Roma Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges, Opportunities for Mission, Modes of Appropriation and Social Significance

Melody Wachsmuth

Introduction

In the twentieth century, Central and Eastern European (CEE) state socialist policies towards the Roma varied, including attempted assimilation and forced sedentarization; but generally, the policies led to an increased socio-economic stability for the Roma. The collapse of these regimes, however, for the most part led to a worsened socio-economic state and in some contexts, to a continued deterioration of relationships between the Roma and the majority culture.[1] In the last twenty years, although increased international attention, policy changes and money has been focused on Romani communities, the expected results have not materialized.[2] Juxtaposed to these realities is the continued growth of Roma Christianity, particularly in Pentecostal and charismatic forms.

Research in Roma Christianity has been much better documented in Western Europe – with the beginning of the Gypsy revivals in France in the 1950s that rapidly spread to Spain and beyond, leading to mission efforts into Eastern Europe and Russia. Serious research of Roma Christianity in CEE exists only in certain contexts, most notably in Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. Despite these limitations, it is possible to see snapshots of the developing picture of Roma Christianity in CEE – from the large-scale revivals such as found in Toflea, Romania, to the work of the long-established churches in Bulgaria, to the young Pentecostal and Evangelical churches recently appearing in South-eastern Europe. Roma Christianity reflects the diverse mosaic of Roma culture and languages:

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[1] Zoltan D. Barany, *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethno-Politics* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 117-25, 201.
[2] For example, the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) was twelve-country commitment to close the gaps between Roma and non-Roma in education, housing, employment and health: www.romadecade.org/index. One report, highlighting ten CEE countries, states that, although small gains are visible, 'summarizing data across the Decade region suggests a worsening of the situation of Roma and a widening of the gap with the total population in regard to poverty, particularly the risk of poverty'. 'Roma Inclusion Index 2015' (Budapest: Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2015), 19: www.romadecade.org/cms/upload/file/9810_file1_roma-inclusion-index-2015-s.pdf

growth has been both explosive and slow, varied and multi-textured, and developing in spite of and in response to the numerous challenges, including social isolation, severe poverty and frequent disenfranchisement with majority culture churches. With this background, I suggest two things in this chapter: the Roma church has a unique role to play in both the transformation of Roma communities and as a catalyst for reconciliation with the larger society; and by placing Roma Christianity in its place within the larger mosaic of the global church, Roma Christians have a uniquely important part in the church's participation in the *missio Dei*.

This chapter, although broad both in subject matter and geography, aims to provide a general introduction to Roma Christianity, specifically focusing on South-eastern Europe, Romania and Bulgaria. First, it places the topic in historical context, highlighting state and church attitudes towards the Roma. Next, it highlights selected themes from Roma churches emerging from numerous survey trips conducted over the last four years, from about fifty Roma communities in the region. Finally, it will extrapolate themes and implications from the churches across diverse contexts with the hope of raising further questions, showcasing the challenges, and pointing to further areas of needed research.

The research methodology was primarily field notes elicited from informal conversations, observations in churches and within Romani homes (both leaders and lay people), and semi-structured interviews. Secondary literature has been used to balance the primary research, although secondary literature pertaining to this topic in these particular countries is limited. The lack of secondary literature, the vastness of the topic, and the lack of in-depth research in specific contexts certainly prevents firm conclusions being drawn – and indeed should serve as a precaution regarding applying the themes unreservedly to every Roma church in the CEE context. Certainly, there are hundreds of Roma churches, particularly in Romania, that have not been surveyed.

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Who Are the Romani? Indicators of Identity

The Romani are thought to number 10-12 million in Europe, with the majority living in CEE. The general public often thinks of them as a monolithic group, either romanticized as exotic and mysterious or demonized as sub-human and parasitic on society. These images create a picture of the Roma as being on a static plane through history and into the present, somehow outside the ongoing dynamic interchange that is inherent in cultures and societies.

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Who are the people we talk about when we use the term 'Roma'? Roma groups can actually be quite diverse in terms of language and culture, so are we applying the label as a social or as an ethnic term, particularly if a group may not self-identify as Roma? Questions of identity drive much discussion among policy makers, Roma groups, NGOs, academics and ordinary

citizens. Consequently, there are many ideas, images, emotions and implications that can be attached to the words Romani, Roma or Gypsy. Confusingly for a *Gadje,* or non-Roma, Roma communities will sometimes self-identity differently from the label designated by the cultures around them. Sometimes communities self-identify as Gypsy, in other communities this is considered a slur, and in still other Roma communities, Roma themselves use the term 'gypsy' (in more of an adjectival sense) to pejoratively depict those who are dirty, extremely poor, engaged in crime and generally living undesirable lives.

To describe identity amidst the diversity, some sociologists and political scientists classify Roma communities on the basis of certain indicators such as language, borders of endogamy, professional specializations, tribal affiliation, religion, settlement period in their respective countries, etc.[3] In addition, there may also be a sense of belonging with the country in which they have lived for an extended amount of time. There are some Roma who speak of their 'Roma nation' while others differentiate between Roma clans to exclude certain groups. Because of this complexity, it is the whole picture that needs to be taken into account: the sociological indicators, the communities' self-identification, and the relationship between the Roma communities and the majority cultures. With this in mind, this chapter will use the term 'Romani' and 'Roma' in a broad sense, depicting a diverse collection of groups, who self-identify as Roma, Romani or Gypsy, and who may have a general conception of shared experience/history, some characteristics of similar culture, and consciousness of the associated dialects making up the Romani language.[4] However, since the term 'Roma' did not become the primary term of public discourse until after 1989, Gypsy will be used when it is contextually and historically appropriate.

It goes beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the debates surrounding the origins and migration patterns of the Roma, although linguistic evidence ties them to north-west India. Migrating through Persia, Armenia and Byzantium, there is evidence of significant settlement of Gypsies in the Balkans between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, sources acknowledging their presence in Serbia, Bulgaria, Wallachia and Moldavia. It was in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that sources cite their appearance and gradual spread to other European countries. By the

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[3] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, 'Historical and Ethnographic Background: Gypsies, Roma and Sinti', in Will Guy (ed), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), 36-41; Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 12.

[4] Adrian Marsh and David Thurfjell, 'Introduction', in David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (eds), *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2014), 8. I include groups such as the Bajash, who although speaking old Romanian rather than Romani, often refer to themselves as Gypsy or Roma. There are other groups such as Ashkali/Egyptians, found in Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania who claim different origins and do not regard themselves as Roma.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, large populations existed in CEE as part of the socio-political environment.[5]

Historical Context

The discussion of Roma Christianity cannot be divorced from the past relationship between the Roma and society – it is important in order to understand the present realities and the church's unique role in a given community. In fact, the Romani relationship with societies has varied over the centuries. There are many accounts of societies taking advantage of the variety of skills and abilities offered by these peoples. However, societies under the differing policies of the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Fascism and the socialist states more frequently responded to the so-called 'Gypsy problem' – that is, making such people fit into the constraints of mainstream society – in ways that created marginalization through the mechanisms of forced assimilation, socio-economic marginalization, enslavement, death, and genocide.[6, 7]

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The Roma During State-Socialism[8]

After the often-harsh exclusionary policies of former regimes and the disastrous consequences of World War II for the Roma,[9] communism and state socialism ushered in a new perspective towards the Roma. State socialism viewed the Roma primarily through a social lens, as a social problem to be solved, as well as offering a large labour force for their

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[5] Some scholars argue for a ninth-century appearance. Marushiakova and Popov, 'Historical and Ethnographic Background', 35; Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 9-12.

[6] Many excellent sources have examined this history. See, for example, Angus M. Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford, UK / Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1995); David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004).

[7] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov have identified two primary patterns of relationship between Roma and non-Roma in CEE: the traditional pattern and the national pattern. In the former, largely in the pre-industrial age, the Gypsies were seen as alien, although having a symbiotic relationship with society. In the latter, which coincided with the Enlightenment, attitudes were fostered by the ethno-national states; as they began to see them as sub-human, attempts were made to assimilate, control, or even destroy them. Marushiakova and Popov, 'Historical and Ethnographic Background', 45.

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[8] Of course, this is a general summary and each state varied in its policies and enforcement towards the Roma under Communism. In addition, state policy changed over the course of regimes. For more in-depth discussion of Roma under Communism, see Will Guy (ed), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001); Barany, *The East European Gypsies*.

[9] For a brief summary on the Holocaust and the Roma, see Ian Hancock, *We Are the Romani People = Ame sam e Rromane džene* (Hatfield, UK: Centre de recherches tsiganes / University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002). For a more in-depth study, see Donald Kenrick (ed), *The Gypsies During the Second World War: In the Shadow of the Swastika* (2 vols), (Hatfield, UK: Gypsy Research Centre and University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999).

agendas.[10] Therefore, communist policy included them in education, employment and housing, and downplayed their language and culture.[11] Generally, this afforded them greater social and economic security. Will Guy notes: 'Instead of subsisting as pariahs, eking a precarious living as a dispensable pool of casual labour, they were now full citizens, at least formally, with the potential of entering the mainstream labour force at equal wages to their non-Roma fellow workers.'[12]

However, despite some of the positive economic and social outcomes, the long-term effects did not show sustainable socio-economic change. On the one hand, because of the assimilation policies and forced sedentarization, Roma joined the working class, but most remained at the bottom of the socio-economic scale and separated in ever-growing mahalas. Because most of the jobs were based on unskilled labour, when the regimes changed, there was no longer the need for such vast amounts of labour. Mandatory educational methods, while improving educational levels, also led in some cases to educational segregation and the creation of special schools that added to the creation of an unskilled or semi-skilled workforce.[13] Finally, assimilation eroded some of the Gypsy traditions – culture, kinship networks and language – as well as losing the momentum of political capital gained during the inter-war period.[14]

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Roma Communities after State Socialism

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Losing the security of jobs and state-sponsored housing after the collapse of communism and beginning of the free market economies, the general socio-economic condition of the Roma deteriorated. As unemployment rose to higher levels than the rest of the general population, an increase in begging, crime and homelessness during the 1990s increased feelings of hostility from the larger society and contributed to ethnically rooted scapegoating and violence against Roma individuals and communities.[15]

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[10] Will Guy, 'Romani Identity and Post-Communist Policy', in Will Guy (ed), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), 9.

[11] Marushiakova and Popov, 'Historical and Ethnographic Background', 47.

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[12] Guy, 'Romani Identity', 9

[13] Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe, 'The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Project on Ethnic Relations' (1997), 48, 60: www.per-usa.org/1997-2007/21st_c.htm

[14] Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 151-52. Because the Roma were viewed through a social lens and did not meet Stalin's criteria for a national minority, some states did not qualify them for the laws pertaining to special educational and cultural minority rights. In many state censuses and documents, they appeared under the heading of 'other'. Yugoslavia, however, was the most tolerant, their 1974 constitution recognizing the equality of all nationalities, and by 1981 the federal state recognized their nationality status and allowed the Roma to display their own symbols. Zoltan D. Barany, 'Politics and the Roma in State-Socialist Eastern Europe', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33.4 (December 2000), 423.

[15] Mirga and Gheorghe, 'The Roma in the Twenty-First Century'.

Although sociologists and Roma leaders argue that most criminals came from the most deprived segment of the population, 'their criminality, in turn, is largely responsible for the way ordinary people view the entire Romani community'.[16]

Today, despite vast international attention and allocated financial resources from governments, EU institutions, NGOs and religious entities as well as Romani politicians, intellectuals and grassroots organizations, steps and policies to minimize Romani social isolation continue to make only small, ineffective, or retro-active progress in CEE.[17] For the most part, Romani communities often have higher rates of illiteracy, unemployment, crime and deeper levels of poverty, and bear an uneasy relationship with the majority community, locked in mutual images of 'the other' which solidifies their social isolation. As Barany puts it: 'Most ordinary people are not inclined to reflect on the multifarious causes of the Gypsies' predicament, particularly because long-entrenched biases and prejudices – often confirmed by personal experience – have already shaped their view of the Roma.'[18]

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Responses of the Roma

To speak merely about socialist policies and post-socialism's effect on the Roma is to classify them as passive subjects or hapless victims – but of course the Roma have been active at many levels of society. Roma political activism has been present since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[19] Although political mobilization was stalled during communism, other Roma scholars and activists have argued that the integration of Roma into state and party hierarchies became the 'unintentional training ground' for later Roma activists. The declining influence of traditional Roma leaders coincided with a growing Romani intelligentsia, estimated to be about 2-3,000 people in 1989, consisting of sociologists, writers, poets, teachers and musicians.[20] In some countries, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, Roma formed cultural associations. Leadership from CEE activists in Western Europe encouraged the development of organizations such as the Gypsy Council in Britain. All of this led to the first world Romani conference in 1971, attended by individuals from fourteen countries.[21] Today, there are numerous Romani organizations, NGOs,

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[16] Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 180-81.
[17] See, for example, initiatives such as the Decade of the Roma (2005-2015) and the European Commission's 'An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020': http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/discrimination/docs/com_2011_173_en.pdf
[18] Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 189.
[19] For example, Roma conferences aimed at mobilizing activism for Romani rights took place in Hungary (1879), Bulgaria (1906) and Romania (1934). Reported by Acton (1974) and Hancock (1991) in Guy, 'Romani Identity', 19.
[20] Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 152, 144.
[21] Guy, 'Romani Identity', 19.

political and social activists and academics, actively working on behalf of their people. However, criticism has been levelled on several fronts: for example, the so-called 'Gypsy Industry'[22] and the immense gap existing between the intelligentsia and the reality of Roma communities. Alongside these other Roma activists and voices, Roma pastors have sometimes become a voice of mediation, earning respect from the non-Roma and also trusted by their own communities.[23]

The Roma and the Church

The Roma are Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant and Neo-Protestant – typically adhering, at least by name, to the dominant religion of the country in which they are living. Often, however, although they are clear on their religious identity, they are not an active part of the institutional church.[24] In European history, the church's response has often been no different from that of mainstream society in regard to its attitudes, images and exclusionary practices.[25] For example, between 1497 and 1774, the Holy Roman Empire released 146 decrees opposed to the Gypsies.[26] In Eastern Europe, in the principalities of Wallachia, Moldova and Transylvania, the church profited from the labour of monastery Gypsy slaves from the fourteenth century until the twenty-year emancipation process finally eradicated slavery from Romanian principalities in 1855-1856. There were, however, a few priests that cared for the spiritual needs of the Gypsies in the late eighteenth century, and eventually a few voices that spoke out, denouncing slavery in the early nineteenth century.[27]

Thomas Acton argues that the eighteenth-century assertion that the Gypsies were 'insincere' in their attachment to all religions and had no

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[22] The Gypsy Industry refers to organizations made up of non-Romani who hire a 'token Gypsy', regardless of his/her qualifications, with the sole purpose of financial or political gain, or those who falsely claim Romani heritage in order to have a career within academia or political activism. See, for example, D. Le Bas and T. Acton (eds), *All Change! Romani Studies Through Romani Eyes* (Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010); A. Ryder, S. Cemlyn, and T. Acton (eds), *Hearing the Voices of Gypsy: Roma and Traveller Communities* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2014).

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[23] See, for example, Miroslav Atanasov's findings on pastors in Bulgaria, 'Gypsy Pentecostals: The Growth of the Pentecostal Movement among the Roma in Bulgaria and Its Revitalization of Their Communities' (PhD dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008); or the church's role as advocate and mediator in Leskovac, Serbia, in Melody J. Wachsmuth, 'Separated Peoples: The Roma as Prophetic Pilgrims in Eastern Europe', in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research,* 37.3 (July 2013), 145-50.

[24] Elin Strand, '"One Scattered Race Like Stars in the Sight of God": The International Gypsy Evangelical Church', in David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (eds), *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2014), 111.

[25] Strand, '"One Scattered Race"', 111.

[26] Margalit (1999), quoted in Miroslav A. Atanasov, 'Gypsy Pentecostals', 99.

[27] Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, 94-96.

morality actually masked an exclusionary racism.[28] Indeed, Roma were denied church-sanctioned marriages, refused admission to the church and participation in the Mass.[29] This exclusion was not just about spiritual access – although churches played a key role in education during the Ottoman and Hapsburg periods, they were not worried about including Roma children until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[30]

In the past two to three decades, many churches have officially changed their orientation towards the Roma or become more cognizant of their exclusionary attitudes. The Roman Catholic Church began to turn its attention to Roma communities after witnessing the rapid growth of Romani Pentecostalism in France and Spain in the 1950s and 1960s, resulting in a historic meeting between Pope John IV and 2,000 Gypsies.[31] In 1970, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People was established, having a special division for the pastoral care of Gypsies. Since then, they have held several world congresses and have produced important documents recognizing Romani marginalization through history and the church's complicity, as well as outlining approaches to holistic mission. In 2007, the report of the Roman Catholic Church's first world meeting of Gypsy priests, deacons and religious people opened with Archbishop Marchetto acknowledging: 'The Church discovers in her children that she is still too stifled by stereotypes and prejudices with regard to the Gypsies, but wishes to renew the dialogue and give a cordial welcome'. It concludes by calling for a mutuality of learning and love between Roma and *Gadje* and mutual collaboration.[32]

The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), founded in 1964, also began to interact proactively with churches regarding their relationship with Roma communities. In 2001, they co-sponsored a conference entitled 'Living in Community – towards equal opportunities and overcoming discrimination: The situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe'. In 2013, CCME, together with the Lutheran World Federation, hosted a conference in Frankfurt for diaconal workers across Europe to continue 'building alliances with other churches, non-governmental organizations and Roma advocacy groups', encourage

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[28] Thomas A. Acton, 'New Religious Movements among Roma, Gypsies and Travellers: Placing Romani Pentecostalism in an Historical and Social Context', in David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (eds), *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2014), 28.
[29] Atanasov, 'Gypsy Pentecostals', 99-101.
[30] Barany, *The East European Gypsies*, 88.
[31] Atanasov, 'Gypsy Pentecostals', 102-03.
[32] This council report indicates that there were at this time 100 consecrated Roma, Sinti, Kales, Manousche, Bhill and Jajabor living in sixteen countries (Europe, Americas, Asia). Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 'The First World Meeting of the Consecrated Gypsies', in *People on the Move,* N. 105 (December 2007).

churches in Europe to protest against anti-gypsyism, and create spaces for 'face-to-face' encounters between Roma and non-Roma.[33]

Neo-Protestant churches[34] also have focused some missionary efforts on the Roma. The Evangelical Baptist Mission to the Gypsies in Bulgaria under the auspices of the Baptist Union has been active among Roma from the 1930s.[35] More recently, a Baptist church in Bucharest began an initiative called Project Ruth in the early 1990s which works to 'transform Roma communities' by providing education and literacy training, vocational programmes, health programmes, etc. Under the umbrella of the Croatian Pentecostal Church, the first Roma church in Croatia was started in October 2012. The *Borongajci*, a Croatian charismatic indigenous movement, planted another one or two churches. International mission organizations have also become active in their efforts to work in Roma communities, their activities ranging from evangelism and discipleship, community development, education, and literacy and translation efforts.[36]

Despite shifting attitudes at official levels, the many individuals and groups active in serving Roma communities, and Roma testimonies directly related to the love and care they have been shown in a local church,[37] the fact remains that exclusion and marginalization are still ongoing realities.[38] Sometimes there can be a latent posture of superiority undergirding the missional approach to a community.[39] Sometimes non-Roma individuals are working without support from their church body because of the perception they are wasting their time on 'those gypsies', or are put off by a fear that too many Roma coming into one church could 'split the church'.[40] This is symptomatic in every Christian tradition in Eastern Europe from Bulgaria

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[33] Lutheran World Federfation (LWF), 'Call for Justice-Orientated Engagement with Roma people: Diaconal Workers Develop Recommendations for Continuing Ministry' (Lutheran World Federation, 2013).
[34] Protestant religious communities forming after the Reformation but with roots in the Reformation.
[35] Atanasov, 'Gypsy Pentecostals', 122-27.
[36] For example, some American denominational mission organizations such as the Southern Baptist's International Mission Board (IMB) and the Methodist Church have specific Roma ministries in CEE. Larger para-church organizations such as Operation Mobilization, SIL International, YWAM, World Vision, and SEND International also have missionaries and/or projects in CEE. Fida International is the development and mission arm of the Finnish Pentecostal Church, and they work in partnership with various churches to encourage holistic mission.
[37] Interviews by the author with Biljana Nikolić (Vukovar, Croatia, 2012, 2013), Zvanko Pavić (Varaždin, Croatia, 2011), and Mariana Tănasie (Sadova, Romania, 2013).
[38] See, for example, G. Haupt, 'Discrimination of Roma People', in *Reflection Group of Roma People* (Brussels: COMECE & CCEE, 2011): www.ifsoz.org/content/download/pdf/110301Brussels.pdf
[39] This observation comes from comments to the author from various non-Roma leaders regarding the inability of Roma to lead their own churches without oversight. See section below: *Why Won't You Be Like Us?*
[40] Field notes depicting conversations with missionaries in Bulgaria (2015), Macedonia (2015) and Croatia (2013).

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to Croatia, but the sentiment was well articulated by Bishop Leo Cornelio in his address at the 2003 World Congress of the Pastoral Care for Gypsies:

> Gypsies are not at ease in our churches and in Christian gatherings. It is also not rare to meet priests, women religious and lay people at the service of Gypsies who declare their loneliness and the lack of recognition their commitments receive from the communities or from other priests and religious. Their efforts to create a team for reflection in touch with Gypsies do not often receive great support from other ministers and religious. These observations and experiences highlight for us the distance that exists between Gypsies and the Catholic Church.[41]

Snapshots of Roma Christianity in CEE

The spread of Christianity among the Roma, particularly in its Pentecostal forms, have begun to challenge some of these attitudes in church and society. A commonly expressed sentiment from Roma leaders is that 'this is the time for the Roma': that there is a general openness to Christian faith in Roma communities.[42] Looking at this from a mission history point of view, this essay hypothesizes that God's *praeparatio evangelica*, that is, his divine initiation and preparation which precedes any kind of human action, has been brought in the fullness of time to Roma communities in CEE.[43] Not only that, considering the estimated numbers of the Roma's population in CEE, widespread conversion and transformation could have a significant impact on wider society.

Indeed, the long-term transformative effects of the gospel in Roma communities are astonishing. A limited number of studies[44] in specific geographical contexts have shown that the impact of Christianity on Roma communities is twofold: it is linked to with social change, including a rise of education levels, literacy, a decrease in crime, and better relationships with the majority culture, while studies of Pentecostalism, in particular, have shown it to be instrumental in the fostering of a 'trans-national' identity and the revitalization of their respective Roma identities.

If, however, we see God the Father as the initiator of mission and 'Lord of the Harvest', the counterpart of Luke 10:2 is also painfully accurate in this context: the workers are too few. Particularly in South-eastern Europe, one of the most commonly uttered needs by Roma leaders is the lack of

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[41] 'Pastoral Care of Gypsies for a "Spirituality of Communion"', Fifth World Congress of the Pastoral Care for Gypsies, Budapest, 2003.
[42] A sentiment articulated by Roma leaders and some non-Roma working in Roma communities throughout CEE. For example, Roma pastors Aleksandar Subotin and Miki Kamberović in Serbia (interviews in 2011 and 2015), and a non-Roma pastor (S.N.) of a Roma church at a Roma conference in Budapest, 2014.
[43] Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2010), 71.
[44] See, for example, Johannes Ries, 'The Cultural Dynamics of Romani/Gypsy Ethnicity and Pentecostal Christianity', in David Thurfjell and Adrian Marsh (eds), *Romani Pentecostalism: Gypsies and Charismatic Christianity* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2014).

trained, mature workers to bring these seeds to growth and fruition.[45] Most leaders bear tremendous burdens due to the multi-faceted needs in impoverished Roma communities. These needs are partly the reasons for the other reality: although the 'field is ripe for harvest', discipleship is slow and laborious.

In many cases, although many are open and willing to hear about Jesus and profess an acceptance of faith, quite a few Roma pastors explain the circular nature of discipleship – falling away, coming back, and repeating the cycle. The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex, but one can point to a few contributing factors. In impoverished communities, survival can be the all-consuming focus for each day, making it difficult to participate in church activities. In some churches, illiteracy among adults is still a primary factor and audio tools have had few successes. Some communities are quite deeply broken with high rates of domestic violence, alcoholism, abuse, witchcraft and violence between neighbours. Because many communities are tightly enmeshed and intensely social, new Christians face daily challenges to act out their new faith.[46]

Still, the few studies that have been done point to the trend that, while many programmes have proved to be ineffective in Roma communities, Christianity is making major inroads and spreading, largely in Pentecostal or Charismatic forms, through Roma Christians themselves. Why the success of Pentecostalism over other forms? Some scholars have suggested it is the ecclesiological structure of Pentecostalism that allows freedom, dignity and a renewed identity by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Elin Strand's work synergistically links Pentecostal theology and Romani culture, applying the work of Toulis who claims that 'Pentecostalism as an important arena for constructing new identities while challenging racist representations'. Strand suggests that the Romani Pentecostal church links social change by introducing a new morality in communities in which God is the 'omnipresent agent of social change'.[47] The following summaries of various studies will help provide snapshots of Roma Christianity in various countries.

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[45] This is particularly, although not exclusively, the case in places like Croatia, Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia, where the churches are small and fairly new. It is also characteristic with pastors working in more than one church. Often the church members are so young in the faith that there has not been suitable time for the Roma pastor to mentor leadership to share the burdens. In one interview, for example, the pastor explained that teams want to come and do short-term projects, but that these had little lasting value. What he hoped for was long-term help to invest in the people. Interview with T.M. by the author (Macedonia, January 2015).

[46] Wachsmuth, 'Separated Peoples: The Roma as Prophetic Pilgrims in Eastern Europe'.

[47] N.R. Toulis, *Believing Identity – Pentecostalism and the Mediation of Jamaican Ethnicity and Gender in England* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), quoted in Strand, '"One Scattered Race"', 117.

Bulgaria[48]

Christianity among the Roma began through the Baptists in the early twentieth century – but the beginning and growth of Roma Pentecostalism began about the same time as it was taking place in France in the 1950s. However, the quickest growth took place in the 1990s, after communism fell. Roma Christians now constitute the majority of total evangelical numbers in Bulgaria, most of them Pentecostal, and the number of their churches today is estimated at 700-800.[49] Miroslav Atanasov's important study of Romani Pentecostalism in Bulgaria concludes that Pentecostalism has revitalized communities and that Roma leaders believe it will change their social and political standing: 'The degree of revitalization might vary from one Roma community to another, but Pentecostalism has clearly provided new ways for this *ethnos* to cope with the constant stress caused by their poverty, oppression and marginal social status.'[50] Interestingly, similar to other contexts, he points out the importance of the Roma pastor who is concerned with a range of aspects of social change including assisting their members in obtaining legal documentation and jobs, and elevating educational levels among his people. His conclusions highlight the changes in attitudes towards women, increasing education, changing ethics and morality in communities, a decrease in crime, improved relationships with the majority culture, challenging certain aspects of Roma culture, renewed identity and integration.

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Romania

In terms of Roma Christianity, Romania is one of the most complex and under-researched places in CEE; and yet it has the largest population of Roma as well as quite possibly the largest number of Roma Christians. One can see big movements of Roma Christianity, some of which are under the Romanian Pentecostal or Baptist Unions, and others that are independent, such as the Christian Union of Roma Pentecostals in Romania (reportedly having 200 churches in Romania). One can see extremes of poverty and wealth: wealthy churches and communities of mansions contrasted with other communities of poorly constructed shacks built on garbage. Apart from the bigger movements, there are numerous and uncounted small, independent churches begun by Roma dotting the many villages and towns.

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[48] For other research from Bulgaria, see Velislav Altanov and Milena Benovska-Sabkova 'The Protestant Conversion Among Roma in Bulgaria: Between Global and Local', in *Българска етнология,* 1-2 (2010), 32-50; Magdalena Slavkova, 'Evangelical Gypsies in Bulgaria: Way of Life and Performance of Identity', in *Romani Studies,* 17.2 (2007), 205-46; Veselin Popov and Elena Marushiakova, 'The Relations of Ethnic and Confessional Consciousness of Gypsies in Bulgaria', in *FACTA UNIVERSITATIS – Series Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History,* 06 (1999), 81-89.

[49] Atanasov, *Gypsy Pentecostals*, 171-73.

[50] Atanasov, *Gypsy Pentecostals*, 223.

Some of these churches and movements focus primarily on their own clan, while others look beyond to other clans or ethnicities.

Perhaps one of the best-known movements under the Romanian Pentecostal Union is the 'Rugul Aprins' (Burning Bush) movement that began in Toflea in the early 1990s, born out of the evangelism and prayer of three women and one man (both Romanian and Romani). Toflea was a town well-known for violence, gangs and alcoholism, and therefore the small group of 'Repenters', consisting primarily of women, underwent persecution from the rest of the village for years. The number of Christians began to grow, influenced by factors such as the obviously transformed lives of the Repenters. For example, one man leading a drug-running gang was converted in Germany and returned to Toflea, shocking everyone with his transformation, since previously they had been afraid of his violent behaviour.

One distinctive way that change was seen in the community was attitudes towards women. Soon after Christianity began spreading, women were illiterate, stayed at home, and 'their spirits were bitter since they felt like servants'.[51] However, when the women started becoming Christians, 'all the women wanted to know the word of God'.[52] One day the pastor had a revelation from Luke 8:1-3. If women were supporting and providing for Jesus' ministry, should not the women in his community see themselves as part of ministry? After this, the church began teaching the women alongside the men, doing family camps, and teaching men to honour their wives instead of treating them like servants.

Toflea became known internationally for their large baptisms, the largest one taking place in 2003 with over 500 people. The church has a strong emphasis on piety and holiness, and has become known in Romania and beyond for its music. Now the church reports 80-90% of the village being converted, and 4,000 members of their church spread over ten churches in Romania, five in the UK, one in Spain, and one in Germany.[53]

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South-Eastern Europe

Compared with the growth of Roma Christianity in Romania and Bulgaria, growth has only more recently begun in South-eastern Europe. Except for Serbia, the churches are much fewer and, in general, younger in Macedonia, Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Albania. Some of these countries have the additional challenge of many Roma identifying as

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[51] Interview with Vasile Căpitanu by the author (Toflea, Romania).
[52] Interview with Anuşa Căpitanu by the author (Toflea, Romania).
[53] Information accumulated through interviews by the author with Anuşa Căpitanu (Toflea, Romania, July 2015), Ilia Bolmandăr (Bucharest, Romania, July 2015), and Ioan Caba (Oradea, Romania, July 2015).

Muslim. Even if they are not practising Muslims, there can still be serious opposition to evangelism and conversion in certain contexts.[54]

Serbia

Among all the countries of South-eastern Europe, Serbia is the exception – it has a thriving Roma Pentecostal movement, with many of the churches influenced or begun in Leskovac, a city in southern Serbia that has a population of 8-10,000 Roma. Although Serbian pastor Mio Stanković began to minister to Roma in the mid-1970s after an encounter with a Roma women, rapid growth did not begin until the 1990s after word spread regarding healings and miracles.[55] In the late 1990s, the church promoted a church-planting project in partnership with an organization from the UK and planted seven churches throughout Serbia. The church split in 2005 but there are an estimated 1,000 believers between the two churches. Not all the church plants survived, but there are still numerous house groups and church plants originating from this movement: an estimated eight smaller house groups of 20-40 people and eight bigger churches.[56] Most of the churches also have other house groups in the Roma communities surrounding their town or city. In addition, the church in Leskovac has been active in evangelism efforts in Croatia.

As the church has been deeply rooted in Leskovac, change over the last couple of decades has been remarkable with the same kind of revitalization noted by Atanasov – a decrease in crime, increasing education, less domestic violence and less violence in the community, and a better relationship with the Serbian community. Šerif Bakić, a pastor of one of the churches, notes: 'Serbians could see the change in the Roma… Before Christ, the police could come seven times because of all the fighting… The government in Leskovac loves us because we have such a positive influence.'[57]

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Selected Qualities of Roma Christianity

As already noted, just as there is much diversity between Roma communities in CEE, so also one cannot speak monolithically about Roma Christianity – as if the qualities, emphases, expressions, theology, and

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[54] For example, J.S., now the pastor of a small Roma church in Bosnia, converted to Christianity from Islam when he was 19. Although his father was initially supportive, he threatened to disown him when he wanted to marry in a church. The conflict eventually progressed to his father renouncing him on television and privately threatening to kill him until eventually undergoing a change of heart towards his son. Interview with J.S. by the author (Bosnia, 2012).

[55] Interview with Selim Alijević by the author (Leskovac, Serbia, 2012).

[56] Estimates coming from Miki Kamborović (Jagodina, Serbia, 2015) and Goran Saitovic (Leskovac, Serbia, 2013).

[57] Interview with Šerif Bakić by the author (Leskovac, Serbia, 2012).

missional intent were all the same in each context. However, from observation and interviews, is possible to trace various themes emerging from multiple communities and countries. These themes are important when considering the opportunities, challenges and areas of further research into the Roma church and its contribution to the global church. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but similar to the 'snapshots', and several themes have been chosen.

The Vulnerable Church

Because of Romani history, Roma churches and Christians often operate in a position of 'vulnerability' shaped by their poverty and relationship with the outside community. Countless stories emerging from Roma communities tell of unspeakable suffering caused by poverty, abuse, violence, alcoholism, rejection and discrimination. Of particular note is the suffering of Roma women who bear the double stigma of having low value in their own culture as well as the mainstream culture. The suffering is not just physical, but also in terms of identity and self-worth. One Roma pastor described how, before God's love had transformed his own self-worth, his identity had been marred by the constant ill treatment by teachers throughout his schooling: 'It is hurting and damaging your life. It makes you feel insecure… it is one thing to be discriminated against but it is another to accept that you are lower than others… I couldn't imagine sitting down in the company of white (Serbian) people.'[58]

Most pastors have a strong sense of burden for serving their own people, desiring not just repentance but also to help uplift their situation. Bakić notes: 'We are thinking that someone must save the Roma people. And who will besides the Roma people?'[59] Part of this is because of a history of neglect by the church; the other part lies in the ability of Roma leaders to understand incarnationally the suffering of their people from their own experiences. A Roma leader in Croatia testifies, for example, that her difficult childhood and trials as a young teenage bride helps her empathize and identify with the people she now serves.[60] Many church leaders are quite poor themselves, because of limited education or job opportunities. Therefore, when they exhort their people to trust in the Lord's provision, their own situation testifies to this reality.[61]

This vulnerability often acts as a pathway to the presence of a God who suffers along with the weak and oppressed. One can see the nearness of

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[58] Interview with Miki Kamberović by the author (Jagodina, Serbia, January 2015). Other interviewees in Romania talked about seeing their parents or grandparents automatically defer to a non-Roma or being instructed to 'keep your head down' (2015).
[59] Bakić, 2012.
[60] Nikolić, 2013.
[61] Of course, there are exceptions. Particularly in Romania, the author interviewed a few Roma pastors who were quite wealthy and had thriving businesses.

God to the vulnerable in the many signs, visions and healings that are part and parcel of Roma testimonies throughout CEE. One man talked about his relationship to the story of Jesus weeping in John chapter 11, how he 'cries in his inner man' when he reads it to know that when you are suffering, Jesus is crying with you.[62] A vulnerable church also acts as a powerful sign to the world and points the global church to mission in the way of Christ: Jesus' self-emptying of privilege and status in order to identify with humanity and eventually conquer the power of death through his death and resurrection.

A Church of the Supernatural

In many communities, magic, curses, a belief in spirits and a holistic spiritual worldview are part of the invisible landscape – this may be another reason for the abundance of supernatural encounters and signs. Visions, dreams, healings, or healing testimonies often play a role in conversion, discipleship and leadership. For example, in a small church in Croatia, at least half the adults are functionally illiterate, and yet some of the new Christians testify to a dream or vision of Jesus who provided reassurance of love and encouragement, exhortation or instruction.[63] Leaders also attest to being supernaturally guided by the direct leading of the Holy Spirit. One Roma pastor in Lom, Bulgaria, was illiterate at the fall of communism, but taught himself to read, using the Bible. He spoke of several instances in his leadership where he felt the Holy Spirit telling him the next step in his ministry. For example, his own vision for building a new church was a small house to reflect the number currently converted, but he told how the Holy Spirit communicated the exact measurements of a new, large church that would accommodate the hundreds who would eventually join.[64]

Of course, because of an openness to dreams and visions, there can also be the problem of discerning the spirits. One German missionary in Bosnia noted the difficulty they had in discerning certain visions of Christ in their community. A Roma pastor who planted a church in Apatin, Serbia, reported that his village had a 'spirit of witchcraft' so they often had to weed out false prophets.[65]

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A Church for all Peoples

Although exclusion has been the dominant theme in regard to non-Roma churches' relationship to Roma, many Roma pastors in South-eastern

[62] Interview with Florian Tănasie by the author (Sadova, Romania, January 2013.)
[63] This information comes from ongoing observation and participation by the author in the church.
[64] Interview with Ilia Georgiev by the author (Lom, Bulgaria, January 2015).
[65] Interview with Zvezdan Bakić by the author (Apatin, Serbia, May 2012).

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Europe have a theological problem with the idea of a 'Roma church'.[66] Ironically, in contrast to many non-Roma church leaders who argue that it is better for the Roma to have their own church, Roma leaders interviewed in Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia specifically articulated their vision of having integrated churches, a 'church for all peoples'. One pastor in Serbia initially put up a church sign advertising it as a Roma church. After realizing that, if a Serbian walked by, he or she would never be inclined to enter, he took the sign down.[67]

However, with the reality that many would still not enter a Roma church, pastors argue that the Roma church must first demonstrate change, and that this will attract non-Roma to their doors. Bakić notes:

> We also think of the Serbian people, not just the Roma people. The Orthodox believers just go once or twice to church for Christmas and Easter… But what about their souls? We are using [ways] just as Paul did when he did mission. He first went to the synagogue and witnessed first to the Jews and then went to the non-Jews. The Roma can forgive and work with all people. But the Serbians are not going to receive you… you must first be an example. To see Jesus in us.

Serving the greater community is another strategy employed to witness to the non-Roma. Pastors in Serbia related the change in community attitudes when they served the entire community by bringing sheets and blankets to a no-frills hospital or painting a local school. Such service challenges the societal stereotypes of Roma being dependent or parasitic on society.

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A Church in Movement

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Most Roma in CEE are sedentary; however, migration, emigration and immigration have been a reality throughout Romani history, 'both as the outcome of dynamic change in order to adapt to new circumstances and as a response to historical opportunities'.[68] For example, after the abolition of Romani slavery, a mass exodus of Vlach Roma at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have about four million descendants spread round Europe and the Americas.[69] Since the fall of communism, many Roma (family units, multiple families from a community, or individuals) have migrated to other EU states or countries in search of economic

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[66] Preliminary research indicates that this attitude is not as prevalent in Romania where the tribal lines between Roma groups appear much less porous. However, more research would need to be done to say anything conclusive.
[67] Conversations with Miki Kamberović by the author (Budapest, Hungary, June 2015).
[68] Reyniers, quoted in Yaron Matras, 'Romani Migrations in the Post-Communist Era: Their Historical and Political Significance', in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs,* 13:2 (2000), 34.
[69] Matras, 'Romani Migrations', 34.

opportunities or in response to racism and/or hostility.[70] Placing this in the larger context of historical exclusion, Yaron Matras explains this movement as 'non-identification and non-confidence' in the systems of the larger societies whereby they 'seek individual alternatives rather than aim at participating in collective processes of change' in their home societies.[71] In other words, they do not trust a government system to take them into account, so they look for their own solutions and possibilities.

In this context, migration is not always or even usually permanent – many retain their home in their countries of origin and return periodically. Due to lack of research, it is difficult to ascertain accurate statistics, particularly in terms of Roma migrant churches that pop up where parts of clan groups have moved. Sometimes there is a circular path of movement where one or more family members of a given household are in Western Europe for a period of time looking for work before returning. Since 1990, the main countries of origin for migration (whether temporary, semi-permanent or permanent) have been found to be Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Romania, and – since 1995 – Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The main destination countries have been Germany, Italy, France, Austria and, more recently, the UK, Canada, Belgium and Finland.[72]

This movement and migration is both fraught with challenge and possibilities for Roma churches in Eastern Europe. Pastors in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria all relate to the difficulties of establishing regular discipleship, the development of leadership teams, and the growth of the church when their members are migrating or constantly in movement for economic purposes. Often it is not just one family from a church that leaves, but several. This can leave the pastor, particularly if it is a small church, struggling to bear the leadership load on his own and having difficulty bringing the people to mature discipleship.[73]

On the other hand, because most Roma groups are collective in nature, they will migrate or move as a family, several families, or as a group from their clan.[74] If they are coming from a particular church, the pastor may appoint a deacon so that their small migrant church may be seen as an extension of the primary church back in their country of origin. In this way, Roma churches based in Eastern Europe have extensions all over Western

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[70] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 'The Situation of Roma EU citizens moving to and settling in other EU Member States', Conference Report, November 2009. This report focused on the destination countries of France, Spain, Italy, the UK and Finland.
[71] Matras, 'Romani Migrations', 36.
[72] Matras, 'Romani Migrations', 35.
[73] For example, interviews by the author with the leadership of Râmnicu Sârat (Romania, July 2015), Ilia Georgiev (Lom, Bulgaria, January 2105), Đeno Nikolić (Darda, Croatia, 2014), and conducted over Skype with Sokrat Apostolovski (Macedonia, December 2015).
[74] Matras, 'Romani Migrations', 36-37.

Europe. For example, the above-mentioned church in Toflea, Romania, reports that only 1,200 members out of 4,000 now live in Toflea.[75]

Although it might be easy to assume that these pathways of migration and movement naturally host mission, more study and research would need to be done to see how much these satellite churches look missionally beyond their own Roma community or tribe to another Roma group or beyond to the host culture. Like many who migrate, they face the challenges of language and adaptation (although they may indeed find another Roma group which speaks the same dialect of Romani), but they might also encounter the additional challenge of a host country's preconceived negative images of the Roma. However, Roma churches have the unique possibility of placing their ongoing movement in the context of God's mission – to train those who are leaving for work to think of themselves as missionaries to whoever crosses their paths.

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Challenges, Themes, and Significance

The Myth of Separate but Equal

The concept of Roma churches raises a question that is quite common in multicultural settings: Is it better for Roma churches to remain Roma churches as opposed to having multi-ethnic churches? This question is multi-faceted and can easily be whitewashed to argue for separation based on cultural preference, when it may only be a smokescreen to mask an exclusionary racism that does not want to deal with the problems that would certainly surface.

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However, the issues of prejudice are not just on the non-Roma side; the Roma can also be ethnocentric in regard to other Roma groups and the *Gadje*. Some Roma may not be willing to receive or listen to the message or instruction from the non-Roma.[76] One Roma pastor related how he grew up in a village that, although having pleasant 'surface' relationships between Romanians and Roma, could never move deeper because of a 'boundary, a wall between the two. They don't want to pass. They like each other because they live in the same village. But somewhere the relationship stops'.[77] In Sorin Gog's study on Roma in Romania, his informants saw the church as a place for the ethnic majority, even if the priest and pastor was active in wanting to include them, and therefore chose not to attend or be a part.[78]

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[75] Interview with Vasile Căpitanu by the author (Toflea, Romania, July 2015).
[76] Bakić, 2012.
[77] Interview with Marius Constantin by the author (Timișoara, Romania, 2013).
[78] Sorin Gog, 'Post-Socialist Religious Pluralism: How Do Religious Conversions of Roma Fit into the Wider Landscape? From Global to Local Perspectives', in A. Boscoboinik and F. Ruegg (eds), *Transitions: Nouvelles identités rom en Europe centrale et orientale* (Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2009), 100-04.

Although there are always stories that contrast with this, interviews with individuals from Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bulgaria echo this theme. There are centuries of exclusion from the majority culture, but there are also centuries of Roma becoming accustomed to exclusion and assuming it exists when in fact it may not. When Mariana Tănasie was a teenager, she assumed a Romanian church would despise her, perceiving her to be 'a gypsy of no value'. She was shocked, however, when a Romanian church adopted her very poor family while they were working nearby as brickmakers, inviting them into their homes: 'When it is the first time in your life that a Romanian family would take you in and sit you at the table and give you a glass and silverware, to eat at the table. I felt I was a king…' When the church came and visited their camp of improvised tents, the Romanians took turns cooking for them, and brought them beds and a table. This love changed Mariana's life: 'They did not make any distinction between the gypsy or Romanian… it was then that I understood there was a God and he could create such love.'[79]

For both the Roma and the *Gadje*, these perceptions, assumptions, constructed images, and certainly racism, erect complex, mutually reinforcing barriers of isolation and separation that present a serious challenge to the church's participation in God's mission in CEE. If Paul admonishes the Thessalonians not to 'quench the spirit' in the context of Christian conduct towards each other, then certainly such barriers in Christian mission would have the potential to quench the Spirit's work (1 Thess. 5:19). One Roma pastor in Macedonia spoke of this phenomenon in Eastern Europe as a 'curse', calling it the 'chains of nationalism'. His vision is to have all nationalities – Albanians, Roma and Macedonians, whom he claims are all racist in their own right – to be a part of his church.[80]

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Reconciliation and Love – The Linchpin of Mission in CEE?

Given the serious nature of these issues, the theological and missiological justifications for pursing reconciliation and unity cannot be ignored. With the view that mission is understood through *missio Dei,* it is God's Triune being that is the very foundation of mission. God the Father initiates mission, the sent Son incarnates mission in the world, and the Spirit empowers mission.[81] Critical to this is the relationality of the Trinity as part of its very essence – a network of relationality that can neither be separated from God's ongoing redemption in human history nor from the church's role in God's mission. As Timothy Tennent points out: 'The church has been ordained by God to reflect the Trinity through redemptive actions in

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[79] Tănasie, 2013.
[80] Interview with Tefik Musoski by the author (Bitola, Macedonia, January 2015).
[81] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions,* 75.

the world.'[82] As we enter into relationship with God, we step into God's family as sons and daughters, and into the community of God, which should reflect the Trinity in love and mutual self-giving.

Given this foundation and the historic relationship between Roma and *Gadje*, it can be argued that reconciliation and love between the two groups bears witness to the Kingdom's holistic redemption, and has the possibility of transforming culture.[83] In this intersection of living transformed relationships in the midst of societal and cultural tensions, the church's prophetic voice will sound like a ringing bell. Because of deeply rooted images, concrete and intentional initiatives need to be thoughtfully promoted by the church, offering repentance, forgiveness and a chance to develop relationships to see 'the other' as a human being. For example, in 2015, the Reformed Church in Hungary's Roma mission organized a conference for reconciliation for peoples of different ethnic groups, among them Roma. During the conference, the participants listened to each other's stories, repented and admitted their own feelings of hatred, superiority, exclusion and scapegoating, and then received forgiveness from 'the other'.[84]

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Why Won't You Be Like Us? The Need for Kenotic Mission

After centuries of policies trying to fit the Roma into society, there has been a shift in attitudes captured by the phrase 'nothing for us without us'. Like many other historical mission endeavours, mission to the Roma has often been clothed with the values and requirements of the surrounding culture – associating Roma lifestyle with being 'non-Christian' and thus requiring an adoption of the lifestyle of the predominant civilization of the time. In other contexts, this paternalistic attitude has been flushed out and brought to justice in the literature and mission praxis. However, it all too frequently persists in attitudes towards the Roma today, seen in both subtle and also overt ways. Sometimes it appears as 'benevolent god-playing' – that is, using the poor to exert and promote a reputation or superior technology while keeping a relational distance. At other times, it appears as more overt paternalistic control, an expressed frustration of 'they just won't behave as they should'.[85] There is often a subject-object dynamic when it comes to Roma communities – are the Roma mere objects to be saved or also subjects in God's mission? Do only their souls matter, or do their bodies also matter?

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[82] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions,* 56.
[83] Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (eds), *Edinburgh 2010 Witnessing to Christ Today* (two volumes; Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 208-09.
[84] 'Roma and Non-Roma People apologized to each other in Balatonszárszó', Reformed Church in Hungary, 2015: http://reformatus.hu/mutat/10635
[85] Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 73.

Clearly, there is often a power differentiation – based on money, status, access to resources and relational power – when an outsider enters a Roma community. Jayakumar Christian's concept of 'marred identity' is part and parcel of entrenched poverty: no longer knowing who you are or believing you have a vocation of value.[86] When the assumption of power collides with this, mission can and will be skewed. On the one hand, there is an identity that assumes they have the answers, and on the other, an identity that bows to status of power and money.

Further, paternalistic ideas can unintentionally enter a community with good motives. For example, there is a danger of merely adopting a western neo-liberal idea of development as part of an adequate missiological approach without taking seriously the nature of transformational development within the Roma culture (as it varies from community to community). One Roma leader from Bulgaria, after years of seeing discouraged missionaries and failed projects, urges mission efforts to take into consideration the 'epistemology' of the Roma people, arguing that development must make sense within the Roma understanding or it will not be effective.[87]

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And therein lies the two-pronged challenge – there is an increasing awareness of the Roma, and with this awareness comes the danger of mission groups flooding communities with project ideas and money. Are non-Roma Christians willing to consider seriously what human flourishing means in a Roma context, and as defined by the Roma? What does transformation look like in the Roma context when it cannot be separated from the vice-like grip of the nation-state and socio-economic viability? These are serious questions that Roma leaders must grapple with and communicate to non-Roma mission practitioners and church leaders. Aleksandar Subotin, who has started multiple churches and house groups in north-western Serbia, says: 'Why do white (non-Roma) people think it is not really that important to learn the culture? Is it because they think the culture is just stealing, lazy, and poor and uneducated, and that is all the people are made up of?'[88]

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Thus, outsiders who set aside their positions of social, political and economic power demonstrate Christ's own incarnational and self-emptying model of mission. Entering into a community in a learning posture, accepting Roma hospitality to enter homes and eat together, fostering trust through relationships, begins to build a community of solidarity. This process must entail mutual giving and receiving, and together walking towards transformation.[89]

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[86] Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 77.
[87] Interview with Radko Kratsov by author (2014).
[88] Interview by the author (Kucura, Serbia, March 2012).
[89] Balia and Kim (eds), *Edinburgh*, 124.

This mutuality enables missionaries to have their own cultural assumptions and forms of Christianity challenged. By being with the Roma in their spaces and listening, there is the opportunity to deepen one's own knowledge of God and his mission. As Lamin Sanneh expressed, if the missionary assumes that God has preceded her into a given culture, '"… to discover His [God's] true identity, the missionary would have to delve deep into the local culture" to discover "the hidden reality of this divine presence"'.[90]

However, this setting aside of power must take into consideration the structures and systems of injustice that enable poverty. A 'liberative action in solidarity' can balance mutuality and a conscious use of social and political power to work towards reconciliation, justice and peace between Roma communities and the larger societies.

Theological Education

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Theological education, it has been argued, is key to an ongoing renewal of the church, commitment to unity, and for 'dialogue between church and society'.[91] In many Roma communities, theological education or Bible training is an expressed need. Sometimes this is due to church multiplication and church growth, although it is hard to determine what kind of growth it is. For example, a Roma pastor in Romania related that at least some of the growth comes from troubling causes: 'A man with a lot of power, if he repents, he opens the church and everyone has to listen to him. He doesn't know anything, he can't read or write, but he wants to be the boss… not just the pastor, but the boss.' He goes on to say that a big problem is a lack of understanding of the Scriptures and low levels of literacy and schooling.[92]

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There are many challenges regarding theological education for church leaders. A high percentage of lower educational levels in Roma communities continue to be the reality in many places in Eastern Europe, although in some contexts there have been some substantial changes. However, if high school has not been completed, they cannot be accepted at most theological colleges.[93] Another challenge is the often seasonal nature of the work schedule for families in rural settings. Finally, theological education needs to take into account the particular cultural, socio-economic

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[90] Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 70.
[91] Balia and Kim (eds), *Edinburgh*, 157.
[92] Constantin, 2013.
[93] Of course, there are exceptions to this. One young Roma from Albania received special permission to attend a Bible school in Tirana, even without finishing high school. He successfully graduated, but related how difficult the first year had been since he did not have the proper study skills, and only by 'the grace of God' and encouragement from his fellow students did he keep going. Interview with Andrea Avdiu by the author (Moravë, Albania, April 2015).

and spiritual issues in Roma communities, as well as those involving the history of Roma Christianity within the larger story of global Christianity.

Theological education that addresses these challenges would facilitate theology and missiology from a Romani perspective. Although almost certainly 'oral theologizing' happens all the time, greater written reflection would continue to strengthen, mature and orient Roma churches to their part in God's mission. In addition, the global church would benefit from the particular perspectives of Romani theologians and missiologists.

Conclusion

This chapter does not claim to be a comprehensive picture of Roma Christianity but rather, it offers snapshots and general themes in the context of the larger socio-political position of the Roma in CEE. The intersection between the general failure of public policy and EU initiatives to 'change' Roma communities and the growth of Roma Christianity has important implications for mission in CEE. Amidst enormous social, political and economic challenges, the Roma church is a vulnerable yet missionally active church, with an eye to transformation as the missional bridge to the non-Roma, and emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit as both present in suffering and bringing healing and deliverance. In this, Roma churches bear witness to the power of the gospel to the larger society. Their sense of mission to the non-Roma, despite ongoing discrimination, serves as a reminder to the global church – where all too often barriers stand between Christians – of the generous and reconciling love of Christ.

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However, missional challenges are formidable: how to understand holistic transformation in a way that honours Roma culture and yet can integrate with wider society? How to challenge the stereotypes and preconceived images held by both Roma and non-Roma? How can Roma and non-Roma Christians lay aside power and exclusivism to be shaped and changed by each other? How can Roma leaders join with non-Roma leaders to offer contextually appropriate theological training? Given these challenges, it is crucial that mission be approached holistically, rooted deeply in the foundations of a Triune God actively at work to reconcile and transform individuals, Roma communities, and wider society.

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In order for Roma Christianity to be better known within the mosaic of global Christianity, further research needs to be done – particularly in Romania, where the largest number of Roma live and the growth of charismatic and Pentecostal forms of Christianity have exploded in recent years. Also, more research needs to be done in regard to church plants in Western Europe as a result of economic migration. How missional are these churches? What kind of influence do they have? Next, as previously noted, many barriers continue to exist between Roma and non-Roma churches. How can a model of mission as reconciliation affect the landscape of CEE? Finally, more research needs to be done regarding the theologies of the

Roma church. How does theology emerging from these contexts challenge and enrich the global church?

If 'this is the time for the Roma', then this is the time to listen, learn and join in with what God is already initiating in Roma communities. As David Smith points out, Christians in the West cannot predict or control the form of Christianity emerging from the global South.[94] Likewise, non-Roma Christians in Europe cannot predict or control the shape and texture of Roma Christianity – the questions it asks and the issues it faces in contexts of poverty and oppression could serve to unsettle and reshape the forms of non-Roma Christianity that surround it.

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[94] David Smith, *Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization* (Nottingham, UK: IVP, 2003), 63.