal churches the Roma find their place and feel complete. Rev. Pavel Ignatov says:

There are no other organizations that deal with the Roma as much and on such a large scale as the evangelical churches. Nobody else pays them so much attention. The political and non-government organizations are not consistent in their work among them. Bulgaria is a poor country, without good social policies. We cannot afford to have the social work that is done in the West. In our country there is no other force impacting the Roma in such a massive way. Our message, besides faith, includes social justice and equality – this is the full gospel (2006).

Many might wonder why the Roma are losing their interest in the Orthodox Church, which is the official state church of Bulgaria. There are still a number of Roma who claim to be Orthodox, but rarely attend services. Many of them report that their spiritual needs are not being met there. The Roma do not experience the Orthodox Church as their own church. There are several reasons for that:

1. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, with its liturgical conservatism and nationalistic attitude, has largely neglected, or rejected, the Roma. Orthodox priests have often been unwilling to offer spiritual services to them - while criticizing the evangelicals for doing so. The evangelical churches have been often accused by the Orthodox for luring people by humanitarian aids and in other ways. My response to that would be: "Well, why has the Orthodox Church not been active in delivering aid to the poor Roma communities? Is it not the mission of the Christian Church to help the poor and the needy in this world?" The main way the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has engaged the Roma is confronting them over the price of candles⁷⁷ but, in their experience, it has shown little spiritual concern for their souls.

2. The Orthodox chants and liturgy are difficult for the Roma to understand. They may observe and enjoy the rituals and ceremonies, but, the knowledge of Christ is less accessible through them. Therefore, the Orthodox Church has not been able to successfully connect with the Roma worldview in Bulgaria and bring them to genuine Christian conversion.

3. The massive conversion of the Roma to Pentecostal Christianity in Bulgaria has also caused them to lose interest in Orthodoxy. The Pentecostal Roma churches are located in the *mahali*, Roma pastors preach there, and the believers sing Roma worship

songs. Roma pastors visit people who are in the hospital, fellowship with alcoholics and the hurting, care and pray for them in a personal way.

There is only one Roma group in Bulgaria that has largely remained within the Orthodox Church – the Kalderash, Serbian Gypsies. Most Kalderash adhere more strictly to the traditions of the Orthodox Church and, with few exceptions, do not attend evangelical churches (Pamporov et al 2001:28). The Kalderash are a smaller Roma group, but quite famous in Bulgaria and distinguished among the rest of the Roma population.⁷⁸

Simplicity

“The ethnic Bulgarians are more learned and want to study and test things, while the Gypsies are simple - they hear and receive the message. The Gypsy has no knowledge to hinder his faith” (Mitrova 2006). The Roma simplicity makes them more open to the gospel of grace and causes them to accept the Christian faith in a simple way. They are more likely to trust preachers who approach them. Many accept the faith quickly and are willing to give up certain sinful ways as they are admonished. The Roma are much like the Bereans of New Testament times: “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness” (Acts 17:11). Evangelist Milanov acknowledges that the Roma are more ‘graceful’ and open to the faith (2006). They are less interested in intellectual pursuit and more in the spiritual, the mysterious.

The Pentecostal message is presented in a simple, understandable, yet powerful way. The Roma, mostly uneducated and without much academics, book knowledge, or literacy, can understand the Christian message clearly as presented by the Pentecostal

churches. They come to faith in Christ with humility and childlike faith. To the question: “What can the ethnic Bulgarians learn from the Roma?” Milanov answered with the words of Jesus: “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). The Roma believe that the divine revelation has come to them as a demonstration of His great love for the poor and simple of the world. “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to little children. Even so, Father, for it seemed good in your sight” (Luke 10:21). Interestingly enough, there is no other occasion in the New Testament where it is specifically stated that Jesus “rejoiced” (Farmer 1998:1407).

Emotions

Roma culture is very temperamental. They have an “eternal now” view of time and generally live for the moment. They are optimists, believing against all odds that things will be better for them tomorrow. They are happy in spite of their miserable predicament. Roma joviality is clearly observed during their lavish celebrations for various holidays, and special occasions like weddings, baptisms, home dedications, and sending-off of young men to military service. These times demonstrate the Roma emotional nature, love for music and festivities. Often Roma spend their last resources and go into debt in order to provide entertainment to their guests for such occasions.

The emotional nature of the Roma has been a major asset in their historical struggle for survival. Emotions are evident in their behavior. They mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. Their historical hardships have made them

compassionate and helpful toward others in need.⁷⁹ Because of their seclusion, the Roma have been less impacted by Modernity, which downplayed human emotions. Therefore, they are not ashamed of expressing romantic passionate love and are good at comforting those who grieve.⁸⁰ “We know how to love, to embrace people and warm them up. If someone visits a Roma house, the host might sleep on the floor, but the guest would always be treated right” (Salchev 2006).

Roma emotionalism has been a great availability factor for their massive conversion to the movement of Holy-Ghost-baptized. Their psyche is engaged by this version of the Christian faith with its mysticism, ecstasy, speaking in tongues, and freedom of emotional expression. This applies to the movement around the world.

In regard to the Pentecostal faith of the American Roma, Sato says:

The music, the clapping and other body movement, the vocal participation, the permitted outpouring of emotion (though always in the context of praising the Lord) seemingly create strong personal feelings of involvement and commitment. All of this, then, provides a basis for a view of the church as a haven, covertly supportive of any Gypsy ways and unique among the institutions of our society in supplying a place, equipment, and motivation for Gypsies to express themselves, collectively and individually. (1988:84)

In exchange for giving up the worldly forms of entertainment and livelihood, the church has offered several important emotional compensators to the Roma: “forgiveness of sins, deliverance from condemnation, and hope for the future” (Sato 1988:79-81).

There was in a *gajo* church in France a Rom who shouted loudly when he heard the Word. His shoes were torn apart. The pastor said: “If you just quit shouting I will buy you new shoes.” The Roma brother got up and said: “Even if the pastor does not buy me shoes I will still shout ‘Hallelujah’ ” (Baba 2006)

Zoba says the *gitanos*’ “emotional intensity has translated into an equally enthusiastic commitment to the church. In the same way that the Acts...tell us people got together every day, they [the *gitanos*] hold meetings and services most of the week” (1999:53).

Ivan Zahariev, Roma Baptist minister, recognizes that the Church of God has attracted them more, because of the greater freedom for expressing their emotions there (Lom 2006). The Pentecostal denominations are much more successful in reaching the younger Roma – from ages 16 to 25. Those who attend the Roma Baptist churches are usually older folk (Dimitrova 2000:63).

In a conversation with a Congregational family in Bulgaria who had ministry among Roma, I inquired about their attitude toward healing and speaking in tongues. Their reply indicated that they disciplined their Roma converts by teaching them Scripture, but, avoided these supernatural elements, because they did not want the Roma faith to be based on emotions. Unfortunately, this has been the view of churches that were product of the Modern Era – their mission efforts have been primarily focused on engaging the minds of believers. The God of Scripture, however, is concerned with every area of a person's psyche, including the emotions. Actually, no one can be born-again or change their lifestyle by reason alone. "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation" (1 Corinthians 7:10). The emotions are an important venue for a personal relationship with God. Speaking of the Roma evangelicals, Sabkova depicts "a powerful personal faith that is rather a feeling, a sense, and experience of the numinous" (2003:83).

The Roma who have received help and victory from God, have a reasons to celebrate. Their emotions, both of joy and pain, are expressed through their singing and prayers. Some say: "With emotions you cannot enter God's Kingdom." But can you enter it without emotions? Christianity is not boring, because God's children are happy. We should worship God regardless of the way the tides turn. God truly wants us to go beyond the emotions, and understand the depths of His Word. The emotions, however, are very necessary. The Roma believers express all the childlike emotions. And they should! Persons who have always been looked down on, but suddenly find themselves in the land of dreams where they are honored as kings and saints, should be rejoicing. Nothing is more attractive than the love of God and the joy of salvation. (Milanov 2006)

Just one spark of faith can be turned into a spiritual fire in the Roma community. A cliché phrase can often be heard in Bulgarian evangelical circles: “The Roma are easily set on fire, but their fire is also easily extinguished.” Those who are really on fire stay in the church, but there are many who also drift away. Therefore, they need to not just become converts, but also disciples. Solid Bible teaching should follow their emotional captivation through Pentecostal worship.

Kalin Chepilev, Mission Director of the Foursquare Church in Bulgaria says:

The Roma accept Christianity in their own way. We try to make them accept it in our way. They believe it with their heart and emotions, not with the mind, while for the ethnic Bulgarians the opposite is true – faith begins in the mind. The human psyche consists of these three elements: mind, will, and emotions. The emotions, however, move the person’s will toward change. (2006)

Sabkova says of the Roma church: “the interviews confirm the psychotherapeutic effect of the collective experiencing of religious feelings in church, accompanied by forms close to Roma culture (music, songs in the Roma language)” (2003:83).

Since the Roma Pentecostal churches have used such indigenous cultural expressions in order to contextualize Christian worship in the mahala, they have been the most successful in discipling the pre-literate oral tradition Roma people. The following factors help Pentecostals overcome the literacy hurdle to discipleship:

1. Many Roma learn the Christian teachings through the songs and music.
2. The simple preaching, storytelling, and illustrations of Roma ministers present and explain the Christian truths in an understandable way for the illiterate.
3. The ministry of conversation and the relationships with believers help the new converts become disciples. That does not require much reading.

4. In most Pentecostal churches discipleship leads to the improvement of literacy skills of many in the community. This is especially true of the younger Roma generation.

Music

The Roma musical abilities have gained them much fame over the years. Roma history itself can be told through music, according to Kabuli, because there are two things that define the Gypsies – “their music and their exclusion from society” (2004:46).

Music has been a major dynamic in the growth of Roma Pentecostalism around the world. One of Pentecostal Christianity’s greatest strengths is that it allows the Roma to freely express themselves through their indigenous music. The music used in the public *mahala* crusades is especially effective in the evangelistic endeavor. While the preaching is important to the Roma, the worship songs touch their psyche in a deeper way. They often are spiritually moved by songs more than by the Word. “The easiest way to witness the gospel to Roma is through music” (Razlog 2006). Since, the Roma are less used to dealing with the written word, music provides a powerful vehicle of evangelism and discipleship. Scholars in both hemispheres have observed that the Roma’ love of music makes music a primary method of transformational discourse in their churches.

Barbara Lange, an ethnomusicologist, has written a whole dissertation dealing with how Romani music has enriched Pentecostal worship in Hungary.⁸¹

Speaking of the Spanish Gitanos, Zoba says:

Their mystical connection to music as a vehicle for storytelling has made song the primary mode of teaching and communicating the gospel. The majority are illiterate...and the only way they can learn is through listening; and music is how Gypsies express their deepest longings. (1999:53)⁸²

Of the American Roma churches, says Sato:

The church provides space, equipment, and electronic amplification for the enjoyment of religious music, both instrumental and vocal. Solo passages or songs emphasize individual performers, usually regular members of the choir or congregation, and allow a valued opportunity for the display of Gypsy talent. A kind of wistfulness is often observable in Gypsies' attitudes as they listen to each other's performances. There has been a deep-seated sense that the world denies Gypsies the recognition their talent deserves, that life in its unfairness passes Gypsies by. At the church, by contrast, all performers are Gypsy; much of the music and the words are their own. (1988:83)

The Roma believers have brought about major reforms in the musical traditions of the Bulgarian evangelical movement, according to Pavel Ignatov:

The Protestant, and especially the Pentecostal, churches give the Roma opportunity to express their skills. They develop their own cultural indigenous singing and music. The Orthodox and the Catholic churches would not change their liturgy for them. In our churches they can pray, preach, and sing in their mother tongue. This has brought about a new evangelical culture of song. Many of their songs have the Roma style music and rhythm. As they sing in Romanes, people are attracted to come and hear the Word. (2006)

Sato also attributes the great success in the evangelism of the American Roma partially to the electronic age: "...evangelist tape-recordings and television programs were able to by-pass Gypsy illiteracy and bring religious information directly into Gypsy homes" (Sato 1988:89). This is also very applicable to the movement in Bulgaria. The fact that music is employed as a major method of Roma evangelism, overcomes the hurdle of literacy. Non-literate Roma can be reached through music. They can understand the message of the songs in their own language and can feel the music in their typical rhythms. The use of modern technological means, such as cassette and videotapes, provide much needed help to literature, which is a weak method in reaching non-literate (or undereducated) groups of people.

Social Dynamics

The massive conversion of the Bulgarian Roma to Pentecostal Christianity is closely connected to their hard social predicament.

Poverty

“Poverty not only causes deprivation and suffering, it humiliates and degrades.” (Miller 2000:25). Pentecostalism engages the poor people of the world more than any other religious movement. The movement began in 1906 with a group of believers hungry for a spiritual move in a small mission at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, USA, led by William J. Seymour, a son of Louisiana slaves and has reached over 600 million followers worldwide. The Roma movement follows this worldwide Pentecostal pattern of spiritual revival among the poor.

The Roma in Bulgaria have been poor, weak, and defenseless in every area of life: spiritual, material, professional, legal, political, medical, and educational. They have had nowhere to turn for help with their multiple needs.

Poverty is not pretty, but disgusting and appalling; it produces an unpleasant smell. God, however, requires us to overcome these feelings and to be compassionate toward the poor. Think about this: What if I was born in a poor hut in the Roma quarter, or in an orphanage and could not speak my mother tongue? How would my life have been different? (Ignatov 2006)

Poverty and migration, combined with an exposure to a religious community usually make people more receptive to conversion. The marginalized groups in a society are often the earliest converts of a religious movement (Rambo 1993:33-36, 80). They are more open, because they seek belonging and a way of escape from the harsh realities of life. The flourishing of the Roma Pentecostal movement gives evidence to this fact.

Poverty, which often has caused them to drift away into socially ill conduct, like addictions or crime, is also a primary factor for their believing in God (Dolapchieva 2003:55). This is a fulfillment of the words of Paul: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5:20).

The Roma’s harsh predicament and low status make them deeply dissatisfied by life and receptive to the Christian message. “Personal dissatisfaction with themselves and their lives opens many people to a gospel of grace and a second chance” (Hunter 1987:84). This is proven by the fact that in most Roma quarters the poorest group has turned to the faith first, like, for example, the ‘Naked Gypsies’ in Sliven (2006).

The poor had priority in the ministry of Jesus, in part because of their high receptivity. Roma poverty and marginality makes them very open to the divine message of love, hope, and emancipation. “We believe more, because we are in greater need; we are poor and our wealth is with God” (Yambol 2006). “The life of poverty has made the Roma believe in something” (Razlog 2006).

Rev. Salcho Salchev, Roma pastor from Perushtitsa says:

God loves us more because we are poorer, yet joyful. We are victims of injustices. From our youth we have had a low self-esteem, feeling defenseless and rejected by society. Many of our Roma people are poor, but find refuge and a haven in the church. God gives them strength to keep struggling (2006).

Materially affluent people do not need faith as much, because they feel they could buy their future and security. Even though most people have struggled economically in Bulgaria, the other ethnic groups have had more alternatives. For the Roma, however, provision is insecure, and the future – unpredictable. Society has treated them unjustly. God is all they have and can depend on (Chepilev 2006).

In the church, the Roma find a safe haven from their social hardships. There they receive true peace, comfort, joy, fullness, and hope – things the world can neither give nor take away. The relationships formed there are positive and constructive. The Roma soul, poor, sick, and humiliated, receives prayer and comfort. They are made to feel as true human beings for a change. The local drinking joints in the *mahala* cannot accomplish that. The evangelical sermon, however, is an ointment, a balsam for the Gypsies (Ignatov 2006). In the Roma community Christ fulfils the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah: “...to comfort all that mourn...to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified” (Isaiah 61:3).

An old Roma woman, recently converted, from Kiustendil testifies:

We have a God. We have faith and pray believing that our prayers will be answered. I pray to Daddy Jesus. Everything is about this one God; we have not many gods. I have served the Lord all year. I gave up everything; even for St. George’s Day I did not slay a lamb. The only thing that I have not given up yet is cigarette smoking. And whatever I have asked of God, he gave it all to me. One preacher visited my house and people came to listen. When I feel heavy, worried, or anxious, I get up to pray and feel that God is with me. (cited in Petrova et al 2004:162)

Roma preachers speak words of encouragement to their congregations: “We have a God in whom we trust. Many people have no one to rely on, but we have Christ. Let us, therefore, leave the earthy cares and follow the Lord faithfully” (Samokov 2006).

Equality

From its beginning during the days of the Roman Empire, Christianity became the most appealing faith, because it removed barriers like race, gender, age, and social status.

...the very gradation of Jews, proselytes, God-fearers, and plain Gentiles was an indirect preparation for the gospel. For no man could be a ‘son of Abraham’ in

the fullest sense unless he was born a Jew. The Mishna says that the proselyte should pray in the synagogue 'O God of your fathers;' he is not, and never can be, on a par with them. Indeed, even the Jew of the Dispersion sank in status when he was out of the Holy Land, for there were some points of his religion, notably sacrifice, which he could not carry out. Women and children, too, were less than full citizens of Israel, at least in the sight of the Jewish male, who thanked God daily that he was not born a woman! All such class distinction was done away with in Christianity, and gave the new religion a flying start on Roman soil: after all, however much he admired the Jewish religion and ethics, it was hard for a Roman citizen to demean himself by becoming a second-class citizen of a despised and captive oriental nation. But this was not necessary in order to become a Christian, where all men were brothers, and distinctions of race, sex, education and wealth meant nothing. (Green 2004:46)

The Gospel of emancipation is a primary reason for Pentecostalism to become the fastest growing religious movement of our time.

The Roma are the most marginal group, the outcastes, the social lepers, of Bulgarian society, much like they are all over Europe. All other ethnic groups in Bulgaria Bulgarians, Turks, Armenians and Jews look down on the Gypsies and feel superior to them. This attitude of 'unquestionable superiority' is expressed in different ways: "From a tendency towards patronizing condescension to outright mockery and isolation." The status ascribed to the Roma causes a number of them to identify themselves as Turks, Bulgarians, and *Vlahs*. The *Aguipti* of Southern Bulgaria identify themselves as Bulgarian Muslims (Tomova 1995: 9). Some of the Romanian-speaking *Kopanari* say they are simply *Kopanari*, not Roma. Often these groups are offended if referred to as 'Roma' or 'Gypsies.'

This low social position makes the Roma feel inferior as a group. They desire to be equal with the other groups in the country, especially the ethnic Bulgarians. One Roma man said: "I do not want to be like the Bulgarians in anything, I just want them to accept me as an equal, just like I accept them" (Petrova et al 2004:78). This struggle for equality and against discrimination has continued throughout the long history of the Roma.

The Gypsies have traditionally attempted, through professing the dominant faith of a country, to make themselves equal to the general population. Often their participation in a religious community helps them lift their social status (Pamporov et al 2001:14). The Pentecostal churches have made them feel equal and cared for, much more than Orthodoxy or Islam. They have raised their social status. The miracle of the movement is that ethnic Bulgarians and Roma, in a context of strong prejudices, have become one family in Christ through God's love and the power of the Spirit.

A Roma family from Dobrich shared their motives for their evangelical faith:

We go to this church, because the pastor considers us equal with the Bulgarians; because he speaks of human suffering and views us as human beings equal with the others. This is not done by anyone else in the city; also we go because these services are interesting – like watching a film. People around us think that we are only able to steal and fight, but in the church we have been assured that we are normal human beings as all others, and that God will help us. (Simeonova and Tsenov, February 2003:97)

Rev. Pavel Ignatov says:

I learned to live besides people who were poor and unclean. I accepted them as God's creation. Every Christian has to love their neighbor, the Samaritan, the dirty person. I let them live in my home. In the Orthodox and Catholic Churches the Roma cannot become equal with the other laypeople. In our church there is total equality between rich and poor, educated and uneducated. The poor are most attracted by that! I have preached social Christianity without being familiar with it in theory. The Church is the Roma's only chance to be made equal with others. In the Orthodox Church, they are spectators. In our church with "dirty clothes" they are not despised, but find a welcome, a place, and a new identity. (2006)

This ministry approach is strongly in agreement with the great British reformer John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Wesley viewed all human beings as God's good creation, made in His image and likeness. He believed God's love and grace was fully available to every person regardless of gender, age, race, or social status.

Pastor Tihomir shares his testimony:

I went to a gathering in the home of brother Igor, former pastor of this church. I was a musician, ashamed of my old life. There I heard songs of forgiveness. Brother Ivan, Asen, brother Zhivko and many ethnic Bulgarians were there; they all hugged and kissed me, saying: We love you brother!" They were not ashamed to be among us and to eat with us. I was in shock and thought: "Who are these people! What is going on?" And because of the love I also became a believer. I began reading the Bible and I was radically changed. (Krupnik 2006)

Maria Dimitrova says:

One of the main reasons for the Roma to attend the Protestant churches...is that there they do not feel as 'others' [different]. The reason for this is that according to the religious dogmas, human beings have the same nature, genetically inherited – namely they are all sinners. Therefore, before God all are equal as spiritual brothers and sisters. (2000:72)

Ethnic Bulgarians, most of whom are agnostics, atheists, or nominal Orthodox,⁸³ feel their social status would be lowered if they join evangelical churches. They may be ridiculed, because of the stigma often attached to evangelicals in Bulgaria. To the Roma, on the other hand, who already are marginalized, this does not matter that much. They have less to lose and more to gain by becoming Pentecostal.⁸⁴ This is mostly the case with the Gypsies around Europe. Says Zoba of the Spanish *gitanos*: "Perhaps the Gypsies, disenfranchised by society in general, turn to the Filadelfia churches because they have nothing to lose by being different" (Zoba 1999:53).

This is a key to the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism worldwide:

They [Pentecostals] are teaching their members that they are made in the image of God; that all people have dignity and are equal in God's sight; and that therefore they have rights – whether they are poor, women, or children. These values are fundamental to the creation of a democratic government, and therefore, at the very least Pentecostalism is preparing good citizens who may exercise their vote in ways that reflect egalitarian values. (Miller and Yamamori 2007:5)

Fellowship and Social Interaction

The hard economic situation of the Roma community in Bulgaria does not allow its members the privilege to participate much in social and cultural activities like theater, movies, concerts, or museums (Popkochev 2004:65). The church in the *mahala* fills the socio-cultural void in Roma life. It reinforces Roma culture and provides a place of social interaction. It gives them opportunity to participate in big events like conferences and evangelistic services. It provides frequent travel opportunities, welcomed in their culture. This is the case with the Roma Pentecostals in many other counties: “there is the excitement and sense of social solidarity derived from gathering together in large groups. In the camping days such big throngs constituted life’s high points” (Sato 1988:82)

The churches have become the cultural institutions of the *mahala*. As many social events take place there, they give people the opportunity to become more acquainted. The churches unite the Roma communities and help their social and cultural progress. In daily worship and prayer services, many unbelievers are attracted by the love and fellowship.

Social Networks

The culture of the Bulgarian Roma is one of high context and ethnic solidarity. Their struggle for survival over the years has made them very united, clannish, and family oriented.⁸⁵ They are proud of their children⁸⁶ and almost never place their aging parents in nursing homes, but care for them till death.⁸⁷

The *mahala* is a place where many people live together in a small territory. The barriers are fewer and the distances are shorter. Being a more closed community, the Roma take important decisions as a group and rarely undertake individual initiatives.

Their relationships include a much wider circle of people than those of the general population. The Roma in any given *mahala* have some family relation to many others, especially those of the same sub-group. In smaller village *mahali* such relations might involve most of the Roma living there. For example all the 200 Gypsies living in Kovachevtsi are relatives, descending from one person – the pastor’s great-grandfather. About half of the Gypsies in this village are members of the Church of God (2006).

Unchurched people who are linked, by *kinship or friendship networks*, to the church’s active credible Christians are more receptive than other people. Undisciplined people tend to become potentially receptive, even emotionally involved, when someone in their social network becomes a genuine Christian. Typically, the church grows when it spreads to the friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers of its members, especially its new members and converts. Churches grow when they periodically survey their members and identify all the... undisciplined people who are linked to believers (Hunter 1987:77).

This is an important factor in the quick dissemination and growth of the Pentecostal movement among the Roma. When testifying they often point to a close relative or friend whom God used to invite them to church. Praying for unsaved loved ones, they take Paul’s words to the Philippian jailor, as a prophetic promise: “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with your entire household” (Acts 16:31).

Therefore, many Roma come to Christ as families and attend church together with their brothers, children, and relatives. The pastors might be cousins to a number of people in the neighborhood and the congregation. Family relations between Roma in different towns and villages have been a key to the planting of new churches.

The following testimonies of two Roma women reflect this dynamic:

I attend an evangelical church. The faith gave me strength, encouragement, and meaning in life. My husband’s whole clan attends this church they are believers. I joined when I got married. After church I feel relieved and refreshed. I feel that a burden has been taken off of me. There is great discrimination...but we decide our own fate. I want to preserve the things of God in my family; I want my children to be good Christians (cited in Petrova et al 2004:131-133).

I attend a Christian church in the quarter...founded by the Roma folk. I started going after my husband was converted. I followed his example by falling on my knees to pray, and the Lord touched me (cited in Petrova et al 2004:136-137).

The family network provides a necessary supportive system for the Roma believers. As they pray and read the Bible together at home they have the environment necessary for a healthy Christian life. These are the stories of a couple of Roma men:

My sister told me about God. She goes to church at the National Palace of Culture (Church of God). There they pray, but every evening my sister and her family pray at home and I pray with them also...We go to Rhema, my parents attend the National Palace, but at home we pray together for needs (Dimitrova 2000:64).

In describing the *Rudari*⁸⁸ evangelicals in Eastern Bulgaria, says Slavkova:

The nomadic groups attend church in their town/village of residence whenever they are not on the road; during their time of travel they pray together with their families. In the winter months many more believers gather in the churches, because the *Kopanari* return from Greece and the *Ursari*, with their bears and monkeys, are back (“The Rudari...”).

Social Service

Throughout history the Christian Church has carried the responsibility to help the poor and alleviate suffering in this world. It has initiated community services more than any other institution on earth. The Pentecostal movement has also been active in social work around the world,⁸⁹ having realized that the relationship with God is “mediated through the poor and disenfranchised in society.” Pentecostal believers have realized that service to the needy is “inextricably linked to Jesus’ proclamation of a coming Kingdom. Indeed a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry...was compassion for the poor and marginalized in society, including interacting with tax-collectors and sinners” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:58-59).

The Pentecostal churches in Bulgaria demonstrate the love of God for the Roma through various social ministries. They express concern for the Roma' spiritual and physical well-being. Tons of humanitarian aids have been brought to the *mahali* like food, clothing, medications, and school supplies. They believe that this has been in direct obedience to God's Word:

Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But, whoever has this world's good, and sees his brother have need, and shuts up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwells the love of God in him. My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:17).

The Roma churches are making a difference in their communities. They simply do this by following the principles of Christian love exemplified by the first century church. The believers know each other's problems and attempt to solve them. They do this mostly, without foreign help, by making great personal sacrifices. They share their resources to help people's needs in the quarter. That attracts many new people to the church. The believers in Dolna Bania shared:

All of our people have bread. When there is a family without food, the pastor gets the believers to collect jars with canned groceries to help the needy. We give food to the elderly, especially widows. We asked for people to donate old clothes for the needy and all the brothers and sisters gave some. We are a giving church where even the poor give (2006).

The Roma Pentecostal churches abide by their simple reading of Christianity's ethic: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Several churches, like the ones in Samokov, Lom, and Moderno Predgradie, Sofia, have done active outreach to poor children in their communities.

It should be clarified that the Pentecostal and other Protestant churches do not provide help for the Roma people just to bring them into the church. That may be part of

the purpose, but it is not the only purpose. The help offered is an expression of the love of Christ to all human beings, regardless of their religious beliefs. People get naturally attracted to institutions that help them and show them care. There are a number of people who criticize the evangelicals for helping the Roma, but are unwilling to do anything themselves for this poor Bulgarian ethnos.

The gifts are not the primary motivation for the Roma to join the Pentecostal churches.⁹⁰ There are, of course, people among them who are only interested in getting humanitarian aid from the church. The faithful Roma believers, however, are not motivated to remain in church by the help given. The belief, that the church-provided help is the primary motivator for the Roma to join the movement, is generally false.⁹¹

Some 'prosaic' explanations can be heard among the surrounding non-Roma population, regarding the "aid" in kind that the Roma receive from the churches. ...the information about aids received from the Protestant churches is scarcely confirmed. The priests collect funds – "a tithe" in the words of one of the informants: sometimes merely symbolic sums, contributed even by the poorest. Aid is redistributed from the funds collected (purchase of medicines for someone ill among the poorest families) (Sabkova 2003:83).

Discipleship Dynamics

Conversion is a process rather than a single event. There are a number of Roma believers that fall away from the faith. If the converted person does not become integrated in the local church life, he/she is not likely to remain. In order for the Roma churches to have a better retention rate, they need to have a good process of discipleship.

In the section on 'Interaction,' Lewis Rambo discusses four elements, which are necessary for the new individual believers to become grounded and fully integrated in their new religious society: *relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles*. If Christian

discipleship is to be successful it should include all these four dimensions of interaction. The Roma Pentecostal churches that have applied them have been more successful in keeping their converts (1993:107-108):

Relationships

“*Relationships* create and consolidate emotional bonds to the group and establish the day-by-day reality of the new perspective.” Living as a closed society, the Roma are very relational people. The new converts need to form relationships with strong faithful believers to encourage them and assist their spiritual growth. That will insure that they remain in the church and in the faith, because, it is virtually impossible to be a solid biblical Christian outside the Church fellowship.

Hunter employs the term ‘proliferation’ as a type of church growth, referring to the multiplication of “units as recruiting groups and ports of entry” (Hunter 1987:204). The Roma churches have done this by having regular women’s, children’s, and youth group meetings. Thus all believers, including pre-Christians and new converts, are able to become integrated into the body by taking part in prayers, worship, and discussions with their own particular group. The time spent together and the sharing of common problems helps them form relationships and bond with the Christian community.

In *The Social Construction of Reality* the importance of communal relationships for religious commitment is given significant attention and cogently explained:

Alternation requires processes of re-socialization...The most important social condition is the availability of an effective plausibility structure, that is, a social base serving as the “laboratory of transformation. This plausibility structure will be mediated to the individual by means of significant others, with whom he must establish strongly affective identification. No radical transformation of subjective reality (including of course identity) is possible without such identification, which inevitably replicates childhood experiences of emotional dependency on

significant others. These significant others are the guides into the new reality...they mediate the new world to the individual...Socially, this means an intense concentration of all significant interaction within the group that embodies the plausibility structure and particularly upon the personnel assigned the task of re-socialization. The historical prototype of alternation is religious conversion...It is only within the religious community, the *ecclesia*, that the conversion can be effectively maintained as plausible. This is not to deny that conversion may antedate affiliation with the community – Saul of Tarsus sought out the Christian community *after* his “Damascus experience.” But this is not the point. To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality. In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could *remain* Paul only in the context of the Christian community that recognized him as such and confirmed the “new being” in which he now located this identity. This relationship between conversion and community is not a peculiar Christian phenomenon (despite the historically peculiar features of the Christian *ecclesia*). One cannot remain a Muslim outside the *umma* of Islam, a Buddhist outside the *sangha*, and probably not a Hindu anywhere outside India. Religion requires a religious community, and to live in a religious world requires affiliation with that community. The plausibility structures of religious conversion have been imitated by secular agencies of alternation. The best examples are in the areas of political indoctrination and psychotherapy (Berger 1966: 157-158).

One of the greatest examples of such a powerful relational bonding, leading to a Christian commitment, took place among the Roma young people in Samokov in late 2004. The event that brought this about was the tragic death of George Todorov, the pastor’s son, who was then only 18. George was killed in a car accident on October 3. As a result, about 50 of George’s friends decided together to join the church immediately. Reni, George’s mother, overwhelmed with emotions told the story:

They came to my home every evening after the tragedy. I entered their pain while they entered mine. It was a very hard time for me, but they were my comfort. While they were comforting me, I taught them the Scriptures and they learned much about God. They had many questions, but the Holy Spirit helped me answer them.

I did not know until then, that all of my son’s friends were smoking grass. I had been praying fervently for years about the problem with drugs and prostitution in the *mahala*. I thank God my tragedy was not accidental, because it brought about their conversion. I told them to listen to their parents and not to use weed and other drugs. God continually gave me a word for them as they came to my house daily for one year. That is how they learned the truth about Jesus Christ. I know everything about them – their whole autobiographies. I showed them that there is life beyond the grave. They were my comfort and solace, and,

as I also realized, my calling and mission. I committed much effort to rescue them from the drugs. They were all delivered from these vices. Many more of their friends also came. Through one child's death, God saved 250 young people who attend church now regularly. If I were not a Christian I would have blamed people. But I realize now that God's ways are mysterious and His plans higher than ours. Through these youth I feel alive; through them I see the smile and the face of my son (Samokov 2006).

By this time, Reni was weeping and all the youth were silent. She was sharing this for the first time. It was one of the most touching stories I had ever heard.

Rituals

"*Rituals* provide integrative models of identifying with and connecting to the new way of life." They make the personal commitment to the faith official and public. They also create a meaningful memory, which would be a good point of reference in the life of the new convert. Rituals are important events for religious communities as they help affirm and propagate the faith. They are also a way of needed social catharsis.

The Roma's inherent religiousness predisposes them toward great appreciation for sacred rituals. Even confession of faith could be done in a ritualistic and communal way in the *mahala*. In the summer of 2006, for example, we attended in Samokov the repentance and faith confession of a Roma man, known as Assen the Bearded.⁹² Assen is an educated gentleman who has a Construction Company and is very successful in business. Most of his family had recently joined the church. But this time he wanted to make an official commitment to Christ. So several ministers were invited to his house to lead him into this new life with Christ. With his whole family in attendance, we gave him a word of admonition and lead him in a prayer of commitment. This was an interesting experience, because I am more used to seeing that happen in the context of a worship

service or a personal encounter. This setting was quite different, however, and showed me how important rituals are for the Roma in the context of family and community.

The main rite-of-passage for new converts in the Roma Pentecostal community, just like in most Christian traditions, is water baptism. The baptisms are usually performed in a river and attended by most of the congregation. There are songs, ministry of the Word, worship, and prayer at the baptism site. Before his/her baptism the new convert vocally renounces the sins of the world and makes a public pledge to Christian service. There are Roma churches that baptize in water even in wintertime, when it is so cold that the ice has to be broken in order for the baptism to be performed.

Communion is another sacred ritual in the Roma churches. It is done in the traditional way with a common cup and unleavened bread. Many Roma believers, especially those affiliated with the Church of God, practice foot-washing after the Lord's Supper. The Roma churches practice most of the rituals done by the Pentecostal churches – weddings, funerals, ordination, prayers for healing, and baby dedications. These are always special times for the Roma faithful. The major calendar holidays of the church are Christmas, Easter, and New Year's Eve. There are usually programs, dramas, special singing, and fellowship meals on all of these occasions. The normal rites-of-passage are done by the Christian Roma, but accompanied by prayers, worship singing, pastoral exhortation, and the evoking of spiritual blessings. On a couple of occasions, I attended 'spiritual' house dedications: The Roma family invites the local pastor and many guests from the community to celebrate their entering into a new home with a meal and a short service. The pastor reads Scripture, shares a brief word, and leads the community in prayer, blessing the family and their new home. The fact that the church actively

participates in those occasions demonstrates divine involvement in every area of human life. It also gives evidence to the Roma' high regard for spiritual values and blessings.

Rhetoric

The *Rhetoric* “provides an interpretive system, offering guidance and meaning to the convert.” This is the hermeneutics and apologetics of the faith that engage the human reason. The new believer should be able to understand and explain the faith rationally and systematically. The rhetoric aspect of the interaction process also gives the believers the ability to defend what they believe and why.

Some Roma believers grow cold toward the faith, because they accept it only through their emotions. Emotions are indeed necessary for a genuine conversion, but solid biblical teaching must follow them in order for the new converts to become disciples of Christ. The Roma churches, especially those whose pastors have been diligent in getting good theological education, have been better with developing programs to teach believers the essential teachings of the faith through Bible classes and small group meetings. Because of the explosive growth of the Roma Pentecostal movement and the fact that most of its followers have come from the grassroots of the *mahala*, however, the ‘rhetoric’ aspect of the interaction remains a weaker point, which requires improvement. The last chapter gives more specific recommendations on this matter.

Roles

The *Roles* “consolidate a person’s involvement by giving him or her a special

mission to fulfill.” As the believers get special responsibilities within the group, they are more likely to maintain their interest and deepen their commitment.

This has been successfully employed by the Roma Pentecostals. Very often the Roma children have joined the church first and then led their parents to the Lord. The church engages the children in a way that the world cannot. The economic situation in Bulgaria does not allow parents to provide any form of entertainment for the children outside the *mahala*, so their participation in church functions becomes the highlight of their weekly activities. Their Sunday school teachers give them roles and many opportunities to participate in the worship. A woman from Fakulteta, shares:

The daughter goes to church to play and sing. There is a young man who takes care of the children teaching them to sing and quote scriptures. And she says: “Oh, mom, the scripture!” She cries when the weather is bad and I don’t let her go (cited in Petrova et al 2004:53).

A teenage boy from Filipovtsi, says:

I am a Christian and attend the Bulgarian Church of God. In our quarter this is the only church. The greatest holidays are Christmas and Easter on them we praise the Lord, recite poems, and do drama for God’s glory (cited in Petrova et al 2004:125)

Young men who feel called to ministry are also given roles by their pastors in order to start early preparation. Pastor Ivan Georgiev shared how he trains preachers:

I train ministers by letting them first read God’s Word to the congregation. Then I may let them preach. I spend time praying with them. I explain that as we pray in the Holy Ghost, God refreshes Scriptures to our memory (Georgiev 2006).

The Kazanluk Church has identified young talented Roma musicians. It has organized an orchestra, of which all the members are youth. They play during various holidays and special occasions in the mahala. Pastor Mitko’s son plays violin in this band and plans to pursue a degree in music (Dolapchieva 57-58).

Since there are so many needs in the Roma community, there are plenty of roles to be filled by believers. The Roma churches have been effective in identifying people's gifts and using them in the ministry. Roma laypeople need to be motivated to participate; of course, there are some among them, just like in most Christian churches who expect the pastor to fulfill most of the ministry responsibilities. If the church functioned as the body of Christ, however, all members should take part in the ministry.

The various social ministries the Roma churches have launched give plenty of opportunity for believers of all ages to be involved in serving. Mostly volunteers fill these roles. Older or middle-age women do the cooking if the church has a soup kitchen for the poor. Whenever churches build a "prayer home" many men (and often women) from the *mahala*, become voluntarily involved using their skills in the building process. Thus, most Roma churches have had to pay little for labor on their sanctuaries.

Contextual Dynamics

Earlier Gypsy missions, like the ones in Britain in the 19th century, failed to successfully evangelize this ethnos because they were attempting to change their culture. In order to become Christians, the Gypsies had to stop being Gypsies. The Baptist Church, in its pioneer ministry among the Gypsies in Bulgaria, rightfully thought on this problem: "As we consider the Gypsy mission, it is very important for us to face the question: should the Gypsies be made to settle in one place? Or could they not become better Christians as traveling Gypsies?" (*Christian Friend* 1939:7)

Roma Pentecostalism's success is substantially due to the fact that it is indeed an indigenous movement:

The Gypsy Evangelical Church differs from previous missions in that it is, in the best sense, profoundly nativistic. It does not teach its converts to be ashamed of being Romani; on the contrary, it tells them that they can be better Gypsies for being Christian – and better Christians for being Gypsies – for unlike the poor non-Gypsies who are tied down to one place by their houses, the Gypsy can carry his witness for Christ wherever he wanders (Acton 1979:291).

McGavran also attributes the growth of the movement to its indigenous nature:

...the May 1974 Church Growth Bulletin reported more than 100,000 Gypsies living in France. These were geographically near to millions of Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The Gypsies all spoke French – but not at home. There they spoke Romany. The Gypsies, despite living in France for hundreds of years, were culturally far distant from the Christians. Only after missionary Clement le Cossec of the Assemblies of God in 1958 started multiplying congregations of Gypsies, which heard the Bible, prayed and worshipped in Romany, did the Gypsy movement gather strength. In 1961 (only three years later) he appointed Gypsy leaders as pastors and colleagues. In 1974 about a third of all Gypsies in France were evangelicals. The total community numbered thirty to forty thousand. From France the Gypsy movement to Christ spread to many other lands (1990: 50-51).

The Gypsies of each particular country and Roma group, have been most effective in reaching their own groups (*vitsas*). Without any knowledge of McGavran's Church Growth principles, like the 'Homogenous Unit' or 'People Movements,' they realized that their witness would be most fruitful if each group evangelized its own people. In France for example, the "Manouche could the more effectively reach Manouche, Rom influence Rom, and Gitan win Gitan for Christ" (Ridholls 1986:57).⁹³

The Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria is an indigenous movement. The Roma's conversion to the faith does not change their ethnic identity, but affirms it and makes them better Roma. The movement was started under the guidance and support of ethnic Bulgarian evangelical leaders, and continues with their active participation, but the main responsibility for it has largely been transferred to the Roma. In mission studies, it has been proven over and over again, that a people group has been reached successfully only when indigenous churches have been established within that group. "Sometimes a

more indigenous ministry will reveal people to be receptive. This is because people in a community need a local pastor and church that understands them, fits their neighborhood, speaks their language, and sings songs they like” (Hunter 1987:79). The study of the Roma churches in Bulgaria has proven this to be true. The more indigenous the Roma movement has become, the more rapid growth it has experienced. In the village of Kovachevtsi, the Roma and ethnic Bulgarians have great respect for each other, but the latter label the Church of God as ‘a sect,’⁹⁴ or call it ‘Gypsy faith’ (Kovachevtsi 2006).

If you need to find any of these Roma churches in Bulgaria, it would not be difficult to do so. When you get to a town or village, you simply inquire where the Roma *mahala* is and once you get there you ask about the church; anyone should be able to direct you. The phenomenal growth and impact of the Pentecostal movement among the Roma has not happened because the Roma have gone to the Pentecostal churches, but because the Pentecostal churches have gone to the Roma. In most Roma quarters, these are the only churches present. There are some Baptist, Adventist, Methodist, or Congregational Roma churches, but the Pentecostal ones are by far the majority. I am yet to find an Orthodox Church in a Roma *mahala* in Bulgaria.

Some non-Roma church leaders feel the Roma need to come to the Bulgarian-led churches, because there they could learn more. While I agree that the Roma pastors need more theological education and training, the strength of the movement is precisely in the fact that the churches are Roma churches located in the Roma community. The Roma go to church to be among their own people, speaking in their own tongue. They feel these churches as their own.

The fact that the local Pentecostal church in any Roma community is *there* gives them a sense of pride and dignity. As I was looking for one Roma church, I asked for directions in the mahala. A Roma gentleman responded: “Are you looking for *our* church?” This certainly helped me to understand one of the most important factors for the growth – the presence of the churches where the Roma live.

In their struggle for equality, the Bulgarian Roma want to prove that they can do the things the *gaje* can do. Most feel that the presence of the churches is very helpful to the mahala community. Whenever churches are being built, both churched and unchurched Roma give generous contributions to them. Revitalization of Roma communities would not have taken place on such a grand scale unless the churches were right there in the Roma quarters.

The massive multiplication of Roma congregations in Bulgaria took place in the first decade after the fall of Communism. This was the time of greatest spiritual harvest in the country. There are some Roma quarters where the majority of the inhabitants have become Pentecostal believers. The bigger Roma quarters usually have several churches; this is due to the presence and activities of more denominations, newer church plants, or church-splits. This offers the Roma a greater choice of churches for worship.

The Indigenous Church principles can be observed in the Roma Pentecostal movement. This is an important factor for the success, growth, and revitalizing impact of the movement in their communities. The Roma churches in Bulgaria have become more indigenous, but they maintain healthy partnerships with other churches and organizations.

Three Self-Principles

The principles of the Three-Self theory can be observed in the movement:

Self-Governing

“The first essential in establishing an indigenous church is to have consecrated, Spirit-filled workers” (*Indigenous Church* 1960:108). Among Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders, Pavel Ignatov was the first to call for the promotion of Roma indigenous leaders to provide spiritual care for their people – an idea that was never seriously entertained before the 1980s. This was adopted by Ignatov as one of the foundational principles for this ministry (Ignatov 2004:122-123). The Roma have taken greater charge of the movement recently. This has been helpful and healthy for its growth. Most of the Roma ministers in Bulgaria have been ordained after 1990. Often their appointments to ministry have come at the request of their own communities.⁹⁵

This has been a major catalyst for the growth of the movement around the world. Within Pentecostal Christianity, it is much easier for Gypsies to become ministers and establish new churches. This is not the case in Orthodox, Catholic, and mainline evangelical traditions. Most Roma congregations in Europe currently have their own indigenous pastors (Kaplan and Taylor 2003:11) and ‘priests’ who can reach their own ‘tribes’ (Fraser 1992:315). This is possible because most Pentecostal churches do not have strict academic requirements for ordination. If they did, this would be a great hindrance, since most Roma lack much formal education.⁹⁶ The ministry appointment elevates the Roma pastor to an important position in their community.⁹⁷ It also gives the Roma an opportunity to be offered pastoral care by persons from their community who understand and serve their needs most effectively (Marushiakova and Popov 1997).

Self-Propagating

“...unless the national church itself by active witness gives birth to new churches and imparts to them directly everything essential to their spiritual growth and life – the indigenous church will die” (*Indigenous Church* 1960:59).

‘People movement’ happens within a given community. In the 1980s, when the movement began in the Church of God, most of the Roma believers learned from their ethnic Bulgarian brothers and sisters, imitating their style of life and Christian worship.⁹⁸ Recently, they have realized they need to be more like their own ethnos and to demonstrate the uniqueness of Roma Christianity (Ignatov 2006). Pastor Salchev said: “We won people by remaining Gypsies. Our people did not have a good understanding of Christianity before, thinking that by converting the Roma have to change their ethnos and become Bulgarian” (2006). The Roma churches keep certain cultural customs; for example the women usually sit separately from the men.⁹⁹

The Roma Pentecostals have perpetuated the movement largely by their indigenous witness, public evangelism, and church-planting. They have often worked in partnerships with others, but the daily witness has been from Roma to Roma.

In Roma Pentecostal Churches, not only the witness but also the worship has been contextualized. One of the most beautiful experiences is to hear Roma worship in their own language and musical style. They sing Bulgarian songs and hymns as well, but the indigenous Roma music expresses their heart worship to God. There are many Roma songs that have been composed by people experiencing spiritual inspiration. The Pentecostal churches have allowed the Roma to freely express their culture through their own ethnic music. Many Roma, as discussed earlier, are attracted to the Christian faith

through songs. They are especially moved when they hear singing in their own language. In regards to preaching, most Roma pastors minister and read the Bible in Bulgarian.¹⁰⁰

Self-Supporting

The Bulgarian economy has been under tremendous hardships in the transition period. Many citizens of the country have struggled financially, but the Roma population has had it worst. Their unemployment, especially in rural areas, has brought them to a condition of economical devastation. Many Roma families live on welfare, which in Bulgaria is quite insufficient. They cannot feed their families or pay utilities, much less buy clothing or school materials for their children. Because of these hardships, the Roma churches have been greatly dependent on outside contributions for funding major building projects. Most Roma pastors have a regular job in order to support their families. Very few of them are full-time ministers.

In spite of this, churches can be seen everywhere in the Roma quarters. These beautiful, even though often unfinished, sanctuaries are a wonderful witness for the glory of God. The church-buildings are often connected to many miraculous stories of provision and help. Some Roma pastors have been more successful than others in communicating with partners their needs and soliciting funds. Many affluent people who visit the Roma quarter are inspired to help the Roma build their 'prayer houses.'

The field research proved that, according to their limited means, the Roma have contributed significantly to their own projects. Just like the widow whom Jesus commended in the temple, they have offered their two mites to the Lord cheerfully and sacrificially. The Roma have given beyond their means, because they are grateful to God. Roma believers have given hundreds of hours of free labor on church-building projects.

The Church of God in Filipovtsi, Sofia was started and completed by faith:

As the congregation was growing we needed a place to worship. We had rented a facility, but the lease was discontinued and we were out on the street...literally. We took our chairs out and gathered at the *mahala* plaza; we made a pulpit and old brother Boris preached to us. Then we decided to build a church, but had no money. At the open-air meeting, we took up an offering. I [Jasharka] was taking notes of the collection: one sister gave 500 leva, another one - 1,000; I wept and said: "God, you do it!" Our people were poor, but contributed beyond their means. There was only one available piece of property and the local mayor gave it to us. We kept praying for the funds. Brother Pavel heard and helped us! Some brothers and sisters collected the gold they had at home and gave it. Brother Boris gave his savings for the roof. Sister Lydia decided we should cook *mekitsi*¹⁰¹ and sell them to raise funds. Even retired women gave what they had to build this sanctuary. God blessed us with a good sound system (Filipovtsi 2006).

The Sinai Church of God in Lom was also built by the Roma of the quarter:

The church was built after the people in the Humata quarter got together. A church building project can unite the whole Roma community. All the Roma participated, because they fear God. They gave much of themselves and contributed financially, according to their means. Everyone in the community, not just the regular churchgoers, did this. We worked hard together making bricks. If people could not participate with physical labor, they would give some money even 5-10 leva could be a sacrifice to some Roma. There were cases when people donated blood in order to make a financial contribution to the church.¹⁰² Some brought food for the construction crew. This was a great expression of people's love for the Lord (Lom 2006).

There are hundreds of stories like these. According to Milanov, Sliven Roma families would use their last resources, during church conferences, to host visitors from around the country. Some women would get their *cheiz* (wedding gifts) out in order to take care of their guests (2006). The Roma believers depend on outside help, because of their poverty, but they themselves give much beyond their means. Churches accomplish great things with small amounts, because people work as a team. True indigeneity does not exclude partnerships, because the Christian Church should function as one body.

The Homogeneous Unit

McGavran makes an important connection between ethnic consciousness and church growth. His 'Homogenous Unit' principle¹⁰³ was originally aimed at inclusion of various ethnic groups in the body of Christ, because no group of people is likely to be reached effectively until they have a viable thriving congregation of their own kind.

Indigenous churches cannot exist unless there is a degree of homogeneity that characterizes them.

Each society, finding itself in certain physical, economic and political circumstances, develops a characteristic culture and self-image, as anthropologists have pointed out, that makes it different from every other society...A homogenous unit of society may be said to have people consciousness when its members think of themselves as a separate tribe, caste, or class. (1990:154-155)

This is very true of the Roma who in spite of their group differences view themselves as a people. Their resistance as a despised minority against outside oppression has kept them together for centuries. Their traditions have preserved them as a culture. They have strong ethnic consciousness and like being with their own people.¹⁰⁴

The great obstacles to conversion are social, not theological...It is patently true that among societies with high people consciousness those methods of propagating the gospel, which enable individuals to accept Christ without renouncing their peoples are blessed of God to the growth of his church...People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers. This principle states an undeniable fact. Human beings do build barriers around their own societies. More exactly we may say that the ways in which a society lives and speaks, dresses and works, of necessity set it off from other societies. The world's population is a mosaic, and each piece has a separate life of its own that seems strange and often unlovely to men and women of other pieces. (McGarvan 1990:156,163)

Ethnic consciousness has served as a vehicle for spreading the Gospel among the Roma. Pentecostalism does not take away their Gypsy identity, but affirms it, improves their self-image, and corrects the sinful aspects of their culture. There is a great number of Roma in ethnically Bulgarian churches, but few ethnic Bulgarians in Roma churches.

The Roma feel comfortable among the Bulgarians, but a pre-Christian Bulgarian would feel uncomfortable among the Roma, because of ethnic biases. Most Bulgarians do not even know about this phenomenal Christian movement, taking place among the Roma.

The Roma began converting in the ethnic Bulgarian churches and many mixed churches still exist. Both models have been effective in the movement. The greatest growth, however, occurred as the Roma developed their own, mostly homogenous, churches.¹⁰⁵ This principle has not been deliberately enforced in the church-planting, but has often been the way things have developed.¹⁰⁶ Partly, this is due to the fact that most Roma in Bulgaria live in communities (ghettos) – secluded from the rest of the population.¹⁰⁷ Thus, the establishing of Roma churches has proved to be of revolutionary effects for the evangelistic outreach among the Roma and the growth of this movement.

Conclusions

The dynamics and factors for the growth of the Pentecostal movement among the Roma in Bulgaria are multiple and very complex. They can be summarized as follows:

Spiritual

God loves the poor, weak, and marginalized people of this world. The Roma are inherently religious and, having experienced the power of the Holy Spirit, they are finding a place of belonging – a home in the Pentecostal Church. For a group that has always suffered and roamed without an earthly home, the hope of the *eschaton* provides great satisfaction and encouragement.

Supernatural

The greatest distinctive of Pentecostalism is the belief in miracles and spiritual gifts. Signs and wonders following confirm the preaching. Most Roma come to Christ as a result of a personal or family crisis. They are especially moved by the belief that God cares for every area of their life and heals their diseases.

Psychological

This movement more than any other religious group demonstrates God's love for the outcaste. The presentation of Christianity is simple and understandable, even to the unlearned. The movement gives the Roma the freedom to express the whole range of human emotions. Thus it becomes a great cathartic outlet for their hard social condition. Pentecostalism is a perfect match for their highly temperamental psyche, moved and inspired by the music in the churches.

Social

The poverty of the Roma puts them in a place of great dependence and need. Their trust in God helps them deal with their hard life. The social service provided by the churches is very appealing. The Roma are not usually attracted by the humanitarian aid itself, but by the love and care it demonstrates. In the Pentecostal movement the Roma's desire for equality is satisfied – there they are treated as normal and equal human beings, unlike in most other places in the world. Their closed communal life is a key factor for the quick dissemination of the faith. The gospel is spread among them through web networks. The churches have become the primary places of social life in the mahali.

Discipleship

The Roma Pentecostal congregations include the four levels of interaction, necessary for the retention of new converts: relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles. The rhetoric is one area that can be improved in order to provide a firmer biblical, reasonable, and theological foundation for their Christian faith.

Indigenous

The Roma Pentecostal movement is becoming more and more indigenous, even though a great number of Roma still attend ethnically mixed congregations. The Roma churches are located in the Roma mahali, governed by Roma pastors, include Roma members, sing worship songs in the Romani language and style, and use Roma volunteers for spiritual ministry and community service.

This is how the Pentecostal Church has become *the Church of the Roma*.

CHAPTER 6

REVITALIZATION OF ROMA PEOPLE, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITIES

The contagious spread of Christianity has had a revitalizing effect on marginalized communities around the world. Recent examples have been featured in the *Transformations* videos, produced by the Sentinel Group and hosted by George Otis, Jr.

In *Transformations II*, we meet native members from Canada's northern shores, where a suicide rate 20 times the national average (not to mention the pandemic of alcoholism, drug use, and physical and sexual abuse directed toward nearly every female) has given way to a new hope in not only one settlement, but many throughout the entire region! Scottish residents in one community tell of the amazing happenings as scores of people held all-night prayer meetings in their barns and homes, leading to a fresh move of God upon their land, emptying local pubs and leaving the once-scarcely visited churches packed to overflowing (James 2002).

One of the most exciting moments of the *Transformations II* video was the time when the Inuit community of Pond Inlet performed a ritual, in which they made a pyre of drugs, alcohol, and pornography, and burnt it publicly, with fuel provided by the local police. The cost of the destroyed paraphernalia was estimated at about 80,000 to 100,000 US dollars (*Transformations II*, 2001). This reminds us of the revival that happened in Ephesus in the first century during Paul's ministry there:

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (Acts 19:18-20).

There are many similar cases of community revitalization caused by Pentecostal Christianity around the world. My research showed significant evidence that this has also happened on a large scale with the Roma in Bulgaria.

An important note should be made in regards to the type of evidence that is featured in this chapter. Several pieces of information have been provided from field research statistics, police reports, and a school official. Since the Roma Pentecostal movement has grown so rapidly, however, that type of hard data is relatively scarce and unavailable at this time.¹⁰⁸ Most of the evidence presented in the chapter is based on the multiple eyewitness reports of people living in Roma neighborhoods who are both insiders and outsiders to the Pentecostal movement. The works of several independent researchers on the Roma have also been cited in support of the thesis, building the case for Roma revitalization as a result of the Christian faith.

For centuries Roma culture has been distorted and challenged. After having lived in Europe for a millennium, they are still treated as outsiders by the dominant host cultures, because of their strange lifestyle, beliefs, and practices. They are in fact the most marginalized group in the old continent. During the last century the stress on their culture was significant. Industrialization almost deprived them of the ability to earn a living through their traditional crafts and occupations. The Holocaust genocide and the Communist assimilation attempts intensified their battle for ethnic survival.

In Post-Communist Bulgaria the cultural stress on the Roma increased, because of the economic collapse, which affected them more than any other group. They have recently battled great unemployment, poverty, and discrimination. Most Roma, especially in the rural areas, live on government funding, which is greatly insufficient. This hard predicament has contributed to their involvement in crime, theft, begging, homeless life, prostitution, illiteracy, poor health, alcoholism and other addictive behaviors. All of the latter are symptoms of cultural morbidity. The politico-economic system in Bulgaria left

them without hope or reasons to live. These conditions brought about the need for revitalization in the Roma neighborhoods.

Pentecostalism has caused significant revitalization of the Romani worldview and culture in Western Europe. The leaders of the Gypsy churches believe that the revival will improve the political and social status of the Roma in Europe. May Bittlel, a Swiss Rom accredited as an expert on Gypsy issues in the Council of Europe, says:

Traditionally we have been many, but divided, and now God is uniting us as a people with the common goal of serving Him. Also, the authorities cannot but acknowledge that the Christian Gypsies do not fit the stereotype of Gypsies being fighters, thieves, and drunkards. The more Christian Gypsies, the stronger our position in our political battle for recognition as a nation in our own right (Dixon 2002).

Alberto Baba, leader in the French Gypsy movement, said:

Before people used to drink and fight, but the Lord has changed our lives. Our children are raised as Christians and do not know the worldly customs. Our youth is different now – they attend school, sing, and grow in spiritual matters. The Word of God brought many things to our youth, and helped the drug addicts find deliverance. The old human traditions are removed and broken (Baba 2006).

The field research for the present text explored how the dynamics of revitalization are evident in the Roma communities where the Pentecostal churches are present. It discovered that the same phenomenon could be observed in Bulgaria. The degrees of revitalization might vary from one Roma community to another, but Pentecostalism has clearly provided new ways for this ethnos to cope with the constant stress caused by their poverty, oppression, and marginal social status. The lasting impact of Pentecostal Christianity is felt in most of the Roma neighborhoods where the churches have been permanently established. The movement has caused some radical changes in the Roma communities and has given them a more satisfying worldview.

A connection has been made in literature between the spreading of ghettos, social marginalization, and anomie, on the one hand, and the process of conversion on the other. It is likewise noted that this is an essential instrument for the social

reorganization of the endangered communities, as well as a mechanism for the preservation of the psychological balance (Sabkova 2003:83).

The Pentecostal movement has addressed the cultural needs and specific problems of the Roma, explained earlier: poverty, unemployment, education, crime, health, and discrimination. The work of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), charitable foundations, political activists, and government agencies have also been of help, but none of them have been able to provide the radical solutions provided by the Christian churches. People attribute the movement's evident success to the miraculous work of God. Of course, this is an established fact of history: Nothing impacts culture more than redemptive religion, which deals with the most intimate areas of people's lives. Preachers influence the human soul and heart, while politicians only deal with outside problems. Religion fulfills its "age-old function of ordering human experience: giving direction to people, establishing boundaries, and providing renewal mechanisms for people when they fail" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:86). The activities of the Pentecostal churches in the developing world have been more effective than those of any secular NGOs, because the NGOs come and go, but the churches are deeply rooted in the community and have lasting relationships there (Miller and Yamamori 2007:41, 52). Faith-based NGOs have been much more successful, because they partner with the local churches.

The mayor, city officials, and most citizens of Dolna Bania respect the Church of God in the Roma quarter, recognizing that "stealing and hooliganism have been reduced in the *mahala*. People are cleaner, better dressed, and more disciplined." The growing impact of the faith there is the only sufficient explanation for that (2006).

Evgenia Dolapchieva recognizes the church in the Roma 'Carmen' quarter of Kazanluk, as the main factor for culture change there:

The factor of utmost significance has been the change of religion or the speedy evangelization process of the group. The massive choosing of a new religion is not by accident and cannot be attributed solely to the weak roots of Islam in the mahala. This process is a very successful reflection of the way of life, the attempt to construct a new self-esteem and even to unify the group into a common purpose. The secret side of this idea is a better way of life. It also is quite remarkable that while Ilona Tomova in 1995 says that 15% of the Roma in the compact mahali, declared themselves as part of one of the Protestant churches, this field study proved that their number [in Kazanluk] is over 90% (Dolapchieva 2003:139).

Pastor Ilia Georgiev from Lom says: “Most major problems in the neighborhood are solved by the church, which has great reputation. The pastors are the leaders and most influential persons in this community” (2006).

Assen Christov shares:

The role of the evangelical church in our country during the democratic period is one of the main factors for positive development in the social and spiritual situation in the Roma quarter in Razlog. The same is true of the other towns and villages where these churches are present. The evangelical church helps people to establish new norms of behavior that are moral and ethical. It makes people better and improves their relationships. This affects both the adults and the children. People who have heard the good news and believed in Christ are motivated to also become better citizens of the country (2006).

There are many personal testimonies of change of life as a result of the evangelization. A Roma man from Sofia shared:

From year to year there is change for the Gypsies. When you hear about God, you are changed. I was an alcoholic, gambled, committed adultery, got divorced, but behold I heard of God, started walking in God’s way and immediately the change came. You can talk various nice things too, but it is best to talk about God” (cited in Petrova et al 2004:12).

Roma women, cited in Petrova et al, share about how their lives have been changed by the Christian faith:

a). The Church changed me much. Honestly, I was a very bad woman. For the least problem I would quarrel with my neighbors, yell and insult them. Now, thank God and the church, I am changed and humbled (2004:100-101). The Church changed many things in me – the hatred, hypocrisy, and deception. I no longer talk inappropriately or curse. I am humble and God speaks to me. I have plans for my life that God gave me (2004:136-137). I have been an evangelical

and attend church since I was 15. The church changed everything in my character. I like the church and that God has called me. He is the best thing for my heart and thoughts (2004: 128-130).

Even Roma teenagers testify of the changes that have taken place in their lives as a result of the Christian conversion. A 16 old boy from Filipovtsi, shared:

I have attended the Church of God for 3 years. First a friend talked to me about it and I went out of curiosity. There the Lord touched me and I stayed. The church changed me radically. Before I smoked, I drank, and associated with bad company. I now walk only in the way of God. There we recite poems and do dramas for God's glory. Everyone will give an account before the Lord (cited in Petrova et al 2004:125).

Thousands such stories can be heard among the Roma believers. There are many changed lives in the *mahali* - drug addicts, pimps, drunks, gamblers, thieves, and felons - all miraculously delivered by the Christian experience. Having begun with individuals, the movement has caused revitalization among the Roma communities.

Impact on the Roma Family

The family was the very first institution established by God from the creation of the world (Genesis 2:18-24) and it is the foundational unit of every society. A nation can be strong only when it has strong families. Everything is affected by what happens in the home and any profound cultural shift has to start there.

The Roma family in Bulgaria has been unstable for several reasons:

1. The early marriages that could even take place when the girl is 12-13 years old. At that age a person is very inexperienced and cannot seriously take the responsibility for a family or raise children effectively¹⁰⁹ (Dolapchieva 2003:116).

2. The Roma traditionally do not have an official legal marriage performed by Bulgarian civil courts. They most often marry, according to Roma customs, with a lavish

wedding celebration. Thus, the community recognizes the marriage, but the union can be more easily broken and then the parties remarried. That causes a disadvantage to the girls who normally should marry as virgins in Roma culture.

3. The crime rate is high among Roma men. Those who have gone to prison for a long time cannot properly take care of their families. It is usually difficult for them to find jobs after their release.

4. The Roma family is strongly male-dominated. Men usually are the breadwinners while the women stay home. Domestic violence has been very common in Roma families and women are the usual victims of it. If a divorce occurs, the Roma women take nothing except the children.

5. Adultery is also a major problem in the *mahala*. Traditionally, the Roma have had a double standard on this matter: if a woman does it, it is considered a major crime, for which the husband can punish her severely. If a man cheats on his wife, however, her reaction simply would be: "Well, that is how men are!"

The Christian faith has caused a positive transformation of many Roma families. Popkochev concludes that the Bible is the most frequently found book in their homes. For many Roma households it actually is the only book they have or read.¹¹⁰ Usually they receive it freely from the churches as an attribute or symbol of the Christian faith (2004:64). It needs to be clear, however, that there is no necessary correlation between having a Bible and reading it. Many Roma are not used to reading books and need to upgrade their education in order to be able to read better. Often young Roma believers learn biblical truth through hearing preaching, praise songs, and Bible discussions, because of their weaker reading skills. The Roma families need solid teaching in order to

understand the Bible and the discipline to read it regularly at home. Their Christian faith stimulates them to read the Bible, however, and thus they improve their reading abilities. In any case, their relationship with the Bible has brought spiritual light to their families and communities. The fact that the most read book in the world has taken a central place in Roma homes is a good indication of cultural and spiritual revitalization.

The “Carmen” quarter of Kazanluk, described by Dolapchieva, is a good example of how the Roma family has been positively affected by the Pentecostal movement. The ministry of Dimitar (Mitko) Banev, pastor of the church since 1992, has had a revolutionary impact on the Roma there. With his wife Ziumbiula Angelova, known by her Turkish name ‘Altanka,’ he has taken the challenge of initiating radical reforms in the Roma family habits. A high percentage of the men in the quarter, according to Banev, have been imprisoned at one time or another, mainly for domestic violence or for murder.

The Gypsy man considers his wife property and does not understand that she also has desires and rights. According to our laws, if he decides that she has sinned against him, he can beat her up and even kill her. They did not regard this as sinful before. Now things have been corrected and the men have started honoring their wives. One reason for the violence is the early marriages; Roma youth marry when they are 13-14 years old - so young that they do not appreciate the family. Then they beat their wives or get divorced (cited by Dolapchieva 2003:51-57).

One of the priorities of the church, under Mitko’s leadership, is to build strong and healthy families. They have no intention of changing the positive aspects of Roma culture and strong family values, but to transform it through a Christian orientation. The pastor has been instrumental in eliminating domestic violence in the neighborhood. They teach that families need to base their relationship on mutual love and respect: while God takes first place in a man’s life, his family is the next priority. Pastor Mitko and Altanka

set a good example for people in the neighborhood. Married for 12 years with 5 children, their family life is based on love and mutual understanding (Dolanchieva 2003:51-57).

The family reform begins with the rites of engagement¹¹¹ and wedding. The traditional Roma wedding, lasting up to 3-4 days with lavish celebrations is rarely done any more.¹¹² The wedding customs have also been modified in many places. Roma weddings are currently divided in two categories: 'secular' and 'spiritual.' This is the case in most Roma communities where the churches are present. The 'spiritual wedding' is different from the traditional Roma wedding, which includes the consumption of vast amounts of alcohol, secular music, belly-dancing, and frequent fights. When a person is invited to a Roma Christian wedding the invitation is not simply to a wedding, but to a 'spiritual wedding.'

The spiritual wedding among the Kazanlak Roma¹¹³ is very popular. Having taken preeminence over the secular one, it is conducted according to the biblical standards. This new type of wedding is done in church and legalizes the marriage before God. The great noise and rejoicing, typical of Roma weddings, remains. The pastor in Kazanlak does not require the couples to have a legal marriage ceremony.¹¹⁴ They are required, however, not to begin their life together at the engagement, which is the norm among Bulgarian Roma, but only after the official marriage. Also they must be of full-age, which is 18 in Bulgaria. As the pastors preach against early marriages, the latter have significantly decreased in the *mahali*. Multiple witnesses confirmed this during my field research.

This marriage can take place in the church building or in the local social club or restaurant. The service begins with evangelical singing and then the pastor gives a sermon, laying out the key principles for a successful marriage: The sermon explains the

nature of the Christian family emphasizing love, equality, mutual support, assistance, and friendship; the traditional Roma values of the roles of the man as breadwinner and the woman as homemaker are strongly encouraged; the church also considers sexual intimacy legitimate, but only within the confines of marriage. Other rituals are done at the wedding to create a lasting memory: candles are lit, communion is served to the couple, and the guests donate money to them. The virginity test, common to Roma marriage rituals,¹¹⁵ is also done at the spiritual wedding in Kazanlak (2003:115 -129).

Even though the marriage rites might differ from one church to another,¹¹⁶ the fact is that the Pentecostal movement strengthens many Roma families. The massive turning of the Roma men to God reduces alcoholism, which leads to the diminishing of violence in the home. One Roma sister from Samokov shared:

Before I became a Christian, my husband and I fought violently at home. It was so bad that the house never had any windows, because we kept breaking them; all of our neighbors knew about our situation. Since we both believed on Christ, we have peace in the home; we have built a second floor in our house and now...all the windows are in place (Samokov 2006).

There is more faithfulness among the spouses. Adultery has been decreased significantly in many Roma quarters. The mahala in Perushtitsa had been notorious for its immorality. "All the neighboring villages knew us for our fornications and adulterous affairs. That is not the case any more since we turned to Christ" (Salchev 2006). That is the story I heard in many of the Roma mahali during my field research.

The strengthening of the Roma families is a significant sign that cultural revitalization is indeed happening among them. Pastor Mitko Banev says:

Our Roma people have been tricked into selling their children to get them married. But we are a new generation of Roma who are founded on the Bible. When a person gets married, he has absolutely no reason to be divorced except for adultery; nothing else, regardless of what his wife does. The husband should

be considerate and careful in how he treats her. God looks at both of them. When a family comes apart, it is a whole unit dividing. Therefore, men should be adults in order to choose the true spouse, the real love (cited in Dolapchieva 2003:128).

Respect for Women

The status of the woman, which has traditionally been low among the Roma, has changed as a result of the faith. Women are more respected and honored than before. They are freer to fellowship with men in public. According to Roma customs women were previously not allowed to have much conversation with men, except their husbands. Even if a woman were in trouble, she would not approach a man for help.

The Roma women were not really considered human beings before the movement. They were perpetual victims of their husband's lies, unfaithfulness, and violence. They were abused both physically and mentally. The Pentecostal ministry has radically changed that and raised the status of Roma women. They are being honored now, because all are brothers and sisters in the faith (Fakulteta 2006). Some Roma pastors like Mitko Goranov believe and encourage the Roma churches to respect not just the pastors, but the pastor's wives as well. Some churches teach their members not to have as many children as the Roma are used to. There are believers, however, that encourage young families to have more kids, according to Roma customs, believing children to be a special blessing from God.

Paloma Gay y Blasco explains how the Pentecostal movement among the Gitanos in Spain has improved the status of women in the community. Their family life is now based on "righteousness, decency, and peacefulness." One *pastora* [pastor's wife] at a women's prayer meeting gave a talk about the advantages of having a Christian husband:

Upon becoming Evangelists¹¹⁷, she said, men stop doing all the evil things, drugs, drinking, going around with other women, stealing, killing, and beating up their wives, except a slap here and there because we sometimes deserve it.” She went on to describe how, after converting, husbands and wives have their meals together and are able to chat. Before “the women would feed the men first, and eat what was left, and even fan the flies away for them, now it has all changed”.... Men who convert are said to “give a better life to their wives:” they behave better toward them, are much less likely to get involved in fights and problems with the police, to be reckless in spending money or to come home drunk. And, more importantly, they are not allowed to beat their wives beyond the occasional slap (Gay y Blasco 1999:120-121).

Theocentric Pedagogy

The Roma families in Bulgaria are going through the process of serious self-evaluation leading to “the practical realization of the pedagogical function of ...the parents.” According to Popkochev, this process has been greatly affected by the new religious orientation, especially of the evangelical type, causing Roma parents to undergo necessary changes in order to properly train their children. There are two groups within the Roma community that are serious about their responsibility to raise the standard of the next generation and provide the proper environment for their education. The first is the highly educated Roma. The second group is that of the Christian believers who are of the conviction that it is their responsibility before God to invest in the child’s proper development both spiritually and academically (Popkochev 2004:74-75). While the first group is a minority within the minority, the second one is larger and far more influential.

The evangelical faith thus has a powerful impact on the way Roma families raise their children. The Christian believers have a theocentric orientation in their pedagogical approach. The Roma, whose faith has become central in their worldview, have seen change both in their social orientation and in the value system basis of their pedagogy.

They teach their children values like charity, honesty, love, and humility. The following testimonies, cited in Popkochev, demonstrate that:

- a). I teach my child to be good, not to curse, not to steal, not to covet someone else's things, but to seek God, pray to God, and let God meet his needs. (2004:51-52)
- b). We teach them not to steal, not to lie, to learn the good and to respect us. And I want my children to teach the grandchildren likewise. And I will teach them well as long as I live...I am thankful to God. (2004:51-52)
- c). I believe in God and do not want my children to steal, lie, or leave their wives and children, going after other women. (2004:51-52)
- d). I thank God that I have 11 grandchildren and we train them now to go to school, not to be illiterate, because our parents of old did not study much, but we insist now that our children study...They should ask God to teach them and to give them wisdom how to study. (2004:69)

The theocentric orientation inspires the Roma parents to be more constructive and purposeful in their pedagogical approach. The expectations are that the child would change by obeying God and applying the faith to life. The theocentric parent is aware of the need to enter the children's world and understand their way of thinking. "This helps establish in the family an atmosphere of security and goodwill, in agreement with the spirit of the individualizing and autonomy-oriented modern pedagogical thought and action" (Popkochev 2004:52).

The Roma believers carefully reconsider their whole life and relationships in light of their theological learning. The Bible becomes the main textbook for this pedagogy. The children are taught to break with the stereotypical behaviors associated with Roma: "drinking, begging, stealing, domestic quarrels, abandoning of children, and refusal to study. The theistically-centered education of children is very positive, instilling in them meaningful values, commitment, and consistency" (Popkochev 2004:64, 71).

The fact that many Roma children are being raised in church, keeps them from falling into the traps of ghetto life. These testimonies of "preventive grace" are very

powerful, just like the ones of radical life changes following conversion. This is the story of a young teenager from Filipovtsi:

People attend church regularly. On the special holidays like Christmas and Easter, just about the whole quarter comes to church. I have attended church since I was 10. When I was younger I fell asleep during sermons, but now that I am older I realize how much the faith in Christ gives to me. I cannot say that the faith has changed something in me, but I can say that it kept me from going the wrong way. I like many things in the church, mainly the songs and sermons, I like it that there is unity in the church...My life has been all studying. The most important thing that happened in my life was that I go to church. I play the piano in the church. Yes, I have planned my life. I have been trying to be an example and in the future want to have a normal life with a normal salary and a pretty woman. All this depends on me and no one else (cited in Petrova et al 2004: 120-121).

Youth Education

One of the major factors related to the perpetual poverty of the Bulgarian Roma is their illiteracy and lack of proper education. There are over 100,000 children who are not in school in Bulgaria; many of them are Roma (Virchev 2006). The healthy raising and education of children is primarily the family's obligation. The Roma believers have taken this responsibility more seriously, because most Roma pastors are strict with their members about putting their children through school. These pastors are well aware that in Bulgaria the educated children have a much better chance of rising above the harsh predicament of the ghetto and developing properly. Since the churches have been in the *mahala*, education is encouraged among the Roma now like it has never been before (Petrova et al 2004:156-159,179).

Mrs. Spasova, principal of one of the Roma schools in Samokov, having discussed the many challenges in educating Roma children, shares two significant observations in recent years:

1. There is a greater number of Roma studying beyond the eighth grade.
2. The best students in her school are from the Church of God (2007).

In the harsh reality of the *mahala*, however, a number of families are still dysfunctional and unable to fulfill that responsibility. Therefore, the Pentecostals have stepped in to provide that education to many Roma children. Many churches have social programs that include putting poor children back in school and making necessary provisions for their education. The Razlog Church, for example, has done that very effectively, under the leadership of pastor Assen Christov:

As part of our social outreach in Razlog, we started an educational center that children would attend after school. Since their parents were mostly uneducated, thus neither interested nor able to help them, the children would come to the center daily. There our pedagogical staff worked with them to help them with their studies and homework. They particularly focused on helping those who were unable to speak Bulgarian well. The children were taught Christianity, computer literacy, languages, morals, and hygiene habits. They also participated in sports activities and sang in the children's choir of the church.

The church also helped children with their transportation to the school, because the quarter is at a good distance from it. The church provided items necessary for the children's education - clothing, shoes, textbooks, notebooks, and school bags. Every morning over 300 pupils received free breakfast on the condition that the teacher would sign their record-books, confirming their attendance of all the classes. We kept in contact with the schools continually. We also organized seminars, teacher-parent meetings, concerts, and excursions to assist the process. Children, who had missed some years of school and were embarrassed to go back to the city school, were taken to a school in a nearby village. We made a special effort to train and motivate the parents in this matter through meetings and counseling sessions with them.

We encourage and pray for more of our young Roma to study in the university. In the Razlog Roma quarter during the last 15 years there have been about 10 people with college education and many who have finished high school. That is impressive and noteworthy among the Roma in Bulgaria (Christov 2006).

In Samokov there were a number of children from extremely poor homes that lived a very miserable life. They used to pick garbage cans for food leftovers and did not attend school. Many of them no longer do so, because in 2006 the pastor's wife Reni Todorova organized the women of the church to care for these children. Presently, 50

children receive a daily meal at the church and then have a Bible study. With some help from foreign donors, these kids were provided all the necessary materials in order to attend school regularly. Thus, they would be prevented from falling into the traps of ghetto life and will have a better chance at success than their families and community can give them. There are a number of other churches that minister to poor children in a similar fashion. Most Roma pastors have the vision to begin social ministries and are praying for the resources, which would enable them to do so (Samokov 2006).

The evangelical churches also provide help for Roma adults to better themselves by receiving education, which they have missed as children. Mission Possible, a Christian Organization working in Bulgaria, has organized literacy courses for older people. Roma churches around Bulgaria have used this program to teach the illiterate in their community to read and write. Last year, Mission Possible helped a number of Roma in Filipovtsi to finish their high school education.

The adequate understanding of the Christian faith, according to Pavel Ignatov “requires education. All the children of Roma believers in Filipovtsi go to school” (2006). Many Roma who have been integrated into regular church life improve their literacy skills by reading the Bible and the songbooks. Dimitrova cites a woman working at the Adventist bookstore: “They [the Roma] are intelligent. Some of them, when they first came to church, could not read or write. After their conversion, however, they learned, because Christians need to know how to read spiritual literature” (2000:61).

Dimitrova makes a very important comment on this matter:

According to my observations there is no Roma family attending Protestant church that is illiterate...from the conversations with the Roma and from my observations I can conclude that most of the Roma in the Protestant churches are able to read and write; apparently the faith motivation has been sufficient for

their learning literacy. At the services many of the Roma read the gospel and sing songs from the songbooks. Also, I think, the other important reason...is that most of the Roma who visit the Protestant churches are from the group of the so-called "Bulgarian Gypsies." The Roma pastors try to make sure their people are educated (Dimitrova 2000:62).

The informers for one field study revealed that religious knowledge is the main motivator for self-education among the Roma. A young man of thirty said: "what I am excited about I have studied on my own – Islamic philosophy." The desire for Christian service motivates many Roma youth to study the Bible. One teenagers said: "Now I want to take private lessons in music and English, I want to learn to play guitar...My life is connected with Jesus and I will serve him for the rest of my life, because that is the only meaning of life" (cited in Popkochev 2004:80).¹¹⁸

New Code of Ethics

The presence of the Pentecostal churches in the Roma *mahali* has brought significant transformation. A number of major problems have been addressed and dealt with. The massive Christian conversion of the Roma has greatly reduced wickedness in their communities. The spiritual revival has led to the raising of their moral standards. Dolapchieva reports that, as a result of the influence of the church in the 'Carmen' quarter of Kazanluk, the restaurants and cafes play better music and certain problems, such as fighting, prostitution, and thefts, have virtually disappeared (2003:52).

Addictions

Addiction to alcohol and drugs has been prevalent in Roma neighborhoods. Their harsh social predicament has caused them to look for an escape from reality. These are signs of cultural morbidity typical of marginalized and oppressed ethnic groups. The

revitalization brought about by Pentecostalism has caused many of these addictions to be broken. Many Roma testify to being free from alcohol, drugs, and nicotine as a result of the faith. The need to battle substance addictions, and bring them under control, is one the main reasons for the growth of the movement among the American Roma as well, according to Sato (1988:89-90).

The recovery programs based on the Christian faith¹¹⁹ have proven to be very successful in freeing people from addictions around the world:

1. The Teen Challenge drug rehab program, founded by pastor David Wilkerson in 1958 has proven to have a much greater success than any secular rehab program. The Health, Education, and Welfare Department, the National Commission of Drug Abuse, and independent researchers have stated that Teen Challenge is far more successful and cost-effective than any other program; 86% of the TC graduates remain drug-free after leaving the program while in the secular programs that number is usually less than 15%. Also while Teen Challenge costs about 1,500 US dollars per month, the cost of secular programs in the States could be “up to 45,000” (Teen-Challenge Website).

2. The St. Stephen’s Society, headed by Jackie Pullinger, has been recognized as the most effective drug rehabilitation program in Hong Kong “even though its methods are overtly religious.” Having recognized this fact, the Hong Kong government has offered free land and housing to serve as St. Stephen’s treatment facilities (Miller and Yamamori 2007:52,61).

Therefore, the case with the Roma is not unique, but simply follows the pattern of the Pentecostal movement around the world. Faith-based rehabilitation programs are far

more effective than secular ones, because they offer Christian discipleship, which brings about spiritual and moral transformation resulting in a lasting freedom from addictions.

“We used to be party people, going to weddings, drinking, and smoking. One of our worship leaders used to drink day and night before becoming a believer. None of that makes us happy any more. Only in the presence of God there is true joy” (Filipovtzi 2006). In the Roma *mahala* of Perushtitsa, alcoholism is a thing of the past. “We are a town with many acres of vineyards for wine-production. In the wintertime people did not have much to do, so there was a lot of drinking. This is no longer the case since the movement has occurred and the church is present here” (Salchev 2006). As people believe and abide by the truths of the Bible they no longer use alcohol. One brother shared: “I gave up the cigarettes in order that God would heal my son. And indeed the boy was miraculously healed” (Fakulteta 2006).

Many Roma boys and girls, influenced by their peers, become involved with substance abuse at a very young age. Because of the faith many of them have been prevented from falling into addictions, which would lead them on a path to destruction. “The church made me better and kept me from the vices so widespread, like drugs and alcohol” (cited in Petrova et al 2004:123). The Fakulteta quarter of Sofia for years had a tremendous problem with drugs, but people testify, that as a result of the movement, the drugs are gradually becoming a thing of the past there. The widespread spiritual revival among the Roma causes radical changes, evident to all. There are Roma quarters, like the one in Razlog, where prostitution and drug addiction are virtually non-existent.

The power of the Holy Spirit and the loving care of the Roma believers has helped people recover from addictive behaviors. The Roma pastors are usually strict

about bad habits; they strongly convey that drinking and smoking are unacceptable for Christians, because such behavior pollutes the body, which should be a temple of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The wise pastors, though, are very loving and patient with those who struggle with such behaviors, realizing that legalism and judgmental attitudes would simply drive these people away from the church.

The power of the Christian faith is imperative for overcoming addictions. For most addicts it may not be so hard to be delivered from an addiction, but staying free is. The harsh realities of life, often push people back into the vicious cycle. Therefore, the Christian faith gives the needy not only recovery and material help, but “an internal transformation that realigns their moral compass” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:62-63). Only then can these people remain free from addiction and experience social lift.

The Roma believers in many places pray fervently against the evil spirits working in their communities; many places of sin have gone out of business. This happens especially during intense times of spiritual revival as people spend many hours in fervent prayer. Rev. Angel Dogov from Rakitovo says, that as he prayed diligently for his *mahala*, in a period of six months nine drinking joints there were closed (2006).

Fighting

Violent physical fights have been a notorious negative expression of Roma emotionalism. They often occur as a result of interfamily disputes; as one person engages another, family members often join in the fight, instead of attempting to stop it. These fights frequently occur at weddings or other celebrations when people are under the influence of alcohol. As a result someone could be stabbed or even killed. The Bulgarian media often report such events when they occur in the Roma *mahali*.

Pamporov et al report that one of the positive effects of the evangelical churches on the Roma communities is that people change their way of thinking and become less aggressive (2001:26). Where churches are present, the fights have often been reduced or have disappeared. The violent use of knives and axes has been greatly diminished. “Years ago there was not a wedding here without a major fight, or someone being stabbed with a knife. But that does not happen any more; people are meeker and humbler as a result of the church’s influence.” Pastors have often stepped in to break up fights and act as peace-makers; the pastor in Samokov once called two warring Roma clans out and made them reconcile and stop the useless violence (Samokov 2006).

Crime

Due to poverty and social isolation, criminal activity has been high among the Roma. The collapse of the national economy, which followed the fall of Communism, was the main reason for this widespread criminality. The Pentecostal movement has been the most effective agent in reducing crime among this ethnos. There are many former Roma criminals whose lives have been changed by the Christian experience; the greatest auto-thief in one mahala became a faithful follower of Christ. Evil has been restrained in most places where the churches are present and have influence.

Since people believed in God, violence and fighting have greatly diminished in Nadezhda, Sliven. The unchurched Roma there might still drink alcohol, but do not jump to start fights anymore. “Our prayers help prevent that” says brother Assen (Sliven 2006).

There are changes in the Roma mahali. Sometimes they are slow, but the culture is changing – this is a fact. And the Christian believers are greatly responsible for that...In the village of Svoboda the mayor was very impressed. He had many positive things to say about the church and the results of the movement. The negative actions of the Roma there have decreased 80 to 90%. Thefts and crimes have diminished. There is a good relationship with the ethnic Bulgarians who have been also very impressed by the Roma (Chepilev 2006).

Ivan Zahariev, pastor of the Roma Baptist Church in Berkovitsa, said:

Before the church existed in Rakovitsa *mahala* there were many murders, fighting among various clans. But when God began to work in this quarter even the worst people joined the church. They accepted the evangelical faith and even former criminals became witnesses for the Lord. The atmosphere is radically changed (Lom 2006).

The city officials in Razlog have no complaints about their Roma population at present, recognizing the recent decline in group criminality and recidivism. The crimes done by minors have significantly decreased and there are no prostitutes in town. Many of these crimes were done by Roma in the past, but they are no more. The Roma *mahala* in Razlog is one with significantly low crime rate in Bulgaria. This has been recognized by local police department chief Mr. Kondev:

The local commission against the antisocial conduct of underage persons in the Razlog municipality shared that, according to their observations there is a decline in the tendencies for group and recidivist crimes and that in one year they have received only 20 complaints about crimes committed by either underage persons or children, announced the chairman of the commission and deputy mayor of Razlog Dr. Rumen Kondev. In regard to these 20 crimes there have been charges pressed and corrective measure taken against the 28 persons responsible. In comparison with 2004 the number of defendants in these trials has decreased from 34 to 28 in 2005. There are no registered cases of child prostitutes...¹²⁰

Rev. Assen Christov received recognition from the Regional Law Enforcement offices, because this decrease in crime has been largely credited to the church's ministry of reeducation (Christov 2006). Brother Mincho, a Roma minister from Razlog, says: "While we were Orthodox we still committed thefts. Only the Holy Spirit can make a Gypsy to stop lying and stealing" (Razlog 2006).

Brother Kolio says about the town of Chirpan:

Before the churches were here, things in the quarter were terrible; the Chirpan Gypsies are notorious: they take up the knife and kill. Now things are much better as God's mercy came and many were saved. In many cities and villages there is change and reconciliation. It is not perfect – bad things stills happen, but the crimes and wickedness have decreased significantly.

The police chief in Samokov recognized that since the churches are in the *mahala*, the crime rate has significantly decreased. Christian love teaches people to be and to do good (Ignatov 2006). The old brother Stefan shared:

Twenty years ago in the Samokov *mahala* there were murders and adulteries. We served Satan. I thank God we knew Him and murder is a very rare thing now; we no longer steal and lie; the drugs are not here any more. The alcoholics are fewer in number (Samokov 2006).

These stories are told by most of the Roma believers and confirmed by outside observers. The Roma have been motivated to work more and depend less on social welfare. In Tran, it was reported by the media, all the Roma paid their power bill while not all the ethnic Bulgarian had done so¹²¹ (Milanov 2006). The greater the church's influence in a *mahala*, the fewer problems for the police are caused by Roma.

Hygiene

Many Roma have not sustained a good sanitary life, because of the poor conditions in the *mahali* with the frequent lack of running water and central sewage. Due to these conditions the Roma have often been somewhat negligent about their personal and community hygiene. One of the Roma pastors in Samokov confronted his congregation about their hygiene habits:

They were dirty before, poorly dressed, and lacked basic hygiene habits. It was terrible. The air was heavy in the church and hard to breathe. It made the services a bit unpleasant. I kindly confronted them about it encouraging them to buy soap and to be clean. We love those who are dirty, but because of our love we teach them to live a cleaner life. Now those same people as they became regular church members are very clean, nicely shaved, and well-dressed (Samokov 2006).

From the very beginning of Mitko Banev's Kazanluk pastorate in 1992, he was determined to improve the life of the Roma through impacting their way of thinking. Banev initiated many practical changes in the 'Carmen' mahala, motivating the believers to be cleaner in both their personal and social life. That has radically changed the

appearance of the neighborhood. After the third year of his pastorate Mitko had gotten the believers to keep a strict daily routine: they pray at 6 a.m every morning; then, they clean their houses thoroughly and the areas around them as well (Dolapchieva 2003:52).

This changes the whole outlook of the Roma quarters. As the people's self-esteem is raised by their faith and church participation, their appearance changes; they desire to glorify God through their dress, cleanliness, and the order in the *mahala*.

Language

The Pentecostal churches teach the Roma to clean up their language: not to speak empty words, foolishness, gossip, lying, profanity, or curses. Filled with the Holy Spirit they are recommended to have a new tongue. Researchers notice this change in Roma talk: "The vocabulary of these people has changed as well: even while discussing everyday problems they often pronounce the name of the Lord and emphasize that they rely on Him" (Sabkova 2003:80-82).

In the Perushtitsa mahala often a person can hear the phrase: "God will provide!" in reference to uncertain situations. Also many there, when they want to affirm they are speaking truth, instead of using the traditional curse: "Mi dai te merel" (May my mother die)¹²² they would say: "Before God [I tell you]" (Salchev 2006).

Better Relationships

As a result of the Pentecostal movement, the relationships within the *mahala*, and between the Roma and the majority population have been greatly improved. The church teaches people to be compassionate and alleviate the pain of those who suffer (Petrova 2004:85-88). Roma believers demonstrate the love of Christ. People fellowship more and

have healthy relationships. When a certain brother is working to build a house, the other brothers from the church join efforts to help him. The faith in God brings unity and love to the *mahala* (Petrova et al 2004:156-159).

I have attended this church for 10 years. The church makes me better and more attentive, kind to people. It teaches me how to respect those older than me. What I like is that there is less gossip, but I rejoice that people who are brothers and sisters in the Lord love each other... They also get together to help those who are in need (cited in Petrova et al 2004:91).

A brother from Fakulteta shares about the changes in his *mahala*:

We respect one another. The word talks in Romans 12 about contentions. Every sinful man on this earth has a gift. If you have generosity, you should show it by giving. As I go help my daughter with sales at the kiosk, people come to get advice from me; both old and young, boys and girls, stop and say: "Uncle you are from the church, you know many things." I really don't know, but God does and helps me teach people. I direct them in regard to their life and problems. I help them fill out paperwork. I advise young people to study (cited in Petrova et al 2004:38-42).

In most places, as a result of the Christian movement, the Roma have much better relations with the *gajo*. In D. Bania, ethnic Bulgarians would even send prayer requests to the Roma church when they have special needs. In Krupnik the Roma are accepted much better by the Bulgarians than they were before; the mayor has even asked the pastor to represent the Roma in the local council. Both atheists and believers affirm that all evangelical churches in the Pleven region are well intentioned toward the state. Researchers also give credit to the believers for playing a significant role for keeping the ethnic peace and tolerance among the various ethnic groups (Simeonova and Tsenov, February 2003:59).

In Roma *mahali*, like Lom (Humata and Mladenovo), Razlog, Kazanluk, and many others, the majority of people have become evangelicals,¹²³ mainly in the Pentecostal churches. The movement has caused a revitalization and culture shift among the Roma all over Bulgaria. Many outsiders to the evangelical circles confirm this fact.

A Roma man from Kiustendil, cited in Petrova et al, said: “I am Eastern Orthodox. I like these churches too, because they somehow unite their efforts and reduce crime in the neighborhood” (2004:156-159). Another one, cited by the same source, said:

The church gives something to the neighborhood – for example, the illiterate begins to write. There were many people who used to drink and the church made them quit drinking. It helps people not to be bad and do bad things. I am reserved toward the church, but they really do something for people here. They gave out 11 houses; they only know how they were able to do it. (2004:144)

An older man from Filipovtsi said in reference to the local Church of God:

I am an atheist. In our quarter there is only one church they are evangelicals as far as I know. I think in this church the people are very good. All who attend the prayers are very nice people. They don't drink, they don't smoke, and they are kind toward others. I personally have interceded before mayor Sofianski¹²⁴ to allow them to build a church in the *mahala*. I will also say that the church folk have always supported the initiatives of the *mahala* council (cited in Petrova et al 2004:79).

So, the Roma churches provide an environment of purity, holiness, and righteousness. Thus, alcohol, drugs, immorality, and other destructive influences are gradually removed. Many Roma have given up simplicity and rude manners at the admonition of their pastors. They have gained greater knowledge about God and life. Many have given up begging and begun to work and be more responsible. The atheists cannot understand or explain this phenomenon.

Changes in Roma Traditions

As a result of the Pentecostal faith, certain ethnic folk practices have been discontinued in the mahali. These traditional customs have been viewed as contrary to the ethic of the newly found religion and therefore abandoned. The decision process for that has been greatly influenced by the ethnic Bulgarian church leaders from whom the Roma

accepted the Christian faith and who have been giving spiritual oversight of the movement for many years. Being mostly younger believers the Roma have needed and relied on that *gajo* guidance and leadership. As they are maturing in the faith, however, the Roma are developing their own processes of internal dialogue to decide on what to do with these practices. Some practices are rejected, some accepted, and others modified. While on the handling of certain practices the Roma Christians mostly agree, there is also some variation and disagreement among them in regard to others. Fortune-telling, stealing and trickery, for example, are unanimously rejected as pagan and unacceptable. The Muslim priests' involvement in Roma funerals has been replaced by that of the Roma pastors. The *courban*, belly-dancing, and social drinking are rejected by most, but still kept by some Roma believers, because they are so entrenched in the culture. The fact that belly-dancing, for instance, at weddings is maintained as a practice among some Roma churches in the Pazarjik area, reflects theological thinking that is more independent from the 'old gajo' Pentecostal leaders. As discussed earlier, there is not one unanimous way of how the faith influences Roma marriage rituals and practices, but certain variations are evident there as well. It is clear overall that the Christian movement, Pentecostalism in particular, is having a powerful impact on Roma customs in Bulgaria as it is around the world. The faith is brought into these daily personal and communal rites.

Islam

Having lived for centuries under the cultural and religious dominion of the Ottoman Empire, the Roma have had a long-standing relationship with Islam. During the Ottoman period many of them converted to Islam often for reasons of convenience. In the

years after the country's liberation in 1878, there were many Roma who became Orthodox Christians, again for convenience. The Orthodox Church, however, has mostly been reluctant to accept them, offer them spiritual service, or engage them in the spirit of Christian love.¹²⁵ That left many of the Roma in Bulgaria, even the non-Muslim ones, under the cultural influence of Islam. There is a high percentage of Roma who have Turkish names, but do not profess Islam. Many Roma, on the other hand, have remained Muslims. According to a survey conducted in 1994, 44% of the Roma respondents claimed to be Orthodox, 39% Muslims, 15% Protestant, and small percentages Catholic (1%) and Jewish (0.5%) (Tomova 1995:14).

Islam, like Christianity and other religions, took advantage of the democratic changes in Bulgaria, to spread their faith. Kulichev reports that by 1994, just 5 years after 1989, there were over 120 new mosques built in Bulgaria, while evangelical churches struggled in many places for obtain building permits (410:1994). The number of newly built mosques in Bulgaria has steadily grown. Islam has not lacked the resources for massive religious expansion in Bulgaria. It has proved, however, to be a non-satisfactory venue of religious expression for the Roma. Both the Turkish and the Bulgarian Muslim (*pomak*) minorities have had a condescending attitude toward the Roma.

The Ethnobarometer research group, not affiliated with the evangelicals, reports the noteworthy existence of Roma converted from Islam to Protestant Christianity. "Their adherence to the churches is no smaller." This has on various occasions caused conflicts in communities that are predominantly Muslim (Sabkova 2003:81-82).

One of the greatest contributions of Pentecostal evangelism, according to Pavel Ignatov, has been the cultural resistance of the Islamic invasion that attempted to

overtake many, especially poor, communities in Post-Communist Bulgaria. The Pentecostal churches have attracted a significant number of the Muslim population in Bulgaria, including the Muslim Roma, who had kept the Muslim traditions. Muslim are more easily converted, according to Ignatov, to Evangelical Christianity than to Catholicism or Orthodoxy, because of the image veneration associated with the latter churches. Certain elements of Islam resemble Bulgarian Protestantism, especially in its alter-conservative version: women placed on a lower level than men, the head-coverings on the sisters, and the absence of image veneration. The Protestant churches, on the other hand, have transformed some of these pre-Christian cultural elements and given former Muslim women a higher social status. While in Islam they keep silent and bear children, in the Pentecostal churches they can evangelize and exist on a more equal level (2006).

Pavel Ignatov notes:

There is problem of identity with the Roma. The Muslim Turks do not accept the Roma and look down on them. Therefore, the Gypsies do not feel well among the ethnic Turks. We, however, make the Roma equal. During the “Bazroditelen Protses” (the National Revival Process)¹²⁶ the Church of God believers [of the minority folk with Turkish names] voluntarily changed their names (2006).

The Pentecostal movement has caused many Roma *mahali* to break away from the cultural connection with Islam, especially in their funeral rites. Most Roma in the past used *hodjas* (Muslim clerics) to officiate their funerals. As people with deep spiritual awareness, the Roma believed that the *hodjas*, who widely practice a version of folk Islam in Bulgaria,¹²⁷ were able to burry the dead in a way that keeps evil spirits away.

Salcho Salchev, senior pastor of the Roma church in Perushtitsa, said:

We are Roma – neither Turks, nor ethnic Bulgarians. As Bulgarian Gypsies we celebrated the Bulgarian Christian holidays. At death, however, we always called on the Muslim priests – the *hodji*. One of the reasons for that was that the Orthodox priests simply never wanted to come here. They did not want the Gypsies to be buried in the same cemetery as the Bulgarians. The imams came

and received money for our funerals, even though we are not Muslims and there is no mosque here. Presently, the evangelical pastors perform all the funerals. If I were absent for some reason, another minister does them. The funerals of church members and the unchurched alike - we perform them all here (Salchev 2006).

This is the story in many Roma *mahali* in Bulgaria. The Muslim priests normally do not perform funerals there any more; even families who are not believers use the *hodjas* more rarely. Most people for funerals call the pastors who take advantage of the opportunity to minister to the grieving families and proclaim the gospel. Brother Gencho from Yambol said: “they call me now for funerals, they do not call *Imams* any more. And I am always ready to be there and help people” (Yambol 2006). The Roma ministers have thus become pastors not just of their churches, but also pastors of the *mahala* as a whole. Some Roma pastors have even been offered to be made imams with good pay, but have refused, because of their firm Christian faith (Ignatov 2006). There have even been *hodjas* who have acknowledged that the Bible is a more powerful Word than the Qur’an.

While rejecting some other customs associated with Islam, the Turkish Roma Pentecostals in Bulgaria often retain the *suinet* (circumcision rite) (Dolapchieva 2003:139), but mostly for sanitary rather than religious purposes. The pastors of this Roma group often give their members a free choice in regards to circumcision.

In “The Turkish Gypsies in Bulgaria and Their New Religious Identity” M. Slavkova describes some of the changes that have taken place among the Turkish Roma as a result of the evangelical faith:

1. They give up fighting, swearing, and the use of addictive behaviors like smoking, drinking, and immorality. The believers have cleaner homes.

2. Their relationship dynamics change. Even though there is a degree of tolerance and improved relationships, as a result of the faith, Muslim families often reject and ostracize their relatives who have accepted Christian baptism.

3. The churches establish a Christian model of customs and rites-of-passage, but maintain some of the Muslim cultural elements, which they do not view as conflicting with the Evangelical faith (2004).

The Roma Pentecostal movement has indeed been driving Islam out of the Roma quarters. The number of Protestant Roma has risen drastically in the last 14 years, since Tomova's survey, while the numbers of both Orthodox and Muslim Roma have declined. Field researchers like E. Dolapchieva take notice of this massive shift. The Kazanluk mahala, where the majority population used to profess Islam, is a great example. The active religious life, the self-motivation and organization of the church, striving toward positive accomplishments, have raised the self-esteem and produced changes of the mentality of the Roma there. An important factor has been the weakness of the Muslim religious activities, lacking serious outreach and organization in 'Carmen.' Even though Protestant Christianity invaded an occupied territory, it has in fact become the dominant religion there. The Kazanlak Roma used to identify themselves as ethnic Turks.¹²⁸ They no longer do! While in 1992, 95% of the Roma in Kazanlak, according to a survey, were Muslims, in 2003 the majority of them - over 90%, identified themselves as Christians¹²⁹ (Dolapchieva 2003:50-54). This is totally a result of the activities of the Roma Pentecostal Church there under the pastorate of Mitko Banev.

Cultural Customs

“I enjoyed the holidays before, but now they are not celebrated as much, they have disappeared, the customs and traditions are not like before,” said a young Roma woman from Kiustedil (cited in Petrova et al 2004:176).

Roma culture includes various customs and traditions dealing with the supernatural that the church has engaged. In the *mahali*, many people, seeking supernatural help for solving their problems, used to melt bullets and engage in other spell-invoking activities; these have been done for various purposes like healing, prosperity, love connection, confronting adversity, and success. The Roma pastors preach strongly against all forms of sorcery, magic, and divination.¹³⁰ There are still some fortune-tellers among the Roma communities, but they have largely lost their influence. The Kazanlak Roma, for example, do not seek the services of fortune-tellers, because for them “fate is determined by God, but could be changed through prayers” (Dolapchieva 2003:110). The Roma Pentecostal believers have taken seriously the Biblical prohibition against divination:¹³¹

There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that uses divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

The Pentecostal Christian faith, not only teaches against dabbling with sorcery, but also eliminates the need for it by its holistic ministry. The belief and prayers for healing, and other existential needs of the Roma community, provide the solution of a divine source rather than a magical one.

Pastor Dimitar from Filipovtsi, Sofia said:

We all used to go to a shrine in Kniazhevo. There was a big rock there and they called it “the tomb of Ali Baba.” Before the gospel came we were more like the Turks. We called on the hodjas to do our funerals. After the coming of Christianity we totally changed our view of God. We had a veil, but God removed it from our eyes to believe in the light of Christ (2006).

Belly-dancing is often abandoned by Roma believers. This is a typical oriental dance, which the Roma enjoy dancing at weddings and other special celebrations. There are some believers and pastors that still do it and consider it acceptable.¹³² The majority of the Roma Pentecostal churches, however, are opposed to it, viewing it as sensually provocative. Many are opposed to all forms of dancing, considering them worldly entertainment. This is how the old gajo Pentecostal leaders have taught them.

One of the major customs that has been abandoned by the Roma, as a result of the conversion to Pentecostal Christianity, is the *courban*. The *courban*, is a custom, sanctioned by both the Orthodox Church and the Muslim community: an individual or a family buys an animal, like a cow or a lamb, to be slain for a specific holiday or a memorial. *Courbans* would also be done if a person wants to express their gratitude to God for something like a recovery from sickness. For St. George’s Day, a major celebration for Roma, lambs are slain and cooked in the *mahali*. When the animal is killed, the priest¹³³ sanctifies the offering; the belief is that whoever partakes will have good fortune and blessings throughout the year. Then the family eats the meal together.

The Pentecostal churches in the Roma *mahali* reject this syncretistic practice and strongly preach against it, considering it a sacrificial offering. They believe with Saint Paul that since Christ was the Lamb of God - the perfect atonement for sin, whose blood sealed the New Covenant, that the Old Testament sacrifices are no longer necessary (1 Corinthians 8; Hebrews 9:11-27).

Thus this common Roma cultural practice is disappearing from the quarters impacted by Pentecostalism. In Perushtitsa, for example, the Roma used to buy 350 *courbans*, one for each house in the quarter, for a certain holiday. Last year, according to Pastor Salcho, only one house bought a *courban*, because of the church's opposition to it (Salchev 2006). In the Fakulteta quarter of Sofia, the courban-sellers have accused the churches of hurting their business. This is the case in many Roma mahali as result of the Pentecostal churches ministry.

Brother Assen, first Pentecostal Roma pastor in Sliven, shared:

In 1977 I had already made a down payment on a sheep for the Mother of God Holiday. At that time I converted to the faith and asked for the down payment back; I told them that I had become a believer and did not want to buy a sheep any more. In the Nadezhda quarter before, people venerated the Mother of God and celebrated Archangel's Day. If someone was seriously ill, they promised to kill a courban in case they recovered. All of this is past and forgotten. Imams used to come for funerals, but now the pastors perform them (Sliven 2006).

A middle age Roma brother compares the *mahala* before and now:

We used to do the old customs and celebrations. Lambs were hanging in front of every house - they killed them for health, success, and fortune in the family...on May 6 [St. George's day] we got the table outside and all of us laughed, rejoiced, and kissed. We also honored the great Mother of God on August 28th We went to the monastery and lit a candle...But now since these changes took place and when the people became evangelicals, we pray in our church to the living God; we do not light candles any more (cited in Petrova et al 2004:85-88).

The revitalization of Roma culture, resulting from Pentecostal Christianity, is greatly reflected in the way they celebrate their holidays. The Orthodox holidays related to saints and honor of the dead are not celebrated any more. Neither are the customs of icon veneration, honor of God's Mother, lighting of candles, nor are the syncretistic burial rites presently practiced. The evangelical influence has made Christmas and Easter the most celebrated holidays among the Roma in Kazanluk, as well as in most other places. Even though certain elements from the Islamic past may have remained in their

festivals,¹³⁴ the impact of evangelical Christianity has been very strong. The Roma divide their rite-of-passage celebrations in “secular” and “spiritual.” Those who are faithful believers do the spiritual celebrations following the Christian model, which does not include drinking, fighting, and unchristian behavior, but rather prayers and worship. Those less committed to the church, on the other hand, celebrate them in their old ways. The lack of finances is also an important reason that the ‘worldly’ way of celebration is no longer possible for many. Therefore, a great number adhere to the evangelical way of celebrating holidays. More and more, evangelical Christianity is the religion that dominates the Roma quarters (Dolapchieva 2003:80-81, 110).

Just like the ‘spiritual wedding’ has replaced the ‘worldly wedding,’ discussed earlier, so the “spiritual sending off” of a soldier is a new practice in the Roma neighborhood. Almost every boy that goes to the military from “Carmen,” Kazanluk has this spiritual celebration ritual of “sending off,” which is a modification of the secular sending-of-a-soldier celebration. The spiritual version of the celebration is done with much prayer and without the use of alcohol. Food and beverages are provided, and the pastor leads the *mahala* people in prayer for the future soldier (Dolapchieva 2003:130). The ‘spiritual’ family holidays promote Christian values among the Roma community.

M. Slavkova notes that the Rudari (Romanian-speaking Gypsies) evangelicals give up certain ‘superstitious traditions’ and addictive behaviors like drinking and smoking. In their nomadic travels they witness of their Christian faith.

They explain that taking a bear’s hair against spells or the belief that the bear chases spells away are superstitions. The Zhambaeshti family from the Troianovo village no longer want to make the traditional *banitsa* (pastry entrée)...on Christmas; they neither eat of the *courban* nor the food blessed by an Orthodox priest during memorials for the dead; when one of our informers from the same village felt unwell, she would call the pastor to pray for her; when the child of a Kopanari family from Kameno (Burgas region) felt fear (panic attack), they

would not take him to a *baba* (witch-doctor) to “melt him a bullet,”¹³⁵ but rather took him to the pastor of the church for prayer (“The Rudari...”).¹³⁶

Renewed Identity

Scholars agree that identity arises and is developed through the process of social interaction (Charon 2004:25). G. Stone defines identity as “the perceived social location of the individual” (cited in Charon 2004:85). According to Charon, “identity is the name we call ourselves, and usually it is the name we announce to others that tells them who we are as we act in situations...identities are socially bestowed, socially maintained, and socially transformed.” Given by the significant others and the reference groups, they “become central to us over time as our interactions reconfirm them over and over.” Paul Burke says: “Identities are meanings a person attributes to the self.” They are defined in relationships, society, and a context of interaction. A person or a group has multiple identities, but some of them dominate and matter most of the time (Charon 2004:85-87). “Identity is really a process; who we are is an ongoing development...identities are the way we identify and present ourselves in situations” (Charon 2004:149).

Social interaction shapes our identities. It is not others who create who we are, and it is not simply who we “really are” inside. Instead, identity results from a negotiation process that arises in social interaction. We label others in interaction; we attempt to shape the identities of others in interaction; we tell others who we think we are in social interaction. Through it all we come to think of our self as something; an identity is formed. And our action is now influenced by who in the world we think we are (Charon 2004:156).

Roma identity is not defined by memory or space. Because of their illiteracy they have no collective historical memory that unites many other ethnic groups around the world. Rather “it is their own moral knowledge, the internal code of conduct and specific appropriateness of culture that makes them being Roma.” One Roma man from Madrid,

for example, defined Roma identity in the following way: “We *Gitanos* are the only people who don’t know their descent. We have always roamed the roads and we had no neighbors who could tell us who we were” (Tsankova 2006b:18-19).

The Gypsies have struggled over the years to retain their own identity. Even in present day Europe, officially committed to maintaining ethnic pluralism and guaranteeing political rights to the minorities, their culture is still suppressed and threatened (Dixon 2002). Whenever a person or a group’s identity is threatened, they need to respond and take appropriate actions (Charon 2004:100). The Roma are still treated as outsiders in the old continent, even though they have lived there for a millennium. Their traditional reaction has been to close themselves in their own world.

The ascribed identity, informed by discrimination and a biased attitude, gives control of the majority population over the Roma minority:

One way of influencing people’s actions is to cast them into a role that we want so that they think of themselves in that manner and behave in the way we want...Casting others into identities that make sense to us and aid our plans in interaction is controlling that situation to some extent (Charon 2004:152).

In Bulgaria, Roma identity is defined by their darker skin color, language, secluded communities, certain cultural customs and traditions, and their common ethnic problems.¹³⁷ The most important identity attributed to the Roma in Bulgaria is the negative label given them by the majority population. That label determines the others’ attitude toward the Roma. Whenever a *gajo* has a positive impression as a result of interaction with Roma, this is usually lifted up as an exception. This discriminatory attitude has caused a number of Roma families, especially those who have experienced social lift and moved out of the *mahala*, to disown their ethnic identity.¹³⁸

Labeling and stereotyping are described effectively by identity theory:

We label them on the basis of what they do or say or how they are dressed or what we have heard. We label them according to what they announce their identity to be...We sometimes stereotype others; that is, we apply a label to them based on sketchy information and we refuse to change the label as we interact. More often, we tentatively label those with whom we interact and during interaction come to revise our definition of them many times over...Our definition of the other often influences his or her definition of self (Charon 2004:149-151).

The identification with Pentecostal Evangelical Christianity creates a more positive image for the Roma. They find their religious identity in it just like ethnic Bulgarians, many of whom claimed to be atheists during Communism, presently find it in Orthodoxy, or like most ethnic Turks and Pomaks – in Islam. The Pentecostal movement has been the most powerful force in leading the Roma to the formation of a renewed identity that does not make them ashamed but proud of who they are as people. The Roma believers do not deny the degree of truth about the negative stereotypes attached to their ethnos. They deal with them, however, by placing them in their own past while openly criticizing the other Roma who behave in socially unacceptable ways.

Many personal stories demonstrate that, in their hard social predicament, the Roma seek their “existential values” not in their “ethnocultural treasury,” but in the faith. Even though some are of the opinion that the evangelical success is due to good organization and abundant resources, according to Popkochev, the substantial truth is actually that the religion brings personal meaning to their lives, and helps them view themselves not just as an ethnic minority. This new religious identity helps the Roma settle their identity crisis, demonstrated by the disappearance of some Roma traditions. The humane religious messages dealing with practical issues of life, rather than canonical dogmas, become a key factor for the formation of this newly discovered Roma identity.

The faith is not simply the way to heaven for them, but the source of purpose and direction in this life. It helps them respect themselves more and brings them into a 'Promised Land' where all are equally important before God (2004:44).

The shift in the cultural identity and value system of the evangelical Roma is demonstrated by their frequent quotations of Bible passages. They are moving away from an ethno-cultural identity to one of religious values. This faith becomes the new Roma identity and meaning for existence. Popkochev is of the opinion that this new personal faith orientation needs to undergo social probation: if a person has truly converted, their life and relationships should be radically impacted; other ethnic groups should accept them more (2004:45). The present research has provided evidence that many Roma believers *have* passed this probation stage; of course, there are people in the church who might not be sincere believers or who are spiritually immature, but as it has been pointed out earlier, the Roma communities, where believers are present, do enjoy better relations among themselves and others; the fact that the Christian faith has been planted, watered, taken root, cultivated, and grown in their midst, is already giving lasting fruit as Jesus promised it would (John 15:16).

Pentecostalism has helped many Roma construct a new and more positive self-image (Dolapchieva 2003:55). They have been in need for a new identity, different from that of an ethnic minority (Sabkova 2003:74). Those who have converted begin a new life. They feel important, their marginal status is changed, and an outlet from their crisis situation, based on ethnicity, is found (Marushiakova and Popov 1997). Also the Roma find a cause and purpose in life through the faith (Chepilev 2006). This new Christian identity makes their coping with their minority problems more peaceful and constructive.

A key in the formation of this new identity is the preaching of the Roma pastors, which could be described by the term *reconstitutive discourse*, used in the academic field of communication; reconstitutive discourse is the form of rhetoric employed by charismatic speakers who set out to produce a fundamental change in the lives, self-image, and actions of their audience.¹³⁹ For example, the Roma pastor Nikolai Vassilev, preaching on Jeremiah 1:4-11, said to his congregation in Samokov:

What do you think of yourself? You might think you are desperate, small, and insignificant. Jeremiah saw his inability and insufficiency to fulfill God's prophetic calling on his life. God said to this young priest: "You are my vessel and instrument; my glory will be manifest through you." Jeremiah responded: "I am a child and cannot fulfill this calling. I will not make it." That is what other people may tell you: "You will amount to nothing..."

Brothers and sisters, we are limited servants, but serve an unlimited God. Indeed alone we can do nothing just like Jeremiah could not. God has loved you and made you His vessels and servants. Start thinking differently of yourself and do not say: "It will not or cannot happen." God said to the young prophet: "Fear not, for I give you a word and authority over the nations and the kingdoms. Uproot all that is unclean and temporary what man has planted! Renounce all deception and begin doing new things!" God's plan never fails. Jesus will build His church. This is His work and promise; we are simply the vessels. The divine words are truth, life, peace, power, and grace. James called Elijah "a man of like passions." The great servants of God were people just like us...

There is nothing worse for a person than to become a slave. Jesus said: "I do not call you servants, but sons" (Samokov, August 27, 2006).

Pastor Sasho from the Lunatsiate village said once at a Roma conference:

We are a chosen and anointed people. God will fill your hearts and souls. Believe in yourself: you are a child of the King! See yourself through the eyes of God! The Lord is your shepherd! Even if you have fired been from work and or have many debts to pay, these trials will make your faith stronger and encourage your soul (Lom 2006).

Integration

For many Roma their worst predicament is the isolation from the rest of Bulgarian society (Petrova et al 2004:85-88). The main goal of the government policies in regard to them is integration. The truth is, however, that no other agency, government, political, or

charitable organization, has been able to move the Roma toward integration as much as the spiritual movement through the evangelical churches.

It is not true as some think that the faith deepens Roma marginality:

...marginalization is one of the causes for the massive sweep of the conversion; the latter, however, deepens marginalization. In other words, the already predominantly Roma image of the Protestant churches, the localization of churches (makeshift or specially built) in the large Roma districts one again closes up the Roma within their community” (Sabkova 2003:84).

The Roma truly enjoy worshiping God within their own communities. The fact that the churches are in the *mahali* makes that easier, especially for those who want to worship close to home instead of going across town. The influence of the churches make the Roma integrate effectively into the larger society, however, by learning morals, getting education, accepting good Christian values, and having a bigger network of Christian friends from other ethnic groups. Of course, some may have a different definition of integration. True integration into a society does not mean that minorities should leave their cultural identity or be assimilated. True integration means that people in a society will have equal opportunity in life to become good and respectable citizens. The Pentecostal movement is the best integrator of the Roma into the life of Bulgarian society.

Kazanluk again is a good example. The church is the main institution in the “Carmen” quarter, serving to unify the ethnos and to provide the facilitation of religious life. It is the main initiator of the reforms improving Roma life, giving them new self-esteem and fulfillment. The church also inspires the local Roma to participate in public life. Thus, the believers realize their significance as a group and get integrated into the life of the city (Dolapchieva 2003:49).

The Roma worldview is transformed by the Protestant message and beliefs. It raises their view of themselves causing them to come out of the victim mentality and leave the shadow of the majority population. They promote leaders to participate in the social and political life. Their mediation function helps them balance the interests of their group and contributes to their integration in the larger society. The Protestant impact helps reduce the socially unacceptable behaviors among the Roma such as drinking, fighting, and even murders. The entrance of religious ideas through guests from abroad open the Roma people to the world. It lifts up their self-esteem, makes them feel cared for and appreciated. The Roma church in Kazanluk, for example, is a “mighty integration center” and attracts settlers to come live in that *mahala* (Dolapchieva 2003:140-141). This is the case in most *mahali* where Pentecostalism has established a permanent presence. Pavel Ignatov, cited by Dimitrova, says:

In many cases the church is the only window [door] for the minorities toward society. Illiteracy and unemployment estrange the Roma from society. So the Protestant churches are the only true “unifier” and “integrator” – through the preaching of Christian principles and its educational activities the church integrates these poor crowds of people into the country’s culture. In our denomination the Roma are treated differently than in the government institutions. They are not ‘Roma,’ meaning, they are all with equal rights (2000:65).

Dimitrova adds:

The statements of the pastors give me grounds to state that the integration of the Roma into society goes by way of the church, which through the pastors integrates them first into the protestant activities they attend. This is confirmed by the way the Roma are treated differently in these communities (2000:65).

Through the faith, the Roma are being integrated into not only Bulgarian life, but also the global community. There have been a number of foreigners who visit the Roma *mahali*. Some Roma pastors have traveled around Europe, the United States, and other lands. These kinds of exchanges broaden their horizons and assist the integration process.

Conclusions

The experience of the love and grace of God has been manifested among the Roma in the Post-Communist era through the Pentecostal churches. This Christian movement has had a great impact on the Roma quarters. There are still problems, because of the harsh economic situation, but the churches' clearly have improved the situation. Many who used to be selfish and spiteful, now love and honor their neighbors.

Pentecostalism has caused a revitalization of Roma culture. This has been evidenced by the raising of moral standards, deliverance from addictions, lower crime rates, better education, more honesty in business, more opportunities for employment – a significant social lift. Fortune-telling, pagan customs like the courban, and Islam are also being driven out of Roma cultural life. The movement has improved their manners, their relationships, and their whole lifestyle as a marginalized group.

Some Roma communities are more revitalized than others. For example the *mahali* Humata and Mladenovo in Lom where Roma evangelical Christianity began in Bulgaria, have become neighborhoods of evangelical culture: Roma children go to mixed schools,¹⁴⁰ illiteracy is non-existent, and there is hardly any crime there. There is another Roma quarter in Lom inhabited by the Kalajiji group where things are much worse, because the Christian movement is just in its early stages there (Lom 2006).

The leading human factor in the revitalization process is the work and vision of the Roma pastors who feel the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to bring about community transformation through reconstitutive discourse. Children are now raised in the ways of God - that is a promise for a better future for the Roma. Even though, the degrees of

revitalization may vary from one *mahala* to another, it is clear that the impact of Pentecostal Christianity on the Bulgarian Roma is of revolutionary proportions.

The movement has brought to many Roma a worldview transformation and a more meaningful and satisfactory existence. They are finding a balanced equilibrium in the Pentecostal temples. A number of Roma Pentecostal leaders have become participants in the political process in the country speaking out for social justice and improvement of the lifestyle of their ethnos. As a result of this revitalization phenomenon, the Roma have found a new reason to live and a hope for the future. They now see themselves as a valuable group of people and have a better self-esteem. Pentecostalism has given them a new identity: instead of social outcasts, they are beloved children of God. This radical transformation has made them better and more responsible citizens of the country. The Roma Christians have the potential of positively impacting Bulgarian society.

There are other factors that have contributed to revitalizing Roma culture in Post-Communist Bulgaria: Roma writers, musicians, intellectuals, political activists, and charitable organizations. None of them, however, have even come close to matching what has been accomplished through the Pentecostal movement. The churches have become the greatest agents of social change in the *mahali*. Christians, city officials, unbelievers, and researchers have been besotted by this grand phenomenon.

In conclusion of this chapter, an important point needs to be made. God's grace is available to all human beings regardless of their ethnic background or social status. All humans are sinners in the sight of God and Christ died for their salvation. Christian conversion brings transformation to all people who have experienced it and improves life on all levels of society. The fact that marginal groups, like the Roma, have been more

receptive to spiritual renewal does not mean that they are more sinful than any other group. The proportions of crime and corruption in corporate Bulgaria, connected to the high political echelon, greatly exceed those in the *mahala*.¹⁴¹ Therefore, spiritual revitalization is needed in every area of Bulgarian life.¹⁴²

CHAPTER 7

CHARACTERISTIC THEMES IN GYPSY THEOLOGY

Introduction

Western Christianity and the Bulgarian mother churches have mostly dominated Roma theology. Since the Roma originated in the East, however, they do not fit the European cultural mindset. That necessitates an indigenous theological expression, which reflects the Roma Christian faith in the context of their cultural and social framework.

The Roma adherents of the Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria have a low awareness of their own theology, because Christianity for them has been primarily a lived-out experience. They certainly do have, however, some indigenous theology reflected in their beliefs, testimonies, songs, and sermons. The songs composed by Roma believers are the most effective expression and the richest source of Roma native theology. Their lyrics flesh it out better than any other written document.

This chapter makes a pioneer attempt to articulate the contextual Roma theology, which has been slowly emerging out of the movement in Bulgaria.¹⁴³ It delineates a range of theological themes that are precious to the Roma. Several songs, expressing Roma indigenous theological thought, have been included.

Background

The Roma Pentecostals have done most theologizing within their churches and the greater evangelical community in Bulgaria. They determine its important themes and how they relate to their context. The Roma have not participated much in theologizing on

academic levels, because there have been few of them with theological education. In recent years a number of Roma ministers have gone through formal theological education.¹⁴⁴ The important sources of Roma Pentecostal theology are:

The Bible. The Bible, freely distributed by the evangelicals, is present in most of the Roma homes in Bulgaria. Two thirds of the people, interviewed by one research team, were aware of what a Bible is and said they had it or had read it. They defined it as “eternal life and salvation” and “the truth itself;” Some said: “I do not want just to read it, but also to live by it. This is a book that changes people’s lives” (Pamporov et al 2001:26-27). The Bible is the fundamental source for the movement’s theology.

Tradition. Roma theology has been inspired and directed by the customs and traditions of the Bulgarian Pentecostal movement as whole. Having initially accepted the faith from the *gajo* Pentecostals, the Roma beliefs and interpretations of Scripture have been greatly impacted by them. The old conservative standards of the Church of God left their mark on the beliefs and holiness code of the Roma churches. The Roma have often gone to their ethnic Bulgarian leaders for various theological questions. So, the dominant culture has influenced the formation of Roma theology.¹⁴⁵

Community of Believers. The Roma have begun the process of self-theologizing in a hermeneutical community consisting of their own ministers and laypeople. As these groups spend time discussing Scripture and theological matters, they make decisions in regard to their beliefs and practices. This leads the Roma believers to a more indigenous theological perspective. Even though mistakes will occur, this is a healthy process, which will strengthen the movement. Roma believers and churches have reached a sufficient level of spiritual maturity to develop their own contextual theology or theologies.

Context. There has never been a theology developed in the history of Christianity outside a particular cultural context. The Roma context, which includes the struggles of poverty and isolation, determines to a great extent the content of Roma theology. This context determines that there are certain areas of their culture that need to be corrected and transformed. The Roma can decide best how their faith speaks to their context.

Experience. The Roma greatly rely on their personal life experiences and mystical encounters for their theological development. To them, God is personally involved in the lives of His children. Radical life changes, like conversion and healing, are quite important to the Roma. Less interested in intellectual pursuit, they want to see God's power manifest in real life. Story and testimony, often including supernatural encounters, are important sources for Roma theological understanding.

Important Themes

There are several significant themes expressed by the movement that make Roma theology unique to their specific worldview, cultural context, and social situation.

Fundamental Concepts

O Del. The Gypsies have always believed in God. Their religious worldview includes God (Devla), and the devil (Beng) as the symbols of good and evil (Pamporov 2001:14). For them God is one, regardless of His various names, the Creator of life and nature. The name of the power controlling the universe, present everywhere and above all, is *Del* (mostly used with the definite article *O* i.e. *O Del* – the God). This important theological word comes from the Roma verb *dav*, meaning “to give.” Therefore, the term

refers to the action of giving continually. *O Del* is the one that constantly *gives*, literally ‘the Giver’ or ‘the Giving One.’¹⁴⁶ As the Giver, God provides all that the Roma need – life, health, and happiness. Alberto Baba, French Roma minister, said: “*O Del si Rom* (God is a Roma), because He understands and speaks our language” (2006).

Divine Love revealed in Jesus Christ. God the Father, the Ultimate Giver, revealed His love by *giving* His only Son Jesus Christ for the sins of humanity, as stated in the golden verse – John 3:16. The Roma love to hear about the cross where Christ’s blood was shed for all humanity. They view Calvary as the ultimate expression of love. When discussing the reasons for their conversion experience the Roma would often make a distinction between “believing because of a need” and “believing because of love,” considering the latter as superior. Just as *love* is a main reason for the Roma conversion to Christianity, so it is an important theme in their theology. Their deep love for God is a response to His genuine and sacrificial love for them.

Love has always been considered a pure and sacred thing in Roma culture. Their ethnic expression of love and romance is very strong and passionate. The Roma believers love to sing and talk about divine love – the kind that the world cannot give them. They feel God has forgiven them much, and in turn their love for Him is greater. “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 7:47).

This deep spiritual love is most evident in Roma worship. Observers admire the worship of the Roma with expressiveness and beautiful ethnic music. It truly enriches the Bulgarian evangelical landscape. Their worship expresses their simplicity, gentleness, power, and softness of heart. Often they can be seen weeping during worship time. They

experience the Lord seeing their openness and sensitivity and bringing them comfort in the midst of pain and rejection by the world. One song says:

We are black Gypsies,
but praise God like angels.
My soul, praise God
from the whole heart and soul.

Suffering

In Roma theology divine love is directly connected to the theme of suffering. The suffering of Jesus connects with their ethnic suffering. Throughout their history the Roma have suffered greatly, because of poverty, persecution, and discrimination. They are still victims of prejudice in Europe and around the world. Often they are treated with great hostility, but the violence against them is left unreported on many occasions, because of negligence or lack of political power. They do not react traumatically to persecutions, but take them with great courage. They are not bitter about the mistreatment and hatred against them (Yoors 1967:8). The Roma have not reacted to oppression and dispersion by making a monument of remembrance like the Jews have. Their *eternal now* mentality, have made them accustomed to forgetting their history, even its darkest points (Fonseca 1995:276).

This is an important theological insight for the World Church. The Roma people are suffering, not only because of poverty, but also because of constant discrimination. They are a perpetual ethnic minority in all the countries where they live – a minority most disliked, hated, and marginalized in Europe. The Roma Pentecostal movement began right after their great suffering during the Holocaust. This unique position within

Pentecostalism gives them the ability to speak theologically and prophetically to the rest of the Christian world.

The sufferings of Christ and of God's nation of Israel touch deeply the Roma heart. Their own suffering brings them close to the presence of God as they, more than most other groups in Europe, realize how much they need Him. "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Phil.3:10). Suffering does bring people into an intimate relationship with God. The Bible provides a good basis for the Roma theology of suffering. The belief in a God who relieves suffering and provides for the outcast, is expressed in the Roma daily prayers and supplications. Around a *mahala* campfire gathering, I once heard an old Roma woman praying:

Oh, God thank you that you care for us the outcast and poor people. You have not abandoned us, but are daily looking down on our suffering. Thank you for these ministers you have sent to us and for their love. We know that even though we are despised by the world, you still love us – the weak and the burdened.

That prayer was a good expression of Roma theology, which connects divine love with human suffering. It is the daily prayer of many Roma believers in Bulgaria. Many of the Roma Christian songs speak of burdens, desperation, sadness, and life's cruelty, but recognize in all of these the nearness of divine help. One such song says: "Hear my pain, only you can hear and understand!"

The Vatican made this declaration concerning the suffering of the Roma:

The Paschal mystery of death and life imparts a character to Christian persons, and to their cultures no less. Something must die in these, too for that passage of purification, elevation and transformation of the entire human person and of his or her culture in Christ and in the light of the Gospel...Here effort will be made to overcome the ghetto-like situations in which the gypsy family and community often find themselves. Gypsy culture, too, must gradually open up to values that are a positive constituent of the birthright of society at large. (Roman Curia 2003)

This theme makes the Roma deeply love the cross where divine and human suffering were made one. They know Jesus Christ loves them and can associate with their suffering and pain. When they suffer Christ suffers with them and He will reward them in heaven for their suffering on earth. That is why they sing (Bania 2006):

You weep God when I suffer,
when I suffer you suffer too!
You will give me a home
where sufferings and pain will cease soon.
You are worthy. I will see you in heaven,
I'll see you in glory, I'll look upon your face,
And you will hug me.

Trust in God

In the church the Roma find relief from their suffering. Their response to the trials is trust in heaven. The Roma's hard predicament makes them rely solely on God for help and provision. Pastor Zahariev says: "The Roma are deprived of many things, but no one can deprive them of the faith in Christ. Their only hope is in Christ, because they lack material things" (Lom 2006). They cry out to God for help and comfort from a context of great need. Many of the songs composed by Roma believers express that Christ is the only source and the only friend they have:

Tears in the eyes,
Pain in the heart,
I have when I see you once again on the cross,
Our Savior.
To live here without you, I cannot,
I cannot, there is no life without you,
There is no joy without you,
There is no love without you,
Now forgiveness and mercy
I wait for, I expect.

To the Roma, God is the only safe haven of rest for the weary, burdened, poor, and grieved. While their life on earth is cruel, God gives them joy.

You turn our grief into joy,
 You wipe away all tears,
 Our souls trust in you,
 In your Kingdom you mention us.

Christian faith to the Roma does not mean their life will be void of struggles and pain, but that they will be able to make it through them by depending on God. Their songs encourage them when in need to *Cry Out to Heaven* and assure them that *Life is Not Hard When You Have a Wonderful Lord* (Bania: 2006). Perseverance and freedom are important concepts in Roma theological thought. Trusting God they can persevere through the trials and get deliverance in the end. “When hard times come and my soul is in torment, I turn to you! In you is my light. I am free as the wind and my soul is free. I am free in you” (Bania 2006). God is everything to the Roma believers.

I was lonely in this world and desperate,
 But God came and changed my life,
 And now I know what is the meaning of my life,
 My King, My King,
 I cannot live without you,
 on this sinful earth. (Bania 2006)

Evangelist Milanov said:

The Roma understand best what is to be dependent on God, like the branches of the vine: “without me you can do nothing.” We can rely on our fair skin and high social status, but they cannot. Thus, they understand best what it means to be a branch from the vine. “There is no church that seeks the Lord both with and without reason like the Roma church does. They are like a person who is constantly in a rip current - there a human cries out for help” (2006).

Trust and reliance on God is expressed through prayer. Out of the 32 Roma informants interviewed by one research team, only 5 said they did not pray or go to church. Most said they prayed both in church and at home, recognizing the omnipresence of God. They said they pray at meals, and for whatever problems they have, such as health or sins. They mention the Lord throughout their day (Pamporov et al 2001:24-25).

“If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask and you’ll receive.” The Roma realize that when they have an intimate spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, they may not necessarily get materially rich, but their life does get better.

Healing

Many Roma, as we have seen already, come to Christ as a result of a physical healing in their family. Roma regularly come to the church with the need for personal healing, or bring loved ones for special prayer (Demirev 2004:35). During altar calls many of them come forward to receive healing from God. The belief that God can heal their diseases touches them deeply.

The Roma believe that physical healing is the natural result of a life of faith. Since culturally they have not depended much on medicine, except folk healers, divine healing occupies an important place in their theology. The Roma believers often bring clothes of sick relatives or friends for special prayer by the church elders. As a culture that appreciates rituals, the anointing with oil prescribed in the New Testament (see James 5:14-15),¹⁴⁷ has great significance to them.

Healing is one of the greatest needs of the Roma and an important theme in their theology. Often Roma songs speak of ‘wounds,’ of ‘sick hearts’ and point to Jesus as the Healer of the human soul and body, the Reliever of all human suffering (Bania 2006):

Stormy days we live on this earth,
 Troubles and trials we have here,
 Jesus you are cure for the soul,
 You fill us with joy and peace.

Many Roma ministers feel that because of the great importance of healing to their ethnos, there is an overemphasis on this Christian practice. Therefore, they teach their

people the need for becoming steady followers of Christ. They encourage them to fully seek God's will and plan for their lives, and not to attend church just for the purpose of receiving healing or resolving some other existential crisis.

Holiness

The Jewish people were separated from the world and set apart to be Jehovah's covenant community. They had to keep themselves pure and holy in order to be the light to the nations. God gave them a very detailed system of rules and regulations in regards to ritual purity. "For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy: neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Leviticus 11:44). God's people in the New Testament were also called to a life of holiness and separation from the world. This theme has been important throughout the history of the Christian Church.¹⁴⁸

The Scriptural theology of purity and holiness engages the old Roma purity code, which they often practice in some measure. The Roma believers in Bulgaria embraced the principles of holiness, which were transmitted to them by the old conservative Pentecostals. Roma churches are usually strict in matters of dress code and personal conduct. The pastors preach a life of self-control that does not succumb to the carnal pleasures of the flesh. They desire to demonstrate a complete break from the typical Roma lifestyle of entertainment, associated often with immorality, drinking, fortune-telling, unrestrained conduct, and trickery. These were the old sinful ways of behavior, stereotypical of the Roma. The Roma churches often do not allow their members to dance or play secular music, even when their livelihood depends on it, because they believe all

Christians are required to be separated from the world and its sinful entanglements. Their songs speak of the Church as the Bride of Christ, which needs to be pure and holy.

The Roma seem to struggle seriously with the concept of divine grace. They feel like they constantly sin and need to ask God for forgiveness (Pamporov et al 2001:16). The Roma believers have fear of God and when entangled in sin (or what they perceive as sin), they cry out for divine mercy. Roma pastors regularly rebuke sin from the pulpit, encouraging people to confess before God and to correct their lives. There is a group of Roma worship songs that speak of backsliding, falling away from God, and the fact the Father is hurt by the behavior of His children. One song says: "I sinned before you, forgive me, I repent; Because of your mercy, O God, do not leave me and do not let me to fall away." Another one speaks of a sad person walking with his head down, because Christ has left his life and calls the backslider to return home to God. Many Bania songs rebuke the sinners, hypocrites, flatterers, deceivers, and the unbelievers with 'disgusting'¹⁴⁹ behavior. Their purpose is repentance and correction.

I met a young Roma family who were believers and regularly attended church, but were reluctant to be baptized in water, because they might sin afterwards. They thought they really wanted to be ready, believing that after receiving water baptism, they should not sin at all. There are also a number of Roma believers that do not want to attend church, because they struggle with bad habits like drinking and smoking.

There are three major reasons for this struggle with divine grace among the followers of the Roma movement. First, the Roma are a shame-culture, and since they live in closed communities, individual faults generally cannot remain hidden from the people they attend church with. Secondly, they have a low view of themselves as an

ethnos due to the outcaste social status ascribed to them by the majority. Thirdly, they have received the Pentecostal message from ultraconservative believers who emphasized the human effort in attaining a holy life. It is important for Roma to understand the biblical teaching, which conveys a balanced cooperation between human effort and divine grace in achieving a sanctified life.

Testimony and Deliverance

Testimony is a major source of Roma theology. Their theology relies more on experience than on doctrines. They are not so concerned with the rational premises of the faith, but want to know how it affects the heart and emotions of the individual. The most important change, which occurs in the life of the Roma community, is the spiritual transformation, which takes place as a result of the Gospel. Since the Roma faith is experience-focused, testimony is a very important expression of their theology. A testimony of a genuine experience with God is a witness to unbelievers that mere dogmatic and rational arguments cannot provide. One Roma song describes several stories from the gospels, in which Jesus changed the lives of women: the harlot who anointed him with fragrance, the sick woman that He healed, and the Samaritan woman who became a great witness to her community. Then the song appeals to women to receive eternal life and healing, and then spread the good news.

This is the testimony of Stefan Kolev, a Roma pastor in Fakulteta:

I was a drunk and my whole family was ashamed of me and willing to disown me. I would tell the believers: "You are false Christians and if I join the church, I will be a pastor." While I was getting smashed with a drinking buddy, his wife came and invited me to church. I said "But your God does not accept drunks." She said: "Come as you are," and I went. There I felt the touch of a warm wave; I had a void in my heart that was suddenly filled. Then I told my friend: "Man, let

us go back and drink to the max, because tomorrow I will dedicate my life to God.” My day of surrender to Christ was October 14, 1990.

I was eager to receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Then my wife, who had not yet fully converted to my knowledge, came home one day and told me that she had spoken in tongues. Out of my zeal I could not believe it and even wanted to beat her up, thinking: “How can she get the Spirit baptism before I do?” Soon, God gave me the experience too. Soon the local church needed a leader; one brother saw a vision of me standing with a Bible. So God called me to take the responsibility. My sister wept, because I stuttered and could not even say a couple of words smoothly. God healed me and I began to speak well. The Holy Spirit gave me guidance and direction, but I needed to learn more. (2006)

Kolev went on to study at two Bible Schools and graduated from both successfully. His congregation was able to build a beautiful sanctuary through the help of generous donors, including the Korean Ambassador to Bulgaria. Presently, pastor Stefan Kolev has a church with over 200 people in attendance and is a well-respected Roma pastor. He is also building a center for feeding the poor and educating the believers.

The typical experiences characteristic of Pentecostal Christianity, like emotional ecstasy, charismas (gifts of the Holy Spirit) like tongues and prophecy, are also an important part of Roma theology. The baptism of the Holy Spirit fills believers with power to witness of Christ to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8), which includes the *mahala*. The Spirit leads the Roma Christians into all truth and helps them overcome their earthly trials and temptations. Through the movement the Gypsies experience Christianity, according to Fraser, as a religion of the heart (1992:316).

The Roma Pentecostal believers think of supernatural revelatory experiences, especially visions, dreams, and revelations, as the normal way of divine guidance. They share numerous vision stories. Brother Ibriam said: “My wife was severely burnt with hot water. I saw a vision – a doctor stretches his hands three times toward her. On the third time she was healed.” The sister was indeed miraculously healed (Yambol 2006).

Most Roma believers, which I met, somewhere in their Christian experience have seen a vision, awake or in a dream. Such mystical experiences are very normal for oral cultures, while literate cultures are more inclined to rely on written documents. They were also the preferred method of divine guidance by the old Pentecostal forefathers in Bulgaria, most of whom lacked much education.¹⁵⁰

The Roma worldview, based on oral culture and animism, predisposes them to a desire for paranormal experiences. As discussed in Chapter Five, supernatural and mystical encounters are a major reason for them to be attracted to the Pentecostal faith. This is also an important theme in their theology and many Roma believers claim to have seen visions or received revelations through dreams. Serious illnesses, resolved by supernatural healings, are the crisis most of them lift up as the turning point in their faith conversion. The ministry of exorcism is also an important part of their practical theology. They regularly pray for people to receive deliverance from demonic oppression and possession. Many of their intense problems are attributed to evil powers. The Roma believe in spiritual warfare and that through prayer and fasting they can have victory over Satan. Special prayers are conducted to break curses and restore spiritual freedom, which they perceive as the perfect divine will for their lives, churches, and neighborhoods.

Pilgrimage

The Gypsies are notorious travelers and often identified by this characteristic. Since their departure from India, Roma ethnic identity has been perpetually forming in the process of migration. The Roma are not like other nomadic groups, who strictly adhere to tribal allegiances and inhabit restricted areas. They are not original settlers

displaced by colonial occupiers. Gypsy nomadism is a worldwide phenomenon especially evident in rural, industrial, and urban societies. The Roma are conscious of being part of a larger whole. “Their urge to travel is no mere wanderlust.” They travel to meet unknown relatives and find suitable brides for their sons in order to avoid interbreeding. “They are a part of a continuing cultural transfusion and an ever-flowing force of renewal.” (Yoors 1967:6). The Roma are a traveling people on “a never-ending quest.” Their travels have formed them as a people group and continue to develop their identity as Christian believers. Travel has been an important method of spreading Pentecostal Christianity among them.

Even though most of the Bulgarian Roma have been permanently settled, they still remain travelers by nature perpetual nomads who do not possess the land they live on. They are always ready to get on the move. They say: “if you stop a Roma from traveling you take away his soul. We are peripatetic nomads, unlike other nomadic groups; we live to help others and to feed on them. That is why some view us as parasitic. (Tsankova 2006a)

Roma Christians know that pilgrimage is an important theological theme in Scripture. The Jews were a traveling people ever since the call of their patriarch Abraham. The biblical people of faith have always been travelers and sojourners. Traveling without knowing where one’s going requires faith and trust in God. Jesus Christ himself associates closely with the Roma experience: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). One Roma song puts it this way: “Jesus walked on this earth without shelter, but with spiritual food, [yet] he was the richest” (Bania: 2006).

The pilgrimages of the Roma have shaped their *eternal now* mentality and worldview. As nomadic people they have been accustomed to living one day at a time, never worrying about *tomorrow*. The Roma are in a “perpetual present: memories,

dreams, desires, hungers, the urge toward tomorrow, all rooted in the present. Without *now* there was no *before*, just as there can be no *after*.” (Yoors 1967:35).

This nomadic worldview has determined the attitude of the Roma toward material possessions and property. Romanes does not have words for ‘duty’ or ‘possession.’ The Roma are notorious for their extravagant generosity and lavishness, often viewed by outsiders as squandering and wastefulness. In Romanes “thriftiness,” actually means “stinginess.” Roma culture does not favor savings, because they believe that provisions should be just for the day (Yoors 1967:35). This ‘eternal present’ view of time accounts for the Roma lack of interest in studying the past or planning for the future. If they have extra money they could spend it all at one time, treating their neighbors to a feast without worrying about making it the next day; or they might purchase furniture or other illiquid assets. So, most Gypsies do not attach much importance to possessions,¹⁵¹ which are simply enjoyed and if possible converted into profit. They like the bike or car, but know that “another bike or car would come along.” This mentality has kept the Gypsies together for centuries and also kept them in poverty. Their belief concerning possessions is: “What we have here today would likely be gone tomorrow” (Fonseca 1995:32).

Many have criticized this Gypsy attitude toward possessions, believing it to be unwise stewardship. Their pastors have often taught them to forsake the Gypsy one-day-at-a-time mentality and begin to plan life for the future. It is interesting, however, that this Roma way of economic operation has stronger warrant in the teachings of Scripture than the capitalist ideology of wealth accumulation (see Matthew 6:25-34).

The Roman Catholic Church encourages its priests to uphold Gypsy pilgrimages as a form of spiritual quest. The Vatican congress on Pastoral Care for Gypsies stated:

Pilgrimages sometimes rooted in the gypsy way of life should constitute a major feature of their pastoral care, and should be encouraged...The itinerant dimension of the life of Gypsies is a testimony of their inner freedom from the phenomenon of consumerism in today's society and a permanent reminder that life is an ongoing pilgrimage towards another homeland, our heavenly home. With their lifestyle, they challenge a cold, rationalistic religion, marked by too much legalism. Pilgrimage is an expression of the religious feelings and faith of Gypsies. They have always been present, noisy and colorful among the crowds of pilgrims walking towards the shrines of Christendom” (Roman Curia 2003).

The travels of the Roma in the past were without a destination, but as Christian believers they are headed toward a heavenly home. Thus, they have joined all the followers of Christ who are not tied to this earth, because they are headed for a better place. Thus, traveling through this life becomes a preparation for the life-to-come – a reality reflected in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Evangelist Reinhard Bonke accurately compares the Christian Church to a Gypsy camp on the move. “We have no permanent property or citizenship on this earth, because we are expecting the heavenly country, citizenship, and inheritance (Milanov 2006). The Roma love to sing about heaven. On this earth they have lived in poverty and oppression, but Christians expect a home of eternal bliss, without pain or sorrow. The following song, composed by the Roma sisters in Bania expresses the pilgrimage theme:

I am a traveler on earth,
And I am traveling to heaven,
I have nothing in my hand,
only your promises.
I suffer much on the earth,
Is this my fate, Oh God?
Change it oh, Jesus, so I can rejoice,
I cannot forget your promises,
I will have hope, Father, in you!

I will rejoice much,
 As you tell me and promise me,
 When you come back to earth
 My soul will rejoice on the journey,
 My travel will end before you,
 And the tears will cease.

Conclusion

Roma theology is a deep and complex subject. In this chapter we have only begun to uncover its rich content. The marginal status of the Roma gives them the unique opportunity to impact their communities and also to speak prophetically to the majority culture. We can see that in many ways their understanding of Christianity is closer to the biblical paradigm than that of Post-Christian Europe. The further development of Roma contextual theology will be very healthy for the movement. Several things would be necessary for this process to advance:

1. Roma Pentecostal leaders and laypeople need to study theology and write on the subject. They need to explain the Christian faith within their context and apply it there. Roma theologians are just in the process of emerging out of the *mahala* churches.

2. The Roma churches need to develop hermeneutic communities, which are committed to developing local theologies from, by, and for the *mahala*. They need to develop a specific process, which would result in constructing a contextual theological product that effectively engages their culture. Some Roma churches have already taken steps in developing such communities.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

In *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, discovered that 85% of the growing, indigenous, and socially active congregations in the developing world belong to the Pentecostal-Charismatic branch of Christianity. They coined the term “Progressive Pentecostals” to identify this growing segment of the movement, which is becoming the greatest force of Christian evangelism and social engagement in the world.¹⁵² The present dissertation proves that their findings correspond with the situation among the most marginal people in Europe – the Roma. This research goes further than *Global Pentecostalism* in the study of culture change and revitalization, analyzing the Roma movement through the academic lenses of missiology and church growth.

The present work *Gypsy Pentecostals* raises awareness of the situation of the Roma around the world and contributes to the scarce academic literature on this Christian movement, especially in Bulgaria. The text traces the history, growth, and indigenous nature of the movement and its revitalizing impact on Roma communities and culture. It helps inform Christians about ministry to the Roma and scholars studying this movement. The analysis demonstrates how the movement addresses the complex Roma social problems. One chapter articulates the theological themes particular to Roma Pentecostals.

The Church is responsible to minister to the poor, neglected, and despised people of the world. This study reports the experience of the transforming power of God manifested among the Roma. Many of the principles discussed here should be applicable

to other groups living on the margins around the world. The power of the Christian Gospel, manifested through the Pentecostal movement, has been the greatest source of transformation for the Roma. Pentecostalism connects to their experience, worldview, and pre-Christian beliefs. It helps them accept the Christian faith on a deep personal level. The available data suggests that the Roma may be becoming the most Pentecostal people group in Europe.

The Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria continues to grow and bring about social change in the country's *mahali*. It has had a significant impact in Roma culture. As a result, many Roma have adopted a new identity, with a healthier self-image, and a purpose in life.

Areas for Future Research

The dissertation's analysis of the Roma Pentecostal movement raises several possible areas for future research:

1. There needs to be a text written, which gives a detailed and comprehensive account of the history of the Roma Evangelical and Pentecostal movements in Bulgaria.

2. The diverse effects of the church growth among the Roma upon the higher status ethnic Bulgarians should be studied.

3. A text that fully develops indigenous Roma theology would be needed.

4. A thorough sociological study on the revitalization of the Roma neighborhoods in Bulgaria as a result of the Christian faith would be in order. That would include more precise statistical data on crime, morality, children in school, divorce rate

changes, and custom transformation. This would be an interesting and worthy project of the sociology field on the power of Christianity to transform communities.

5. A detailed study of the psychological effects of the Pentecostal faith and worship would be interesting and enriching.

6. The study of Roma indigenous worship music in Pentecostal churches in Bulgaria would make a good ethnomusicology project.

7. What missiological insights can be learned from the Roma Pentecostal movement about ministry to marginal people groups?

Recommendations

My research data and discoveries warrant several recommendations about how the ministry among the Bulgarian Roma can be improved and made more effective.

Evangelism

Christian believers are called to be ambassadors of their faith to the world. The gospel must be communicated among all people who have not yet believed and personally come to the knowledge of Christ. The Roma believers should continue to be active in evangelizing their own people and allow God to use them in reaching others. The favorable time of spiritual harvest among them continues, because the majority of the movement's adherents in Bulgaria are first generation believers from the underclass.¹⁵³

Important Insights

The following methods should be implemented in Roma evangelism:

1. *Relationships*. The Roma should continue to use their personal and web relationships to bring people to Christ. The more of them come to faith, the easier its dissemination becomes, because of the close-knit nature of the Roma communities.

2. *Simple Preaching*. The message of Christ should be presented in simple and understandable ways with testimonies and illustrations the Roma can relate to. The educated Roma ministers should not depart from the simple presentation of the message.

3. *Music*, in the setting of free worship, is one of the most important venues to convey the gospel message to Roma. Their indigenous music stirs their hearts and emotions toward longing after God. The worship expressed by raising of hands, clapping, and spiritual dance should be given more freedom in the Roma Pentecostal community, because these are venues of important psychological outlet prevalent in the Pentecostal movement worldwide.¹⁵⁴ The worship should involve the total human being – body, soul, and spirit (Miller and Yamamori 2007: 141-142).

4. *Social service*. The various humanitarian ministries of the churches lift many Roma out of poverty and give them a chance in life. These ministries express God's love to both believers and unbelievers. That causes many Roma to begin a more active spiritual search and eventually become committed disciples of Christ.

5. *Indigenous ministry*. The Roma movement should strive toward becoming more indigenous with Roma leaders who use Romanes and cultural elements in evangelism. The ministers should teach believers to give out of their means to support the ministry. They should work toward developing their own contextual theology.

6. *Multiplying Congregations*. The goal of the leadership of the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria should be to plant churches in every Roma mahala in the country.

Usually, it is not difficult for churches to be started among the Roma, but the number of mature and qualified Roma ministers is not sufficient to meet the shepherding needs of these churches. Therefore, in order for the movement to reach its maximum potential, more Roma ministers need to be trained and sent.

7. *Healing and spiritual gifts.* In order for Roma evangelism to be successful, it needs to be fully Pentecostal in both doctrine and practice. Prayer for healings and the practice of the nine *charisma* gifts, listed in 1 Corinthians 12,¹⁵⁵ should be an integral part of the Roma services. The Roma should be given an opportunity to experience the divine presence in a tangible way through miracles.

8. *Evangelistic Campaigns.* Open-air or indoor evangelistic services are one of the most effective methods for evangelism in the movement (Yambol 2006), because the Roma love massive gatherings (Dolna Bania 2006). The Roma should continue to employ this method of evangelism that has proven successful over the years, because it combines several important evangelistic tools previously mentioned – indigenous music, preaching, and healing prayers. They also sometimes use visual tools to present the gospel such as drama or the ‘Jesus’ film; these are more successful media than literature, because most Roma are less capable or interested in reading.

The massive evangelistic gatherings spark the interest of many non-churched Roma and encourage the believers. They are important, but supplementary to the regular ministry of the local churches and personal evangelism.

9. *Revivals.* Spiritual revivals are times of intense seeking after God and spiritual refreshing. They inspire people to live a life of holiness, power, and active witnessing. Many new churches and missions have been planted as a result of revivals. McGavran

demonstrates that revival is a very important factor in church growth. As churches are committed to intense prayer and “feeding on God’s Word,” the community will experience revival, which catalyzes church growth. The Roma churches can prolong these times of spiritual renewal (1990:134-135).

10. *Unreached Roma Groups*. Most Roma in Bulgaria have been evangelized, except a couple of groups, which remain mostly unreached – the Kalderashi and the Kalaijii. Those two communities are in need of a people movement that will bring about Christian revitalization like it has in most other Bulgarian Roma groups. The Roma believers should pray for and launch special outreach ministries to these two groups.

Global Evangelistic Vision

The Roma Pentecostals believe they are a chosen people. They love God deeply and sincerely desire to serve Him. People have said that God might use them to stir spiritual awakening on the old continent, where the Christian remnants are slowly disappearing behind cold cathedral walls. (Unfortunately, when the European Union was recently celebrating a jubilee, Christianity was never honored as a major factor in Europe’s history! Ours has truly become a Post-Christian continent.)

But the Roma Pentecostal faith is alive, well, and on the move, penetrating this darkness. We can see the Roma churches in Bulgaria in most of the towns and villages where Roma live. Could the story of the Celtic Barbarian movement, which brought about a Christian revival to the slumbering Europe of the fifth to ninth centuries, be once again repeated? Could God use the most marginalized people of Europe to rekindle the light of Jesus Christ on the old continent?¹⁵⁶ That is desirable, because institutional Western Christianity is a spent source. No one is capable of expressing the joy of

Christian salvation better than the Roma. God can speak prophetically from the margins of the *mahala*. The West needs to receive their message and ministry (Milanov 2006).

Discipleship

While the Roma churches have been strong on evangelism, my research showed that their discipleship has been less effective. Massive evangelistic meetings in the mahali may have thousands in attendance, but few of them remain in church. Many Roma converts fall away, because they do not become fully grounded in the church family. Says Ignatov: “Most Roma are evangelized, but live outside of the church community” (2006).

Making disciples is an aspect of Christ’s Great Commission that the Church must fulfill. The evangelistic proclamation is necessary, but not sufficient for the reaching of a particular ethnos. The new converts must become disciples and committed followers of Jesus Christ. In order for the discipleship process to be successful, the Roma churches should employ Lewis Rambo’s four levels of interaction (1993:108).

1. *Relationships*. The members of the church should make friends and bond with the new converts. The latter need to be integrated into the life of the church through participating in small groups: women’s, youth, and men’s meetings. This will create an environment where people can associate with others like themselves and grow together spiritually. It will help the new believers to be resocialized into a healthy church family.

The church members should develop lasting friendships with the new believers and demonstrate the love and grace of God to them. Even though the holiness standards should be maintained, legalistic tendencies should be avoided. There have been many new Roma converts, struggling with certain addictions, who have been driven away by

legalism and judgmental attitudes in the church. The Roma pastors and laypeople should be very patient and loving toward such struggling souls, allowing the Holy Spirit to perform the divine work in their lives. Loving relationships, rather than prohibitions and rules, would help people attain a genuine knowledge of God.¹⁵⁷

2. *Rituals*. The new believers need to be personally identified and connected to their new way of life. Sacred ritual is the place where the ultimate meets the intimate. Through the rite of baptism the convert confesses publicly the Christian faith and leaves the worldly life behind. The baptism with the Holy Spirit with the evidence of tongues is often viewed as the confirmation of Roma Pentecostal converts. There are other important rites-of-passage such as weddings, baby dedications, house dedications, and funerals, which express care and support by the community of believers.

The new converts should also be integrated into the regular spiritual life of the church. They should learn the ingredients of the liturgical order: praise, singing, tithe and offerings, and communion. The discipleship process should also include training in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship. The continual spiritual devotion of the Roma believers would keep the fire of revival burning and stirring this phenomenal movement.

We prayed very fervently against the evil in the community – the drinking joints, the gambling addictions, and the violence. We would gather in homes and pray all night long. Then things began to happen - demons were coming out; drinking joints were closing, and there were no more major fights. This is how the spiritual revival was stirred and Jesus became known to the *mahala*. People were being added to the church. The needy people often called us for prayers. We felt God was among us. As we were spiritually consistent God did great things. When we became slack and inconsistent the revival diminished. (Samokov 2006)

3. *Rhetoric*. The new convert needs to be taught by the hermeneutic community the doctrines and the meaning of the faith. Many Roma believers are susceptible to false teachings and/or legalism, because of their simplicity and poverty. Sound Bible teaching

would help prevent the movement from such unhealthy influences.¹⁵⁸ The pastors who have received solid theological education are more capable of providing this important component of the discipleship process.

Roma Pentecostal churches should develop regular Bible studies that introduce believers to the essential teachings of the Christian faith. Since many local Roma pastors have lacked education, this need has often been filled by alternative means like video and audiotapes. This has been a quick and practical way of learning in their context.

5. *Roles.* The new believers should get involved in the life and ministries of the Church by accepting special responsibilities. The discipleship process should include serious mobilization of the Roma converts and laity. Many Roma churches have already taken advantage of their laypeople and given them roles in the worship, administration, and social ministries of the local church. This contributes greatly to the bonding process, because the new believers begin to feel valuable and important to the life of the Christian community. Roma ministers should teach their congregations that all believers should share in the responsibilities of ministry. Roma Christians should be helped to develop their spiritual gifts for ministry.

As Rambo's four interaction components are well incorporated in the discipleship process, new converts will become strongly connected to the church, and would be less likely to fall away or become disillusioned.

Since there are a number of Roma who have missed years of education, learning to read and write will be needed for more effective discipleship in the Bulgarian context. Therefore, literacy programs should be an intentional component in their development. Even though literacy should not be a prerequisite to discipleship, it makes the process

more manageable. It also is necessary for the Roma proper integration into Bulgarian society. The church should thus be both the spiritual and education center of the mahala.

Christian discipleship is effective in producing healthy believers only in the context of a vibrant Bible-believing and Bible-teaching church in the community. Discipleship is not simply going through a study course, but it is actually a life-long process. Christians should regularly study the Word, pray, participate in small groups, fellowship, and witness of their faith.

Effective discipleship will strengthen the faith of the Roma, but it will also inevitably move them toward social transformation. The spread of the Christian faith, according to Hunter, causes social reform, but this fact is “widely unrecognized” by the public. “Indeed, probably more people have been liberated from disadvantage and oppressive conditions through discipleship than through social reform campaigns” (1987:83). The continual discipleship in the Roma churches would insure that the cultural revitalization might continue to transform and improve their social situation.

One of the surprises during my field research was the large Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the Roma quarter of Kiustendil.¹⁵⁹ Their discipleship process is particularly impressive: For a person to become a member, he/she needs to undergo a Bible program called ‘Saturday School;’ the student in this school, called ‘a candidate for a disciple of Christ,’ is taught the 27 essential doctrines of Christianity. Also the new Adventist goes through a probationary period of 6 months in order to prove his/her Christian faith before becoming a member. During that period they need to have evidence in their life that they have repented and broken up with the world such as giving up

smoking and striving to live holy. Thus, this Roma Adventist Church¹⁶⁰ strictly follows Christ's commandment to make disciples (Matt.28:19).

Even though Pentecostals may not fully concur with Adventist theology, we could learn from their practice of discipleship. Churches that have strong discipleship programs have much better retention rates than those that do not. McGavran says:

J.B. Kessler in his fine study of the Protestant churches in Chile and Peru feels that the great growth of the Adventists in Peru is in large part due to their excellent program of indoctrination of catechumens and second- and third – generation Christians...Many missionaries, deterred by honest reservations about the soundness of Adventist theology, might hesitate “in the Adventist way” but if...Adventist growth in Peru can be credited in large part to effective teaching of what they consider essential to salvation, why could not any Christian, copying this part of the Adventist program, *teach effectively* what *they* considered essential to salvation? It will be found that, contrary to the presuppositions of many, the causes of growth are non-theological. Anyone can use them.” (1990:132)

Teaching Responsibility

The Roma pastors have realized their important role in their communities. They need to continue teaching their congregations about their responsibility to improve life in the mahala. Discrimination has been a major problem for the Roma, but blaming everything on this external factor is a passive approach that has done little in bettering their situation. There are several areas in which the Roma believers can take initiatives to improve their social predicament:

1. The education of Roma children is primarily the responsibility of their families. Children need to be helped and encouraged at home in order to do well in school. Roma parents need to invest in the future generations and learn how to raise their children more responsibly and effectively. Teaching young girls that early marriage often hinders their progress has helped many of them reach a higher social status. A number of Roma

churches, like the ones in Samokov and Sliven, have been active in social work with neglected children and those coming from highly dysfunctional families.

2. The Roma believers need to trust and recognize God as their main source of support and provision. The pastors should be an example of sacrificial giving if they want their laypeople to learn how to give. If all the Roma believers learn to regularly pay their tithes and give offerings, the financial situation in many of their churches could be improved. The problem is that many Roma live on personal loans, make little profit, and as a result their contributions to the church are small.

3. More Roma pastors need to become full-time ministers. Most of them currently have a secular job or a business, but they would be more effective if they could be free from this burden.¹⁶¹ The Roma laypeople should realize that supporting their pastors financially is biblical and necessary for the effective functioning of the church. Because of poverty many Roma believers cannot abide by this principle. If they are not able to fully support their pastor, however, they can usually give him some partial support. Even though foreign donors have helped the Roma pastors, the support of pastors is primarily the responsibility of their local flock.

4. The Roma pastors have taught those few that have become more successful in business or career that it is their Christian and moral obligation to help those in need. When social work is organized and supported by the local people, they feel like they have ownership of it. That makes it much more effective and lasting. Therefore, people in the mahala should learn about the blessedness of giving. Sacrificial giving could be monetary, but does not always have to be – it could mean giving voluntarily of one's time, skills, things, or other needed resources (Clinton 2007:ix). Foreign sponsorship and

NGO involvement is useful, but total dependence on such is not healthy for the Roma Pentecostal movement.

Leadership Promotion and Training

One of the most important elements needed for any Christian movement to be strong and successful are effective and capable leaders. The Roma believers need caring pastors who can be their mentors and spiritual fathers. Rev. Mitko Goranov makes a great point: “When Jesus saw the multitudes scattered, he did not see them as people who lacked money, buildings, or jobs, but as sheep without a shepherd” (Lom 2006). In order for the Roma churches to produce high quality believers and consistent followers of Christ, much effort should be placed on developing each Roma pastor.

In Bulgaria most Roma pastors have been promoted and ordained within the last 15 years. The rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement, especially after Communism, has necessitated that ministers be placed to lead the many new churches started. There are still a great number of churches that do not have a permanent pastor. On many occasions, in order to enhance the growth, ministers have been ordained prematurely - without the proper spiritual preparation and readiness for pastoral work. This has caused a number of problems, church splits, and ministry burnout. In a fast-growing movement such mistakes may be unavoidable, but Roma leaders need to learn from them and avoid ordaining people too early. They need to test the candidate’s motives and readiness before they entrust them with the responsibility of ministry.

Many Roma pastors have realized their need for theological education and practical preparation in order to be effective spiritual shepherds. Most of them have been

self-learned or taught through seminars, but without formal training. In order for discipleship to be effective the Roma pastors need to apply themselves to study Scripture.¹⁶² Those who have received theological, biblical, and practical ministry training, have been far more effective in discipling the members of their flocks. Without a divine calling and solid preparation for ministry, people might cause problems that damage the credibility of the movement.¹⁶³

Solid theological education is compulsory for every pastor, but should also be accessible to the laypeople. The movement presently is in need of effective programs for educational upgrade of the ministry. The Bulgarian Evangelical Theological Institute and the Presbyterian Seminary in Sofia have offered such programs. For Roma Pentecostal pastors, extension programs of education are needed because, with large families and a church to care for, most cannot commit to long-term residency academic education.

The ministry development process should include and pay attention to the pastor's wife. She is often overlooked by the Roma Christians, because of the low status of women in their culture. The Roma churches should respect and hold the pastor's wives in high esteem. This would greatly contribute to the improvement of the status of women in the Roma *mahali* (Goranov 2006).

Roma theology can also be further developed as more indigenous Roma receive theological education and write on the subject. The Roma churches need not only have their pastors educated, but also teachers and educators should be prepared to carry out the ministry of discipleship in their communities. It would be appropriate if an institute of ministerial training would be created that focuses primarily on the Roma. There Roma ministers would not only be students, but also teachers.

The following curriculum would be appropriate for the training of Roma Pentecostal pastors:¹⁶⁴

1. *Biblical Studies*. Several courses should be taught that survey both the Old and New Testaments, making the students well acquainted with the books of Scripture. The study of hermeneutics will help them interpret and understand the Bible better.

2. *Christian Theology and History*. The essential teachings of Pentecostal Christianity should be studied and understood. The students should learn both the biblical and the historical foundations for Pentecostal doctrine. Apologetics will help them be able to explain what they believe and why. They should also be sufficiently familiar with the history of world Christianity and Bulgarian Christianity in particular.

3. *Practical Ministry*.

a). *Homiletics*. Learning how to prepare sermons is very important for pastors. They should be familiar with the different types of sermons, the outline preparation, the use of illustrations, and the methods of delivery.

b). *Liturgics*. The students should know about the order of Pentecostal service – prayer requests, offerings, and altar invitations. Special guidelines should be given in regards to performing rituals like baptism, communion, foot-washing, baby dedications, weddings, and funerals.

c). *Counseling and Pastoral Care*. The students should learn how to help people both with daily problems and in crisis situations. Every pastor does counseling; the question is whether they would do it effectively or not. Even though they do not need professional training, they need to know the main issues involved in family counseling and crisis intervention.

d). Administration and Stewardship. The pastor should learn how to organize the life of the church and be an effective leader. The biblical view of church finances is one of the most important issues for the Roma believers: the pastors need to learn the principles of tithes and offerings and teach them to their congregations. This will move the Roma churches toward greater freedom and indigeneity.¹⁶⁵ The treasurer (clerk) needs to learn the legal matters in relation to church registration, taxes, and property issues.

e). Social work. Since the Roma churches have begun to take on the challenge of improving life in their communities, it would be necessary for the ministers to have better knowledge of the social service field. The pastors need to be taught about lay ministries. They in turn can train and mobilize the laity for the various ministries that the church initiates.

4. *Roma history, language, and culture.* Roma ministers should study the history and culture of their ethnos. This would be greatly beneficial to their ministry, because the church would serve not just for the spiritual development of the Roma people, but also for the preservation of their culture. It would also help the pastors to be more effective in ministry as they understand the cultural idiosyncrasies that the faith addresses. It would encourage the creation of hermeneutical communities where cultural customs would be discussed in the light of Critical Contextualization.¹⁶⁶ This would also give an opportunity to the Roma to further develop their indigenous theology.

6. *Literacy skills.* Tutoring in Bulgarian language and grammar should be a part

of this ministerial training process in order to help the Roma pastors and Sunday School teachers improve their reading and writing skills. This will give them the ability to raise the educational level of Roma children, youth, and adults.¹⁶⁷

Teachers who understand Roma culture should teach this curriculum. The level should not be highly academic, but accessible to the Roma pastors and believers. Storytelling and songs would be especially effective in training ministers in an oral cultural context. The program should be well balanced with opportunities for practical ministry. The proper education of the Roma pastors and leaders will be an important step in the improvement of the life in the Roma communities as a whole.

Unity and Cooperation

One of the main reasons for the revival that many point to is the unity among Roma ministers and believers. The movement grew tremendously as the Roma Christians constantly spent time together in prayer, worship, fellowship, evangelism, and social outreach. In the times of greatest growth their communal life was a fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus: “that they may be one, even as we are one...that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them, as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).

As Jesus prayed this prayer, he was well aware that divisions would take place among his followers. The phenomenal growth of the Roma Pentecostal movement in the early 1990s, led to the establishment of many churches in the *mahali*. This has often caused conflicts because of jealousies over finances or positions. Naturally, those things would happen as long as we live in a sinful world, because Christian believers are still human beings. This, however, should not serve as an excuse. The Roma ministers need to

seek divine guidance and exemplify Christian love by working together to help their needy impoverished people.

Some Roma pastors feel like if another minister plants a church in their *mahala*, they are invading their territory and taking away their church members. These pastors need to look, however, at the great need in their community: the fact that there are many people who are not yet steady disciples, necessitates more workers for the harvest. If a laborer works honestly, without causing divisions, but with a spiritual burden to help expand God's kingdom, the already established pastors should support him/her in the planting of a new Roma congregation.

George Hunter makes a useful observation on this matter:

The size of the harvest should determine how many laborers are needed to gather it. If another church enters a field larger than it can manage, that field needs more laborers! No one church can gather all of a significant harvest. Its style will be indigenous to some of the people, but not to others. Its ministries will meet the needs of some people, but not those of others. So, there are no compelling reasons for withholding from receptive people the option of discipleship through your church. (Hunter 1987:79)

The Roma Pentecostal pastors need to cooperate and work in unity in order to reach their *mahali* effectively for Christ. This would be a great witness of the love of God to their neighborhoods. In order for that to happen certain pastors need to repent for the competition and the jealous attitudes among each other, realizing that they serve the same Lord and have a common goal – to be witnesses of the diving love revealed through Christ to all humanity.

This does not mean that Roma congregations should merge into one local church. More healthy churches would in fact have a more effective local outreach. The churches in the same *mahala* should, however, be united in fellowship and purpose. In order to stir

a divine move in their community, the local pastors should begin praying together on a regular basis. As they build spiritual relationships and bond in love and fellowship, they would share their vision and pray in unison for the *mahala*. They can also cooperate in organizing discipleship programs, evangelistic campaigns, and social ministries for the community. Christians believe that God has promised to bless such unity:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the Lord commanded the blessing – life forevermore (Psalm 133).

During my field research, I was impressed to see Roma *mahali* where pastors have unity, fellowship, and common prayer meetings, and support each other's organized events.¹⁶⁸ This is a great witness for the Lord Jesus Christ in those places. There are *mahali*, on the other hand, where some Roma pastors demonstrate lack of maturity by refusing to fellowship or cooperate with one another. Thus, as leaders they themselves hinder the move of God in their respective quarters.

There has been much talk among Roma believers about being discriminated against by their fellow ethnic Bulgarian Christians. There have been some condescending attitudes on the part of some ministers toward others, because of ethnicity. This has caused unnecessary tensions between Christian brothers and sisters in certain places. Of course, the Roma have been overall well-accepted in the Bulgarian evangelical circles – that is one of the reason they have indeed become evangelicals. The official policies of the evangelical churches are against discrimination, but often the discrimination has been unconscious, unintentional, or as a result of intercultural misunderstandings.

Much prayerful consideration and open dialogue are necessary on this serious issue. Every Christian should know: ethnic or racial discrimination is not merely a

cultural matter: it is *sin*. Blanket and stereotypical statement about Roma, ethnic Bulgarians, Turks, or people of another race, should not come out of a Christian's mouth. Both the ethnic Bulgarian Christians and the indigenous Roma believers need to examine their position and prayerfully search their hearts on the issue. The Kingdom of God includes *panta te ethne* - people of every 'nation' (in Greek *ethnos*), tongue, race, and tribe. Unity in ethnic diversity is a great reflection of Christian love and the very spirit of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11).

The Roma ministers should continue their close cooperation with the ethnic Bulgarian ministers, and with those of the Turkish minority, because this reflects the fact that all are equal before the cross of Christ. The ethnic Bulgarian and Turkish Pentecostal leaders, on the other hand, should accept their Roma brothers and sisters as equally valuable children of God and should put forth their best efforts to liberate them from the hard social predicament.¹⁶⁹

One of the most impressive things I encountered during my field research was the following letter of thanks, dated March 7, 2004, from Father Stoil Lazarov, priest of the 'Sveta Nedelia' ('Holy Week') Orthodox Temple in Rakitovo, to Angel Dogov, Roma pastor of the Church of God in the same town:

On behalf of the Church leadership, the parish priest Father Stoil Lazarov and the whole Christian community in the town of Rakitovo, we thank you for your understanding of our need and the donation of 400 Gospels (New Testaments) for the Orthodox temple in our town (2006).

Even though as Pentecostals we should maintain our distinct beliefs, it is healthy to have fellowship and dialogue with other Christian groups. The example of Rakitovo should help all Bulgarian Christians to realize that we can work together and dialogue not just with people of our own respective denominations, but also with other fellow

Christians, including the Orthodox Church. This expression of unity, for which Christ prayed, is a great witness of the power of the gospel to bring people of various origins together through the love of God and the Holy Spirit.

Social Engagement

Certain Bulgarian scholars criticize the Roma evangelical movement for providing an escape from reality and for being socially passive.¹⁷⁰ This is actually a grave misconception. The Pentecostal faith of the Bulgarian Roma is far from being only escapist, heaven-focused, and socially passive. The present research has already demonstrated the movement's social power to revitalize Roma communities. This follows the pattern of Pentecostal Christianity around the world, which has become a leading movement for community transformation and integration through evangelism, discipleship, and social service. Miller and Yamamori's research has concluded that 85% of the churches in the Developing World that are growing, indigenous, and socially active belong to the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian family (2007: 212).

Many Roma churches *have* become actively involved in helping their neighborhoods, according to their limited resources. Thus, the Roma churches represent a God who not only saves from sin and takes people to heaven, but also cares for people's existential needs. Some Roma churches have done that by organizing soup kitchens, by caring for disadvantaged children, and the poor in general.

The problem has often been that Roma who receive good education and launch successful businesses or careers, move out of the mahala or detach themselves from their people. Such people who have experienced "redemption and lift" need to be encouraged

to be actively involved in helping their communities. They truly have the potential of impacting their ethnos toward spiritual, cultural, and social transformation. Roma Christian businessmen that have appeared in Kazanluk, for example, have initiated business exchanges helpful to their quarter (Dolapchieva 2003: 57-58).

The Roma should also actively participate in public life in order to improve their situation. That means that they should vote in elections, but refuse to be manipulated or bought. The believers need to seek political candidates who are people of strong Christian values, good education, and who have proven their commitment to help the Roma community.¹⁷¹ Even though Roma churches should remain cautious about their involvement in politics, their voice should be heard clearly in public life for the purpose of spiritual, cultural, and social transformation of their *mahali*.

The *Praxis* Model of Contextual Theology (see the Appendix) with its emphasis on social change can be a useful theoretical perspective for understanding Roma theological expressions. It has inspired many churches around the world to battle poverty and structural injustices. Much Roma practice and lore is consistent with praxis theology, but with greater knowledge of the model they could be more effective in social work. The model can impact Roma theological thought and action, as it moves their communities from isolation toward spiritual and social liberation. It can be effectively used both to analyze and to address their social problems. The model can be a powerful tool for the transformation of their culture through prophetic speech and action. From the margins the Roma can also speak prophetically to the rest of the world.

The Roma have lived under similar circumstances in Eastern Europe, as the Blacks have in the United States. Both groups have been victims of discrimination, ethnic

struggles for human rights, poverty, and marginalization. Black theology in America, which began during the Civil Rights movement with writers like James Cone, is a good example of a liberation theology that uses the *praxis* model. Unites States senator Barack Obama, shares what caused his attraction to the Christian faith in the Black church:

For one thing, I was drawn to the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change. Out of necessity, the black church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. In the history of these struggles, I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world. In the day-to-day work of men and women I met in church each day, in their ability to "make a way out of no way" and maintain hope and dignity in the direst of circumstances, I could see the Word made manifest. (2006:324)

According to the findings of this research this statement is true of the Roma Pentecostal churches in Bulgaria as well.

Working with Roma

The evangelical leaders and groups in Bulgaria, especially the Pentecostal ones, should realize that the Roma are in fact their parish, because neither Orthodoxy nor Islam have been so effective in engaging them. We should not be embarrassed by this fact, but rather proud, because it is a normal phenomenon in church growth:

In most seasons, in most nations, "the masses" are more responsive than "the classes." Much evangelism has presupposed the opposite that if you first win the people with education, wealth, culture, and influence, then Christianity will "trickle down" to the masses. But this approach has aborted thousands of possibilities for the spread of the gospel...Wesley saw that the faith must necessarily spread first from those people with no power so that others might perceive it to be the power of God. (Hunter 1987:81-82)

Those who minister to Roma need to be aware of the fact that the attitude toward the Roma, who occupy the lowest level of the Bulgarian social ladder, demonstrates the

level of maturity of our country. As the body of Christ the Christian Church should set an example to the world in love and care for these poor needy people. The ninety-year old Ilia Davidkov had some words of folk wisdom:

It is sin to do wrong to a Gypsy. Not only that. It is sin to send him away from your house without giving him anything or talking to him. In the West, they do not have any Gypsies and so they invented indulgences. They buy paper blessed by the Pope, so God forgives their sins. But thank goodness, God sent us people here – the Gypsies. Give them something, do them some good, lay down your pride and arrogance, and the Gypsies will feel good, you'll have done some good, and God will forgive your sins. (cited in Tomova 1995:9)

Kalin Chepilev, a minister, says: “I have worked with them for 10 years. They taught me to be thankful for what I have and enriched my spiritual life. I have learned to respect all people as equally having the right to salvation and happiness” (2006).

The following principles will be helpful to people from other ethnic groups who want to be successful in service to the Roma minority in Bulgaria:

1. *Humility and Compassion.* The person who desires to engage the Roma should approach them as a humble servant. He/she should develop relationships with them based on love and equality. They should be approached with the attitude of compassion and empathy. A person going to them should be in prayer and seek ways to help them. Real Christians cannot see the situation of the Roma and remain indifferent, but will desire to help. The Roma have been deceived and used by many, and can detect insincere attitudes. As we get closer to their problems and genuinely demonstrate concern for them, we can gain their friendship and trust. The gajo ministers and church leaders in Bulgaria need to take a serious step to engage the Roma. Only if we approach them as learners, can we truly become agents of change to their environment.

2. *Cultural sensitivity.* In ministering to the Roma, we need to keep in mind that we are dealing with a culture different from our own. We need to gain better knowledge

of that culture and mentality. We should also respect their thinking on various issues and realize that it is the responsibility of their pastors to set the standards for them. This regards the various cultural rites, marriage, dancing, and other customs, that we may not fully understand. We need to learn about the customs in question and what their specific meaning is to the Roma. Even if we do not agree on a certain issue, we need to pray in order that God will deal with them and help them mature. They need to know God's grace and love, not just the rules and prohibitions. Roma Christians are usually serious about the faith. God has given them the Holy Spirit who will guide them into all truth. They usually know how to minister to their own people better and more effectively than non-Roma do. We should acknowledge and respect that. Also as culture changes certain church standards may also be subject to change as well.¹⁷²

As development projects are done, people need to carefully consider the skills of the Roma and the community needs. We should not undertake social programs that the Roma cannot embrace as their own.¹⁷³

3. *Government Attention.* The Bulgarian government officials should take note of the Roma churches and offer them assistance in community reform efforts. The State needs to learn of the resource of the churches for social work and use them in helping the poor Roma communities. No secular humanitarian (charitable) organizations have the potential of influence that the local churches do. Most of the social work by the churches is done voluntarily, and often more effectively, than by the secular foundations and Non-government Organizations. Most Roma mahali have several active evangelical churches, which have already proven their commitment and ability to organize programs that socially lift their communities. The Bulgarian government can take advantage of that

resource, already present, and provide some county properties and funding for social work. So, the churches with the support of the state can be very effective in alleviating poverty and improving the life of the Roma. This has been learned and used in Western countries for a long time as the churches there have filled the position of social care institutions. The idea of the faith-based initiatives, used to help impoverished areas in the United States,¹⁷⁴ could be used by the Bulgarian government in improving the life of the Roma by employing the potential of the churches in the *mahala*.

Nadezhda

We now return to the Sliven quarter of Nadezhda where our journey began. The year was 1972. Bahar Urbanova, 22 years of age, had laid in the morgue for 24 hours. The doctors had pronounced her dead and were preparing to do an autopsy. In the meantime a group of believers was having a house prayer meeting interceding for her. After midnight, God raised her from the dead and she returned home. The doctors could not find her body in the morning. Assuming someone had stolen it, they immediately went to Nadezhda, where Bahar was from, and found her hiding – alive and well. Bahar spoke about wonderful things she had seen in a vision during this supernatural encounter. Somewhat like the resurrection of Jesus brought the universal Christian Church into existence, so the resurrection of this Roma woman caused great growth of the Pentecostal faith in Nadezhda. The Sliven Roma quickly began turning to God.

This miracle also symbolized what the people believed God was preparing to accomplish, not only in Nadezhda but in the Roma *mahali* all across Bulgaria – a resurrection of their culture from spiritual death, and liberation after centuries of

oppression. Nadezhda has been changed radically. This quarter previously had such a high crime rate that even the local police was reluctant to intervene in cases of trouble or violence. Presently, however, there is a newfound love, unity, and peace among the inhabitants. Evangelist Ilia Milanov, a native of Sliven, says:

There was much evil in this neighborhood. Until 1990 there was not even one evangelical church in Nadezhda, now there are over 10. All these churches have a great ministry to this community. The Roma attitude toward each other has improved and there is a better relationship between them and the ethnic Bulgarians. The conferences for Roma believers organized here are great celebrations in which the Holy Spirit moves.

The change is real, because the Roma believers not only preach, but also live the gospel. All the community initiatives, like cleaning the parks and gardens, the public decorations, are organized by the Christians. Even the blind can see now that Nadezhda has been radically transformed. The police and the mayor's office recognize that. Even those who have been opposed to this faith, acknowledge that Christ is alive in the neighborhood. The unbelievers in Sliven treat these churches with great respect...I have been asked: "Are there rich people in your town?" My response is: "Yes, in Nedezhda – that is where the richest people live;" people usually are surprised by that answer, but it gives me an opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus, which alone provide true wealth. I once told westerners who suffer much depression: "If you want to see a people that do not know depression, look at the Roma. They serve God from Monday to Sunday – every day there is a worship service somewhere. That does not leave them much time to meditate on their problems and get depressed. (2006)

Even though the Roma still have many problems, the large Roma quarter behind the Sliven train-station, has become worthy of its name 'Nadezhda,' meaning 'hope' in Bulgarian. Viewed previously as a place of darkness and hopelessness, it has become a place of life. The Gypsy Pentecostals will continue their journey. They will not only survive, but will thrive, because they believe their life and strength is in Jesus Christ. The spark of Christian light and renewal has been ignited in their communities. Our hope is that this spiritual fire will spread to many others!

*Bahtale Taven An Odel!*¹⁷⁵

NOTES

¹ Examples of such institutions are the University of Greenwich, London, England, the University of Hamburg, Germany, the University of Texas, Austin, United States, and the University of Paris, France.

² In Bulgaria the University of Veliko Tarnovo has undertaken the study of the Romanes language and pedagogy in order to prepare capable teachers for the Roma communities.

³ These terms should not be confused with the city of Rome or the country of Romania. They have totally different etymological origins and are unrelated.

⁴ The Roma sub-groups in Bulgaria are explained in greater detail in Chapter 2.

⁵ That is where the phrase “Nice job, but Gypsy job” comes from.

⁶ One phrase I learned that might be considered humorous, but reflects the Roma view of outsiders was: “Jikana Kahanamen Kalagaje?” meaning: “How long will the Bulgarians (Gaje) devour us?”

⁷ It should be noted that the pastor of the Azusa Mission was a one-eye black man, son of Louisiana slaves by the name of William J. Seymore. Throughout its history Pentecostalism has been the religion of the poor and oppressed classes around the world.

⁸ Vinson Synan’s statistic of 2001 gives a total estimate of 523,767,000 followers of the Holy Spirit movement, including Pentecostals, charismatics, and neo-charismatics. That number has likely grown in the last seven years.

⁹ These evangelical groups are mentioned, because of their presence in Bulgaria. Seventh-Day Adventists are usually not grouped with the evangelicals. The Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Moonies, are not either. Even though confused with the Protestants by the uninformed, they fall into an entirely different category of Pseudo-Christian cults.

¹⁰ ‘Melting pot’ in a social sense is a population center where a number of ethnic groups live together.

¹¹ Newberry gives the example of the Nigerian Christians who felt Western dominance hindered their theological self-expression: “For over one hundred years they have done our theological thinking for us, and in ecclesiastical matters they have taken vital decisions for us. It is now overdue for Nigerians themselves to determine what is the will of God for His Church in Nigeria”

¹² One such new insight is the idea of “Myth Time” differentiated from “Mundane Time” (Harkin 2004:xxiii).

¹³ The Roma have been suspicious of outsiders and have traditionally protected themselves from assimilation by maintaining their separateness. Therefore, many of them have given misleading information to researchers in order to keep certain aspects of their culture hidden from the *gaje*. There have also been a number of sources on Roma that were not useful because of their authors’ lack of serious field research. By comparing sources and consultation with prominent Roma scholars, I was able to discern between the more and the less reliable texts. The field research was also helpful in making that distinction.

¹⁴ A number of other sources that are cited and listed in the bibliography have been complimentary to the study. Here I have reviewed the writings that have made the most important contributions to the text that readers should be familiar with. I also mention some texts, which could be useful to readers to be familiar with in order to study the subject further, but have not been used that often in the text.

¹⁵ Pentecostalism has had such a profound effect of culture change on Gypsies that any serious modern researcher of Roma culture cannot ignore it.

¹⁶ There are very few research papers of college students and a couple of bachelor’s theses on the subject, written by believers. Therefore, I have relied more on writings by researchers from outside the church circles, which are also few. The main source for the material, especially in the second part of the text, was collected by field research.

¹⁷ Spain would be an exception, because the percentage of *gitanos* is quite significant there – the highest of any country in Western Europe.

¹⁸ The Gypsies had letters of protection from the Pope claiming they were on a pilgrimage of penance. Therefore they received certain benefits and privileges. Much of their medieval history was connected to their relationship with the Church, but that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

¹⁹ In Bulgaria the ‘marhime’ concept is predominantly used by the Serbian Gypsies, the Kalderash, and is virtually unknown to the ‘dasikane’ and the ‘horohane’ Roma. To them it means ‘dirty’ and ‘contagious’ (Pamporov 2001:16-17).

²⁰ Generally, the practices of Roma fortune-telling, stealing, and trickery only target gajo and are not done among the members of the Roma community. "If a Gypsy steals from a Gypsy, they are afraid of the punishment of God" (Salchev 2006).

²¹ The story has it that when victory was declared Asparuh got off his horse, drove his sword into the ground, and said: "Bulgaria will be here!"

²² This is a judgment based mainly on the perspective of economic security, and not on the spiritual point of view. The great Christian revival among the Roma took place largely after the crumbling of the Communist system in Bulgaria.

²³ The President is the Head of State and Commander-in-chief of the military, but the Prime minister and his cabinet, who normally come from the party holding the majority of seats in Parliament, hold the executive power.

²⁴ The remaining 2.1 % are the smaller ethnic populations like Pomaks, Armenians, and Jews.

²⁵ The increase in the number of the Roma population in the 1990s can be attributed to:

1. The lack of birth control among many Roma families. When many Roma became unemployed after the fall of Communism, child subsidies from the government were a strong motivation for that.

2. The doing away with the assimilation policies of the Zhivkov government. The Gypsies did not feel any longer uncomfortable to self-identify as 'Gypsies' or 'Roma' in national censuses.

²⁶ The *Meshare* court handles disputes between clans, and intervenes to defend Kalderash interests when they have been jeopardized by outsiders.

²⁷ One of the worst moves of the Communist government, led by Todor Zhivkov, was the so-called 'National Rebirth Act' of 1984, which forced all ethnic citizens with non-Bulgarian names to change their names to Bulgarian ones. This mostly affected the Turkish population, but was also felt strongly among the Roma.

²⁸ "Romani has a rich oral tradition of songs, tales, and expressions, but it is not taught in the schools" (Bennett 1992: 41).

²⁹ There are some textbooks on Roma culture and history that have started being used in mixed schools in order to engage Roma pupils.

³⁰ Not all Roma groups in Bulgaria continue to abide by the traditional purity code discussed in Chapter 2. The extreme poverty has pushed many of them to consume leftovers and unsanitary foods that are detrimental to their health.

³¹ The Bulgarians economic crisis in the Post-Communist days affected the Roma minority more than the other ethnic groups in the country. The criminal tendencies among them are likely a consequence of their life of poverty, unemployment, and lack of good education.

³² As a minister and theologian, I have to say that all people are sinners and have done things that are wrong. In Bulgaria thieving and corruption have happened in the last 18 years on very high government and corporate levels; the people responsible for these crimes have NOT been the Gypsies. Most of the latter culprits are free and live comfortable lives – some are still part of the high government echelon while others have left the country. Therefore, the use of the Roma as a "scapegoat" for the social ills would not solve Bulgaria's complex problems.

³³ They indeed had in their possession such Pontifical letters, but there has not been any substantial evidence for their authenticity. In 1932 Signor Stefano Fortini, an experienced scholar, conducted a thorough search of the Vatican archives, but found no evidence that such letters existed or that there was in fact a meeting between the Pope and the Gypsies. Therefore, the evidence on the matter is inconclusive – either the Gypsies were using a false pretense or the supportive documents have disappeared since the archives of the Vatican are known to have suffered losses.

³⁴ 'Beatification' refers to the final step before a person can be elevated to sainthood. "It is bestowed on people who showed heroic virtue in their lives."

³⁵ Meaning 'black' in Romanes 'kalo' is a name by which some Spanish and other Gypsy groups in Europe call themselves.

³⁶ Until the 19th century the Protestant Church, like the Catholic and the Orthodox, did not show much concern for the souls of the Gypsies. Institutional Christianity mistreated them by either forcing them to conform or by denying them fellowship. That, however, did not cause the Gypsies to grow apathetic

toward religion. There were many Christians among the Roma – attracted by the rituals, the community, the singing, and the saints (Vanyusha).

³⁷ There have been those among the Gypsies who traditionally have considered trickery a legitimate method of making a living. The property of the *gajo* to them has been viewed as ‘fair game.’ Therefore, the most usual victims of Gypsy thievery, fortune-telling, and swindling have been non-Gypsies.

³⁸ In conversational Bulgarian *evangelie* (gospel) often refers to the whole New Testament. That is why the story is known as ‘the stolen gospel.’

³⁹ Being travelers as they are, it is no wonder that Roma are found in the United States. As migration took place in the new world they also came or were brought here about a century ago. French Gypsies were brought into Louisiana and Spanish Gitanos - to South America.

⁴⁰ This probably means ‘the first *evangelical* Christian.’

⁴¹ This was partially due to the isolation of Eastern Europe during the time of Communism, and its limited contact with the West. Clement Le Cossec did visit Bulgaria briefly in the 1967 and met with some Gypsy believers (Le Cossec 1991:140), but the political situation of the era must have prevented more active involvement. The Roma believers in Bulgaria were not able to develop a strong relationship with their Western Roma brothers and sisters until after the end of the Cold War.

⁴² One informant shared the following great story, which was not confirmed by others: A *gaji* sister from Shumen came to Yambol and as the Holy Spirit moved on her, she gave out a message in Romanes: “Devla Barea, Devla Gudlia (Great Lord, Sweet Lord)”...In Romanes then God said: “Come to me! You are my children! I will give you eternal life and where I am you will be also.” As people inquired if she was a Gypsy, she declined. Apparently, she could not have known what the words, she said, meant.

⁴³ The *Tinchevisti sect* (known as such by the Bulgarian Communist Secret Service) was a group of Pentecostal believers who remained completely underground during Communism. They were named after their early leader Stoian Tinchev, and stayed isolated from the Pentecostal Union and all other evangelical groups. The Tinchevisti were extremely conservative in their conduct and dress. They preached against wearing watches, neckties, and jewelry. The men were obligated to have mustache and the women - head coverings at all times. This radical group later underwent reforms and experienced great growth under the leadership of Pavel Ignatov. It became connected with the Church of God, headquartered in Cleveland, TN, and was registered in the early 1990s as the Bulgarian Church of God. Apparently, in this case the old Tinchevisti were hoping that brother Shaban would join them.

⁴⁴ All of these brothers have powerful testimonies, but since this is not strictly a historical text, I have been selective in regard to the information, which would find its place on these pages. Therefore, many places and people will remain unmentioned in the dissertation, because the Roma Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria deserves a separate text thoroughly reviewing its history. Here, I just present the main highlights, which I felt would be necessary for the readers to be familiar with.

⁴⁵ This was a common method of water baptism for many evangelicals during the Communist period.

⁴⁶ The Church of God had inherited from the old Tinchevisti the belief that every new convert needed to have the ‘three seals’ of the new birth – water baptism, Holy Spirit baptism, and the Lord’s Supper accompanied with foot-washing. That was one way they departed from the official doctrine of the Pentecostal Union, which held that surrendering one’s life to Christ completes the New Birth.

⁴⁷ The Church of God in Western Europe and the United States brought the attention of the international community to Ignatov’s exile, because of religious propaganda. The students of Lee College (presently Lee University) wore badges with the text “Pray for Pavel.” This began a massive campaign of international pressure on Todor Zhivkov’s government to release Pavel Ignatov. During those months the government received 36,000 letters protesting his arrest and internment and noise was made in the Western media. As a result Pavel was eventually released after six months of exile.

⁴⁸ The believers in these two neighboring villages, would alternate having Sunday services in both. This was an underground fellowship that was part of the Church of God.

⁴⁹ Bania is a village with hot springs near Razlog. Zhivko Denchev was married there, and is the founder and pastor of the local Church of God.

⁵⁰ While studying in the United States at the time, I initiated contact with the organization. Then I translated most of the materials and voiced over the Bulgarian translation on videotapes in their Texas studio. Together with Clendennen, we organized a Pastor’s Conference in the mountain resort of Semkovo, Bulgaria, and selected Assen as the school director.

⁵¹ These articles often misrepresent the facts, because the attitude of the 'democratic' media has not been very favorable toward the evangelical churches. The fact that there is media attention, however, proves that the impact of the Roma churches on the culture has been significant.

⁵² Even though I am not a Roma, they asked me to serve in the Association in order to provide helpful insight and contacts. Also, since ethnic organizations are not favored in Bulgaria, they wanted to be inclusive in their leadership.

⁵³ The Bulgarian abbreviation *S.E.G.A.* stands for *Start for Effective Citizen Alternatives*.

⁵⁴ One exception might be the North Eastern part of the country, because the Roma populations there are significantly smaller and are under the strong cultural impact of the larger Turkish minority.

⁵⁵ We should keep in mind the fact that the Bulgarian Pentecostals make up the majority of all evangelical Christians in the country – over 85%.

⁵⁶ These three are also the largest evangelical denominations in the country.

⁵⁷ The Bulgarian Church of God and the United Churches of God were of the same roots and were one underground fellowship (The Church of God) during Communism, but because of a leadership clash, they parted company soon after the political changes. It is unfortunate that this underground movement, which survived so many years of Communism, when democracy came was split in two.

⁵⁸ This study was not confined to one particular group, but deals with the Pentecostal movement among the Bulgarian Roma as a whole.

⁵⁹ There are several important reasons for this statistical fog:

1. Since the movement has grown so rapidly in the years after Communism, the statistical information is somewhat unclear.

2. The evangelical denominations have not kept official records of their constituents based on ethnicity. They consider all believers as equal brothers and sisters in Christ and are not willing to divide them along ethnic lines.

3. The Roma mentality and simplicity also hinders an accurate estimate. The fact, that they belong to the evangelical Christian faith and have new life in Christ, is more important to them than the specific denomination. Many Roma Protestant believers do not know what denomination they belong to, according to Dimitrova (2000:31-32). My research shows that the laypeople usually know the name of the church, but may not be exactly sure of the denominational affiliation. The Roma pastors, on the other hand, are normally well aware of who their churches are affiliated with.

4. The Roma churches are known for frequently changing their denominational affiliation, even though their beliefs essentially remain the same (Dimitrova 2000:70). There have even been Roma churches that hold membership in more than one denomination. These problems are bound to occur in such a fast-growing movement due to various reasons, like church splits, displeasure toward some denominational leaders, or promises by others for help.

5. The number of baptized believers is much higher than those who attend church regularly. For example, according to Dolapchieva, 90% of the inhabitants of the Roma quarter in Kazanlak, identify themselves as Protestants. So there are many Roma who have been touched by the Pentecostal message and have been baptized, but many have not yet become disciples or have drifted away from regular attendance. Many Roma identify themselves as Protestants or evangelicals, but do not attend church every Sunday, just like most ethnic Bulgarians who identify themselves as Orthodox, would not be seen regularly at Divine Liturgy.

6. The exact number of Roma Pentecostal churches, is also difficult to establish, because there are many smaller groups and house churches, some of which are counted and others are not.

⁶⁰ The Adventists are actually not considered part of the evangelical community.

⁶¹ Andrei Raichev, a leading Bulgarian sociologist, recognizes the Roma believers as a great force, to proportions, of which they themselves are unaware (Christov 2006).

⁶² On the second day of the Feast there was "an all night colorful torchlight procession of the priests drawing water for purification with joy (Isaiah 12:3) from the Pool of Siloam" (Farmer 1998:1474).

⁶³ The Roma in Bulgaria would often emphasize the holidays they celebrate in order to give evidence to their religiosity.

⁶⁴ The apostle Paul says: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death... Oh Death where is your sting, Oh grave, where is your victory... thanks be unto God who gives us the victory through our Lord

Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:26, 55, 57). Paul encourages the Corinthians church assuring them that all Christian believers can have victory over death (Farmer 1998:1630).

⁶⁵ Many Roma do not recognize the Gypsy kings recognized in other Roma groups.

⁶⁶ A number of good individual Roma testimonies have been presented in various chapters of this work.

⁶⁷ Deism is the belief that God created the world, but does not continue to be actively involved in it. One of the most famous people who held this theory was Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States of America; Jefferson rewrote the Gospels excising all the miracle stories. Most of the Christian world does not believe in Deism; God never retired, but he "sustains all things by the word" (Hebrews 1:3).

⁶⁸ The missionaries of the Colonial Era of the 19th century failed to successfully reach the animistic cultures of Africa, because the Western Enlightenment had distorted their view of God. Their message to the local Africans was that God takes care of the spiritual issues, but science solves existential problems. The middle level issues (demons, spirits, magic, witchcraft, healing, folk practices, and supernatural manifestations) were completely denied and debunked. These Colonial missionaries did not present to the locals a God that can heal and defeat evil spirits. This deistic view of God, which contradicted the teachings of the very Bible they carried, prevented many of the tribal Africans from accepting Christianity as their own faith. They went to church on Sundays, but during the week they still secretly visited their shamans.

⁶⁹ Both Turks and Roma have sought the Muslim imams in Bulgaria for meeting felt needs. Many of these imams sell charms and practice a folk syncretistic version of Islam, which is not in agreement with mainstream Mohammedan teachings.

⁷⁰ Rambo is right, because if there were not a critical element, which causes serious thought and emotion, a religious conversion would be nominal and not genuinely sincere. Without a degree of crisis a 'conversion' would simply be a change of mind or opinion, and not really a conversion. Genuine Christian conversion requires repentance, which is a type of personal crisis. Without that element people would feel fine as they are and will not feel the need to convert. There are also people who claim to have always been Christian believers. By definition if they claim that, they might have true faith, but without a conversion experience, which is the point of this argument.

⁷¹ Since there are so many variations of Protestant (Evangelical) Christianity, we must say that there are some which have a more deistic view of God affirming his work of creation, but denying the his powerful present involvement in the affairs of humans. They have a non-literal interpretation of Scripture and are known in Western theological circles as 'liberals.' Some liberals even deny the divinity of Christ and most conservative Christians do not accept them as brothers and sisters in the faith. There are those, on the other hand, who hold a literal view of Scripture, but hold to *cessationalism* - the belief that miracles ceased after the first century A.D. Both of these groups on the issue of miracles depart from Bible teachings and from the majority of the Christian world. Thus, they are closer to Deism

⁷² G. Peterson was a Danish missionary to Bulgaria in the 1920s who focused his outreach efforts on the minorities: Muslims and Gypsies. There were even two prominent Plovdiv Turks - Hamdi effendi, a teacher, and Hiusni effendi, an imam, who became interested in this work, but were soon sent to Istanbul by their Turkish superiors. Peterson founded a school for Gypsy children in the Plovdiv quarter of Stolipinovo, which was attended by teenage boys. There he taught them to read Bulgarian, to sing spiritual hymns, and quote gospel verses. Since they all worked as shoe-polishers and took time off in the morning to go the school, Peterson would give them half a loaf of bread daily to compensate for that half-day's work. In Stolipinovo a famous evangelical song was often heard during those days: "I will sing about Jesus, about His love for me." The young Gypsy boys had learned it in the school. Peterson also spent much time with the traveling Gypsies that camped at the city outskirts (Kulichev 1994:320-321).

⁷³ Pavel Ignatov, who has many ecumenical friendships, says that one of the Monsignors in the Catholic Church in Bulgaria shared with regret that the Catholics have less influence in Bulgaria, because they missed the opportunity to impact the Roma (2006).

⁷⁴ The 'Naked Gypsies,' the poorest Roma group in Nadezhda, Sliven, were the first ones to convert to Christ. The Musical Gypsies and the Turks in the quarter began accepting the faith later.

⁷⁵ *Gypsies (Giuptsi)*, an ethnographic study on the Roma communities in Petrich and Sandanski, makes some interesting points. The Roma in these two towns have a deep need for spiritual guidance. They

struggle with their religious identity, resulting from the lack of their own history and writings. This makes it hard for them to integrate into Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church has completely overlooked the fact that religion would be an effective way of raising the Roma social status. The growth of the evangelical influence among the Roma is a proof of the lack of interest or active work among them by both the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Muslim regency. The various ways evangelicals attracts Roma to their Churches include religious education programs for children and adults, and distribution of humanitarian aids. The evangelicals have also built church temples in the Roma *mahali* and addressed their needs in many other ways (Pamporov et al 2001:29).

⁷⁶ There is an excellent historical example of this that Pavel Ignatov, who is well read and a diligent student of Bulgarian ecclesiastical history, shared with me: During the 17th century there were 32 villages in Bulgaria that were followers of the so-called Paulician heresy. They were completely isolated and treated as second-class by the Orthodox Church. Then a Catholic priest came from the Vatican and began preaching there and baptizing them. This active outreach to the Paulicians resulted in their becoming Catholics. (Peter Bogdan, a prominent Bulgarian Catholic, said that the Paulicians could not accept Christianity without seeing a miracle.) Presently, these are the Catholic populations of Bulgaria. This demonstrates the fact that when a group is totally neglected by one religious tradition, it is likely to turn to another (2006).

⁷⁷ This problem presented by the media seems somewhat humorous to observers: Certain Roma groups have produced candles and made them available for a price about 5 to 10 times cheaper than the candles officially sold by the Orthodox Church. Several years ago the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church officially announced that the only candles effective for spiritual use are the ones sanctified and produced by the Orthodox Church. This was aimed at preventing people from buying candles from the Roma who were seriously undercutting the Orthodox prices. In one city ethnic researchers were amazed that a local Orthodox priest bragged about his successful negotiations with the Roma over the price of candles, but never expressed any spiritual concern for their souls (Simeonova and Tsenov December 2003:38).

⁷⁸ In many other countries thousands of Kalderash Roma have recently become Pentecostals. For example, the majority of believers in the United States are from the Kalderash group. In Bulgaria there are few Kalderash Pentecostals and a couple of Kalderash Pentecostal churches. Compared to the rest of the Roma in the country, however, they have not turned massively to this movement. This can be explained by the following factors:

1. The Kalderash Roma do not live as a compact community in *mahali*. They are usually in small towns or villages with no more than several families living in one place. They arrived in Bulgaria at a much later date – mostly after the end of the Ottoman period in the late 19th century.
2. Many Kalderash are extremely wealthy, owning much gold and beautiful houses. They consider themselves the Roma nobles and look down on the other Roma groups. Their brides are being sold for thousands of dollars.
3. They are mostly endogamous and strictly clannish. Because of their strict intertribal loyalty, a conversion to Pentecostalism may result in ostracism. They do enjoy the services of Orthodox priests.
4. The Kalderash are often connected to some shady business and organized criminal activities like group pick-pocketing, prostitution, and illegal alcohol trade.

These might be some of the reasons that the Bulgarian Kalderashi have not yet turned massively to Pentecostalism. For more information on this group, see chapter 2.

⁷⁹ This was witnessed by a group of Americans who were on a short-term mission to Bulgaria in the summer of 2006. One of the ladies on the team had a heart attack. During her stay in the Samokov hospital there were at least two ladies from the church spending every night with her. This is a cultural thing – Gypsies never leave loved ones alone in a hospital. It also demonstrates the dynamics of emotional attachment in Roma culture.

⁸⁰ I have been told various stories of Roma who provided comfort for others. One young man serving in the Bulgarian military was really homesick and would often brake down. Nobody showed him much understanding, except a Roma soldier who stood by him and provided needed comfort.

⁸¹ *Holy Brotherhood: Romani Music in a Hungarian Pentecostal Church* (2003) by Lange is a study of a Pentecostal congregation in Hungary with a significant number of Roma members. The author

describes the conversion of the Roma and their incorporation into the Pentecostal fellowship, which causes radical transformation in their lives. The primary focus is on Roma indigenous music and its relation to church leadership and spiritual gifts.

⁸² “Music as Discourse: Gypsy Pentecostal Music in Portugal and Spain” (2005) by Ruy Llera Blanes is a good article demonstrating the power of music in the evangelistic discourse and worship of the Roma.

⁸³ Many Bulgarians who claimed to be atheists under Communism, now claim to be Orthodox. They usually, however, do not attend church except on holidays, do not pray, and do not read the Holy Scriptures regularly. I want to nuance this, however, by saying that there are many sincere and committed Christians among the ethnic Bulgarians in all the three branches of Christianity – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. The number of Roma Christian believers has been growing steadily though in recent years, largely because of their quest for a new ethnic identity – and most of that growth is happening in the Pentecostal movement.

⁸⁴ If I am in conversation with strangers in Bulgaria, and share with them I am an evangelical minister, if they are Roma they would react more positively, because the majority of them know about the faith and have high respect for preachers. My father would often greet Roma strangers by saying “Slava na Boga” (“Praise God”). That connects well with them. Ethnic Bulgarians, on the other hand might think that is awkward, unless they are believers themselves.

⁸⁵ This attitude of clannish solidarity has led to a number of unpleasant incidents between Roma extended families living in the same *mahala*. The Bulgarian Media have reported a number of occasions when an interpersonal dispute quickly turns into an ugly physical confrontation between whole Roma clans. Recently, the news reported how, because of a monetary debt, a Roma clannish fight was started, and somebody’s house was set on fire as a result.

⁸⁶ A frequent saying in Romanes is: *Romane chave si peske chave i kiarem peske*, meaning “The Roma child is a child himself and proud to be such.”

⁸⁷ One Roma minister’s placing his father in a nursing home caused a great displeasure in the *mahala* and became one of the reasons for his stepping down from the pastorate of a large Gypsy congregation.

⁸⁸ The *Rudari*, already described in chapter 2, are one of the main Roma groups in Bulgaria. They speak Romanian and are divided into sub-groups such as the *Kopanari*, *Lazhichari*, and *Ursari*.

⁸⁹ A century ago the early Pentecostals’ sense of eschatological urgency caused them to neglect social service. Believing Jesus was soon to come, they thought this world needed the gospel message more than they needed bread. In recent years, however, the Pentecostals have caught on with the rest of the Christian Church. They have built a number of orphanages, hospitals, schools, homeless shelters, rehabilitation and humanitarian aids centers. They have provided funding for many development projects in order to lift people out of poverty.

⁹⁰ Both the Baptist and the Adventist churches in Bulgaria have a strong social ministry among the Roma. M. Dimitrova reports on the humanitarian activities of these groups, which are quite impressive. They have provided much humanitarian help to the Roma churches and quarters. Because of their strong base in the United States, they have been able to do a lot more in terms of material help for the Roma minority than the Pentecostal churches. The majority of the Roma have opted, however, for the Pentecostal groups. This gives certain evidence to the fact that the social ministry and the humanitarian aid is not, as some people suggest, the main motivation for the Roma to become Pentecostal or join Protestant churches. The situation with the Roma in Bulgaria is similar to that of the poor in Latin America, of whom it has been said: “The Catholics opted for the poor, but the poor opted for the Pentecostals.”

⁹¹ One leading evangelical leader told a researcher that the Roma attend churches for the help benefits and that they are inconsistent in their faith. Those were stereotypical statements. The same minister admitted that “no one has yet understood the mentality of the Roma.” He also said that no Roma attend the local parish church under his care (Dimitrova 2000:44,48). The gentleman obviously made blanket statements about an ethnos he knows little about. There truly are Roma who are inconsistent about their faith and that seek only personal interest in the church. This, however, applies to believers of all ethnic groups. I do not want to mention the name of this informer, because I do not want to embarrass him. My hope is that he will prayerfully seek God in regard to his attitude toward the Roma and make the appropriate corrections.

⁹² As we have seen throughout the text believers or ministers are often identified with the place they are from. Among the Roma especially, however, there are a number of nicknames in order for a person to be properly identified. For example Alexander Todorov is known as 'The Baker,' Stefan Kolev as 'The Fat One,' Ilia Georgiev as 'the Black One,' Sasho as 'the Kalderash.' There is an Assen 'The Caravan' and also Assen 'The Pulpit.' This Assen is known as 'The Bearded' for obvious reasons.

⁹³ One internet study discusses the movement in Western Europe and attributes its effectiveness to the fact it has been compatible with Gypsy culture. The evangelistic mandate to reach Gypsies necessitates adaptation to their culture and worldview. Once churches are planted, their structure and organization cannot follow the Western models. As nomads, the Roma should function under a flexible structure in order to avoid conflicts between their ministry and their constant movement. Often Gypsy believers are opposed to organization, feeling that this is a serious problem in many churches. They believe the Holy Spirit dispenses ministries and each person should function, according to their God-given gift. Thus they have developed various ministries (Study 2000).

⁹⁴ The term 'sekta' (sect) carries very negative connotations in Bulgaria.

⁹⁵ There is a good example in Scripture of the need for indigenous ethnic ministers:

"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom ye may appoint over this business." (Acts 6:1-3)

In this case the early apostles appointed seven men who were Greek proselytes to Judaism. They had Greek names and spoke Greek well. They were able to minister best to the needs of their own community, because they were of the same culture.

⁹⁶ The majority of the Bulgarian Roma, it was noted earlier, do not have a High School diploma.

⁹⁷ Most Roma do jobs that are considered lower class – janitorial work, maintenance, construction, and retail trade. Career and authority have a great meaning to them, because there are very few in their communities that attain more respectable places in society. Those that do, often leave the community. Since they have a feeling of inferiority, they want to prove that they can accomplish in life what the ethnic Bulgarians can as well. Therefore, the work of a pastor becomes an effective way for Roma men to have a respectable career opportunity. Even though, there is usually not much financial benefit in being a pastor, the position of 'man of the cloth' is held in high esteem among the Roma.

⁹⁸ This was in line with the times, because the Communist government propagated assimilation of the ethnic minorities. All expressions of minority culture were suppressed and discouraged.

⁹⁹ In church the men usually sit on one side while the women sit on the other. This was practiced by the old Bulgarian Pentecostal believers, and many Roma churches consider it necessary. Mainly, the reason is that in case the husband of some sister in the church, is not a Christian, he should not see his wife sitting next to another man in church. If that happens it could cause the jealous husband to stop his wife from attending the worship services.

¹⁰⁰ There are several reasons given for that. The main one is that there are a number of Romanes dialects in Bulgaria. Some Roma pastors are able to preach in Romanes, but many of them are not, because they have read the Bible and have been discipled in Bulgarian. There are Roma groups that do not speak Romanes. Some explain that they preach in Bulgarian, because they desire integration, wanting all Roma children and adults to learn to speak Bulgarian well. These reasons account for them mostly using Bulgarian as their preaching language. Romanes also lacks certain theological terms, which in the Roma songs are often borrowed from Bulgarian.

This is unlike the ethnic Turkish churches in Bulgaria that mostly do both their singing *and* preaching in Turkish. The Bulgarian National Television also has a newscast in Turkish in order to accommodate the large Turkish-speaking population of the country.

¹⁰¹ *Mekitsi* are special Bulgarian pastries.

¹⁰² In cases of emergency, families in Bulgaria would give a monetary compensation to the blood donors.

¹⁰³ The HU principle has been debated, criticized, misinterpreted, distorted, and misapplied. It is not my purpose here, however, to enter into this debate. I just would like to say that the true intent of the

principle is inclusion, not exclusion or segregation. It also is an effective way of attracting pre-Christian people and for the discipleship of indigenous believers. No church can claim to be a church for all people groups in a large metropolitan, if its pastor preaches (and choir sings) in only one (or two) of the many languages spoken there.

¹⁰⁴ Researchers have found out that many of the Roma in Bulgaria actually prefer living in secluded ethnic neighborhoods instead of mixing with the majority population in apartment buildings.

¹⁰⁵ This means predominantly Roma attending a particular church in the *mahala*. That church may include one or several of the Roma sub-groups living there since the Roma are not a monolithic whole. In the eyes of the majority population, however, the Roma are usually viewed as one people.

¹⁰⁶ In the Nadezhda quarter of Sliven the churches are homogenous along Roma group lines. The Naked Gypsies have their churches, the Musical Gypsies worship together, and the Turks have their own congregations. All of the Pentecostal believers in Nadezhda, however, have a good fellowship, love, and unity with each other. They attend each others services and special events. This truly reflects the love of Christ.

¹⁰⁷ In the United States the Roma do not live in secluded areas, but remain culturally secluded. They do not have much relation with *gaje* except in business dealings. That explains why most Roma Pentecostal churches in the States have their own pastors and are homogenous. The few occasions when a *gajo* attends regularly a Roma church there, is in cases of mixed marriages.

¹⁰⁸ I have suggested in the 'Conclusions' chapter that sociologists should do a detailed study that thoroughly examines the areas of community revitalization in the Roma *mahali* as a result of the influence of the Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria. That would be an interesting and worthy, while at the same time demanding sociology project.

¹⁰⁹ The Indian practice of arranged marriages also occurs sometimes, but is not as popular.

¹¹⁰ Studies have shown that few of the Bulgarian Roma read books. In their autobiographical stories most would not mention any author or writing that has had a profound influence on them or served them as an example to follow. Popkochev concludes that, "the book is not present in the home of the Roma family." The probable reason for this is the fact that their freedom is limited by their social predicament. Thus their main concern is physical survival, rather than spiritual or cultural enrichment.

¹¹¹ The normal Roma engagement is a very festive event, which ends with the couple sleeping together to test the girl's chastity. Some churches do not practice that kind of engagement any more, but simply have a presentation of the couple before the church accompanied with prayer. There are churches that reserve the test of virginity rite for the wedding itself. A number of others maintain the Roma rite where the couple begins their life together at the engagement. So there is no one particular standard on the engagement ritual among the Roma churches. It differs depending on the particular sub-group or on the way they have been taught by their pastors. Personally, I am of the opinion that every Roma pastor and congregation should decide what the appropriate manner of engagement is in their local community.

¹¹² The typical practice of the Bulgarian Roma is to take a monetary loan for such a celebration and then for a while struggle to pay it back. Some Roma pastors rebuke and discourage this *modus operandi*.

¹¹³ It is popular among all Roma believers, but we are using Kazanluk as an example here.

¹¹⁴ Pavel Ignatov does not marry Roma couples unless they are legally committed in civil court. A number of Roma pastors like Assen Christov also make it compulsory for young couples to have a civil court marriage, which makes the union official before Bulgarian law. Bulgaria does not legally recognize church marriages, even though there have been attempts to pass legislation for their recognition. The Roma in Bulgaria mostly do not have civil marriages. So a number of pastors desire to reverse that trend while others maintain this traditional Roma custom.

¹¹⁵ The virginity test is done on the second night of the marriage ritual. The groom and bride get behind closed doors, while a couple of old ladies stand close by. There is a white piece of cloth on the bed. When the couple consummates the marriage, the cloth with blood is presented to the old women who are very skillful at recognizing genuine blood from a virgin's defloration. If in doubt they pour spirits on the blood and it should form a flower figure. (There are some cases where cheating is done by using animal blood, but if the old women look at it closely they will detect the difference. If a Roma girl is proven not to be a virgin, this creates great sadness and shame to the groom and the in-laws. In that case they do not

spend money on a lavish wedding celebration). Afterwards, the white cloth with blood is paraded on the streets of the *mahala* celebrating the bride's purity.

¹¹⁶ An interesting fact, I learned about the Roma weddings in Kiustendil, is that they very rarely now take place on Saturdays, because of the strong influence of the Adventist Church in that *mahala*.

¹¹⁷ Gay y Blasco means 'evangelicals' here.

¹¹⁸ The other group mentioned in this study that is interested in self-education are those from Roma families that have risen above the stereotype: educated, individualistic, successful - different from the typical *mahala* case.

¹¹⁹ One of the main principles of the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, not exclusively a Christian group, is the need for divine help in order to break the self-destructive chemical dependence.

¹²⁰ This citation was from an unidentified undated source provided by Asen Christov.

¹²¹ As a result of the faith the normal trend was reversed. A number of Roma *mahali*, like Stolipinovo in Plovdiv, have been known for not paying their power bill for years, because they have not been able to afford it.

¹²² In order to prove they are speaking truth, Roma would pronounce a curse on a loved one. The full meaning is: "May my mother (or another relative) die if I am lying to you!" Of course, this is used by other ethnic groups in the country, but is very typical of the Roma. The church strongly rebukes this kind of swearing as well as the use of filthy language.

¹²³ My mother shared with me about a conversation on the Roma radio program. A certain Roma guest on the station talk show was suggesting that all the Roma should be taught English and converted to Eastern Orthodoxy. A group of Roma men from Fakulteta called in and were really upset, saying: "We do not know who this guy is, but we want to tell him we are Protestants here and will not convert to Orthodoxy."

¹²⁴ Stefan Sofianski is the former mayor of the city of Sofia.

¹²⁵ The reasons for this, as discussed in the previous chapter, are complex. First, the Orthodox Church traditionally has associated the Roma with Islam. Second, the nationalistic orientation of the Orthodox clergy made them isolate the Roma and be totally reluctant to engage them. Old Roma women have shared how when there were prayers in the schools in the early years of the 20th century, the Roma children (called "little Muslims" by the priest) would be asked to leave the classroom. For the same reasons, in the past the Orthodox would normally not allow Roma to be buried in Christian cemeteries.

¹²⁶ This was the time in the 1980s when the Zhivkov government forced all the Bulgarian citizens with Turkish names to change their names to Bulgarian ones. This affected not only the ethnic Turkish minority, but many of the Roma as well.

¹²⁷ Folk Islam uses charms, magic spells, and amulets. This version of Islam is different and contrary to fundamental Qur'anic teachings, but is widely spread all over the Muslim world.

¹²⁸ As mentioned earlier this is common among Roma. Many of them want to abandon their true identity, because of the low status ascribed to it.

¹²⁹ All Roma in Kazanlak now declare loudly and clearly: "we are all Christians." They also have an unfavorable attitude toward Turks and Turkish names. They still use the Turkish language, however, and Romanes with many Turkish words. The Carmen quarter Roma largely ignore the old Islamic religion. They say in the quarter there has never been a mosque, neither have they ever had Muslim imam who is Roma (they only remember Hodja's wives who were Roma). The pastor, however, is one of their own people (Dolapchieva 2003:54).

¹³⁰ I attended a Roma service one time when an older lady testified how she had received advice from another one to consult a fortune-teller. The pastor sternly rebuked these women and clearly stated the church's position against fortune-telling.

¹³¹ It is good to mention here that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, whether deliberately or not, has sanctioned sorcery and witchcraft by dedicating a temple to Baba Vanga, a renown Bulgarian necromancer from Petrich. This is part of the pagan syncretism approved and endorsed by the Orthodox Church.

¹³² The convictions and standards might differ on this matter from one church to another.

¹³³ The Orthodox Church has a number of syncretistic practices like the *courban*. They also accept certain types of memorials for the dead, which derive from ancient ancestor worship.

¹³⁴ We should note that not all cultural elements which may have been rooted in other religions, are necessarily wrong for a Christians to continue practicing. There is no pure version of Christianity without a cultural context! The meanings of cultural elements are more important than their forms. The

problem of syncretism is in the meaning. As the Bible is carefully studied, cultural customs can be kept, rejected, or modified. It all depends on what the particular custom means and how New Testament Scripture engages it. For example the Christian Church kept the Jewish custom of tithing, but not circumcision, especially for gentile believers. Many Roma Pentecostals keep the bride-price custom, but reject fortune-telling. Some Bulgarian researchers talk about 'syncretism' in Roma religious customs, but do not fully comprehend the meaning of that concept in the context of Christian mission. Of course believers do need to be careful, because there is a fine line between 'syncretism' and 'indigenous Christianity.' While the first is generally considered negative, the latter is positive. The syncretism, which mixes paganism with Christianity, is much more prevalent in Bulgarian Orthodoxy than in Roma Pentecostalism.

¹³⁵ Making (melting) a bullet is a typical folk custom to disarm spells and black magic.

¹³⁶ This article also notes that certain Rudari believers participate in the traditional Orthodox and folk ceremonies. Breaking the smoking habit is especially difficult among the old Rudari.

¹³⁷ Certain of these aspects might be stronger in defining Roma identification than others. There are some groups of Bulgarian Roma who have no knowledge of Romanes. Those that do speak Romanes have a number of different dialects in Bulgaria. A number of them also have a lighter skin color than others. The Kalderashi normally do not live in *mahali* and are wealthier, but their strict adherence to the Kalderash clannish traditions keep them together as a group. There are many Roma groups that are kept together by their particular group identity. Even within the same *mahala* the different Roma sub-groups often have biased attitudes toward each other.

¹³⁸ There have even been certain Bulgarian politicians who have kept secrets about their origins in order to cover up a possible Roma link.

¹³⁹ Hammerback and Jensen discuss this concept in *The Rhetorical Career of Cesar Chavez*. (Chavez, who started a labor union of Mexican farm workers in California, has been placed on the level of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a leader for civil rights.)

The desired result of *reconstitutive discourse* is redefinition and reconstitution rather than mere persuasion of the audience. Its goal is to cause the "auditors to adopt an altered identity and often to act out a new way of life." It changes how the listeners view themselves and frees them up for greater opportunities in life. Reconstitutive discourse moves people toward an identity change and helps them become participants in the constitutive conversation. It liberates them "to think and act more creatively, intelligently, and humanely." This kind of discourse has certain rhetorical qualities, which are indispensable for the purpose of "changing character." Born-again Christians are an example of a group of people who "see themselves as different in fundamental ways from their former selves" (Hammerback and Jensen 1998:44-47).

The reconstitutive discourse consists of three main parts, according to the model offered by Hammerback and Jensen:

1. *The first persona*. The audience should acknowledge the speaker's personal qualities, family heritage, and life history. The rhetor's nobles character, intelligence, and good will gives him/her an *ethos* basis for effective persuasion (1998:51-52).

2. *The substantive message*. The rhetor enacts and embodies the message. Generally, "when a rhetor identifies with a message, auditors who identify with that rhetor will be inclined to identify with the message too" (1998:52-53).

3. *The second persona*. The rhetor calls the listeners to change and then act in a ways that would be consistent with the change. The merging of persona and message give the rhetorical power for inspiration, persuasion, and reconstitution. The charisma and character of the speaker helps him/her communicate the message effectively and brings about the organization of followers who adopt the ideas of the message (1998:53-60).

¹⁴⁰ The mixed schools, where Roma children study together with ethnic Bulgarian ones, provide the best education for the Roma, according to my research. The segregated Roma schools offer a much lower quality of education. Bulgarian is not learned well there, there is less discipline, and the Roma children do not receive the needed attention.

¹⁴¹ Some recent scandals have exposed that fact.

¹⁴² The following story illustrates this point: Ivan [Zahariev], Baptist Roma leader, had been holding evangelical meetings in the town prison. In reaction to that, the local Orthodox Church leaders requested that the authorities stop Ivan and his team "from spreading heresy in the prison." The authorities,

however, declined this request, because of the positive changes they saw in the prisoners” as a result of the evangelism (Dimitrova 2000:46). The Christian faith can bring about spiritual revitalization on all levels of society - from the prisons to the National Parliament.

¹⁴³ It should be noted that the contextual theology articulated in this chapter mostly refers to the Roma Pentecostal believers in *Bulgaria*. While it does have similarities with the theology of Roma Pentecostals around the world, the Bulgarian context is unique so the following discussion may not fully apply to the movement in other places.

¹⁴⁴ Most Roma pastors have gone through some form of short-term ministry training through seminars, conferences, and video-tapes. The number of those who go through a regular Bible College curriculum has also grown, but the exact statistic is difficult to obtain.

¹⁴⁵ For example the songs produced by the Roma churches in the Razlog area, follow the rhythm and lyrics of Macedonian (Southwestern Bulgarian) folklore, and particularly the theology of the old (ethnically Bulgarian) Pentecostal believers in that area. That is why there are so many song lyrics in that local repertoire that address believers as ‘child’ or ‘children.’ Roma culture, we should remember, borrows much from the outside world. Even in music they often learn to play and sing national folk songs better than the nationals themselves. So, we should not be surprised that in the Roma praise music in Bulgaria there is such a great variety of songs and music styles - folk Bulgarian, Turkish, Macedonian, and Romani.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Dad’ in Romanes means ‘Father’ almost identical with the English ‘Dad, Daddy’ and close to the Bulgarian ‘Tatko, Tate’ (Kabuli 2004:78, 168). These are some of the terms that confirm the Indo-European origin of Romanes. Devel (Lord) is close to the Sanskrit *devata* and the English *divine*.

¹⁴⁷ Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven (James 5:14-15).

¹⁴⁸ The following passages from the New Testament epistles demonstrate the biblical teachings on holiness: “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1). “And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness” (1 Thessalonians 4:7). “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

¹⁴⁹ There is actually a song talking of ‘disgusting humans’ who cannot stand each other.

¹⁵⁰ Visions and dreams are valuable and authentic Christian experiences. In fact they are closely connected with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit and they shall prophesy...And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Acts 2:17-21)

A word of caution is in order, however, on this matter. Theology and Christian life cannot be solely based on mystical experiences, because that opens the door to deceptions. There should be a good balance in the development of theology between Scripture, Christian historical traditions, the hermeneutic community, reason, and personal experiences. Visions and dreams are in order, but their authenticity should be judged in light of these other factors. Churches where almost everyone gives and/or receives words of prophecy in every service may practice nothing more than a form of witchcraft for the purpose of control and manipulation, hidden behind the image of charismatic Christianity.

¹⁵¹ The Kaldersashi, a Serbian Roma group in Bulgaria, would be an exception to that general rule. They drive luxury vehicles, wear expensive clothes and jewelry, spend thousands on weddings or funerals, and live in extravagant houses with expensive furniture. There is a Kalderash house in North Bulgaria, which resembles the White House.

¹⁵² The term Progressive Pentecostals is especially important as it brings a balanced approach to ministry and avoids two unhealthy extremes within Pentecostal Christianity:

1. The sectarian legalistic trend, characteristic of early Pentecostalism, that stays away from any social engagement. Its adherents are primarily concerned with 'the sweet by-and-by' and have no dealings with the world except for evangelistic purposes. It fails to fulfill Christ's exhortation to be "the salt of the earth" and to express love toward those in need.

2. The Marxist approach of Liberation, Social Gospel, and Kingdom Now theologians, who are mostly concerned with social matters, but neglect the Great Commission of proclaiming the gospel and making Christian disciples.

¹⁵³ "People are more receptive to outreach from *new groups and classes* than from established groups and classes. Furthermore, a first generation church can attract people that an older congregation cannot." People are usually more excited if they helped create the agenda and truly own it. In the pioneer group also there is less of a generational conflict (Hunter 1987:77-78). Even though there have been Roma Pentecostals in Bulgaria for over 50 years, the most extensive spread of the faith has happened in the last 18 years. Thus, the majority of the movement's followers and ministers are indeed first generation believers.

¹⁵⁴ In Bulgaria and other East European countries, the old-time conservative Pentecostals did not allow people to clap or dance in church, because that was associated with the worldly entertainment. Therefore, the Roma, particularly joyful people, once converted, were required to not dance or clap in church. The Roma Pentecostals should understand that those are human *gajo* regulations contrary to God's Word (Psalm 47, 150).

¹⁵⁵ The nine gifts are prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, word of knowledge, word of wisdom, discernment, faith, healing, and working of miracles. There are two other gift lists in the New Testament:

1. Five-fold ministry gifts: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher (Ephesians 4:11).
2. The helping ministry gifts: exhortation, counseling, charitable giving, helps, alms (Romans 12:6-8).

One person could operate in one or several of the spiritual gifts.

¹⁵⁶ One of the great tragedies of Europe is that the old continent has abandoned its Christian heritage. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a daughter of a Protestant pastor, during her recent presidency of the European Union called for an amendment in the European Constitution, which would lift up faith in God and Christian values. The motion was lost! The continual refusal of the European Union to acknowledging its Christian heritage may well contribute to its demise.

¹⁵⁷ There are Roma believers who only know the Lord by prohibitions and rules, and rarely hear about the joy and gladness of Christian life. They need to learn more about true sanctification and holiness. The work of sanctification happens as the believer yields his/her will to the grace of God: "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). The Roma disciples should learn of God's love and grace for them, and be open to the Holy Spirit to conform them to the image of God's Son Jesus Christ. This will happen in the relational atmosphere provided by other fellow believers.

¹⁵⁸ Even though one of the availability factors for the massive conversion of the Bulgarian Roma to Pentecostalism has precisely been their simplicity and lack of highly academic knowledge, in order for them to grow in the faith they need to have a good knowledge of Scripture and Christian teachings. God speaks in the Bible: "My people perish for the lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6).

¹⁵⁹ Their Saturday service, which I visited, was full with over 500 people in attendance, a Christian choir, great order, and discipline. People of all ages attended, well dressed, to hear Scripture, well-prepared message, testimonies, and a teaching on holiness and purity. I was able to interview two of the leaders of that church after the service.

¹⁶⁰ The Roma Adventists in Bulgaria, with their 50-year history, can also be the subject of an interesting study. Through their international ADRA Foundation they have been able to help the Kiustedil Roma *mahala* in many ways. Also a Bulgarian Roma Adventist by the name of Sulio Metkov did the first Romanes translation of the New Testament. Born in 1921, Metkov was already an activist for Roma rights in Bulgaria when he came to the Christian Adventist faith. Interestingly enough, in his search for the origins of the Roma people, Metkov read the Koran, then went to the Synagogue; from there the Rabbi sent him to the Adventist Church where Metkov found the 'truth.' In 1963 he undertook the difficult task of translating the Bible in Romanes. In 1994 the London Bible Society recognized that in spite of the attempts made in Hungary, France, and Albania, Sulio Metkov was the only person in Europe to make such a full

translation of the Bible in Romanes. Metkov is thus the first person in history to make a complete and high quality translation of almost the whole Bible in the Romani language. His Romanes New Testament has been recently published and made available to the Bulgarian Roma. (Strumina – “Even the Roma have had” - *Romano Ilo*, 1995, n.17-18, September – October.)

¹⁶¹ In most cases the economic situation does not allow that at present, but this is what the movement needs to work toward. There are Roma pastors like Mitko Goranov from Lom, and Nikolai from Vidin, who are fully supported by their churches.

¹⁶² The Apostle Paul says: “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

¹⁶³ Bulgaria's Baptists send pastors for training only after their local community recognizes them as leaders.

¹⁶⁴ The first three parts of this curriculum are generic - all people preparing to be pastors need to study them. I know this from my experience in ministerial training and have discovered that they are also necessary for the Roma ministers. The two latter parts of the proposed curriculum (Roma culture and literacy) are educational needs that are fairly distinct to Roma pastors.

¹⁶⁵ Often Roma pastors feel uncomfortable to ask for personal support from their churches. They, however, should not be embarrassed to teach their people the principles of stewardship, because “it is more blessed to give than it is to receive” (Acts 20:35). The Roma believers will be blessed as they learn the biblical principle of sowing and reaping. The learning of the biblical principles of giving and financial stewardship will be an important step toward their freedom from poverty.

¹⁶⁶ Critical Contextualization is the method developed by Paul Hiebert in dealing with cultural customs in light of Christianity.

¹⁶⁷ Lack of proper education has been a major reason for the low social status of the Roma in Bulgaria. The church is the best environment where the young generation can raise their education level.

¹⁶⁸ The fact that the Roma pastors have started networking with each other is a positive move, reflected in the creation of their Association.

¹⁶⁹ The ethnic Bulgarian leaders and churches should be given credit for their great effort in helping the Roma Pentecostal movement. It would be a great mistake if a distance is created between Pentecostal believers in Bulgaria on ethnic grounds. This would not reflect Christian love and unity.

¹⁷⁰ Popkochev, for example recommends that the new identity, inspired by the Pentecostal movement, should offer the Roma more than just a “stereotypical trust in heaven” and lead them toward a clearer understanding of their personal potential for the solution of the community problems (2004:44-45).

¹⁷¹ Around election times various political parties court Roma votes by active ‘social program’ campaign. Then they usually forget about the Roma until the time of the next election. There have also been politicians who have used the Roma poverty to their personal advantage, but have not cared much to help the Roma with their serious needs.

¹⁷² For example when I joined the Bulgarian Church of God, it was wrong for a woman to have her head unveiled. Now, that is no longer the case in most churches. The Roma churches, however, remain overall conservative in their standards.

¹⁷³ There was a Roma community in south Bulgaria that a Non-government Organization did a project for. They received funding to build several houses for poor Roma families. Unfortunately, they did not employ construction companies owned by Roma nor involve the community much in the process. So after the money were spent, the houses were partially completed and the project failed to fulfill its original purpose.

¹⁷⁴ A good example is the faith-based initiatives of George W. Bush in the United States, which have proven to be very effective in poverty stricken areas, like the ghetto-type Black neighborhoods. Dr. Tony Evans, pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship Church in Dallas, befriended Bush and inspired the future president to provide government support for churches with their social programs.

Evans struck a deep chord in Bush when he talked about churches as the best social sources available for delivering aid in any community. Evans recalled: “He shared with me afterwards that the talk that I gave was the inspiration for his faith-based initiatives program as governor in Texas...Rove recalls Bush as quoting from Evan’s speech in Greenville on several occasions: “On every street corner there are places that know how to deliver help to people in the neighborhood, where you can turn for help. They’re called churches.”

Pastor Evans has been a supporter of the faith-based programs of Bush, even though the majority of the African American community votes for the Democratic Party (Aikman 2004:115). Regardless of how one feels about the Bush presidency, the faith-based initiatives were a great idea.

¹⁷⁵ God Bless You! (*Romanes*).

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APPENDIX

The Praxis Model of Contextual Theology

The *praxis* model of theology is an exciting way of engaging marginalized groups and making them full participant in history. It inspires Christians to analyze their context and moves them toward becoming agents of social change. The model has been identified with the well-known Liberation Theology, seen in Latin America and in the African American churches in the United States. It has also been described as practical theology – theology that takes action.

The model recognizes that God’s presence is manifested not only through culture, but also through history. Its theological product is informed by contextual analysis and processed by reflective action. Praxis is not inspired primarily by classical texts or behavior, but by “present realities and future possibilities.” The Bible itself is a story of the struggle of the Jewish people for freedom. The message of Jesus shook the religious and political power structures of His day; that eventually cost him his life. The model’s biblical basis is the prophetic tradition with its numerous voices against structural injustice and social oppression; it also follows the New Testament call not only to hear, but also to do God’s Word (James 1:22) (Bevans 2004:70-71).

The term *praxis* has its roots in Marxist philosophy, which believed that reason should go together with and be challenged by human action; it calls for people to move beyond being mere objects of history and to become its subjects. It challenges them to move from interpretation and analysis of events, to changing the world. Therefore, the

purpose of *praxis* theology is not just to understand and explain the Christian faith, but also to articulate its commitment to meaningful Christian action. The true fulfillment of theology is not “in mere ‘right thinking’ (ortho-doxy), but in right ‘acting’ (ortho-praxy).” The model is a new and fresh way of doing theology, which “more than all others, is able to deal adequately with the experience of the past (scripture, tradition) and the experience of the present (human experience, culture, social location, and social change)” (Bevans 2004:72). The praxis model calls for true Christians to act in opposition to oppressive structures for the purpose of liberation and transformation of the lives of the poor.

The model is committed to social change and calls for responsible action on behalf of the poor. It rejects “academic theology divorced from action” as irrelevant. It does theology not just by reviewing literature, but also by taking action relevant to the particular context. It requires partnership with God in the work of healing, reconciliation, and liberation. All believers are called to do the theology. The theologizing process continues indefinitely, because the constant changes in the context and history require new articulations of the faith (Bevans 2004:73-75).

The steps in the praxis models are as follows:

1. *Context analysis*. The particular situation is analyzed in light of experience, culture, social location, and movement of social change.

2. *Rereading of the Bible and Christian tradition*. The problems are interpreted in light of Scripture and a course of action is decided.

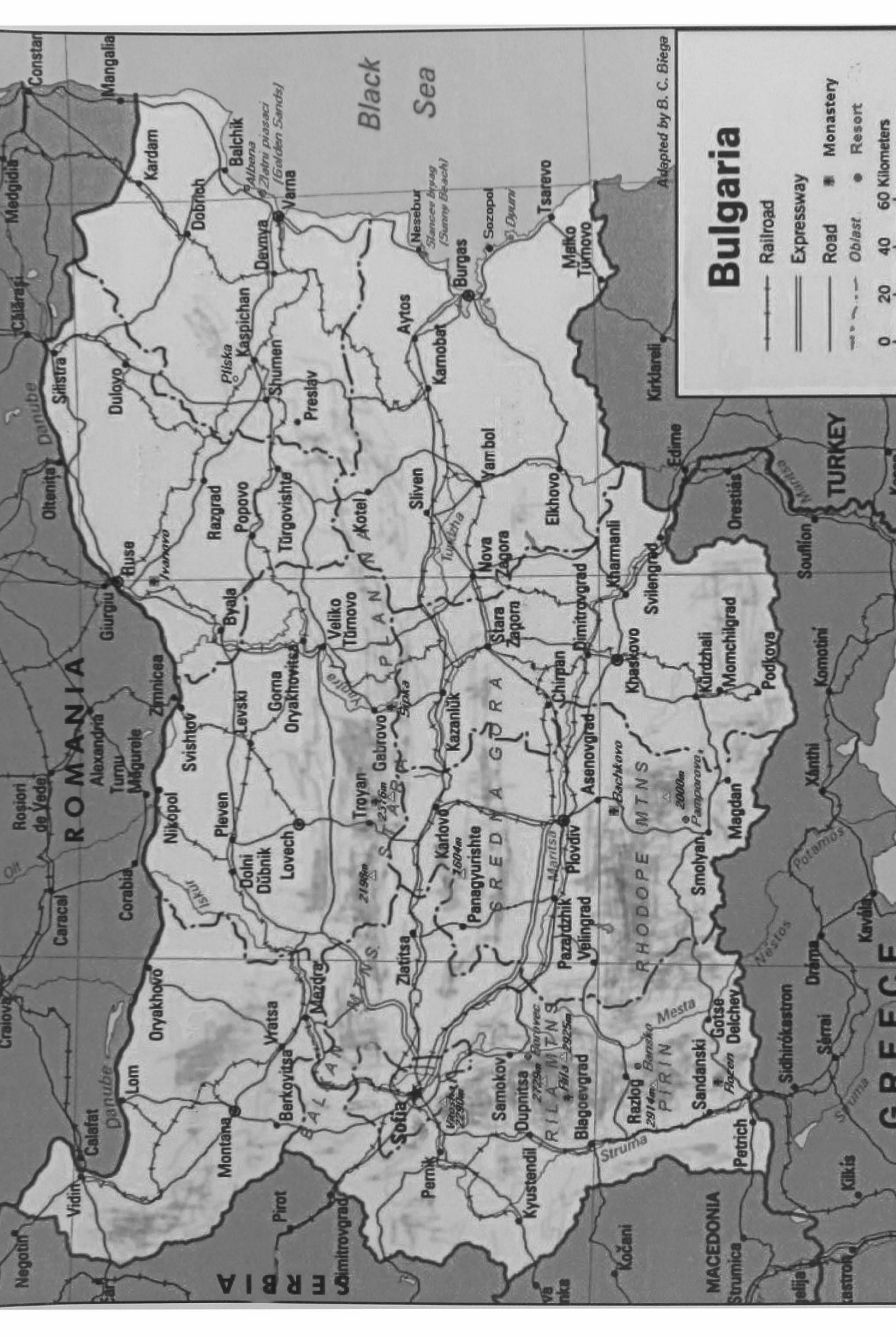
3. *Committed and intelligent action*. The Christian community takes appropriate action to address the particular problems.

4. *Reflection* takes place and the cycle is generally repeated.







Leonardo Boff divides the liberation theology method in three phases: “seeing analytically, judging, theologically, and acting pastorally or politically.” This model offers fresh revelation from God. The strength of the *praxis* model is its solid epistemological grounds, its “alternate vision,” and its influence on theology. The weakness is its close connection with Marxist philosophy (Bevans 2004:76-78). In connection to the model, says Bevans:

The actual *being* church of the small community sheds new light on what it means to be ‘church.’ Rather than succumb to the alternatives of despair and (more commonly) cynicism or repression and (often subsequently) suppression, the Christian faith is called upon to face the world today with a “prophetic realism,” ready to face the consequences of the fact that a society based on happiness cannot survive; only a society based on truth can survive (2004:79,82-83).

An important note should be made here in order to respond to the model’s critics. The coercion and atheism of Marxism clearly goes against Christian principles, just like the extreme individualism, greed, and exploitation in Capitalism do. Both these systems of human government are corrupt and represent structural evil, because they have been designed and utilized by sinful humans beings. On the other hand, they both offer some useful ways to engage culture, which can serve as frameworks in forming contextual theologies. Therefore, regardless of some of its Marxist paradigms, liberation theology does deserve a fair hearing. After all, Jesus Himself came to let the oppressed go free.



Bulgaria

-  Railroad
-  Expressway
-  Road
-  Monastery
-  Oblast
-  Resort

0 20 40 60 Kilometers

Adapted by B. C. Biega

Black Sea

ROMANIA

TURKEY

GREECE

FRIDAY

MACEDONIA

PIROTT

PIROTT

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