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ON THE PHENOMENON OF ROMA CONVERSION (An empirical experience)*

Introduction

Having lost their original religion in the waves of migration, the Roma as a rule, and in order to survive, accepted the religion of the domicile population and added to it hues of their own originality. We remember the words of two very distinguished world Romologists, Mirga and Mruze: "The indifference of Roma to major religions, as well as the phenomena of authentic religiosity, were in connection, on one hand, with the imposed status of outside, marginal group which had been pushed through several centuries of their stay in Europe outside the frame of society and church, and on the other, with defence mechanisms which their culture had devised during the migrations and nomadic way of life... It is worth underlining that the Roma did not take over certain beliefs and rituals indirectly from the sublimed and highly abstract religious doctrine but from a processed version of popular religiosity which by its form and contents was closer and easier for them to understand."

Researchers, representatives of three major confessions and many laymen contend that the Roma are rather tolerant and unstable in religion, that they do not possess an indigenous religion, but it is, usually, a mixture of several religions, with elements of paganism. Thus, for the sake of illustration, the Orthodox Roma would strictly observe the ritual protocol of Christian holidays but would also celebrate other festivals outside the Christian corpus, or formulate the holidays in terms of ritual in a non-Christian way. Their knowledge of the official teachings of the major religious communities is modest, supported by distinct fatalism, superstition and belief in the effectiveness of magic. In general terms, their relation to religion is simple and warm, with no overstressed fear of god's punishment. It is from there that the doubt about their being »good« believers as any other nation originates.

For the scientists interested in the confessional affiliation of Romas in the period preceding the Ottoman rule spread in the Balkan region appears to be how to get relevant, historically-grounded data. It is most often mentioned that in the period of the Nemanjić's Serbia, between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, the Romas who tended to settle down professed their allegiance to Christianity. The Orthodox Christianity also prevailed in the first decades of Turkish rule¹, while the accelerated Islamization started in the sixteenth century as written by Tatomir Vukanović (1983:39): "This is the time of Turkish feudalism rule when the Romas in the Yugoslav countries accepted Islam *en masse* which enabled them to get certain social privileges". The dominance of Islam was secured by numerous legal and traditional regulations (for instance, prohibition of marriage between the Roma Muslim and the Roma Christian, tax exemptions); some of them can still be found at some places.²

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¹ "The presence of many groups of Christian Gypsies in the first decades of Turkish rule unequivocally proves that their mass arrival should not be related to Turkish conquests. Still, the fact is that a certain number of Muslim Gypsies arrived in the Balkan region with the Turks" (Zirojević, 1976: 76).

² As said by Romas themselves, the religious background of Romany couples is still being taken into consideration while deciding upon their marriage.

Table 1

ROMANY POPULATION REGARDING ITS RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AT THE END OF THE 16TH CENTURY

KAZE (URBAN SETTLEMENTS)	Chri- stian House- holds	Muslim House- holds	Wido- wed House- holds	Single House- holds	Muslim and Christian Households
Beograd		251			
Čačak	5	1			
Kragujevac					12
Kruševac					22
Kučajni	13	16		8	
Leskovac		13			
Niš (at the <i>nahia</i> or county level)	296	106	4		
Paraćin					7
Pirot		9		2	
Prokuplje		18			
Smederevo		16			
Valjevo	4	5			
Vranje		16		2	
Zaplana - mine at the Kopaonik	1	19			
TOTAL	319	470	4	12	41

Vukanović, T. (1983), *Romi (Cigani) u Jugoslaviji (Roma /Gypsies/ in Yugoslavia)*, Nova Jugoslavija, Vranje, p. 45-46.

In the second half of the 19th century, however, the reverse conversion started. Along with further weakening and, finally, destruction of Turkish Empire, the legal protection and the guaranteed civil rights of the professed Islam religious population were lacking so that the Romas turned to the symbols of the Christian faith, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes by compulsion.

The process of conversion has started for earnest among the Roma in Serbia, *conversion* into various Protestant religious communities, and we are of the opinion that its track of development is going to be less a) in the direction of abandoning the religion of their »forfathers« and accepting a new one, than b) in the direction of taking another confessional fork. The local Protestant churches are well organized communities, with operating mechanisms of integration and introduction of new members to the life and activity of the church, providing strong social and material reasons for conversion and loyalty and a concept of transnational communities, favouring brotherhood and equality.

The disposition of the Romany being to the confessional identity change

Still, there are few empirical indicators about the confessional being of the unique Romany ethnicity from “within”, namely, the ethnicity that has recently been granted the status of the national minority; it is torn between Orthodox, Islam, and, since not so long ago, Protestant religion. In the fight for preserving the cultural and the ethnic identity, the fragile intellectual elite has not paid sufficient attention to the existing religious differences no matter how big they are. The paper presents the data from the empirical research of the “Religious Life of Orthodox Romas in Southeast and Southwest Serbia” carried out in July and August

2001. We also wanted to throw some light upon this issue - that we regard as very important - from the sphere of Romas' religious life that can, in the future, play a decisive role in improving the overall position of Romany national minority. However, it must be said immediately, that the obtained findings should be accepted with considerable caution. First of all, the sensitive ground of different religious attitudes required a specific research approach that assumed an indirect way of obtaining the answers. Secondly, there was no elaborate empirical instrument that was practically confirmed in previous research and that would be used for comparative purposes.

In our research the starting point comprised two groups of hypotheses.

I

1) Rural Romanies, with Muslim confessional background, have lost their Islamic characteristics in predominantly Orthodox environment and turned to Orthodoxy.

2) Urban Romanies, with Muslim confessional background, have combined their Islamic characteristics with Orthodox ones in predominantly Orthodox environment.

3) Rural Romanies, with Orthodox confessional background, have retained some of their Orthodox characteristics in predominantly Muslim environment, but with an Islamic shade.

4) Urban Romanies, with Orthodox confessional background, have adopted Islamic characteristics in predominantly Islamic environment.

II

1) The process of conversion of Romanies occurs but less often a) in the direction of changing the "forefathers" for the sake of another religion, than b) in the direction of changing the confessional branch.

2) Both Orthodox and Muslim Romanies living in south-east Serbia are most often converts into some of the Protestant communities.

3) Among Orthodox and Muslim Romanies living in western Serbia there are few converts into some of the Protestant communities.

4) Romanies convert into various Protestant religious communities because they are not national and favour equality and brotherhood.

Is there any difference between the attitudes of, one hand, Roma Christians and, on the other, Roma Muslims, towards the prospects of the inter-cultural model of living? We tried to obtain the answers to a set of questions posed to the Romas themselves; these questions referred to the ways they themselves experience their own confessional identity and the way they refer to the possibility of its change.

Interpretation of the Results

Table 2

RURAL MUSLIM ROMAS IN THE MAJORITY ORTHODOX ENVIRONMENT

“There is an impression that Muslim Romanies in rural environments have lost their Islamic characteristics in predominantly Orthodox surrounding and obtained certain Orthodox characteristics. Is this true?”

<i>Modality</i>	N	%
Yes, they have adjusted to the rural Orthodox environment and they can only be distinguished by name and surname	290	30,5
Partially, they have retained the major Islamic rituals but they also respect and practice the customs of the local Orthodox environment	363	38,2
No, they remained Muslims as all other members of this religious affiliation	148	15,6
Something else	12	1,3
No, I do not know	137	14,4
TOTAL	950	100,0

Number of answers in Table = 950

No answer = 15

Modality	Orth. Roma		Musl. Roma		R. in SES		R. in WES		Ort. R-SES		Ort. R-WES	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes ...	133	30,8	18	25,4	188	38,2	23	14,3	115	36,5	18	15,4
Partially ...	134	31,0	39	54,9	152	30,9	65	40,4	98	31,1	36	30,8
No ...	84	19,4	12	16,9	89	18,1	31	19,3	58	18,4	26	22,2
Som. else	9	2,1	-	-	8	1,6	1	0,6	8	2,5	1	0,9
No, I do not know	72	16,7	2	2,8	55	11,2	41	25,5	36	11,4	36	30,8
TOTAL	432	100,0	71	100,0	492	100,0	161	100,0	315	100,0	117	100,0

N	432	98,2	71	98,6	492	98,6	161	97,0	315	98,7	117	96,7
No answer	8	1,8	1	1,4	7	1,4	5	3,0	4	1,3	4	3,3

With the proposed statement the examined do not agree in any number over half of the cases if it is regarded at the general level and within Roma population itself. Rural Muslim Romas have not converted to Orthodoxy; instead, they have primarily preserved the characteristics of their own faith respecting the customs of local Orthodox environment - this is the prevailing answer. Such a moderate attitude is characteristic for both Orthodox and Muslim Romas along with, naturally, a greater frequency among the later ones (31% to 54,9%). We should not, however, neglect more than the third of Romas in Southeast Serbia who, in the individual score, agree with our hypothesis.

Table 3

URBAN MUSLIM ROMAS IN THE MAJORITY ORTHODOX ENVIRONMENT

“Do You agree with the statement that urban Romanies, Muslims according to their confessional background, combine Islamic and Orthodox characteristics in predominantly Orthodox surrounding?”

Modality	N	%
Yes, they have adjusted to the urban Orthodox environment and they can only be distinguished by name and surname	217	22,8
Partially, they have retained the major Islamic rituals but they also respect and practice the customs of the local Orthodox environment	437	45,9
No, they remained Muslims as all other members of this religious affiliation	144	15,1
Something else	11	1,2
No, I do not know	143	15,0
TOTAL	952	100,0

Number of answers in Table = 952

No answer = 13

Modality	Orth. Roma		Musl. Roma		R. in SES		R. in WES		Ort. R-SES		Ort. R-WES	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes ...	103	23,8	12	16,7	142	28,9	17	10,4	88	28,0	15	12,7
Partially ...	166	38,4	47	65,3	189	38,5	84	51,5	120	38,2	46	39,0
No	85	19,7	12	16,7	92	18,7	27	16,6	61	19,4	24	20,3
Som. else	10	2,3	-	-	10	2,0	1	0,6	9	2,9	1	0,8
No, I do not know	68	15,7	1	1,4	58	11,8	34	20,9	36	11,5	32	27,1
TOTAL	432	100,0	72	100,0	491	100,0	163	100,0	314	100,0	118	100,0

N	432	98,2	72	100,0	491	98,4	163	98,2	314	98,4	118	97,5
No answer	8	1,8	-	-	8	1,6	3	1,8	5	1,6	3	2,5

Neither does the behavior of urban Muslim Romas differ; they also remain devoted to Muslim rites along with respecting and practicing the customs of the surrounding majority. This estimate surely stands more for Muslim Romas than Orthodox Romas (38,4% to 65,3%) as well as Romas in Southwest Serbia with respect to their compatriots in Southeast Serbia (38,5% to 51,5%).

Table 4

RURAL ORTHODOX ROMAS IN THE MAJORITY MUSLIM ENVIRONMENT

“Is it true that Orthodox Romanies in rural environments, while retaining their Orthodox characteristics, in predominantly Muslim surrounding have also accepted certain Islamic customs?”

Modality	N	%
Yes, they have adjusted to the rural Islamic environment and they can only be distinguished by name and surname	118	12,4
Partially, they have retained the major Orthodox rituals but they also respect and practice the customs of the local Islamic environment	391	41,0
No, they remained Orthodox as all other members of this religious affiliation	275	28,9
Something else	8	0,8
No, I do not know	161	16,9
TOTAL	953	100,0

Number of answers in Table = 953

No answer = 12

Modality	Orth. Roma		Musl. Roma		R. in SES		R. in WES		Ort. R-SES		Ort. R-WES	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes ...	21	4,8	13	18,8	73	14,8	6	3,8	16	5,0	5	4,3
Partially ...	140	32,3	43	62,3	157	31,8	70	44,0	105	33,1	35	29,9
No ...	194	44,7	13	18,1	199	40,3	44	27,7	152	47,9	42	35,9
Som. else	9	2,1	-	-	8	1,6	-	-	9	2,8	-	-
No, I do not know	70	16,1	-	-	57	11,5	39	24,5	35	11,0	35	29,9
TOTAL	434	100,0	69	100,0	494	100,0	159	100,0	317	100,0	117	100,0

N	434	98,6	69	95,8	494	99,0	159	95,8	317	99,4	117	96,7
No answer	6	1,4	3	4,2	5	1,0	7	4,2	2	0,6	4	3,3

Somewhat more moderate in Southwest than in Southeast Serbia (35,9% to 47,9%) and much more prominent regarding the answers of their ethnic though not religious brothers (44,7% to 18,1%), Orthodox Romas consider themselves consistent guardians of their “forefathers” religion. In this way they bring into doubt the given hypothesis that the minority religion - in the described case the Orthodox with respect to the Muslim one - along with preserving the primary characteristics, is “permeated” with the elements of the majority one. The difference, however, appears at the macro level. Observing the overall sample (Romany and non-Romany population), comparing Romas’ attitudes in Southwest Serbia and Southeast Serbia and separately, the answers of Muslim Romas - the most predominant is the solution that Orthodox rural Romas, yet, in practicing their religious life, combine the characteristics of the “forefathers” religion with those of the majority environment religion.

Table 5

URBAN ORTHODOX ROMAS IN THE MAJORITY MUSLIM ENVIRONMENT
“Do urban Romanies, Orthodox according to their confessional background, in predominantly Islamic surrounding obtain the Islamic background?”

<i>Modality</i>	N	%
Yes, they have adjusted to the urban Islamic environment and they can only be distinguished by name and surname	97	10,2
Partially, they have retained the major Orthodox rituals but they also respect and practice the customs of the local Islamic environment	377	39,6
No, they remained Orthodox as all other members of this religious affiliation	305	32,1
Something else	10	1,1
No, I do not know	162	17,0
TOTAL	951	100,0

Number of answers in Table = 951

No answer = 14

<i>Modality</i>	<i>Orth. Roma</i>		<i>Musl. Roma</i>		<i>R. in SES</i>		<i>R. in WES</i>		<i>Ort. R-SES</i>		<i>Ort. R-WES</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes ...	37	8,5	11	15,5	58	11,7	8	4,9	30	9,5	7	5,9
Partially ...	139	32,0	44	62,0	159	32,2	74	45,4	99	31,3	40	33,9
No ...	181	41,7	16	22,5	211	42,7	43	26,4	144	45,6	37	31,4
Som. else	7	1,6	-	-	10	2,0	-	-	7	2,2	-	-
No, I do not know	70	15,9	-	-	56	11,3	38	23,3	36	11,4	34	28,8
TOTAL	434	100,0	71	100,0	494	100,0	163	100,0	316	100,0	118	100,0

N	434	98,6	71	98,6	494	99,0	163	98,2	316	99,1	118	97,5
No answer	6	1,4	1	1,4	5	1,0	3	1,8	3	0,9	3	2,5

By analyzing the attitudes of the examined, we conclude that the hypothesis stating that urban Romas of Orthodox origin, in the majority Muslim environment, accept Islam background has not been confirmed. The greatest number of the answers given by the examined focus around the proposed answer related to the transition, that is, the answer that in the practical religious living favors the mixing of the elements of the two confessions. What is repeated is, however, is the firm belief of Orthodox Romas (41,7%), especially in Southeast Serbia (45,6%), that the minority faith position does not affect their religious feelings at all; thus, they remain loyal to the faith of their forefathers.

Table 6

**ROMAS AND ESTIMATE OF THE PRESENCE OF
PROTESTANT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

“Many Romanies Orthodox and Muslim convert and turn to various small Protestant religious affiliations, which we technically call sects (Adventists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehova’s witnesses...). Do You have, i.e. do You know such Romanies in Your neighbourhood, quarter, village, district?”

<i>Modality</i>	N	%
Yes, many of them	166	17,4
Yes, a few	231	24,2
No, I do not know	558	58,4
TOTAL	955	100,0

Number of answers in Table = 955

No answer = 10

<i>Modality</i>	<i>Orth. Roma</i>		<i>Musl. Roma</i>		<i>R. in SES</i>		<i>R. in WES</i>		<i>Ort. R-SES</i>		<i>Ort. R-WES</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes, many of them	59	13,6	22	31,0	150	30,4	1	0,6	58	18,5	1	0,8
Yes, a few	132	30,5	32	45,1	125	25,4	74	45,1	81	25,9	51	42,5
No, I do not know	242	55,9	17	23,9	218	44,2	89	54,3	174	55,6	68	56,7
TOTAL	433	100,0	71	100,0	493	100,0	164	100,0	313	100,0	120	100,0

N	433	98,4	71	98,6	493	98,8	164	98,8	313	98,1	120	99,2
No answer	7	1,6	1	1,4	6	1,2	2	1,2	6	1,9	1	0,8

One fourth of the examined Romas and non-Romas in the overall sample state that they acknowledge only a few followers of small Protestant religious communities while almost three-fifths state that such cases are not familiar to them in their immediate surroundings. This leads to the conclusion that there can be no talk about some exceptional presence or enhancement of the role of so-called “sects.” However, a slightly different picture is obtained when reviewing separate attitudes of Romany population.

The first thing that strikes the eye is the difference in the attitudes taken by the Orthodox and the Muslim Romas. The answers of the former are within the range of the stated average of general population while in the answers of the latter there is a drastic change of the situation. Almost half of the examined state that they already know several compatriots who have chosen such a religious option while close to one third state that these are not only sporadic cases. Slightly less than the fourth of Muslim Romas state that such a trend is not unfamiliar to them. While only one Roma of Islam confession in Southwest Serbia state that he knows a great many followers of Adventism, Baptism, Pentecostals and other Protestant churches, this number increases in Southeast Serbia to almost the third along with the fourth that have heard of a few isolated cases. The separated Orthodox population of Romas in Southeast Serbia and Southwest Serbia do not share any other opinion but that which is present in the region.

Table 7

ROMAS AND THE REASONS FOR TURNING TO PROTESTANTISM

“A sociologist of religion contends that Romanies convert to various small Protestant religious affiliations (so-called sects) because they are anational and advocate equality and brotherhood, and a theologian find the reason for that in the fact that they economically help, predominantly, poor Romanies. According to Your judgement, who is right?”

<i>Modality</i>	N	%
Sociologist of religion	180	19,0
Theologist	388	41,0
They are both wrong, Romanies convert due to the weakness of Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic community	134	14,2
They are both wrong, Romanies convert because they are weak in their Orthodox or Islamic belief	113	11,9
They are both right	24	2,5
They believe in the doctrine of the Protestant communities	7	0,7
Something else	26	2,7
No, I do not know	74	7,8
TOTAL	946	100,0

Number of answers in Table = 946

No answer = 19

<i>Modality</i>	<i>Orth. Roma</i>		<i>Musl. Roma</i>		<i>R. in SES</i>		<i>R. in WES</i>		<i>Ort. R-SES</i>		<i>Ort. R-WES</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Soc. of rel.	66	15,2	18	25,7	118	24,2	15	9,3	54	17,1	12	10,2
Teolog.	196	45,2	30	42,9	226	46,3	55	34,0	162	51,3	34	28,8
They are both wrong	60	13,8	8	11,4	59	12,1	19	11,7	48	15,2	12	10,2
They are both wrong	45	10,4	8	11,4	41	8,4	29	17,9	20	6,3	25	21,2
They are both right	3	0,7	-	-	3	0,6	3	1,9	2	0,6	1	0,8
They bel. in the doc. of the P. c.	4	0,9	1	1,4	3	0,6	4	2,5	-	-	4	3,4
Something else	12	2,8	2	2,9	10	2,0	5	3,1	8	2,5	4	3,4
No, I do not know	48	11,1	3	4,3	28	5,7	32	19,8	22	7,0	26	22,0
TOTAL	434	100,0	70	100,0	488	100,0	162	100,0	316	100,0	118	100,0

N	434	98,6	70	97,2	488	97,8	162	97,6	316	99,1	118	97,5
No answer	6	1,4	2	2,8	11	2,2	4	2,4	3	0,9	3	2,5

Serbian Romas are generally ready to agree with the attitude of the Church leaders that the reasons for successful spread of Protestantism should be looked for in humanitarian and social support that accompanies the religious teaching. Because of this, our thesis that “Romas convert to various religious Protestant communities since they are a-national and

promote equality and brotherhood” is not confirmed. It does not mean that such a thesis is without its supporters and that it should be readily discarded: namely, one forth of Muslim Romas agree with it as well as, in general, the Romas from Southeast Serbia (we have already pointed out that it is exactly the Romany population, especially in this area, the most eager to accept Protestant faith). It should also be mentioned the second prominent (17,9%) thesis held by the Romas in Southeast Serbia and among the Romas in the region (21,2%): namely, the Romas are prone to Protestantism since "they are weak in Orthodox and Islam faith ". It is obvious that in the Southwest the susceptibility to the missionary Protestant activities is understood by their Romany compatriots in the Southeast as hesitancy in adhering to the religious dogmas, that is, as inconsistency of the Romany religious being.

Conclusion

Among the supplied answers the solution “I do not know” was also present.

This was a chance for anyone to sincerely express any personal dilemmas, but also, due to various reason, to veil the real answer or postpone any serious consideration.

This form of answering was very present with the questions related to the sensitive issues of confessional co-existance. In the entire sample, among the Orthodox Roma and in the region of SE Serbia, it's frequency is 11% and 17%. However, the percentages drastically rise when the answers of the Roma in SW Serbia are concerned, even with the Orthodox Roma, varying, from question to question, between 20% and 30%! On the other side, the most consistent in answering is the population of Muslim Roma – almost no person made use of the answer “I do not know” to describe his/her attitude (3 pollees for question 25 are an exception)! We are faced, so to speak, with a tripartite reaction, which certainly “colours” the obtained results. The steadiness of the Muslim Roma in answering gives us the right to consider their answers as the most consistent. The expressed uncertainty in answering with the Roma in SW Serbia prevents us from providing conclusions in regard to their views of the possibility of co-existance in a multicultural environment.

The Romani confessional panorama in Serbia is the following: In SE Serbia the predominant are the Orthodox Roma, there are Muslim Roma in larger towns, but they are not present in villages. The situation in SW Serbia is the opposite – it as an environment traditionally imbued with Islamic spirituality, so the Roma have adopted the Muslim faith. Respecting the characteristics of both regions and observing some of the previous reasearch projects, we started with four major hypotheses in our research: a) in the case of Muslim Roma in predominantly Orthodox environment, the rural population turns to Orthodoxy and the urban combines Islamic with Orthodox characteristics and b) in the case of Orthodox Roma in predominantly Muslim environment, the rural population, while keeping their Orthodox Christianity, “colours” its religion with hues of Islam and the urban Roma completely turn to Islam. The interviewed Roma, who in this stratified sample represent the Roma ethnicity on the entire territory of SE and SW Serbia, did not quite agree with us. In all of the four cases, their answers inclined to the variant of “partly, they have preserved their main rituals, but they respect and practice the customs of the local environment”.

We are prone to interpret this attitude as readiness of the Roma – as always and everywhere in their centuries-long history of transnational situation – for existance in an intercultural community. While multiculturalism propheses passive “by-existence” of many different instances of “otherness”, interculturalism entails active “co-existence”, exchange of experence, life styles and values of different ethnic groups. The Roma have manifested already, in the domain of religion, their readiness to continuously enrich the majority religion and culture in general, without eroding their own religious identity. Modern researchers (D. B. Đorđević) call this form of Roma behaviour *intercultural integration* and those from the previous century used to find the roots of that in a specific form of *ljaremanism* (T. Vukanović).

The Muslim Roma openly demonstrated greater tolerance in accepting and expecting of their brothers of other creeds. When they decided to side with the majority population, they did not expect from the minority population to assimilate; as a minority, they would not blindly adhere to their tradition but they expressed readiness to get to know the characteristics of a different religious view. On the other hand, by explicit favouring of own confession, the Orthodox Roma are closer to the positions of a multicultural ordering, similar to the current frame of mind of the predominant Orthodox Serbian population. The minority Muslim population in the rural area is expected to completely fit in the Orthodox environment, and when they are a minority themselves, over 40% “defend” their community from any intrusions of non-Christians experience and demand abiding by the Orthodox canon.

These conclusions are co-relative to in principle to those when it comes to Roma of different territorial belonging, which is no surprise considering the predominance of Orthodox religion in SE Serbia and Muslim religion in SW Serbia, respectively. The described high percentage of answers “I do not know” in the SW prevents us from giving a valid elaboration of the attitudes of the Orthodox and Muslim Roma in SW Serbia.

* * *

In the last several years, there has been a marked tendency in the Serbian population of turning to the Protestant fork of Christianity. The entrance of small Protestant religious communities into the Roma ethnicity, traditionally Orthodox in SE Serbia and Muslim in SW Serbia, could not have passed unnoticed. We were interested in the estimates of the Roma themselves about the intensity of this process. *The data obtained reveal that it is stronger in the SE parts, particularly among the Muslim Roma.* The Orthodox Roma are not spared either, but the intensity is weaker for the time being.

South Serbia in particular has been known as a synonym for successful adaptation of the Protestant view of the world, both for the Serbs and the Roma. That the Roma are familiar with the Protestant teachings is no surprise, concerning the fact that we had a chance during the research to see purely Protestant Roma churches in Leskovac and Vranje. Somewhat surprising is their spread among the Muslim Roma, having in mind the strictness of the Islamic faith in terms of conversion to another religion. By this, our thesis that the process of conversion is more about changing the confession fork than religion has been *refuted*.

Complicating the Serbian religious field by introducing Protestant spirituality did not pass without reactions. Sociologists of religion and dignitaries of the Orthodox, Catholic and Islamic communities gave their standpoint concerning the reason for this trend, and what we were interested in was whose argumentation was closer to that of the Roma themselves.

In all of the erstwhile public appearances, the representatives of the domicile churches in question have mainly stigmatized the minority religious communities. Their caritative activity is viewed as a form of “recruiting” new members, where the Roma, being a national minority in the worst social and economic position in the country, are so much susceptible to this kind of activity. *It seems that the Roma have themselves adopted the views of the religious communities they belong to in estimating the intentions and final range of Christianity’s third fork.* Immediately after that, weakness in faith is ascribed to the Roma. As opposed to laconic condemning, it is much more difficult to opt for the search for one’s own mistakes. In order to avoid the situation of not seeing the wood for the trees, we have to refer to the considerable percentages of other answers.

Having lost the religion of their homeland, the Roma most often declare themselves as Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Muslim. However, they are not easily accepted by the believers of all three sides, often there is social distance with elements of xenophobia and racism. Marginalized for centuries, banished and prosecuted, with neglected language and religion, culturally underdeveloped, forced into a vicious circle of misery – the Romani nation is open to Protestantism due to a number of *religious, social and material reasons*. One fourth of Muslim Roma agreed with the statement that their joining Protestant communities is motivated by Protestant propagation of equality and brotherhood. 11% to 15% of the answers tried to find

the reasons for such behaviour in the weakness of the SOC and Islamic Community. Therefore, it is for the majority people and the major churches to consider what it is that they do(not) offer to the suffering Roma people and how much effort should be put to reach a true understanding of a multi-level confessional identity.

The in-depth theoretical and empirical investigation of the conversion problem emerging among Romany Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics in various Protestant communities would provide for further testing of the rational choice theory since it is probably referring to the rational choice the Romas are making while converting to Protestant communities and new religious movements; this choice is, moreover, founded upon purely theological or purely material reasons.

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