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## The role of religion in resolving conflicts in the communities of Roma in Slovakia

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Viktória Šoltésová

## **The role of religion in resolving conflicts in the communities of Roma in Slovakia**

### **Introduction**

Religiosity is one of the most important parts of the Roma personal and social life. And there is also the potentiality. Has perspective transform not only spiritual, but also the social life of the Roma communities. According to the official statistics, the number of Roma in the Slovak Republic is actually smaller due to the fact that a great deal of them did not register in the population census as Roma. One part of the minority is living in disadvantaged conditions with a high level of long-term unemployment; they strongly depend on welfare payments, their educational level and their social and economic situation is very low, and they are socially excluded from rest of society. However, the Roma population is heterogeneous and differential. Communities are differing in dialects, lifestyle, human environment etc. Majority of the Roma population is living in the eastern and the southern part of Slovakia. The legal situation of the Roma was discussed in different member states of the European Union. Those countries which recognized the Roma as a national minority should be contrasted with those that haven't done so.

### **Spiritual life of the Roma communities**

Traditional Roma life style with special customs and moral norms of family life started to destroy on the end of the nineteen sanctuaries. Misunderstanding and rejection of the majority culture ended in the destruction of the traditional value systems. Common values are dividing under the concrete living conditions and specific historical experiences of the cultural groups<sup>1</sup>. Identity of the Roma people

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hübschmannová, *Několik poznámek k hodnotám Romů (Skica)*, [w:] *Romové v České republice (1945-1998)*, Praha 1999, p. 29.

is differential in the area of education, social status or living conditions. Identity of the Roma people living in the cities is similar as it is in the majority population<sup>2</sup>.

Socio-cultural development proceeded slower in traditional Roma communities than in the majority population. We can see components of the Roma spiritual culture in archaic forms until today. First researches of the Roma religiosity in our area discovered typical pattern of the magic practices covered up by the formal Christianity<sup>3</sup>.

In every dialect of the Roma language exists one term- and it is word for God – *del*. This term is expressing as power, authority and rightness. But it means *giving* too. It is possible to understand God as a spiritual personality giving good and punishment. In Roma culture is the understanding of God special – God is good father with respect. Typical temperament we can see in extreme love and anger toward God determined by live conditions and situations<sup>4</sup>. „The part of the spirituality is faith in the power giving the rules for the world existence and the place of the human being in it. In socio-cultural context has this function Christian God<sup>5</sup>”. Spiritual life is showing itself in public forms of the religion – rituals, customs, superstitions, hymns, traditions and concepts<sup>6</sup>. In agreement with Bartosz many customs have got magic character and they are related to after-life. It indicates developed cult of the decedent Roma people. Most of this customs have Balkan-Slovanian background. Strong persuasion about living spirits of died persons in the middle of the family is related to the faith in spirits<sup>7</sup>. It is still beyond comprehension Christian doctrine of resurrection, because it is an apocalyptic idea of spirits' come back on the earth. Therefore it is easier to believe, that live is ending with the death of the body<sup>8</sup>. But some specific Roma customs survived in some areas- in ghetto like settlements. Roma spiritual culture developed in dependency on the social situation of the Roma people. We can find more symbols of the traditional culture in the country<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Uherek, A. Novák, *Etnická identita Romů*, [w:] *Čačipen pal o Roma. Súhrnná správa o Rómoch na Slovensku*, M. Vašečka (ed.), Bratislava 2002, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> M. Jakoubek, *Romové – Konec (ne)jedného mýtu. Tractatus culturo(mo)logicus*, Praha 2004, p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> R. Rosinský et al., *Amare Roma. Špecifická práca v rómskych komunitách*, Nitra 2006, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Palubová, *Fenomén smrti v ľudovom náboženstve Rómov z okolia Trnavy a Nitry*, [w:] *Boh všetko vidí. Duchovný svet Rómov na Slovensku / O del sa dikhel. Romani pataviben pre Slovensko*, M. Kováč, A. B. Mann (eds.), Bratislava 2003, p. 17-35, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Boh všetko vidí...*, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bartosz, *Neboj sa cigána. Na dara Romestar*, Sobrance 2004, p. 120-121.

<sup>8</sup> P. Šuleř et al., *Romové. Tradice a současnost*, Brno 1999, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> V. Šoltéssová, *Misiológia so zameraním na rómske komunity. Religiozita Rómov v kontexte vzdelávania misijných pracovníkov na Slovensku*, [w:] *Potrebujeme misiologii? Pokud ano, proč ji nevyučujeme a systematicky ji nerozvíjíme?*, Praha 2007, p. 63-74; V. Šoltéssová, R. G. Robertson, *Misiológia so zameraním na rómske komunity*, Banská Bystrica 2003.

The core Roma concept of *romanipen* means: Roma values, language, the consciousness of a community of origins and history and tradition. The main moral and ethical principle accepted in various forms of the Roma communities, known as Oral law tradition too. It should be similar like *adat*: total system of inherited norms, customs, worldviews and values of the *Batak* people in Sumatra (what about I heard from the presentation of Anwar this week). *Romanipen* is the keystone of the Romani identity. For Carpathian Roma people it is moral issue. But for the nomadic Roma communities it is still traditional law with its institute of control. This internal legal system not only protects the Roma from external and internal threats, but also serves as a code that organizes Roma society.

### Specifics of religiosity of the Roma in Slovakia

The term itself religiosity lacks universal definition (term of psychology and sociology of religion, religious studies<sup>10</sup>), the researches highlight the different features and expressions of religiosity<sup>11</sup>. In the past, even confused notions of religiosity and spirituality. This is difficult to characterize religious manifestations and survival of Roma. The term „Roma religiosity” may under floorboard

introduce and give the impression that Roma have special, they only own religion. Religiosity and faith of broad segments of the Roma ethnic group is inherently and in many different external manifestations of religious thought and action of the majority community<sup>12</sup>.

The research in Slovakia has revealed „multi-layered public religiosity”. It is a combination of older *pre-Christian* and new Christian concepts and ideas<sup>13</sup>. These concepts are superstitions, e.g. signs in dreams and their interpretation. Worldly and posthumous punishments are in contradiction; the reason for God’s punishment is breaking an oath (sanction, ceremonial, oath of loyalty). Religiosity is one of the most important parts of the Roma social and private life, and the Roma attribute great significance to religiosity both in implicit and in explicit forms<sup>14</sup>. Palubová concerning the research of religiosity Roma in Trnava and Nitra notes that

<sup>10</sup> J. Komorovský et al., *Religionistika a náboženská výchova. Terminologický a výkladový slovník*, Bratislava 1997; M. Stríženec, *Súčasná psychológia náboženstva*, Bratislava 2001, p. 39-46.

<sup>11</sup> L. Žaloudková, *Religiozita a náboženská participácia v súčasnej nemeckej sociológii*, „Slovak Sociological Review” 2001, nr 1, p. 71-84.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Palubová, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> R. Pivoň, *Negatívne sily, niektoré ich podoby a pôsobenie v živote Rómov*, [w:] *Boh všetko vidí...*, *op.cit.*, p. 115-127.

<sup>14</sup> M. Kováč, M. Jurík, *Religiozita Rómov a aktivity cirkvi vo vzťahu k Rómom*, [w:] *Čačipen pal o Roma...*, *op.cit.*, p. 127-143.

part of the religion is faith in the existence and presence of the forces that control the world and determine the place of man in it. In the broader cultural and social context, this is the role of the Christian God<sup>15</sup>.

Spiritual life is much more than in the church, but also in forms of folk religion which address the spiritual needs of man (rituals, customs, superstitions, religious songs, traditions and beliefs). These include a strong emphasis on the repatriation of the dead (mules), oaths and curses, particularly important paintings and sculptures of saints, etc.<sup>16</sup> With special Roma habits we do not meet throughout Slovakia. Roma spiritual culture evolves depending on the maturity of the social situation of the Roma. More signs of traditional culture and customs can be found on the more rural areas.

The Roma community as a variety of other ethnic, cultural, religious and social communities, does not form homogeneous whole. Roma perception of religion is according to David's specific, defines him as a „complex syncretic Christian ideas and their own faith-based animist background<sup>17</sup>”. Since religiosity is a multidimensional phenomenon, is manifested by faith in a transcendent reality, recognition of moral standards and a personal level is expressed through outward behavior and manner of religious participation. We will not reflect in this section different approaches to the typology of religiosity<sup>18</sup> since this is a brief description of some typical trends found in researches religiosity of Roma in Slovakia.

Religiosity of the Roma in Slovakia (in church participation and religious practice) is on the one hand specific and on the other hand differentiated – in two dimensions:

**1st dimension: passive religion communities, traditional forms of ceremonies and faith that resigned to its external manifestations.** First are passive religious communities, which long ago previously took over the religion of the majority population. For them comes forward traditional forms of worship and faith that resigns to its external manifestations. Although such a *implicit* faith has considerable importance for the life of the communities<sup>19</sup>. Great importance the Roma worldwide and in Slovakia attributed to the sacrament of baptism<sup>20</sup>. Except the funeral, however generally the involvement of Roma in church life is minimal. Except the funeral, however generally the involvement of Roma in church life is minimal. We meet as a paradox: religious decoration and the de-

<sup>15</sup> Z. Palubová, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Boh všetko vidí...*, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> P. Řičan, *S Romy žít budeme – jde o to jak*, Praha 1998, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> L. Halman a R. de Moor, *Religion, churches and Moral Values*, b.m.w. 1991, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> *Čačipen pal o Roma...*, *op.cit.*, p. 234.

<sup>20</sup> J. P. Liégeois, *Rómovia, Cigáni, Kočovníci*, Bratislava 1995, p. 82-83.

sire for God's *presence* in research correlates with occasional attending of the church<sup>21</sup>.

**2nd dimension: religiosity of Roma who recently converted, spontaneous and active religious life.** Another dimension is the religiosity of activated or religiously recently converted Roma. They excel in dedication. Members of such communities are often themselves become missionaries. They live very spontaneous and active religious life. They show great interest in the practical application of the new articles of faith in their personal life. On the other hand, this concern is often subject to social environment, personality of the preacher or other external circumstances that change over time. With this change, there is often a change in the faith of the Roma, which then turns to a new mission and a preacher in the neighborhood<sup>22</sup>. For example, movement of evangelical Christians among Roma began in the UK and France, led by Clément Le Cossec<sup>23</sup>. Gypsy Pentecostal movement, which developed in the 50th years in France, found by J. P. Liégeois response across Europe and worldwide<sup>24</sup>. Currently are in France, about 200 evangelical church communities that are involved in movement (Gypsy Evangelical Movement-GEM)<sup>25</sup>. Some studies have pointed the personalization of religion (eg the experience) and a strong integration in primary groups as important factors in its appeal<sup>26</sup>. Enthusiastic experiences are characterized by enthusiasm manifested loud prayer and movement, best known manifestation of Pentecostal spirituality is the practice of spiritual gifts- for example speaking in tongues<sup>27</sup>. According Podolinská research in the local community of *Plavecký Štvrtok*, the church missionary strategies of the church *Word of life* are effective, so that they „offer them God of poor, uneducated, and condemned, the living God, which leads believers to a personal conversation<sup>28</sup>”. According to Čurejová what can affect religiosity of the Roma are not religious dogma, but the relationship of the missionary workers

<sup>21</sup> M. Kováč, *Slnko pre spravodlivých. Posvätnosť prísahy a Božia sankcia medzi horehronskými Rómami z obce Telgárt*, [w:] *Boh všetko vidí...*, *op.cit.*, p. 129-146.

<sup>22</sup> Čáčipen pal o Roma..., *op.cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>23</sup> W. Kay, A. E. Dyer (eds.), *European pentecostalism*, Leiden 2011, p. 122; [http://www.clementle-cossec.org/index.php?p=1\\_7\\_Epop-e-missionnaire](http://www.clementle-cossec.org/index.php?p=1_7_Epop-e-missionnaire) (1 IX 2012).

<sup>24</sup> J. P. Liégeois, *op.cit.*, p. 83; *The Roma and Religious Identity. Pentecostalism among the Roma in Slovakia*, <http://www.eminet.sk/?q=node/117> (13 VII 2007).

<sup>25</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gypsy\\_Evangelical\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gypsy_Evangelical_Movement) (11 X 2012).

<sup>26</sup> M. Tížik, *Mutácia náboženstiev v globalizovanom svete*, „Slovak Sociological Review” 2001, nr 1, p. 118-123; <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/12703.htm> (12 V 2007); <http://solair.eunet.yu/~lechurch/evangel.htm> (2 V 1999).

<sup>27</sup> P. Řičan, *Psychologie náboženství*, Praha 2002, p. 255.

<sup>28</sup> T. Podolinská, *Boh medzi vojnovými plotmi. Náboženská polarizácia v rómskej kolónii v Plaveckom Štvrtku*, [w:] *Boh všetko vidí...*, *op.cit.*, p. 147-174; interview with E. Radičová (Roma missionary in Plavecký Štvrtok), 2010.

to the community. „Missionary worker who understands them and have a knowledge of their environment – it is able almost to do miracles<sup>29</sup>”. It is necessary a more detailed survey of some elements of attraction for Roma religious converts in Slovakia. On the other hand, has been reported the different mentality of the Roma in the Pentecostal movement, which manifestations in the sixties resulted in to the separation of Roma churches in France<sup>30</sup>.

Based on her research specifies Podolinská new typology of „Roma Christianity” in Slovakia. Let us mention some of them: She draws attention to its orientation for the earthly life, which is reflected in the few developed eschatology. As other characteristics mentioned pragmatic type of contact with God and personal communication with Him. The conception of sacral time is completely missing in „Roma Christianity”. The Absolute is worshipped anytime. The time is singular and homogenous, filed with equally evaluated events. Any point of time has a potential to be sacred, there is no time more or less suitable for communication with sacrum. Strong faith in symbols and dreams, and magical elements in religious practice, are a part of it. Individual forms of devoutness (completed with family ones) significantly prevail over collective ones<sup>31</sup>.

## Religious Conversion among the Roma Population

Roma, in the same way as the rest of the population of Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, Czechs, could choose freely to engage with newly available religion. The phenomenon of Roma converting to new religious movements in significant numbers, especially to Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, appeared. *Conversion* is a complex and dynamic process with several dimensions and has to be described and analyzed in stages. The reasons to convert arise from complex circumstances, and conversion happens in stages. We need to consider the family and social networks of the converts, and be aware of the role of the authority and charisma of the proselytizing missionary or priest. The factors of family networks and authority of the missionary seem to be of key importance for the conversions of Roma. Significantly, recent waves of conversions among the Roma in the studied locality have occurred only in communities that tend to lack a social structure typical for traditional family-based Roma communities. This decay of traditional values and norms could take place on several scales. It occurs among the Roma that live more or less outside of their communities and logically, their

<sup>29</sup> L. Čurejová, *Te Del o Del*, „Rómske listy” 2003, nr 2.

<sup>30</sup> T. Podolinská, *Boh medzi vojnóvými plotmi...*, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>31</sup> Eadem, „Chocolate Mary” – „Roma Christianity” as ethnic and cultural approximation of Christianity among the Roma in Slovakia, [http://www.cesnur.org/2008/london\\_podoliska.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2008/london_podoliska.htm) (3 X 2012); A. Bartosz, *op.cit.*, p. 120-121.

bonds with the original communities are reduced. On the other hand, this decay of traditional culture and community is visible even inside Roma settlements and occurred gradually with relocation and displacement of Roma settlements during the period of socialism, as well as with the impoverishment, unemployment and social and material segregation in Roma settlements during the nineties. One of the effects of this social decay is also the decay of the traditional family bonds and hierarchy, which might result in a conversion to a religious movement. Thus, the affiliation to a religious movement can become a way of constructing new forms of social relations<sup>32</sup>. The result of the new conversion is *multilayered public religiosity* because Roma are rarely completely loose the original confession, they prefer layered one over the other. Therefore, it is common in the life of the religiously activated Roma people, that in the last decade they already passed one or more conversions. However, this does not lessen their honest dedication to the new faith. *Multilayered public religiosity* is effort of converts to modify it in response to the current situation, without radical changes. Eventually becoming in connection of characters of several confessions in a specific type of personal religiosity<sup>33</sup>. Among the factors to support an extension of the phenomenon belong to M. Kováč and A. B. Mann syncretism (joining of probably incompatible elements), adaptability (flexible adaptation to the incentive), and identity<sup>34</sup>.

According to internal estimates of churches affected Roma mission life of about 10 000 Slovak Roma. These estimates statistics mean those Roma who participate in church activities, going to prayer groups and begin to identify themselves with that denomination. In many churches is the phenomenon of extinction of some missions in Roma areas, so researches looked at the causes of extinction such missions. It turned out that in most cases was caused by the leaving of specific priests, pastors or missionaries who initiated the establishment of the mission<sup>35</sup>.

## The Role of Religion in Resolving Conflicts

In order to see the potential of religion to resolve conflicts, we will see a concrete example. Podolinská describes the action of the Christian mission in the village Plavecký Štvrtok Total coexistence Roma people and the majority population of the village is quite problematic. Mutual relations sharpens the long-lasting conflict of Roma groups in the middle of the colony, which also resulted in several battles and violence. This conflict divides Roma Plavecký Štvrtok into two camps.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.eminet.sk/?q=node/119> (5 VI 2006).

<sup>33</sup> M. Kováč, M. Jurík, *op.cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Boh všetko vidí...*, *op.cit.*, p. 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> T. Podolinská, T. Hrustič, *Boh medzi bariérami. Sociálna inklúzia Rómov náboženskou cestou*, Bratislava 2010, p. 47-48.

That started Roma in settlement together to communicate, considered one of the pastors in one of the biggest changes, which passed the Roma believers<sup>36</sup>.

Research SIRONA 2010 confirmed the basic input hypothesis, namely, that under the influence of religious missions, there is also a positive social change and, under certain conditions even the follow *social inclusion*. Roma mission success in the light of positive social change to Roma people demonstrated the Roma alone, even their non-Roma neighbors, mayors, school teachers, officials of the local employment offices, field social workers, etc.<sup>37</sup> Experts published, among others, the following recommendation:

Because in locations with strong pastoral activity occurs an increase in communication and social skills, changing drinking behavior and consumption habits, and there are community leaders and local authority, we believe that the environment is conducive to subsequent social and other community support programs. Therefore, we recommend these locations as targets for different types of NGO projects that are currently underway and will be held in Slovakia<sup>38</sup>.

### Mission Work in Local Roma Settlement Areas

In the Slovak Republic is working with state approval under the Act 394/2000 Collection of Laws eighteen churches and religious communities, and in 2010, according to census 62% of the population declaring themselves to the Roman Catholic Church. In addition 24% of the population (no religion and unknown) are all other citizens belong to the one of the religions. Together it is therefore up to 76% of the population<sup>39</sup>. However, it is necessary to distinguish between those who have faith in God, in spite of though the does not participate actively in the life of any Christian church in the context of Slovakia and between those who is considered a member of the church, though is not intrinsically convinced the Christian Articles doctrine. On the problem in assessing the statistical information also highlights Krivý social scientist who notes that not everyone who is presented as a member of the church's *religious*. However in a person who receives the message of God and His redemptive by faith action, creates a life philosophy, transforms the scale of values, its moral standards, principles. Consequence of this is the change in life and in action of man<sup>40</sup>. This is a potential of permanent changes that will affect the long-term action.

<sup>36</sup> T. Podolinská, *Boh medzi vojnóvými plotmi...*, *op.cit.*, p.147-175; T. Podolinská, T. Hrustič, *op.cit.*, p. 92-94.

<sup>37</sup> T. Podolinská, T. Hrustič, *op.cit.*, p. 96-98.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 117-118.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.scitanie2011.sk/wp-content/uploads/Tab.-141.pdf> (10 IX 2012).

<sup>40</sup> M. Kováč, M. Jurík, *op.cit.*, p. 134.

Let us mention some examples: The activities of Christian churches in the Roma community in Slovakia are education of Roma leaders organized by the Committee for Lutheran Mission among Roma (The Lutheran Church of the Augsburg Confession), projects of Pastoral Centres in Roma settlements developed under the guidance of the Commission for the Pastoral Care of the Roma in Roman Catholic church, or orphanage managed by the Orthodox Church<sup>41</sup>. Evangelical Free Church operates in Presov in the Tehelňa by organizing Roma clubs and summer camps for youth. The work in the Roma community in the village in eastern Slovakia Hlinné is associated with missionary Pierre van Vuuren, who is working on a long-term project – translation of the Bible in the eastern dialect of the Roma language. Another settlement Zlatník is located in the village Vítkovce and missionary work in the Roma community is associated with Daniel Kušnierik. The pastoral activity was focused on employment because there is massive unemployment, many community members are living on welfare. They can not, however, wisely manage the money they receive. It was necessary to encourage them to send their children to school regularly. They also help them deal with moneylenders. During the pastoral interviews people shall assume responsibility for their own lives. They are also learning how to raise their own children.

Very well define it Červeň Jozef, Roman Catholic priest, who in 2003 accepted a Pastoral Care of Roma Lunik IX. Košice:

In the Roma settlements does not make sense to work for short periods. In our opinion, there are three basic pillars, to which should be at once lean. Children need education, adults need jobs and education for all levels. Address only one area, not complex, it has no meaning<sup>42</sup>.

Coordination of programs of state institutions, churches and church projects, associations, social and missionary programs, it is one of the fundamental priorities of the community work in Slovakia.<sup>43</sup>

Currently, we meet with a comprehensive evaluation activities of civil associations, foundations and other organizations of the third sector, which includes also activities of Christian churches in relation to the Roma population in Slovakia. Some programs support the project of the evaluation (eg Civic Association Hope for Children worked on their own project evaluation „Know Your Rights”)<sup>44</sup>, and consequently churches have gained valuable information that may lead to more effective planned socio-mission activities.

<sup>41</sup> V. Šoltésová, R. G. Robertson, *op.cit.*, p. 64-65.

<sup>42</sup> *Rómovia veria, že Boh im všetko odpustí*, „TV oko. Nepredajná príloha denníka Sme” 2006, nr 17, p. 5-11.

<sup>43</sup> *Čo sa osvedčilo? Výber z rómskych projektov v strednej a východnej Európe*, Bratislava 2003, p. 81-96.

<sup>44</sup> V. Šoltésová, R. G. Robertson, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

## Conclusion

To characterize religious manifestations and survival of Roma is difficult, as the Roma community as a variety of other ethnic, cultural, religious and social communities, does not homogeneous whole. Therefore, we briefly summarize the results of several field surveys, however, were mostly in the regions with superior representation of the Roma population. Often in communities with a residential segregation of the Roma community. Roma in Slovakia is religiosity in church participation and religious practice on the one hand and specific to other differentiated. The phenomenon of conversion in the Roma community brings with it not only new religiosity, but even positive social change. Positive effect on conflict resolution in particular Roma communities documented in Slovakia targeted research SIRONA in 2010.

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