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**BRANISLAV PAVLOV:  
HEAD OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN BUJANOVAC\***

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**INTRODUCTION:  
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN SOUTHEAST SERBIA**

The members of the Christian Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses in Niš are organized into two Assemblies, namely, Niš-South and Niš-North. They are, in terms of organization, related to the province that Vranje, Leskovac, Prokuplje, Aleksinac, Kruševac, Zaječar, Bor, Negotin i Kladovo also belong to. The baptized members and friends, about two hundred altogether, are enabled to meet, since 2005, twice a week in the Kingdom Hall in Skopljanska Street, 3 (Тодоровић 2011).

The Jehovah's Witnesses Assemblies also exist in Leskovac (about 80 believers gather together in a building in their ownership in the unpaved part of Dubočica Street, 131, next to the High School for Commerce) and in Vranje (about 100 believers, also in their own building in Đure Đakovića Street, 23/1); groups for prayers can be found in Aleksinac (20 members), Prokuplje (20 members), Bojnik (ten members) and Pirot (ten members).

The preaching service in the streets of Southeast Serbian cities are done together by brothers and sisters of Serbian and Roma nationality. Equally the Romas are represented also in other activities done by the Witnesses on a daily basis. In two Assemblies in Niš there are some forty members. The Assemblies in Leskovac (since 2006) and Vranje (since 2004) already have the constituted leadership from the Roma members living in Slavko Zlatanović settlement in Leskovac. In the same street in which there is Pentecostal „Tent Church“ lives, with his family, Danilo Veselović and so does, in Vranjska banja, Nenad Bekić. In Leskovac there are twenty-five and in Vranje thirty Romas, members of Jehovah's Witnesses (Тодоровић 2012b).

**BRANISLAV PAVLOV –  
HEAD OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN BUJANOVAC**

Branislav Pavlov was born in December, 1970, in Žablje; he grew up in the village of Kucura, raised by his parents, Mother Ljubica (maiden name

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Živojinović) and Father Milovan. His paternal grandfather was German, named Špele Mihalj, who got killed in the war so that Father took over his maternal family name Pavlov. He has a four years older sister, Sofija.

Branislav Pavlov spent his childhood in Kucura, with his grandfather Todor and grandmother Sofija, a small village in Vojvodina with the dominant Rusyns population and Bosnians originating from the regions at the bottom of Grmeč Mountain. His family belong to the natives of this country. They have always declared themselves as Serbs though the Rusyns also called them Tsigany or Roma though none of them spoke Roma language and though all of them had, for generations, village estates in their possession. Branislav Pavlov comes from a typical working class family that earned its living in the Carnex Company and schooled its children: sister Sofija completed economic-commercial high school while Branislav completed mechanical engineering one.

In Kucura there were three churches, namely, Roman Catholic, Greco Catholic and Orthodox ones. For Orthodox believers, the responsible priest came from neighboring Despotovo though his visits were sporadic, most often on Sundays and when the letters in the religious calendar were marked red (meaning a religiously significant date), partly because of poor interest on the part of local population. Yet, since Branislav's uncle was a caretaker in this church, he participated, together with his maternal grandmother, in religious rites since an early age (also did some cleaning, bell-ringing, etc.). As for religion, though, he knew little (except for making a cross or saying "Amen"). A tragic incident that brought about the death of a close cousin in his later childhood as well as the priest's explanation, in the memorial service, that the man was taken away from his wife and his three children by the will of God, caused his further refusal to go to church.

The first encounter with Jehovah's Witnesses he experienced while doing his army service in 1988 in Pula (Croatia). Everybody made a fun of the soldier who volunteered to do his service to his homeland; yet he adamantly avoided wearing a grey-olive green uniform. During an afternoon rest Pavlov was accidentally eavesdropping while the same soldier was discussing God, Trinity, Jehovah and other biblical topics with another soldier, latent Adventist. None of these did he understand. On his return from the army, his mother had over, in 1991, a group of Slovak women from Bački Petrovac as house guests. These women talked about God Jehovah; it is then that he recalled the conversation between the two young men from his army days. He, his sister and Mother, started their own studies of the Holy Scripture; however, the two women soon dropped it altogether once they found out that this new faith had no similarities with Orthodox Christianity that they had traditionally belonged to. But Branislav did not give up the newly discovered knowledge about God and for two years he traveled, by bus or bike, to the nearby village of Savino and, later on, to some thirty kilometers far Bački Petrovac to attend the meetings of three families, two Montenegro and one Slovak ones. Finally, after having discarded secular vices like cigarettes and drink, in 1993, he became a Jehovah's Witness – Announcer. He also gave up his job

as a physical worker in a nearby construction company and committed himself to preaching: for half a month he did numerous seasonal agricultural works and the other half he tirelessly preached to the people living in the neighboring villages. He also participated in the formation of a cell of believers in Vrbas.

In 1996, Branislav got an offer from the BETEL<sup>1</sup>, Belgrade, to move to Kosovo, to Peć and to proceed with his missionary work there as a full-time Announcer in a special religious service (ph. 1 and 2). He spent three years in a mostly Islam environment learning Albanian. There he met his future wife Irena,<sup>2</sup> that he got married to in February, 1999. He formed a group for biblical studies comprised of Albanians and Romas. Already in March were they forced to leave Kosovo because of the war developments. His home was burned down, namely, the house he and his wife had obtained from the Bosnian family that had accepted the Truth and converted to Jehovah's Witnesses. Homeless, they went to Montenegro, to the city of Ulcinj where, relying on their knowledge of Albanian, they spread their faith among the local Albanians as well as among some forty thousand refugees from Kosovo, especially from the territory of Peć. They were also active in Bar and Podgorica where they formed a separate group.

In the year of 2000, they were assigned the city of Šabac as their new address in the preaching service. They remained there for three years while, at the same time, visiting groups from Valjevo. In the year of 2002, they moved to Čačak where they remained for no less than five years, also covering the territory of Gornji Milanovac, Požega, Užice and Novi Pazar. The following two years they spent in Kikinda (ph. 3); last three years they have been living in Bujanovac (ph. 4).

### JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN BUJANOVAC

Before Branislav and his wife came to Bujanovac, their brothers in faith from Vranje had held once a week a meeting with some fifteen interested Romas in a private house.

“I have noticed that Romas are very religious people. They believe in everything; they observe Islam and, yet, these days, for example, on St George's Day, they regularly practice the rites meant to be performed on that very day. I make jokes with them, I tell them that they do all this just to avoid hurting some god! They do it for fear of making any god, by chance, angry with them! Unfortunately, they ex-

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<sup>1</sup> The word has its origin in the Hebrew word *betel* meaning “the house of God.” Formally, this is the official title for units of Jehovah's Witnesses all over the world through which the preaching work is organized and monitored.

<sup>2</sup> Irena comes from Predejane, Serbia. As a daughter of a military man, her life was that of frequent family migration from one place to another (she was, for example, born in Postojna, Slovenia). After her father had got killed in an automobile accident, she moved, together with her mother, to Belgrade where her brother was born. In the eighties the whole family accepted the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses.

press their religiosity in the ways which draw them to trouble, for instance, they deal with spiritualism a lot; there is much bewitching and magic which is a very ugly thing. I was literally stopped here in the street, in Bujanovac, by the people asking me to study the Holy Scripture although they declared themselves publicly as followers of Islam. It means that they kept giving to the hodja the needed material contributions each quarter of a year; it means that some kept on going to the mosque though this attendance was not very popular among them and it possibly was only on Fridays for jummuah, as they say. The attendance became more intensive with the opening up of a Roma mosque in Bujanovac; especially in the last two years there has been somewhat more insistence on Islam affiliation among the local Romas, partly because of that part of the Roma who have shown interest in the biblical Truth that we are preaching.”

Three years later, the existing community is still lacking the status of an assembly though it has grown to thirty announcers and two or three times more of those who study the Bible and try to order their lives according to the required Christian patterns of regular behavior in faith. Except for Branislav and Irena, the recently arrived couple from France with the task to help the community strengthening and a Serbian woman named Biljana Simić, all of them are Roma. In fact, these are several Roma families that have accepted, collectively, Jehovah. There are, among the followers of Truth, very well off individuals, materially well provided for or even rich, just as there are those who lead a very hard life, who live as tenants in other people’s homes and who hardly manage to make ends meet. Before God, though, they are all equal in their love for Him; with joy do they greet each other before the meeting begins, they applaud to the participants in the debates held in the theological school, together they sing songs to Jehovah and explain the quotations from the *Watchtower*, which is official newsletter of Jehovah’s Witnesses at the global level. A part of the city in which religious gatherings are taking place is called “Morava 87”; it is located in a belt where the Roma *mahala* ends while the Albanian one begins.<sup>3</sup>

Interest in discussions is also present among the Albanians in Bujanovac and Preševo, especially among the more educated ones; yet no one has decided as yet to actively attend the meetings and study the Bible not only because of a great number of Romas in the established community but also because of the national and the religious identity intertwined among the Albanian people in the south of Serbia, in Kosovo and Albania.

“In the last three years as I have been living here in Bujanovac, we have traditionally, in the month of March, held our Memorial in the local Cultural Center. We have invited both Serbs and Albanians; we have even printed invitations in Albanian. Still, among more than

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<sup>3</sup> The settlements inhabited by Albanians are better in terms of infrastructure as confirmed by an asphalt road leading to the Kingdom Halls (as the Witnesses call their holy places), that is a salon on the ground floor of a three-storey house.



four hundred attendants, hardly thirty people did not belong to the Roma ethnic group.

A similar situation can also be found in our immediate surroundings. Let's say, a group of Albanians from Macedonia was dealt with by Italian Jehovah's Witnesses who preached the word of God in Albanian (mastered for that very purpose) and yet, no special results were achieved. I relate this to the specific, local way of looking at religion: as a national minority in this territory, Albanians have closely connected their identity with Islam and, thus, they can interpret the interference of some other religion as an assault upon their nationality. Coming to the Jehovah's Witnesses meetings could represent, in that context, the lack of loyalty to one's own religion.

The same case is with Rusyns who are mostly present in Ruski Krstur and Kucura in Vojvodina, namely the village I also come from. As a small Greco-Catholic community, they are very closed when it comes to accepting some other religious belief though they do not refuse the literature we are offering and they are listening to our preaching. But the conversion to other religion would represent, from their perspective, an act of betrayal of their own nation."

Pavlov performs his missionary activities between Preševo and Surdulica, including the neighboring villages, but the focus is mostly on the work with Bujanovac community, both regarding its maintenance and its further strengthening. In organizational terms, Bujanovac group belongs to the present Assembly of Vranje. Recently they were given a chance to get together in a majestic three-storey house of a brother who is temporarily working in Sweden and who let them use a salon space of eighty square meters on the ground floor (ph. 5 and 6). In this way they made it easier for them to cover considerable organizational costs as well as to solve the problem of gathering together, at one place, an increased group of believers for weekly meetings, on Thursdays and Sundays.

### **PRINCIPLES OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITY**

In the charges of the public-opinioned anti-cult movement in Serbia small religious communities are constantly accused of proselytism supported by ample economic donations; in the same way Jehovah's Witnesses are under the severe criticism of both Muslims and Orthodox in Bujanovac. Pavlov does not deny that the faith he belongs to takes care of its believers since without genuine love for those close to you there is no genuine love for God. But he stresses that this care is firstly motivated by the strivings for a complete spiritual renewal of the existing body of believers:

"The response to this question is complex since it assumes the understanding of the spirit of the Holy Scripture. The values stressed in the Holy Scripture are not of material nature; neither do they assume any well-being. Many new religious communities today play this card: they offer to the believers some packages, gifts or humani-

tarian aid. However, Jehovah's Witnesses do not do this; we give our time for free to people; we teach them how to increase the quality of their lives by changing their present habits. This change can, in the long run, contribute to some kind of material success since the people who used to spend their money on cigarettes, alcohol and entertainment can now save the same money or learn how to use it in a much wiser way.... There are schools in which we educate people, for free, how to read and write; in the beginning, we went to their homes but when the number of the interested grew, we have established a whole class and assigned one of our members to work on their literacy.

On the other hand, Jehovah's Witnesses do not leave their followers without bread. As their Head, I am very well acquainted with the ways of life of our brothers and sisters and when all the social help is exhausted, we help each other. This refers to health care if needed. We do not boast about it; the Bible itself teaches us to be modest and satisfied with what we have. I cannot deny that some people, at first, visit our community for this reason: they enter our homes to see how we live, how we behave properly at our meetings, dressed in suits and with ties, how decent and kind we are; they might think that we gain something by this, that we are rich people."

To the question concerning the vital reasons for an increased interest of the local Romas in the Bible studies, the Head of Jehovah's Witnesses in Bujanovac replies that in the beginning these are always conspicuous changes in behavior and outlook of the mature population of believers (ph. 7):

"Here, in Bujanovac, people firstly see what their eyes see: they see kindness, goodness and an increased quality of life; this comes first. Even those people who do not come to our meetings defend Jehovah's Witnesses in public places, saying 'They are better than others' and this they claim only on the basis of the perceived changes of behavior."

The preaching is done in Serbian which is not any particular problem for Romas since the majority of them understand it and speak it in daily communication, especially young generation (ph. 8). Once a month it is done in Romany. The increase of the religious knowledge is fostered by some brochures translated into the Arlian dialect (*You can be close to God* and *Who can perform God's will?*) otherwise used for communication among the Romas of the Bujanovac region. Despite the current problems the leaders run into in their evangelical work (incomplete standardization of Romany language), it seems that the future *missionary-ministering needs of local churches* will be the major influence on the intensity of translation of religious service literature.

"I did not support the use of Romany language in the religious service discourse since there is not standardized Romany dictionary; neither are there any precise Romany words for particular biblical questions and religious topics. In time I have changed my mind. Why? Well,

here it is: I observe the reaction of our Roma believers during the religious service in Romany: they feel fine on hearing their language. They are pleased for hearing how efforts are made to explain, even in Romany language, all those biblical things they could only hear about in the majority Serbian language. Though they sometimes admit they do not quite understand particular religious themes. That is why I recognize the obligation to perform, in near future, standardization of Romany language, to define common expressions for all concepts including the most important religious issues.”

Despite some experiences from site research (Todorović 2012d) that could support the thesis that the Roma's joining the religious communities of Protestant provenience was motivated by the national affiliation of their prominent members, Pavlov emphasizes the fact that the believers in Bujanovac made this decision firstly motivated by their inner religious needs, independently of the national identity of their religious authorities.

“National affiliation would be of no importance. Maybe personal characteristics; some people are more reserved while there are people who are open and accessible in communication. We are of all kinds, that is present unlike the importance of national affiliation. I have told you that I have not been taught to be a Roma; neither have I been chosen to come here because I am a Roma. Even when these people here see me, they call me ‘Gadjo’ meaning ‘A Serb has come’ without saying I am their man. And all other people who come from other places are welcome by local Romas with all their hearts, especially when they show love and understanding.”

### **REACTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT TO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES ACTIVITIES**

Reactions to Roma Jehovah's Witnesses among their co-habitants are diverse. In the city itself there are strictly defined spheres of everyday living between Albanians and Romas: they live in separate *mahalas* (city quarters), the places for going-out and partying are also separate; in a word, they do not mix.<sup>4</sup> Business contacts and common jobs are the only chance for their interests to meet; also, some of them make fun of the unusual practice of local Romas to put on their suits twice a week and to wear a tie and thus dressed up to go to their meetings in the Kingdom Hall as the building in which Jehovah's Witnesses members gather together. Others, on the other hand, welcome considerable shifts in the habits and behavior that are evident in newly-converted members although, officially, many of them have not comp-

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<sup>4</sup> It seemed so interesting, however, to observe a situation that we observed from the balcony of Pavlov's flat in a building, at the very center of the town, opposite to the City Municipality: namely, general vivacity of an Albanian city wedding was made even more vivacious by Roma musicians playing their instruments.

leted the period of the Holy Scripture study or the announcers have not been baptized yet.

Generally speaking, with further increase of responses to the preached biblical truths, firstly from Roma homes, the Head of the Witnesses accept the possibility of religious intolerance shown to them. Pavlov does not hide in our conversation that in the last six months he has received site reports about provocations towards declared believers, firstly in the service of preaching. Yet he still counts upon positive effects of his missionary work, that is, respect shown to them by surrounding public opinion because of their way of life and the seriousness with which they behave towards others.

“I had an experience,” says Pavlov, “two years ago; I interfered in a most unhappy event happening in a street in broad daylight. An Albanian boy tried to rape a Roma girl. I defended the girl and sent the boy away. The news spread all over our small place. Even police inspectors did not wonder at my reaction knowing that someone who assumes to be a Jehovah’s Witness should react in that way. People have respect for what we are; they do not prevent us from having our meetings; I have already told you that we have been having our Memorial, in the last three years, in Bujanovac Cultural Center.

We are happy because of the way people regard the changes taking place in the home of our believers: houses are cleaner, people are more faithful, women are more obedient, children are better in school. Here it is: we openly persuade Romas to send their children to school; they have to accept the state requirements for compulsory eight year schooling; many have changed their attitude to school. Or, though this is not a literal biblical demand, I still say to the young, ‘You cannot be a Jehovah’s Witness unless you have all positive grades in school.’ At their age, their only obligation is to learn, to regularly attend their classes, to be paragons to others in completing their tasks. Now, here they come to boast to me how they no longer have a poor grade in a certain school subject and how they are pleased with it.”

### **COOPERATION OF JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES AND OTHER RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

Jehovah’s Witnesses members see themselves as useful members of social community stressing, most of all, the virtues promoted by the Christian teaching and insisting on their observance by the people of Bujanovac and in their own ranks. However, they do not recommend themselves to municipal authorities and actors of local political scene as partners in planning common actions thus paying strict attention to separate biblical mission from daily political developments.

“One initiative on my part which was oriented towards municipal structures, at the time when I officially moved to Bujanovac, was a



petition to let us use a certain municipal premise for our followers' gathering; we would regularly pay the rent. But there was no understanding for it, firstly on the part of the Serbs who headed these institutions; neither was it, later, with Albanians."

Neither in terms of religious contacts are the things any better. Pavlov says that he has informal contacts with the representatives of the *Roma Islam Community*. To be more precise, in 2008, in the Roma *mahala* in the New Settlement a Roma mosque was opened up and named "Dženet (Paradise) Mosque", next to the main City Mosque which is mostly attended by Albanians. Once did a Roma, Ali Dermaku<sup>5</sup> obtain a permission from the leader of the Islam Community Hamdija Jusufspahić that he could do the prayers and bowings since he reads well Qur'an, that is he got the right to perform the duties of *imam* in Roma settlements. When the construction of a religious shrine for the gatherings of Roma Muslims ready to properly observe Islam rites was completed, Ali Dermaku was promoted to the status of a *hodja* though he has no formal knowledge obtained in a religious school.

The very moment when those Romas who converted to Christianity started to refuse giving usual monthly allowances to the Islam authorities, Jehovah's Witnesses were recognized as a religious group jeopardizing the former almost monolithic affiliation to Islam (with a few Orthodox Romas). Pavlov was criticized for belonging to the "rich outsiders" who buy local Romas with financial help and donations in food and clothes. Younger Romas from the *mahala* in which the religious shrine of Jehovah's Witnesses was situated, were instructed to disturb – by knocking on the widows and making all sorts of noises<sup>6</sup> – the regular meetings as was properly reported to the police headquarters. In the negotiations with Secretary of the Roma Islam Community Nazif Mamutović, attempts were made to draw their attention to the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses in Bujanovac were not obliged to ask for any work permission from any religious communities including the Islam Community which should not disturb them in their peaceful observance of the given religious duties. With the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church they have no relationships established whatsoever.

From other small religious communities, Jehovah's Witnesses are distinguished firstly because of their committed field work, that is, their *preaching service* when they visit city and village households, distribute religious literature and discuss religious subjects with individuals interested in them. In carrying out this task, they meet with all sorts of reactions, mostly negative ones: starting with silent protests because of disturbances to open threats and rare but still occurring attacks at the physical integrity of brothers and sisters in Roma and Albanian *mahalas*. Involved in all this are equally Albanians and Serbs as well as Romas.

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<sup>5</sup> The first of the Romas in Bujanovac who has gone to *haji* (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

<sup>6</sup> Since they know it is a object in private ownership of the man of their own ethnic group, from the same *mahala*, there was no serious disturbance of safety such as breaking glass or ruining the facade.

“You know, I, as a non-Roma, find it difficult to accept that a Roma can threaten a Roma, that he can curse him and drive him away from his threshold. Never before have I seen Romas treating each other in this way.”

Despite all, Pavlov states that all this is due to the ignorance of the way of work of Jehovah’s Witnesses on the part of the majority population and that this kind of treatment they receive will not discourage them in their further religious activities. The preaching of God’s words from the Bible for the sake of providing for salvation of all those who accept religious instruction is what they will go on doing equally among Albanians and Romas. Moreover, they find national affiliation of those they are addressing has no role to play whatsoever but they are aware that more successful results in the mission activities among Romas can be achieved by the believers of Roma nationality and so can, among Albanians, the believers of Albanian nationality. For now, exclusively Romas pay visits to Roma and Albanian homes.

### **JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES’ VIEWS OF LIFE IN THE BORDER REGION**

Now, as an inhabitant of Southeast Serbia, previously as a resident of some other border regions such as Kosovo, Pavlov expresses full understanding of the problems brought about by the life in the fringe geographic regions which are of state interest (ph. 9). He knows all about the troubles of ordinary people doomed to subsist far from urban centers which means poor infrastructure, poor communication links, distance from important health care institutions, unemployment, low wages. Through a special prism all these problems should be regarded with reference to Romas. Uneducated and thus deprived of an otherwise poor offer from the world of employment, they fight for their physical subsistence among Albanians and Serbs who find their fight for supremacy more important than care about poor neighbors of Roma nationality. The situation, unfortunately, does not get any better in the cases when the labor market receives young Romas with completed primary or even high schools. An almost hopeless situation, at least briefly, was improved, by the activities of numerous non-government organizations which offered programs of limited duration. They were concerned with coexistence of members of different national communities and short-term solutions of accrued existential problems. Not rarely have these efforts been an opportunity for new controversies since the privileged members of Roma ethnos achieved their narrow partial interests without caring about the needs of a wider number of their compatriots.

“Listen, this group of ours in Bujanovac is very ‘colorful’ in the educational terms; at least one third of the members are with completed high school, especially young ones. At least in their case the problem of finding a job should not be on the agenda. And yet, what happens? Regardless of their achievement in schooling, they still lack

career prospects here. What motivation is, then, all this for all other Romas who are at present undergoing educational process? When I recommend them to send their children to school, as I constantly do to Roma parents, they reply with a question, 'What will they gain by completing schools? They'd better help me sell stockings on the flea market.' The level of integration into a local community, here, in Bujanovac, does not rise at all with the Romas achieving higher educational levels; they are still marginalized as before (underlined by D. T. and J.Ž.).”

The problem gets additional complexity by an inflow of Protestantism into Roma lives with lasting implications for their identity (Đorđević 2009). The traditional religious-confessional image of the Roma as an inheritor of Orthodox Christianity and Sunnite Islam has been disfigured though the Orthodox and Islam priesthood has never paid any special attention to Romas as actual and potential believers in their ranks (for instance, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islam Community have never established any special bodies for missionary activities among Romas<sup>7</sup>). Local religious authorities stayed away from Roma ghettos in which daily activities were taking place while their confessional brothers looked at them suspiciously during temple prayers or holiday processions (Đorđević and Todorović 2011). The conversion, yet, into various small religious communities has brought to Romas the desired and waited-for respect and attention in the pastoral soul-caring as well as a belief in better future and one's own dignity, in a word, all that has been denied to them in an arrogant behavior of domicile religious authorities (Todorović 2012c). By joining Jehovah's Witnesses in Bujanovac, the Romas have brought themselves into a double-marginalized position: at first, only at the ethnic level, their minority-ism was now also in the religious context.

On his part, Pavlov warns about undue expectations that small religious communities can find, while performing their religious tasks, some special time for social care. He regrets the fact that brothers and sisters are burdened with poverty and paucity and that they are exposed to acts of injustice; yet, the values that the Jehovah's Witnesses teach are not of material but of spiritual character. They transcend this worldly borders and refer to salvation and preparation of the believers for a new coming of Christ. It is good if the believers are educated, informed and generally cultured; this can help them to better understand religious instruction but the Jehovah's Witness-Announcer will not posit as a fake sure receipt for success in this worldly business.

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<sup>7</sup> A special board for Roma care is established only by Roman Catholics; since the Second Vatican Council they also have an organized care about migrants, institutionalized in the *Code of Canon Law* (1983). It underlines that the host country is obliged to ensure, for migrants and Romas, the right to their own language and spiritual legacy. Finally, Pope Assembly for pastoral of migrants and travelers has recently brought about *Guidelines for Pastoral Care for Gypsy* (2008).

“We do not encourage our young to achieve university education. To get some schooling, yes, but not to strive after some academic education. Why? Because unreal are the expectations from educational efforts in these poor border areas of ours. Listen, I will illustrate the way in which local Romas who are not Jehovah’s Witnesses see their future: girls hope to get married to someone from abroad while boys hope to marry some girl with Swedish or Swiss ‘papers’ allowing them to stay and work in these countries (underlined by D. T. and J.Ž.). Not to mention the dangers to the spiritual health of believers and their relations to God, namely those brought about by excessive engagement in other extra-school activities and excessive aspiration to material goods. What is the value of gaining the whole world if you lose your life?”

The strengthening of the family values coincides with, however, proper biblical behavior that the authorities require in the theological school. The family is the very center of life of a Jehovah’s Witness. Mutual respect between man and wife is expected as well as children care but this cannot be properly done if man yields to vice (drinking, smoking, gambling, drug-taking) (ph. 10). The success of a family is not measured by material possessions; quite the opposite, modesty is a desirable value. Inappropriate is a sexual intercourse in the pre-marital period; as suggested by the Holy Scripture, only a young man and a young girl who are “in God” should get married to each other.

“For us a successful family is the one sitting together at a meeting, father, mother, son and daughter. So as to know the proper places for man, woman and children in the family.”

The compromises are not made when it comes to other forms of religiously expected behaviors. The Jehovah’s Witnesses do not compel Romas to abandon the customs they think they should observe. Quite the opposite: they should abandon non-biblical behaviors not by following an order given by the leader but by the believer’s own conviction that such practice is God-offensive. Of them all, those who want to be baptized announcers must follow the norms from the Holy Scripture meaning St George’s Day is not to be celebrated, the children of the Jehovah’s Witnesses should not play with either a lamb or a kid; neither should they celebrate birthdays and other holidays (Тодоровић 2012a). They should understand biblical background of non-celebrating such things rather than merely following oral prohibitions pronounced by religious authorities.<sup>8</sup> “No one has the right to dissolve God’s word”, stresses Pavlov in his explanation.

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<sup>8</sup> Jehovah’s Witnesses celebrate only one holiday named the *Memorial of Christ’s Death* and they celebrate it on the night of Nisan 14, the first month of the Jewish year in the Jewish lunisolar calendar, occurring in March/April.



“Nada is a very clever little girl attending sixth grade. Her geography teacher constantly reproaches her, as the best pupil in her class, for not taking part in various school celebrations. Nada has declared herself as a Jehovah's Witness though she has not formally become a member and neither have her parents though they actively study the Bible – but are not officially baptized yet. One day she has brought candies and sweets to school and asked her teacher if she can treat her class friends. In this way she has tried to show how much she loves all of her friends but not on the dates when her birthday really is; so, they should not understand love only on the basis of celebrations organized on precisely defined date.”

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In Serbia, the corpus of believers of minority religious communities is recruited from three sources: 1. by reproduction from the given minority religious community, 2. by conversion of members and sympathizers of the majority religious organization, and 3. by missionary activity in a religiously syncretic ethnic minority – firstly, among Romas.

As a typical example of ethnic and religious minority-ism, for a decade and a half the Romas have been a subject of intensified interest of minority faiths and minority religious communities, especially New Protestantism. In fact, four reasons substantially contribute to the fact that the Romas are a religious-confessional reservoir of Protestantization, namely, 1. racial, national and religious neutrality of New Believers in performing a special service, 2. constant movement of Romas for ensuring elementary existence, 3. Roma's sense of not being burdened with in-depth links with Orthodoxy and Islam, and 4. pressure on the Romas to push them to the fringe of the pastoral mission of local clergy.

A rather modest Romas' joining of the communities of believing Protestants in Southeast Serbia for a two or even three decades has not suggested that it will, in the meantime, grow into an onrush of conversion of a wider scope. The growing Roma believers' movement, in some cases, has taken on the forms of independent prayer's homes in which the Romas have overcome their religious minority-ism and have grown into a majority structure of particular minority faiths and religious communities.<sup>9</sup> The newly-adopted religious identity assumed the process of discarding deeply rooted habits from the ghettoized life in *mahalas*: physical conflicts and quarrels of marriage partners, consumption of cigarettes and alcohol, gambling, fights with police, irregular school attendance, early marriages. The transformed family and harmonious kinship and neighborhood relations, discarding asocial activities, completion of primary school and continuation of (high) schooling, marriage after maturity – these are measurable indicators of advanced emancipation of the Romas from the ranks of minority religious communities in Southeast Serbia (Тодоровић 2012a).

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<sup>9</sup> More detailed in Тодоровић 2012b.

All these above-mentioned changes are also visible among the Roma-members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Bujanovac. The stable core of the baptized members comprises some thirty believers, mostly kin. The Bible explorers are much more and they come from affluent and poor layers; they are the ones that the leaders of the Witnesses seriously count upon in the realization of their own plans for further spreading religious influence. The Romas from Bujanovac, the Witnesses, are also a litmus paper for appreciating the public opinion inclinations as well as those of the representatives of the traditional religious communities towards religious Others in this part of Southeast Serbia.

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## PHOTOGRAPHS



Ph. 1. Pavlov with a group in Peć, Kosovo 1996 (standing first on the left)



Ph. 2. Pavlov at his desk in Peć, Kosovo 1996





Ph. 3. Pavlov leads a discussion on the Bible in Kikinda in 2008



Ph. 4. Pavlov makes a speech at the county congress in Pioneer Hall in Belgrade in 2009





Ph. 5. Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, Bujanovac



Ph. 6. Pavlov welcomes believers before Kingdom Hall



Ph. 7. Atmosphere before a weekly meeting in Bujanovac



Ph. 8. Pavlov addressing Romas – Jehovah's Witnesses in Bujanovac



Ph. 9. Talking with Pavlov in his family home in Bujanovac



Ph. 10. Pavlov with his wife Irena

