Separated Peoples: The Roma as Prophetic Pilgrims in Eastern Europe

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Since the Middle Ages, migrating groups of people, one of the largest groupings of which are now most commonly called Romani, have elicited various responses from their host communities in Europe, ranging from being honored musicians and craftsmen to facing forced assimilation, banishment, slavery, or death. Throughout the centuries, elements of each host culture, language, and religion became tightly interwoven into their own culture, with each Roma village or group of villages differing in terms of religious expression, dialect and language, and cultural practices. Differences from village to village prevent a homogenous conceptualization of Roma culture, yet commonalities of culture and language still remain. One of the primary markers of shared identity is an awareness of separation from non-Romanies (the gadže)—an awareness cultivated by the Romanies’ unique cultural and linguistic framework and fostered by centuries of prejudice.

In a recent European Union document entitled “Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020,” the EU estimates there to be 10–12 million Roma in Europe, making them Europe’s largest ethnic minority. Twelve Eastern European governments declared 2005–2015 to be the “Decade of Roma Inclusion.” However, few tangible gains have become evident at the local level. The Roma remain largely marginalized in terms of economic status, education, and political clout.

Today in Croatia and Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches have little interaction with nearby Roma villages. This sense of separation is reflected in the recent words of Aleksandar Subotin, a Roma pastor: “Nobody wants to accept the Roma, not the traditional [Serbian Orthodox] church, not the Protestant church ... so now is the time we can make our own church for the Roma.” This religious and social exclusion may be one factor contributing to the growing movement of God among the Roma over the last decades. Roma are coming to Jesus through dreams, visions, and miraculous healings. Their spiritual worldview, their acute physical needs, and their identity pockmarked by centuries of discrimination have allowed many, at least initially, to “come easily to Jesus,” the God who accepts them as they are.

On the surface, it appears that God’s mission in eastern Europe takes place in two separate spheres: the Roma and the rest. And yet, what if God’s activity in the margins of society could be dynamically linked with the center of society? Could a Roma village being transformed under the power of the Gospel have any impact on the historic separation between the majority culture and the Roma? If, as many have said, God’s self-revelation often manifests itself in the margins, then God’s activity among the Roma may not be just for the Roma but may also have the potential to bless the dominant culture and become the vehicle of healing and peace between the two. In order to provide a context for this discussion, I (1) summarize historical themes related to this separation and present the contemporary situation, (2) reflect on the relevant research from five Roma villages in Croatia and Serbia, and, finally, (3) offer four missiological implications.

Historical Themes and Contemporary Issues

Roma history is complex, unevenly patterned with discrimination, fear, idealization, and a certain mystique—all of which makes it difficult to trace and understand the virulence of anti-Roma sentiment today. As Roma scholar Ian Hancock notes, “We are, after all, a people who have never started a war, who have never tried to take over a foreign government. . . . In fact, if anything typifies us as a people, it is our desire to keep to ourselves.”

Idealized nomad or thieving beggar: two polarizing images of the “other.” European attitudes toward these traveling groups of people were not always hostile. Although scholars note the eleventh century as the earliest possible Roma reference in the western Byzantine Empire, the twelfth-century documents a more substantial presence, and by the fourteenth century, the Roma were widely established on the Balkan Peninsula. The religio-cultural landscape of the Middle Ages allowed care for wandering pilgrims to be viewed as a “privileged duty.” Their craftsmanship and musical abilities were often a recognized asset and sometimes even a coveted ability in the royal courts throughout a number of centuries. Roma groups participated in the Serbian uprisings against the Turks in the early nineteenth century and in the Bosnian peasant revolt against the Turks in 1875, and they fought with the Serbians in World War I.

Nonetheless, historical accounts also emphasize their otherness. Many accounts describe the Romas’ physical appearance as “black like Tatars” and mention their adornment of silver earrings and clothes like blankets, features that immediately pointed to their separateness. In fifteenth-century Switzerland a historian described the Gypsies as “outlandish and very dark people; they had their dukes and counts, and said they come from Little Egypt.”

David Crowe speculates that the alluring mystique of the traveling groups in the Middle Ages worked in their disfavor when the Turkish conquests increased fear of dark-skinned outsiders. Although they contributed unique aspects of craftsmanship to society, the Roma were kept at a distance “through the creation of an array of stereotypical myths . . . that became an integral part of the social fabric.” According to Crowe, their nomadism was not just a reaction to the prejudice they encountered but was also part and parcel of their unique cultural and economic values, which few outsiders attempted to, or were allowed to, understand.

Hancock notes that “antigypsyism” has taken many forms throughout the centuries. Institutionalized measures aimed at controlling or eradicating Roma have ranged from forced assimilation, economic penalties, and kidnapping children to “civilize them,” to torture and death. Slavery began in the fourteenth century in an area that partly overlaps present-day Romania and

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was not abolished until the mid–nineteenth century. Afterward, little was done to help the former slaves become reoriented into society. The most organized form of Roma persecution took place during the Holocaust, referred to in Romani as Baro Porrajmos, “the great devouring.” Estimates of Roma deaths range from 200,000 to 1.5 million.¹⁰

The church has often been complicit in perpetuating hostility and suspicion toward the Roma. Throughout history the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches have demonstrated scant interest in inviting Roma into their midst, seeing “little contradiction in both keeping them at a distance and condemning them as irreligious.”¹¹ In Christian folklore, Romanies were accused of “forging the nails with which Christ was crucified”; their fundamental sin was seen as their refusal to offer shelter to the Holy Family when it fled to Egypt.¹² The spirituality of the Roma, often involving spirits, magic, palmistry, and fortunetelling, was abhorred by the church.¹³

Not until the nineteenth century was there any evident interest in Roma souls. In 1952 a religious revival beginning in France spread Pentecostalism among Roma in Europe. Roma missionaries were instrumental in spreading this revival, first to western Europe and then to eastern Europe by the 1970s. The Gypsy Evangelical Church (started in France in the 1950s) baptized over 70,000 individuals in its first three decades of existence. Fraser characterizes its success as a result of the special identity and social solidarity it created for people. In addition, he notes that it put radical claims on an individual’s lifestyle, such as abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, gambling, cheating, and theft, while promoting literacy and education.¹⁴

Contemporary issues. Today, there are more active Romani organizations working on behalf of their people than ever before. The decade of Roma inclusion and the EU framework for Roma integration illustrates a significant international commitment to
"socially include" the Roma. In response to centuries of trying to "solve the Roma problem" without consulting the Roma, the vision leans heavily on Roma participation to bring about

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the decade’s goals with the catchphrase: “Nothing about us without us.”

Despite such aims, it is difficult to see any improvement at a local level in the countless Roma villages scattered throughout former Yugoslavia. In fact, in eastern Europe some problems have grown worse since the fall of Communism, under which the Roma had easier access to housing, health care, and jobs. The wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s displaced peoples of all ethnic backgrounds, but the Roma, often without proper documents, were in a particularly vulnerable position. The growing economic crisis of the last few years has begun to deepen anti-Roma sentiment again, resulting in violent attacks, forced eviction and relocation, and political and economic scapegoating.

Discriminatory practices continue to be manifest at the local level through segregated schools, unequal health care, and segregated neighborhoods and villages, which are substandard in terms of sanitation, roads, running water, and electricity.

While presenting his March 2012 final report, Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe’s Commission for Human Rights, called for a "Truth Commission in Europe" to address the atrocities committed against the Roma people. Significantly,
he identified the root problem today as the “attitudes among
the majority population.”18 One young Roma man in southern
Serbia wrote that he felt like a “second-class citizen, a perfected
animal, but not quite a human being.”19 Such layered and com-
plex issues within multiple spheres of human existence continue
to maintain and even deepen the separation between the Roma
and majority cultures.

Research in Croatia and Serbia

Preliminary research, ongoing since June 2011, was conducted
primarily through participant-observation of churches and vil-
lage life and informal and semi-structured interviews with pastors
and Roma Christians.20 Although the research primarily focuses
on one village in Croatia and four in Serbia, it is also draws on
information from other villages in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and
Bulgaria. Darda, a Croatian village, has around 1,000 Roma and
one baptized Christian couple. The four Serbias villages are as
follows:

Despotovo: 70 Roma families; the church has 25 baptized
members out of the 35 that attend.
Kucura: 282 Roma families; the church has 50 baptized
members.
Apatin: 4,500 Roma; the church has 50 baptized members
out of the 60+ that attend.
Leskovac: 8,000–10,000 Roma; two churches have a com-
bined total of around 1,000 baptized.

Beginnings. The interviewees most often talked about coming
to Jesus as a result of a vision, dream, healing, or healing testimony.

Young churches. The spiritual openness in the villages does not
immediately translate into a steady pace of discipleship and
transformation. In Leskovac, Pastor Šerif Bakić notes: “It is easy
to work with Roma because they are so quick to receive Christ . . .
but then sometimes they also quickly go.” In Kucura, Subotin
estimates that out of the fifty baptized, only ten exhibit any active
change and intentional growth. In Apatin, Zvezdan Bakić esti-
mates that only around thirty of the sixty who regularly attend
are active in their faith.
The reasons for this slow growth are complex, but a few
prominent themes emerged from the interviews. In villages such
as Darda and Kucura, adult illiteracy is extremely high, and tools
such as audio Scripture and videos have had no visible results.
Consulting “magic men” continues to be an ongoing problem
when the people become sick. Zvezdan Bakić claimed that the
people of his village have a “spirit of witchcraft” and are visited
by the occasional “false prophet,” so church leaders must care-
fully control and monitor people’s visions, since not all of them
are from God.
There are also vast cultural barriers inhibiting non-Roma
who minister in the villages. Many Croatians and Serbians know
very little about Roma culture and language, not realizing the
extent of its variance from their own. There is little recognition
of the need for cultural study, which could lead to a more con-
textualized mission approach from non-Roma to Roma.
Socioeconomic factors also contribute, for normally the
Roma focus the majority of their time and energy on day-to-day
economic survival, health concerns, and family needs. Finally, the
deep areas of brokenness in villages—pastors highlight fractured
relationships between neighbors, violence, alcoholism, sexual
and physical abuse, theft, and witchcraft—require patience and
perseverance to overcome.
Church as advocate and mediator. In many Roma villages, Roma
themselves are unaware of their rights or how to access those
rights and the opportunities that are open to them. Since political
authorities have done little to fulfill promises, the Roma pastors
understand that their role extends into many spheres of life, rang-
ing from urging young people to wait until eighteen for marriage
and children, to helping their people obtain proper documents.
Miodrag-Miša Bakić, one of Leskovac’s rising generation of young
leaders, wrote that he believes the church and a handful of other “spiritual authorities” are the only institutions that can help his people on a global level—in fact, he believes that the church has been given divine authority for this purpose. Subotin noted that he is not just a pastor but also “lawyer, advocate, nurse….[God] gave me these people and I must serve them, work with them, encourage them, help them…not only to preach the Gospel, but to…help them have normal lives.”

Pastors also urge parents to keep their children in school and advocate for equal, nonsegregated education. Before the existence of the church in Kucura, only half of the children attended school; now, all the families in the church send their children to school. Before the revival in Leskovac, around five youth per year would finish high school. Now, pastors estimate that around 40 percent finish high school, most of whom are in the church. Miodrag-Miša Bakić points to education as a key factor if his people are to prosper. His vision is that the church must help equip the Roma to represent their people in “every area of life in our country.”

Changing attitudes. The church’s role as an advocate in Roma communities has improved the relationship between the Roma and the local authorities. In addition, in Apatin, Kucura, and Leskovac, a marked decrease in domestic violence, alcoholism, stealing, prison sentences, witchcraft, and fights between households has been noticed by the outside community. Saitović noted, “Lately the [Serbian] police have been bragging that they don’t have any problems with their Romanies. Serbs cause them bigger problems now.”

In addition to changing attitudes from the authorities in a given town, a few non-Romanies who have been visiting villages have noted ways in which Roma ministry has expanded their own perception of God and mission. One Croatian man in conversation with the author shared that his blossoming relationships with Roma were “destroying” his prior theological views, forcing him to wrestle with a more holistic Gospel as he faces the deep poverty and brokenness in the villages. One woman expressed astonishment when a Roma woman insisted on confessing her sin and asking for forgiveness after throwing this non-Roma out of the house a month earlier. She commented that she had never seen that kind of open humility in the Croatian churches of which she had been a part.

Serbians have begun attending a few Roma churches; Apatin, for example, has fifteen Serbs who attend regularly. Perhaps the most dramatic shift of attitudes, however, can be seen in Leskovac, as it has been solidly established for more than twenty-five years. Not only do the pastors enjoy a better relationship with local authorities, but Roma attitudes toward the Serbs are also changing. Šerif Bakić noted the importance of not just forgiving the Serbian people but being concerned for their seeming indifference to God and the growing drug problem with Serbian youth. He recognizes, however, that Serbs would not be receptive to Roma people unless there was radical evidence of transformation. He noted:

We are using [ways] just like Paul did when he did mission. He first went to the synagogue and witnessed first to the Jews and then went to the non-Jewish. The Roma can forgive and work with all people. But the Serbians are not going to receive you…[you] must first give example…see Jesus in us. Many Serbians come to the Roma church also. They enjoy worship. Serbians see the hope in Roma people, in God. We wait for God to open the door to do some big evangelizing so that everyone can see.

The two churches in Leskovac have sent missionaries to plant churches in five different towns and numerous adjoining villages. In addition, representatives travel into Croatia and other countries in order to encourage and strengthen Roma believers and advise non-Roma working with Roma.

Missiological Implications

Both the Bible and church history display numerous themes that are theologically illuminating for Roma history. God has often chosen the migrant, the dispossessed, the weak, and the despised either to fulfill a special commission or to become a vessel by which God reveals himself. Whether it is the stammering Moses speaking to Pharaoh (Exod. 3–7) or the Samaritan woman who leads many to Jesus (John 4:1–42), in such accounts we see God’s character and the nature of his mission. Indeed, the “migrant model” of the incarnational Christ, who chose alienation and exile, emphasizes the “weakness and non-dominance of the Misio Dei.” Jesus’ ministry to the socially exiled profoundly shocked his followers but was often joyfully received by those kept separated on account of gender, race, or socioeconomic status. The miracles and signs among such people were a radical witness to the holistic and counterintuitive nature of the kingdom. Within this framework, four implications emerge from this preliminary research.

First, the Roma churches are both indigenous and pilgrim in nature. The churches established in Leskovac approach church life, worship, mission, and interpreting the Bible in a way that flows out of the distinctives of their worldview. They have no country that would compete for their loyalty, nor can they be comfortable in the countries they live in because of their relative powerlessness and poverty. This weakness compels them to be in a state of constant movement toward God, living in the “already, not yet” tension of the kingdom of God. William Cavanaugh explores the meaning of “pilgrim” in its ancient sense as being a continual journey toward the center—communion with God. The medieval pilgrimage required a “stripping away of the external sources of stability in one’s life. The pilgrim’s way was the way of the cross.” Curiously, medieval pilgrimages were the social location for some of the first encounters between European peoples and the Roma. Today, however, even as those pilgrimage encounters eventually resulted in separated peoples, the Roma as a pilgrim church traveling toward God are positioned to become a powerful catalyst of reconciliation.

Second, the Roma as a pilgrim church acts as a sign and
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wholeheartedly to these signs. The challenges of holistic discipleship are formidable and complex, and yet when the church finally becomes established, it acts as a prophetic witness regarding the holistic nature of the kingdom.

Third, the transformation of a Roma village can act as a centripetal, or “come and see,” type of mission to the majority culture around it—a process already beginning in Apatin, Leskovac, and Kucura. The movement from the center to the periphery in order to witness the transformation in villages has the potential to bridge the formidable separation, potentially empowering Roma to then be “sent” to the center. The pastors in Leskovac have articulated this connection between centripetal and centrifugal mission, and although there is no certainty that other Roma churches will embrace this missional impetus, the missionaries they send have tremendous influence in Roma communities throughout Croatia and Serbia.

Finally, another kind of reverse mission is possible for Christian Croatians and Serbians who are willing to enter the Romas’ world. Gioacchino Campese writes about God’s presence among the poor and the Christian call to journey away from his or her center of power to the periphery. In such a place the “insignificant” are the missionaries as they demonstrate a communion of dependence with God and therefore “prevent us from becoming sedentary people” in faith. This reverse mission has the capacity to transform the “sent” in a way that means they are sent back to their own people with a broader understanding of God and his mission.

In light of these implications, it is critical for Roma Christianity in eastern Europe to be studied in relationship to the majority-culture churches. Several Roma pastors and individuals who work with Roma have said, “Now is the time for the Roma.” If indeed Roma families and villages continue to be transformed by the power of God and Roma churches continue to spread throughout eastern Europe, then it is also time for the majority-culture churches to pay attention to God’s presence in the margins of their own society. The Roma church has a critical role in facilitating holistic healing and integration for its own people. But perhaps also God’s mission among the Roma will be integral to a new kind of mission that reaches beyond the Roma village and becomes the primary vehicle through which peace and reconciliation can heal an entrenched separation.

Notes

1. In this article, I use “Roma” as an umbrella term for groups of people that have some related cultural characteristics and that speak or used to speak Romani. Although “Roma” has gained international acceptance, some groupings of people with related cultural characteristics do not identify with this word, either because their cultural/language grouping is too different or because of the stigma attached to that identity. It is also important to note that in the areas where this research was conducted, there is often a discrepancy between how the majority culture identifies a given village and how the village identifies itself. This is usually because the majority culture knows little about the cultural/linguistic relationships of a particular group.


3. Interview with author, Kucura, Serbia, June 22, 2011.

4. Ian Hancock, We Are the Romani People (Hatfield, Eng.: Univ. of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), 32.


6. Fraser, The Gypsies, 63.


8. Quoted in Fraser, The Gypsies, 67, 68.


10. Hancock, We Are the Romani People, 17–28, 34.

11. Fraser, The Gypsies, 185.

12. Hancock, We Are the Romani People, 57, 58.

13. Fraser, The Gypsies, 129.

14. Ibid., 184, 316.


16. The most recent forced relocation was in Belgrade, Serbia, in April 2012.


20. The following section contains quotes from interviews conducted between June 2011 and June 2012 in the villages of Kucura, Apatin, Leskovac, Despotovo, and Darda.

21. E-mail to author, June 15, 2012.

22. Ibid.

23. Each Serbian township has a “Roma coordinator” to act as a mediator, advocate, and voice in the local government. Both pastors declined the offer, fearing that politics and corruption would compromise them.


The Jon and Jean Bonk International Fellowship Fund

Dr. Jonathan J. Bonk retired July 1 as executive director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center and editor of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research. Anticipating that leadership transition, the OMSC Board of Trustees in 2012 launched a substantial scholarship initiative—the Jon and Jean Bonk International Fellowship Fund.

Dr. J. Nelson Jennings, OMSC executive director as of July 1, says the initiative “will enable beleaguered Christian leaders to come to OMSC from challenging situations. Currently we have to turn away many worthy candidates due to lack of funding.” The fund will provide friends of the Bonks, OMSC alumni from around the world, and others who have admired their ministries from afar a “concrete way of honoring Jon and Jean on the occasion of their retirement,” adds Jennings. Jon and Jean have wanted to find a way after they retire and return to Canada to perpetuate their longtime commitment to serving marginalized church leaders and missionaries who live and minister in places where it is extraordinarily difficult and sometimes dangerous to be a follower of Christ.

Working alongside Jon and Jean Bonk has been such an honor and inspiration. Their leadership, vision, compassion, strength, and patience, a rare combination of traits, have served the Bonks and OMSC very well. The Jon and Jean Bonk International Fellowship Fund—www.omsc.org/bonkfellowship—is a crowning glory to their ministry. In keeping with their humble spirit, this fellowship is a benefit to others. It will enable those who serve the risen Christ in difficult, oppressive, and challenging circumstances to enjoy the unique opportunities for renewal offered by OMSC. I invite you to join many good people who are truly grateful for the Bonks by making this dream come true.

—Dr. David Johnson Rowe, president, OMSC Board of Trustees

Read the Jon and Jean Bonk International Fellowship Fund newsletter and view the video online. For details, go to www.omsc.org/bonkfellowship or contact Dr. J. Nelson Jennings, Executive Director.

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