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PROTESTANTIZATION OF THE ROMA FROM SOUTHEASTERN SERBIA*

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ABSTRACT

The *Protestantization of the Roma* refers to the recent process of mass involvement of Serbian Roma in small religious communities of Protestant provenance.

The research was conducted using the deep interview method on the basis of a structured questionnaire with baptized believers of Roma nationality belonging to the Christian Baptist Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Adventist Church, and Evangelical Pentecostal Church in the territory of Southeastern Serbia. The sample included both Roma and non-Roma high clergy of the abovementioned religious communities, as well as religious leaders of major religions of the region (Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community).

This paper describes and discusses the *ways* (missionary activities, conversion, and proselytization) *factors* (socio-economic, seminarian, cultural, and political) of the Protestantization of the Roma, the *results* of the Protestantization of the Roma and the *components* of the new religious identity of the Roma converted to the "third" branch of Christianity. The principal findings of the research show that the process of Protestantization of the Roma in Southeastern Serbia leads to: 1. the emancipation and mitigation of social exclusion, 2. reshaping of the cultural identity and religious matrix, 3. the changes in the position of a minority, and 4. rethinking and adaptation of the *Rromanipe(n)*.

The Serbian society has the opportunity to meet and accept Christian Protestants in their entirety *through the Roma* and the *positive impact* that Protestantism has on their lives. At the same time, the Roma will be enabled to become exactly what all Christian believers strive for: to be the salt and the light to others in their own community.

Key Words: Roma, Protestantism, Protestantization of the Roma, Southeastern Serbia, ways and factors of Protestantization, results of Protestantization of the Roma, Rromanipe(n).

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Introduction: Protestantism and the Roma

The Roma are a multi-religious and multi-confessional people of the Balkans, who have lost the religion of their original homeland on their historical path, by embracing the religion of the majority in their present environments. In Serbia, they are the followers of Christianity and Sunni Islam,¹ but their traditional Christian (Orthodox/Roman Catholic)/Islamic religious-confessional affiliation has been seriously jeopardised by the inflow of Protestantism, along with permanent implications on their identity.²

In the past, reservation and distrust determined the behavior of official religious structures and church dignitaries of other provenances towards the Roma as religious followers. The problem lied in the disinterest of the church institutions and higher clergy who were the role models for the whole congregation. Orthodox churches and Islamic communities had never formed special bodies for missionary work among the Roma people, and the local clergy stayed away from the Roma ghettos in which the Roma practiced their everyday activities. Having been led by the expressed indifference, their brothers and sisters in religion looked at them with suspicion at prayers in churches or mosques or ceremonial processions, and outbursts of religious hostility toward them were also present.³

Having used the disinterest of traditional churches, Protestants in Southeastern Serbia became receptive for the problems of the Roma, and, with a lot of Christian love, included

¹ There are members of the Shia branch of Islam among the Roma of Niš and some other places in the south of Serbia. See details in: Dragoljub B. Đorđević, and Dragan Todorović. *Jemka has Risen (Tekkias, Tarikats and Sheiks of Niš Romas)*. (Niš: Faculty of Philosophy, 2009). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/2.1.1._Djordjevic_i_Todorovic_-_Ustala_Jemka_-_Jemka_has_Risen_c9a22.pdf.

² Dragoljub B. Đorđević. „Preobraćanje Roma na protestantizam (Model, činiooci, tumačenje) [Conversion of the Roma to Protestantism].“ In: *Konverzija i kontekst (Teorijski, metodološki i praktični pristup religijskoj konverziji)*, 227–244. (Novi Sad: Centar za empirijska istraživanja religije, 2009). Available at: https://www.academia.edu/15796985/Konverzija_i_kontekst_teorijski_metodolo%C5%A1ki_i_prakti%C4%8Dni_pristup_religijskoj_konverziji.

³ Драган Тодоровић. *Друштвена удаљеност од Рома (Етничко-религијски оквир) [Societal Detachment from the Roma People (Ethnic-religious Relations)]*. (Ниш и Нови Сад: Филозофски факултет у Нишу и Stylos, 2007). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/2.1.2._Dragan_Todorovic_-_DRUSTVENA_UDALJENOST_OD_ROMA_75805.pdf.

them into the existing group activities and encouraged them to reject inappropriate behavior and build a new identity, based on the Holy Scripture.⁴

The process of Protestantization of the Serbian South occurred in three waves and each of them was characterized by a specific way of missionary activity among the Roma families, besides other things.⁵

1. The first wave started during the *1950s and 1960s*, with the arrival of the first believers from Belgrade and from the northern areas of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, most often in the form of colporteurs and literary evangelists. They were spreading the “joyous news about the second coming of Christ” and sold spiritual literature, which spurred curiosity among the population who welcomed them into their homes, listened to their preaching and bought copies of the Bible and other religious literature. Soon afterwards, they chose to faithfully serve God, quite differently than their ancestors had been doing for centuries back; their homes were becoming places for meetings of small prayer groups, at which worship was conducted and, with the help of Bible classes, the preparations for those interested in baptism were made, which was always accompanied by suspicion of neighbors and the surveillance of Communist Party authorities. Those rare individuals represented a fertile soil onto which the word of Protestantism fell, and their families were the gardens of future religious activities in closer and wider surroundings.

⁴ Presented results are a part of a large-scale social-empirical research conducted on the sample of sixty baptized believers of Roma ethnicity belonging to several Protestant religious communities in the territory of southeast Serbia (Christian Baptist Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Adventist Church and Evangelical Pentecostal Church), fourteen Roma and non-Roma leaders of the above-mentioned religious communities, and six religious leaders of the majority religions (Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community), and within the PhD thesis “The Proteantization of the Roma of Southeastern Serbia”, which the author defended in October 2011 at the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade.

⁵ On the diffusion of Protestant religious communities in Southeastern Serbia in detail in: Драган Тодоровић. “Етнографско-социографски показатељи раширености протестантских верских заједница у југоисточној Србији (са посебним освртом на Роме протестанте) [Sociographic Indicators of the Spreading of Protestant Religious Communities in Southeastern Serbia (with a Special Emphasis on Protestant Roma)].“ *Етнолошко-антрополошке свеске* бр. 19, 20126, 87–111. Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Etnografsko_sociografski_pokazatelji_bb63e.pdf.

The word of God was spread by word of mouth among cousins and friends and at sermons during home gatherings or, yet, through Bible correspondence school, more precisely, by directing those interested individuals to mail correspondence Bible courses.

2. The second wave started *at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s*. The growing number of regular visitors at sermons, most often on Saturdays and Sundays, made religious leaders leave small family homes and bring together individual prayer groups into a mutual location, most often rented, and gradually into newly-formed churches, onto the municipal land or the land of wealthier believers who would change the function of the existing buildings or build new ones on their own properties.

The engagement of the first fully-formed spiritually literate religious body was also evident, and it came from children's, youth and sisterhood sections of religious communities. They confirmed their religious commitment by organizing mass public evangelizations (by renting large hotel or movie halls), handing out religious tracts to citizens in the street and visiting their homes, and they were already known for their charity work. Namely, the aforementioned 1990s represented a period in which the Protestant charity organizations ("Adra," "Love thy Neighbor") actively helped by giving humanitarian help to the most vulnerable classes of domestic and immigrant population, first during the period of hyperinflation and sanctions, and later during the war conflicts in the former Yugoslavian territories.

3. The third wave was connected with the democratic changes in Serbia *at the beginning of the 2000s*, when the conditions were created for more open religious activities of both traditional and approved communities and the so-called small religious communities.

In all major cities, and increasingly in small towns and among village populations, Baptists, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals were largely institutionalizing their work conditions, most often with the help of large, parent communities from abroad.

They were buying buildings as their own properties or were renting locations at which the sermons were being held by the first schooled or locally-produced religious leaders, and individual religious education classes were organized with children and the youth, and they were expanding their activities by organizing cultural-artistic (especially at Christmas and Easter) and sports events, as well as advisory and educative activities.

In their attempt to coordinate their missions with the challenges of the new millennium, many religious communities are becoming more open to the interests of the youngest generations of believers by an active use of modern technological tools for the promotion of the most important religious principles. There are more and more web presentations of local churches through which the information about the schedule and content of religious services become available, and the audio recordings of pastors' sermons, as well as many other pieces of information from religious life.

However, no matter which period or which advantage was taken into consideration, the Biblical truth was best transferred through direct contact. Live conversations and calls from the relatives, neighbors, and friends had the most influence on the new friends of the church to avoid the pressure of tradition and to start walking along the path of God. The experience of the closest ones was always trusted, especially when the halo of holiness did not permit lies and deceit, in particular when they experienced testimonies about the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit in curing serious illnesses and other kinds of misfortunes.

Who were the first Roma people from the south who were touched by the evangelical word of “the third branch” of Christianity?

1. Firstly, the asylum seekers from the critical 1990s and seasonal workers from abroad, most often in the surrounding countries (Italy, Austria, and Germany). While doing their everyday jobs or waiting for documents in collective centers, they often met quiet, but regular “standers” in the streets of the European metropolises who were offering religious literature

to random passers-by. Or they received into their homes a two-party group of smiling people who were talking in a familiar language about God and life after death, the topics which also troubled them away from their homeland and they did not have anyone to share them with. After a longer or shorter absence, they would return to their homes, bringing with them newly-appropriated religious beliefs. Usually, they would join the already-formed home groups or their homes would represent the core of the future religious organization of the religious community they belong to.

2. Then, there were *seasonal workers* across Vojvodina (hoeing corn and potatoes, picking cherries and grapes, planting vines). While doing sharecropping in order to “seek their fortune,” they were surprised by the invitations from strangers to visit their churches, and even more with the kind and almost homely reception by the majority people who, according to their previous experiences, mostly “treated” them with suspicion and scorn, and rather often with cursing and beating.

3. Those who could not go abroad to work or they avoided hard physical labor in the outdoors, turned to trading, a permanent task of harsh survival for the Roma. Thus, the seasonal traders on wholesale markets in the Serbian capital of Belgrade were among the first ones from their poor southern fellow countrymen who had the opportunity to listen to the instructions on the pious behavior in this world for the purpose of securing resurrection in the hereafter. They would save some literature which was given to them, but they also memorized certain words so they could retell them to their closest ones in their hometowns during cold winter days.

4. Finally, there were all those Roma people in big and small cities of Southeastern Serbia who were from the sidelines able to come into contact with well-intentioned people who were not seen with approval by the surrounding Orthodox population. This occurred in two ways: either they *were servants in their houses*, thus becoming a part of the extended

family, or they *saw with their own eyes God's answer to the prayers of the preachers* for curing the reluctant members of their own families. Their later testimonies were the best recommendation for an excellent reception of Protestant teachings among other Roma in their neighborhood.

The Hierarchy of the Ways of Protestantization

The Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Islamic community included the Roma with suspicion into their religious groups, justifying that with their modest theological knowledge and ritual indiscipline, additionally supported fatalism, widespread superstition and magic practice. Researchers reported on the fact that their religious life was very inarticulate and that it was most often the mixture of elements from several religions and pagan cults, being that they are from the diaspora and that they lost their original religion.

It is important to point out that the Roma people, regardless of the religious syncretism, are very religiously tolerant. The fact that our large religious communities do not take care of the Roma people and that they have neglected any pastoral work among them, has caused their unstoppable conversion into Protestantism. Conversion into Protestantism has brought to the Roma people many things that they have been denied in Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and Islam: dignity and respect, concern and care, hope and perspective.

How do we see the process of *evangelization, conversion* and *proselytism* among the Roma?⁶

⁶ On the hierarchy of the way of the Protestantization of the Roma in Southeastern Serbia, in detail see in: Драган Тодорович. „Пути протестантизације ромов у Србији.“ В: *Роми Украјине: из минулога у мајбутње*, 419–427. (Кијев: Институт Украјинској археографије та джерелознанства ім. М. С. Грушевського НАН Украјине, 2008). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Puti_protentantizacii_Romov_v_Serbii_32d6f.pdf; Dragoljub B. Đorđević. „Evangelization, Conversion, Proselytism: Example of Romas' Protestantization.“ In: Dragan Todorović (ed.)

Missionary work – Protestant religious communities which operate today in Serbia view their activities among the Roma as purely missionary work. We agree with this evaluation in those cases when it comes to a small number of the Roma people who have not declared themselves either as Christians or Muslims.

Conversion – The number of Roma individuals who have formally accepted Christianity or Islam is large, but these connections have mostly remained at the level of formal affiliation and insufficient knowledge of religious teachings.

Proselytism – There are some Roma people who belong to the group of classic, church followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church or the Islamic Community, who have full religious awareness and active religious practice. Although they will not admit it publicly, Protestant religious communities care about having such followers.

The results of our research indicate that the engagement of the observed non-traditional religious communities in Southeastern Serbia so far can be described in many cases as *missionary activities*, among the Roma people of undefined religious needs, and then also as *conversion* of a small number of the Roma whose thin connections with their old denomination can only be seen in their funeral rituals and their last names among Muslims, that is, in death rituals and celebrations of Patron Saints' Days among Orthodox Christians. First of all, due to the disinterest of the religious leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community, the most success in spreading the teachings of Jesus Christ was achieved by the Evangelical Christians, followed by Adventists, then Jehovah's Witnesses, and, at the end, Baptists. They all have smaller but stable religious cores, whose rise in the matters of faith is still to be worked on, especially with the youngest generations. Perhaps then, there could be more room for talking about the *proselyte* tendencies, which are mostly absent today.

Evangelization, Conversion, Proselytism, 75–82. (Niš: YSSSR, Komren Sociological Encounters, and Punta, 2004). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/2.2.19._Todorovic_-_Evangelization_Conversion_and_Proselytism_f8651.pdf.

The Factors of the Protestantization of the Roma

Plenty of reasons which are beneficial for the conversion of Roma Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims into Protestants can be systematized in four groups: *socio-economic* (giving charity, education, counselling, medical help, economic development), *theological* (pastor's personality, service in the native language, the existence of purely Roma churches, the essence of religious teachings), *cultural* (the role of song, music and dancing during service, freedom of emotional experience and expression of faith, closeness in personal contact and taking care of the family and children as the characteristic of a traditional cultural pattern of the Roma) and *political* (advocating religious freedoms and the equality of all religious communities, and fighting for the human and political rights of the Roma people).⁷

The theoretical-empirical analysis shows that the hierarchy and interrelations of factors are as follows:

1. The religious humanitarians from Protestant ranks started to meet Serbian citizens two decades ago, while the country was shaken by inflation and war conflicts. Poor homes received neatly packaged gift bags from far away, containing food and clothes and certain

⁷ On socio-economic, cultural, theological and political factors of the Protestantization of the Roma, see in detail in: Dragan Todorović. „Uloga kulturnih faktora u protestantizaciji Roma jugoistočne Srbije [The Role of Cultural Factors in the Protestantization of the Roma in Southeastern Serbia].“ *Kultura* br. 136, 2012a, 376–402. Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Uloga_kulturnih_faktora_u_protestantizaciji_Roma_775b4.pdf; Драган, Тодоровић. „Суштина верског учења као богословски фактор протестантизације Рома југоисточне Србије [The Essence of Religious Teaching as a Theological Factor of the Protestantization of the Roma in Southeastern Serbia].“ *Култура* бр. 141, 2013, 53–72. Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Sustina_verskog_ucenja_kao_bogoslovski_faktor_3cc96.pdf; Драган Тодоровић. „Улога богословских фактора у протестантизацији Рома југоисточне Србије [The Role of Theological Factors in the Protestantization of the Roma in Southeastern Serbia].“ У: Тибор Варади, Драгољуб Б. Ђорђевић и Горан Башић (ур.) *Прилози стратегији унапређења положаја Рома*, 113–136. (Београд: САНУ и Заштитник грађана Републике Србије, 2014а). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Uloga_bogoslovskih_faktora_b44b1.pdf; Драган Тодоровић. „Стање и перспективе политичког активизма међу Ромима пентекосталцима у југоисточној Србији [Status and Prospect of Political Activism among Pentecostal Roma in Southeastern Serbia].“ *Теме* вол. 38, бр. 3, 2014ц, 999–1018. Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/politicki_aktivizam_Roma_822c4.pdf.

words of encouragement, which sometimes literally prolonged the existence for some individuals.

While the majority of the population, equally burdened with great difficulty and poverty, stayed clear from the denounced “sects,” the Roma people were not afraid to enter new church yards and to patiently wait to receive a free package. On the gates of Orthodox monasteries, they were often greeted by reproachful looks intended for beggars and quasi-musicians; but here, together with cardboard boxes, they were greeted with smiles and messages of understanding. It was due to the strange set of circumstances—new faces who thronged in a small space outside the scheduled time of divine services—that the heads of the churches were given a unique opportunity to share a few words of God, along with helping the, until then, “invisible” people.

In fact, as the subjects of the service of charity, the Roma opened an entirely new perspective of the missionary work of Protestant Evangelists. The Christian directive for the expansion of the religious circle overpowered the fear of public reaction; therefore, among other things, the Roma people were given brochures about Jesus Christ which contained the time and place of Sunday gatherings. Having looked up to their neighbors and friends, more than they truly understood the essence of the provided propaganda, the Roma were becoming frequent visitors, and also during the distribution of Christmas and Easter gifts for children, and some of them were attending religious education classes.

In this way, the second great wave of the Protestant influence in Serbia grew intensively. Carried away by the initial success, preachers multiplied their appearances in town quarters, but also in suburban and rural areas with the Roma population. Accelerated Bible courses were organized, accompanied by collective baptisms. This kind of escape from tough times suited the Roma people well: with support, they could freely express their own religiosity.

After the stabilization of the situation in the country, the primary reasons for foreign centers to conduct charity work in vulnerable areas started to emerge. There were fewer and fewer donations, and church leaders could gradually sum up the actual effects of their missionary work among the new converts. Those who supported their faith only because of presents, soon stopped coming to the gatherings. A significant number of them still wanted to devotedly follow the strict orders of the faith, primarily those concerned with taking proper food and good health habits, especially among Adventists and Jehovah's witnesses. Poverty kept them away from that: oil was always more expensive than fat, it was hard to stay away from caloric food during their seasonal jobs, and the return to vices (such as alcohol, cigarettes) was easily encouraged by everyday life's misfortunes. Those remaining were a few followers of Christ, who were ready to persist in the rightful thinking and behavior. The true damage as opposed to the apparent benefits from the excessive charitable actions among the Roma was realized: the multitude of the so-called *false believers* and *a handful of accusations* for converting and proselytism coming from Orthodox Christians and Muslims.

The conducted interviews have shown that the giving of any kind are now rare in all communities; even when there are some, they are intended for the needs of the long-term members. It has been unwillingly *confirmed* that at some point, there was an attempt to support biblical truths with charity work, but this has not proven to be a successful recipe for missionary work.

A wrong idea about the economic power of the Protestant churches in Serbia has been established. There is a story that they take excellent care of their baptized members, that they provide them with secure job positions and free schooling for their offspring, frequent trips abroad, and that they use these and other privileges to lure new members in the surrounding area. The truth is, however, that *the insufficient financial support for the fieldwork* is the main problem with which the Protestant religious activists are faced in Southeastern Serbia.

Central offices of Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptists in Niš (the base of Pentecostalism is in Leskovac), which are dependent on Belgrade, do not manage to respond to all the requests of the growing Roma followers. The locations at which the services are held for newly-formed prayer groups and religious communities in smaller towns are equipped by replaced, old benches and chairs from Niš; small amounts of money collected during the service or by collecting the tithe does not even pay for the rent fees and monthly events of regular activities.

The effect of pre-school education in kindergartens and day care is known, but their existence is still at the level of imagination for the Roma children. In the best case, voluntary classes of religious education for children are more or less a compensation for the preparation of the youngest ones for school. Paid expenses for the semester at a Protestant Theological Faculty are provided only for a few lucky students, in the form of granted scholarships from international foundations or the support of wealthier followers. Parents themselves have the obligation to participate, at least minimally, and thereby confirm in practice that they are willing to make self-sacrifice in exchange for their children's better and more successful future. Second language courses or programs for acquiring computer skills are in the form of tutoring by more educated followers during their free time. Only a few children from the community can expect to go to a summer or winter camp during the year, and often they have to provide certain payments.

Instead of modern rehabilitation centers for withdrawing from drugs or shelters for victims of domestic violence, small religious communities can, at the best, provide *a kind word* of understanding and strengthen those who have lost faith by telling them *quotes from the Bible*. Like lighthouses on the open sea, the role-model believers shine in their villages or town quarters or testify with their own example about the correct choice of religion. The intense interpersonal relations in the group are used for the needs of old and weak members:

transportation to the church or a health facility, help with cleaning their households, and reading religious literature together. In the most difficult situations, funds are provided for the necessary medication or medical equipment, most often through churches from larger cities.

Among the successful entrepreneurs from the private sector, who are familiar with the competitive conditions of the market, there are no baptized believers who can include, occasionally or permanently, a section of the most agile members, who are skilled in certain trades, into their employment. Without the status of a legal entity in the legislative and tax system of Serbia, small religious communities are far from being able to cooperate with local authorities, non-government organizations or foreign donators in order to provide help for starting a private business of a member. Good intentions are limited to *short-term loans* for completing started work, which are then returned, as a rule, to common funds or as a piece of furniture for the households of young couples who are believers.

2. In the interviews that we have conducted with them, the Protestant religious leaders have insisted on the theological reasons of conversion: the Roma are primarily brought in front of the church door by *the hunger for the satisfaction of growing, but unrealized spiritual needs*. Within the community of fellow believers, they achieve their spiritual harmony and peace and they devote themselves to the study of God's words. The Roma people are constant "seekers" when religion is in question, but, most often, they have not been able to realize their centuries-old need to take their burden, troubles, but also desires, and stand before God equally to other people of the Orthodox Christian and Islamic faiths. Instead of open arms, they have been greeted with suspicious looks and negative words by priests and the majority of followers, limited access only to the border lines of church properties and separate burial places. When it comes to religious practices, they were left with ceremonial and holiday rituals, primarily those related to the cycle of birth and death, and religious awareness has been formed by a mixture of superstition, elements of pagan cults, and memories from

forgotten homeland. It was not until the conversion into the “third branch” of Christianity that the Roma people were given the long-awaited *respect* and *attention* in church pews and equality before God.

It was not easy for missionaries during their first encounters with the Roma individuals as believers. On the one hand, they were satisfied because they were given the opportunity to give sermons to the new visitors who embraced Christ eagerly and with a pure heart, while on the other hand, they encountered an unexpected situation. An additional dose of sensibility was required in order to properly introduce them to the most significant biblical truths and to channel the correct way of practicing religious duties among half-literate or illiterate older generations. In receptive language, the brave converts were supposed to be given the explanation that there were a lot more steps in reaching God’s love besides a once-a-week visit to the church in clean clothes.

However, the ignorant and uneducated Roma people recognized the confirmation of the acts of the Holy Spirit in specific testimonies and practical behavior of the closest “God’s people.” They were listening to Bible morality, but they also measured the effectiveness of prayers for health of the Roma in need, both physical and spiritual. Those who were healed from the most serious illnesses and deficiencies undoubtedly confirmed the existence of God’s answers to the faithful Roma people. Also, the homes which, until a few days ago, were filled with harsh words and curses by quarrelsome family members, were now filled with peace and harmony. The first neighbors came to each other for advice on how to behave in a specific situation and to solve accumulated disagreements.

During the diffusion of the Evangelical word among the Roma, pastors were faced with particular problems: *the lack of translated literature* and *unequipped teachers of religious education*. The unsolved question of *the standardization of the Romani language* posed itself as an insurmountable obstacle: Gurbeti, Arlije and others did not use the same

alphabet and they often had different pronunciation for everyday words. Since the establishment of new communities in smaller towns, many times with a purely Roma population, it turned out that a more important question was establishing local church officials. The love for God deep in one's heart, which was up to that point expressed by regular visits to church gatherings, was supposed by enlarging religious awareness to be supported by "local people," who were willing to humbly respond to the needs of believers at any moment and to prevent their stumbling caused by disappointments due to negative social reactions. Such individuals would oversee the rise of new believers, and with a lot of kindness, they gave them strength to stay on the path of God and warmed up their lost hope before the challenges of uncertain existence. There was still a constant lack of *leaders from the Roma groups*, who were able to introduce their fellow people to the secrets of the Holy Scripture in their native language, but also to employ their character, conduct, and integrity of faith in order to help them stay free from vices and antisocial forms of behavior, which were otherwise condemned in the religious codices of Protestants.

3. With the absence of the written language and ethnic territory, musicality was a centuries-old characteristic of the Roma national and cultural identity. With their playful notes and singing voices, they were only welcome among the "Gadjos," without doubt and fear behind those invitations.

Musical passages are integral elements of the divine service of Protestants; they are used for the initial blessing of the present believers and for bringing them into the dignity of the living word of God that needs to be listened to. Melody is less important than the interpretations of the Holy Scripture. With Jehovah's witnesses, recorded tones are prevalent, whereby Adventist churches have pianos and organs. Sensibility is restrained by strict rationality in adopting numerous biblical rules about life in holiness. *Church buildings do not attract people with cheerful sounds, but with theological doctrine*—the clergy of these

churches repeat unanimously; in hundreds of different languages, millions of believers read the same psalms with heart, but not euphorically.

However, with Baptists, especially with Pentecostals in purely Roma churches, Christian music consisting of spiritual texts and rhythms, which are close to the Roma mentality, is an irreplaceable aroma of a specific religious experience. God's instructions transformed into harmonious lyrics are supported by an orchestra with many members playing percussions, guitars, accordions and keyboards. "High-amperage" instrumentals, amplified by loudspeakers, accumulate vocal demands and channel them towards the almighty authority. The divine services of the Roma are different from the Serbian ones: no one suppresses anyone in their expressing, nor is there the most accurate proscribed way of receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. God's word is listened to, but, above all, it is chanted: different voices zealously sing a unique prayer while celebrating their unity with God.

4. "The political field of the Roma" in Serbia is an emerging construct. After many centuries of being excluded from the process of making important decisions and participating in the public matters, the Roma are gradually becoming "socially visible," partly due to a more successful political representation. The potential created by an active participation in the initialization of the international Roma emancipation at the beginning of the 1970s⁸ was not transferred to the domestic framework: the engagement usually ended in establishing many Roma associations dedicated to cultural creativity and sports activities. The solution to the problem of trust between the majority and minority groups was systematically absent: life in ghetto neighborhoods, outbursts of racism, police repression, inaccessible legislation, discrimination at the workplace, housing, and education.

⁸ The first World Romani Congress was held in London in 1971, and the first elected president was Slobodan Berberski, a prominent writer from Zrenjanin. At the third Congress in Göttingen (Germany) in May of 1981, Sait Balić, an engineer from Niš, who was at the time the president of the Union of Roma Associations in Serbia, was elected President. At the fourth Congress in Warsaw (Poland), 1990, Rajko Đurić was elected president.

The post-socialist transition undermined the previous achievements and additionally tightened the situation. The hate speech and the rhetoric of right-wing ideologies became stronger, and the social tension and traditional prejudices between the dominant population and the poor ethnic group were being instigated, instead of initiating thorough institutional steps for improving the living conditions of the Roma citizens.

Having stepped onto the Serbian political scene through their representatives at the beginning of the new millennium, the Roma tried to respond to the contemporary challenges of social isolation of one of the largest national minorities in the state.⁹ Due to the lack of a historical experience of political organization, but also a concrete support by the official authorities, the desired unity of all the Roma on the political scene was not obtained. That is why, the political community of the Roma in Serbia is still characterized by the unfinished institutionalization. What is particularly alarming is the lack of the Roma political participation on local and regional levels, that is, non-participation in the local elections, and thereby in the legislative and executive organs, professional and advisory bodies in charge of the improvement of the position of the Roma people, civil activism for the protection of the human rights, education and communication systems, public opinion institutions, etc. The various adopted strategies and recommendations, under the pressure of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Council, do not offer concrete solutions for multiplied problems on the micro level, and even less, the means for their realization.

The slow overcoming of obstacles in the larger part of the political promotion of the Roma and internal misfortunes (undeveloped political culture, the absence of “strong” leaders

⁹ At the parliamentary elections in Serbia, in January 2007, as minority parties, the Roma Union of Serbia – Dr Rajko Đurić and the Roma Party – Srđan Šajn had each won one seat in the Parliament. Neither party secured the seat in the new convening of the Serbian Assembly. The participation of Roma representatives is insignificant in other controlling and opposition parties, actors of parliamentary and non-parliamentary disputes in the Serbian political arena. (Even when it is present, it is in the function of securing electoral votes of the Roma.)

and parties, lethargy, a low level of education, unavoidable struggle for everyday existence), makes individuals spread the story that it is difficult to unite poor, scattered, and unpopular Roma minority, because they do not experience at all their ethnic identity in the political context. This prevents the increase in awareness of the political public in the application of the political rights of minorities and automatically disproves the arguments of those well-intentioned to strengthen aspirations and capacities of the Roma, as individuals and as a community, to improve opportunities in education, health, housing, employment, and the quality of life in general.

Political activity is, however, one of the most important means for the improvement of the position of the Roma. With the rise of political activism, they do not intend to conquer new territories and suppress other people, but they only wish to abandon the existing outsider positions and rise above the general social poverty and discrimination.

What are the perspectives on the inclusion of Protestant religious organizations into the abovementioned “Roma political field”? The reformer from Wittenberg, who defined church as an invisible/visible community based on faith, hope and love, was the one who separated the internal Protestant religion from social and political currents, that is, religious from the secular government. Many things have changed since that period, “the third branch” of Christianity has experienced many internal divisions. Especially among the Evangelicals, and Pentecostals, the prevalent opinion has been that the evangelization and the social-political engagement are not mutually exclusive, but they are a part of overall Christian duties, such as the obedience to Jesus Christ, as well as love for the neighbor. Moreover, the religion we practice transforms us to fulfil personal and social responsibility. *Faith without actions is dead*—it is the attitude which inspires today many church leaders to, besides playing the role of the messenger of the joyous word, bravely lead the people from Latin America, Asia and Africa in the political fight for the achievement of a series of their rights.

In the ongoing turmoil of articulating and representing political interests of the Roma, and strengthening inner capacities in the form of legitimizing the first echelon of Roma leaders, an additional process could take place gradually: *the cooperation between city and church representatives on a local level*. Because, at least partly, the past failures of the Roma political organization lie in the non-functional material, technical, personnel and organizational structures (some particularly emphasize the harmfulness of the traditionalist concept of the irreplaceable “Roma leader” in all areas of life, and also in the sphere of politics). Dissatisfied with the realization of the given emancipation process in the political sphere, certain Roma people have found engagement in the civil society, some of them have chosen retreat and conformism, and the others have turned to the (auto)destructive rebellion (criminal, drug and human trafficking, and other deviant forms of behavior).

These are all challenges with which the Roma Protestant leaders are faced with in their missionary goals among the Roma people in Southeastern Serbia. For example, after the initial mutual misunderstandings and confrontations, the Roma Evangelical pastors have become the synonym for wanted partners of municipal authorities in the solution of the piled up problems of the Roma. Because they provide a strong cooperation with the “non-Roma” on the basis of the common interest: reducing the crime rate, improving family relations, a new relation towards the spheres of work and production, etc. However, by overseeing and serving among the faithful, the ordained leaders advocate universal religious values, which correspond to the secular: justice, freedom, truth, the rule of law, and fight against the growing discrimination. In this way, religious communities use their activism to accomplish two goals: they improve the desired public political cohesion and the credibility of the Roma representatives and secure permanent support of a wider society. *Time will show whether, in the future, the religious leaders will also take over some other functions of raising awareness*

among the Roma and therefore, expand the scope of their activities according to which the new believers would choose them on the religious market. So far, this has not been the case.

A more massive response of the older Roma population to the calls of minor religious communities during the last two decades in the Southeastern Serbia has been primarily motivated by their **charitable** activity (*the attention* which was dedicated to their *material* needs). Then, there were **theological** reasons (*answers* to said prayers/healings, recoveries, miracles/ and spreading the stories about these among the closest acquaintances, with the gradual introduction to the significance of the Holy Scripture). In the third place, there were **cultural** reasons (*cordiality* and *openness* in contact which was expressed by the Serbian believers and the traditional affection of the Roma towards the *musical content*, the integral elements of the Protestant services). **Political** reasons, in the form of political articulation of demands for universal integration which is now given by the Pentecostalism in the Latin-American or African countries, are still *not recognized* as important among most of the Roma in the areas of Southeastern Serbia.

Newer generations of converts, however, emphasize **theological** and **cultural** reasons, whereby **socio-economic** reasons become less important, and **political** reasons are still at the end of the list of motives for the Roma when they decide to join small religious communities.

The Effects of the Protestantization of the Roma

The diffusion of Protestant teachings among the Roma in Southeastern Serbia, which was more intensive two decades ago, started the process of *transformation of their collective identity*. Uniting with the “God’s chosen nation,” who will earn salvation by believing in

Jesus Christ, thoroughly reconstructed their everyday view of the world and understanding of the future. In this way, the *Rromanipe(n)*—“the Bible of the Roma people”—has been redesigned and adapted to modern times. The bases of the “new Roma community,”¹⁰ immersed into the Reformation heritage, are shaped.

There are evident improvements which occur in Protestant homes of the Roma under the influence of religious teachings:¹¹

1. family relations have changed radically, in the context of the mutual respect among family members and keeping to the agreement,
2. politeness accompanies everyday contacts with the non-Evangelized relatives and non-Roma neighbors,
3. quitting vices: swearing, cursing and gossiping, lying and deceiving, smoking, coffee and drinking, gambling, fighting, stealing and prostitution, all the way to drug abuse, if it has ever been present among the Roma,
4. the Roma town quarters (*mahala*) are no longer a synonym for disorder, offences, clashes, and police presence,
5. marriages among the too young and common-law marriages are prevented,

¹⁰ Магдалена Славкова. *Циганите евангелисти в България*. (София: Парадигма, 2007), 256.

¹¹ On the changes of the collective identity of the Roma converted to Protestantism, in detail see in: Dragan Todorović. „Roma and Conversion to Protestantism: An Example of Southeast Serbia.“ In: Martina Topić and Srdjan Sremac (ed.) *Europe as a Multiple Modernity: Multiplicity of Religious Identities and Belonging*, 228–251. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014b). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Roma_Conversion_91914.pdf; Драган Тодоровић. *Роми на трећи начин (Утицај протестантизма на свакидашњу културу Рома) [Third-Way Roma]*. (Ниш и Нови Сад: ЈУНИР и Прометеј, 2015). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/Dragan_Todorovic_-_ROMI_NA_TRECI_NACIN1_f868c.pdf; Dragan Todorović. „Rromanipe in Transition: Protestantization of Roma“. *Facta Universitatis: series Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History* Vol. 15, No. 1, 2016, 39–52. Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/1971-14266-1-PB_18a6c.pdf; Драган Тодоровић и Драгољуб Б. Ђорђевић. „Утемељење новог верског идентитета код Рома протестаната у југоисточној Србији [The Establishment of a New Religious Identity in the Protestant Roma in Southeastern Serbia].“ У: Драгољуб Б. Ђорђевић и Драган Тодоровић (прир.) *500 година протестантске реформације*, 171–204. (Ниш: Југословенско удружење за научно истраживање религије и Универзитет у Нишу – Машински факултет, 2017). Available at: https://www.npao.ni.ac.rs/files/584/14_Todorovic_i_Djordjevic_89f28.pdf; Драган Тодоровић. „Протестантизација Рома: 'бити' и/или 'имати' [Protestantization of Roma: 'To Be' and/or 'To Have'].“ У: Тибор Варади (ур.) *Роми Србије у 21. веку*. (Београд: САНУ, Одељење друштвених наука, Одбор за проучавање живота и обичаја Рома, 2018).

6. contracting marriages, buying or taking away the bride are condemned, as well as adultery and divorce,

7. children are encouraged to finish elementary schools and to attend high schools,

8. literacy and rhetorical capabilities of believers have been increased,

9. hygiene habits have been improved and healthy life styles have been developed,

10. “résumés on the job market” have been acquired: effort and hard work are propagated for each honest and pious job, together with frugality and modesty in demands.

Under the influence of the newly-adopted religious view of the world, the essence of the ethnic and cultural self-importance of the members of the Roma—*Rromanipe(n)*—will be based in the new age on the following “distinctive emblems”:

1. sedentary, contrary to the nomadic lifestyle,

2. nurturing the Romani language—more as an expression of respect and confirmation of tradition, and less in order to distance themselves from the non-Roma,

3. ethnic exceptionalism stagnates with the introduction to God (identifying with a united and homogenous ethnic group is replaced by the identification with religious affiliation),

4. a new religious boundary has been established between the converts and non-converts—the previous universal differentiation “Us, Roma” and “Them, Gadjos” has been replaced by the division into “Us Believers (the Roma and non-Roma of the Protestant faith)” and “Them, Non-Believers (the Roma and non-Roma outside Protestantism)”;

5. the concept of ceremonial purity has been redefined (*magerdo* or *mahrimo*), that is, Roma “purity” and non-Roma “non-purity” (cooperation with “brothers and sisters in Christ” breaks the barriers created by traditional labelling of surrounding peoples as “impure”);

6. “blood purity” gives place to “purity in Christ”: the selection of a partner exclusively on an endogamous basis has been replaced by a selection on a confessional basis, with the expansion of the ethnic color;

7. the traditional “to be, but not to have” changes into “to have, but not to be”—an uncertain existence based on the traditional ways of survival (exploitation of marginal resources—collecting secondary raw materials) has been replaced by the “theology of prosperity”: inclusion into the “Gadjo” world of earning, material wealth and private ownership of properties;

8. the group authority and strictly determined attitude towards the elder has been transferred to the personality of the pastor: with mediation of the divine word, the religious leader is also in charge of resolving family disputes and making contact with the competent local authorities;

9. traditional norms and customary justice (“the Roma judgment”) has been replaced by obeying divine laws and the secular/worldly legal system;

10. the holidays from the religious cycle of Orthodox Christians and Muslims (celebration of ‘slava’, inviting priests and khwajas into their own homes, visiting relatives and friends during the religious procession, adherence during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, circumcision of children, praying five times a day); Baptists and Pentecostals keep the sanctity of birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ within a close family circle and communion with brothers and sisters in the church building;

11. the celebration of quasi-religious, unique holidays for all the Roma in the world (Djurdjevdan/Ederlezi, Vasilica, Bibija) has been renounced in order to respect new religious and social discipline;

12. the wearing of the “new religious suit” also implies the separation from *rituals* (traditional medicine, fortune-telling, incantation and sorcery, offering animal sacrifice,

visiting cult places) and *beliefs* from the pagan cycle (stories about fairies, witches, vampires and other supernatural beings, visions).

What kind of reactions did the converted Protestant Roma encounter among their fellow countrymen, but also among the majority Serbian Orthodox Christian population?

Having introduced the Protestant principles into the Roma quarters (*mahalas*) and having broken many years of patterns of social and cultural communication, the “third type of Christians” could not at first count on the support of fellow countrymen for their ideas, tendencies, and procedures. The need to “dress” their own religiousness into different spiritual clothes and perform communion with brothers and sisters of Serbian nationality was not seen as a new chapter of Roma emancipation and integration into the surrounding majority.

It was the hardest for the lonely “newly-baptized” individuals in their everyday relations with their family members, numerous relatives and closest neighbors, traditional Orthodox Christians or Muslims. They stood in front of an eternal imperative: bear the pressure and not lose faith, but also talk about religious topics and make life in the church closer to non-believers. Conflict situations would arise between spouses or between spouses and their parents: some were still in established cultural patterns, the others were ready to break with customs and tradition. Women hiding from their husbands, and children in fear of their parents’ punishment, attended religious services, while trying to follow the instructions from the sermon.

However, the changes within the family circle and on the economic plan turned the attention to beneficial effects of the Protestantization of the Roma households. In the end,

they were accepted by those who met them well, while non-acceptance remained among those who do not know them.

The majority of the public was emphasizing at first the tensions and differences: the decent Pentecostal groups were greeted with provocations and insults on their way to their Sunday services, or there were angry remarks through the windows of the prayer homes because of the choral singing and loud music. Gradually, the good neighborly relations were improved and the basis for the dialogue was formed: there was a positive view of the men who did not get drunk and who respected their wives and children, as well as of neat, nicely dressed and homely wives with well-behaved children. The Roma “favelas” were not only observed from the safe distance, but strengthened by faith, the men and women from these favelas started to come and be prepared for the inclusion into the functioning of the prevalent social patterns.

However, it is still early to make evaluations about the contribution of the “third branch of Christianity” to the desirable integration of the Roma into the Serbian society. It will only occur in the second stage of Protestantization, relying on the fruits of emancipation and social inclusion.

For the very end of this paper, I will make the following statement: through the Roma and the positive influences which Protestantism gives to their lives, the society in Serbia has the opportunity to meet and fully accept Protestant Christians. At the same time, the Roma, members of the “third branch of Christianity,” will be given the opportunity to become that to which all believing Christians aspire: to be the salt and the light for others in their community.

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