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Article

The Role of Conversion Narratives in the Social Dynamics of Evangelical Roma: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract: While many experts in Roma studies are writing about conversion of Romas in Europe and about the "new religion" impact in their social life, there are also some academic articles which are expressing the lack of conversion narratives. Understanding the excitement of various researchers seeing the social transformation, it looks like there is only side of the phenomena, and there is no, or very little, research referring the role of conversion in such transformation. The main objectives in this qualitative study, is to explore the role of narrative conversion and the role of conversion in social transformation of Roma communities. Data are generated from in-depth of semi structured interviews and analysed through the biblical doctrinal lens of conversion. Through the findings, we understand that Roma evangelicals should be aware that not the religious shift is the key of individual and community change, but the proper implementation of Biblical values.

Keywords: conversions; narratives; Romas; evangelicals; church; social transformation

Introduction

In the past decades much research has focused on looking at today's impact of Evangelical Churches in Roma communities. The large majority expresses their findings in a positive perspective. There are also articles which talk about lack of conversion narratives.

In the scientific field, in popular-evangelical culture and social media, criticism or skepticism about the veracity of these social transformations have emerged. Whether the arguments come from scientific analysis, through social media or in the discussions and observations of representatives of religious cults, the common aspect that follows the negative perspective of these accounts is either the lack of the conversion narrative or the lack of transformations that are not similar to the other social phenomena in other communities investigated.

In this study we will analyse the use of evangelical Roma in village Herculian, Covasna county, presented by Denes Kiss[1]. The said study pursues a scientific methodology of in-depth research and argues the lack of a transformation by arguing the lack of a narrative of conversion. We will compare this study with other research where significant social transformations are recorded.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the role of narrative in the conversion process. With a clear sociological and theological perspective, we believe that in the future, the analysis of other similar communities could be studied or criticized through the appropriate theological lens.

In this study we will try to answer what is the role of the conversion narrative? In order to achieve the proposed goal, we analysed the impact of some evangelical Roma movements found in the specialized literature, from Central and Eastern Europe, and other evangelical Roma communities in Romania in which the "conversion narrative" has been mentioned.

The data used for this study were collected from various specialized literature and from PhD research which I was involved between 2020-2023 and after the study time, visiting four different Roma communities in South part of Romania. Fifty-six people were interviewed both Roma and non-Roma from different religious groups (Orthodox, Baptists, Pentecostals, Brethren, free

evangelicals) with different professions in the medical, IT, accounting, bakery, construction, housekeeping and ecclesiastical fields (pastors or elders).

Analysis revealed that there is a small number of literatures which talks about lack of conversion narratives. This lack of studies is limiting our perspectives in regards the dimension of "fake conversion". Still, the findings of this study reveals that the main trigger of individual and social change are the biblical values and the real and correct understanding of *metanoia* or as called *repentance*. The merge of biblical teaching, which takes place in ecclesial with formal education[2], produces a genuine and long term community change.

The Lack of Conversion Narrative, Case Study

One of the important studies that talk about the lack of conversion narratives is the article by Denes Kiss who in 2007 spent a month with his colleagues in the Pentecostal Roma community in Herculian, Covasna County. As the author mentions, together with his team, they focused their attention especially on the phenomenon of conversion of the Roma population to the Pentecostal religion [3]. After a detailed sociological and ethnographic presentation, the author notices some discrepancies. One of these is the nominalism of the Pentecostal respondents. The number of Pentecostal believers declared in the 2002 census was 358 people, these represented their collective transition to the mentioned cult.

It was not the group conversion that attracted attention, but the fact that there are only 50 baptized members in the ecclesial community. In an attempt to find an explanation for the phenomenon of mass conversion to Pentecostalism, the author summarizes four theories: the thesis of individual conversions, the thesis of cultural affinity, the thesis of Protestant ethics and the thesis of high birth rates [4]. These theories support the reason for the conversion of the Roma from Herculian, providing a strong ethnic peculiarity of the religious group. It is important to mention that this religious group is independent or not registered in either of the two existing religious denomination, accepted in Romania.

The essential aspect is the object of our study is the discrepancy observed by the author between the discursive level and their [5]: the lack of ecclesial discipline, the sale of alcoholic beverages and cigarettes by some important members of the ecclesial community, in the context in which it is known that Pentecostal evangelicals do not encourage the consumption of alcohol and tobacco.

Of course, there are other studies that support the lack of narrative in the conversion process, but as D. Kiss observes, and other researchers are also of the opinion, that it is difficult to identify a single model for conversion, being a complex act: volitional, involuntary, active, or passive conversion [6].

The Need to Adopt New Values

They are probably mass or individual conversions whose veracity can raise ethical questions. But for a clear understanding of conversion, it is necessary to understand the definition of this term and the necessity of this phenomenon in the Roma context.

The central aspect is the acquisition of new values. The fact that each culture, nation, or ethnic group has its own values, or customs is a common characteristic. These are virtues or character traits, traditions, beliefs or customs accepted by a smaller or wider group of people. This explains the fact that some people are ready to sacrifice almost anything, even their own lives, even with fanaticism. But those values represent the relational foundation of a family, ethnic group or people, regulating the harmony between the members of that community.

Honesty, love, happiness, integrity or honour are just some of these values that can be found all over the world, regardless of skin colour, background or religion. Various social factors, such as close and extended family, friends, school, and good or traumatic experiences, can shape or influence these values.

Historically, within Christianity, in the history of the Church, which led to conversion, this *obscure and marginal movement generated by Jesus* [7], become a dominant religious force in Europe, in

just a few centuries the new values of the new community were formed. The charitable acts in which Christians were involved during the pandemics of the time, the different status of women in Christianity, ethical education and even martyrdom have spiritually and socially revitalized Europe [8].

We observe from the first centuries of our existence, the Church is one of the factors in the formation of new values where the individual and society receive new values. Here the woman, the poor, the orphan, the stranger and even the slave acquire new valences. Luca-Samuel Leonte identifies the concerns of first-century Christians anchored in *the deep study of the word of God, followed by a permanent concern for the application of the teachings in their personal lives* [9]. And the human values sought by each person, mentioned above, are relevantly outlined in the Holy Scripture. In the Bible, says Elisei Rusu, there is the ability to discern what is true, correct and of eternal value: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God for it, who gives to everyone with an open hand... but to ask for it in faith...* (James 1:5-6a). Values such as honesty, respect (for people and for God), generosity, freedom are clearly outlined [10].

What can be observed in the Roma context is the complexity of understanding the axiological system, of those ancestral values of the proto-Roma. It is difficult to capitalize on the heritage of Asian values (except for the Romani language, which is scientifically proven by linguists such as Marcel Curtiade or Gheorghe Sarău). As can be seen from the turbulent history, tragic historical experiences (such as nomadism, slavery in the Romanian Principalities, the Holocaust and the lack of ethnic recognition during communism) must have led to a perversion of values. This is how we can explain the low level of education, the low poverty level, which, in turn, have led to a high degree of crime or customs that today contravene with some laws.

What evangelical Christianity anchored in the precepts of the Bible brings is precisely the change in these values listed above.

Throughout history, there have been feeble attempts, some of them even lacking interest in bringing the Roma into the bosom of the church [11]. Mirel Bănică believes that *the Roma have a selective spirit when it comes to religion* [12]. There were cases in which they adopted the religions of their masters for certain material advantages, for example exemption from taxes, or for accepting and winning the goodwill of their masters and the Orthodox or Catholic Church. Some of the church rules forbade the marriage of Gypsies for various reasons [13]. But at the emergence of Protestantism (or *the new faith*, as it is called by some researchers) in Romania, the new religious system did not retain common historical elements within the Roma communities.

More than welcoming the Roma when they were looking for an identity, evangelical Protestantism in Romania offered them a new set of values. The appropriation of these values has led to radical changes in some Roma communities.

In conclusion, the human values that work in people's lives, Elisei Rusu believes, produce an atmosphere of well-being and respect that helps the development and well-being of society [14]. The author believes that the implementation of these values *requires time, involvement and correct sources of training*, and education has an important role in transmitting and implementing human values. The place where they can be enunciated and guarded are the *family, the church and the school, all of which play a fundamental role in the formation of the younger generations* [15].

Therefore, the change or reform of values with biblical roots are accepted, appropriated by Roma communities and projected into individual and community daily behaviour.

The Biblical Perspective of Conversion

We believe that it is important for researchers interested in the phenomenon of transformation of Roma communities where there is a Roma church, to understand, at least at the terminological level, the biblical definition of conversion. One of the biblical definitions of conversion, the closest appropriate for the context of evangelical Roma in the communities surveyed is that of Aloys H. Dirksen who defines the term *μετανοέω* and *μετάνοια* as *a conversion from sin that requires regret and confession of it* [16]. In the author's view, sin must be rectified by changing the mind, and conversion

is seen in both an ethical and spiritual sense. The terms found in the Bible (return to God or from sin, repentance, confession, change) are also found in the Roma communities researched, implying both verbal confession and behavioural change. This is a theological perspective found by Mark J. Boda [17] in the Torah, and it also involves a return to a relationship with God [18] and is very often found in the Rome evangelical day to day language reflecting their past and present. Often in their theological perspective, a new eschatological perspective appears. From a *carpe diem* living way of thinking, new faith community speaks about the certainty of eternal destiny.

Ethnographic perspective of Roma Conversion

Repentance in Roma communities is not only a verbal or theoretical theological act, but also has a holistic perspective. Similarly with Cone James' perspective which involves repentance and change of the individual who must have the desire to give up himself and the world to be saved, in Roma evangelical communities we see connection between *repentance*, *obedience*, and *action*. In Cone's view, these are three essential elements and he believes that *there is no repentance without obedience and there is no obedience without action. And this is always action in the world with Christ fighting the evils who hold men captive* [19].

Another sense of the term *metanoia* in the researched communities which is emphasized by Boda is the repentance which involves a relational change followed by one's love, actions, and words [20]. In this way, believers do not live on the periphery of the community waiting for its end, but are involved in the community through preaching, love of neighbour, acting socially through the care offered to the members of this community. This transformation shows that Romas from field research became the "followers of Jesus are not proselytes, they are converts" [21].

In the Roma communities surveyed, whose members say they have *repented*, the transformations noted have occurred because of obedience to biblical principles regarding suffering, poverty and racism around them. Their obedience consists in the action that believers take. Depending on the needs and dynamics of each locality, their *metanoia* is initially a spiritual one: from the possibility of sin. Roma believers regretfully mentioned crimes "before knew the Lord." According to their testimonies from ethnographic research, they gave up stealing (scrap metal, electricity, domestic animals in neighbours' yards or grocery shops), alcohol was given up in Roma communities, music is used exclusively in the context of worship, it was also mentioned that in evangelical houses domestic aggression disappeared.

Love of Neighbours, Proof of Conversion

Another characteristic of evangelical churches in Roma communities met the preachers' messages is the element of *love* [22]. In his regards, Roma preachers consider the ethics of love to be the essence of the faith of Jesus [23]. They are calling their fellow Romas to an unusual achievement. In love of neighbour, as Jesus said, it means the Samaritan man who responds to human needs by crossing barriers of class, race or social condition. And they proof what they believe: believes that love take the initiative in seeking ways in which they can experience a common sharing of mutual value.

Professor Otniel Bunaciu observes that love for other people implies a certain proximity. *This means that not everyone is my neighbour and at the same time everyone can be my neighbour. From this perspective, even anyone who is not a Christian can be neighbour* [24]. In this context, the Roma Christian is positioned in a meaningful space between a near and distant neighbour, creating a dynamic image of love.

Sometime the problem that Roma people might have is identifying their neighbour. Otniel Bunaciu presents Karl Barth's reflection with the practical way of manifesting love in everyday life. In Barth's view, the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* [25] has as its central idea "Who is my neighbour?", answers this question by exploring the relationship between human love and divine love.

As a result of their love, they start building or renovating houses and creating new/better living standards for both Roma and Romanian neighbours.

Dynamic Between Individual and Community

Another aspect reflected by the new Biblical values adopted which brings new mind set, is a new identity. This new identity should not be understood in sense of lack of assuming ethnical identity, but the change of the man within.

Evangelical Roma in the investigated communities, after conversion of members of these communities, experience a special and new perspective of dignity. They are more focus in what Howard Thrumman named *the growth of man from within*. They believe that Jesus' statement that every man is a child of God is the key to release from the prison of the world.

Church leaders complained during field research that one of the consequences of dropping out of school among Roma is the impossibility of obtaining a decent job and the rise of crimes. We observed a connection between school education and biblical education lies in the fact that with the reading of Holy Scripture people understand that the lack of well-paid, honourable, and necessary jobs for community development is an effect of lack of education. God's people, as evangelical Roma understand that they should represent the elite of society (*you are the head, not the tail* [26]), but achieving this goal is done only through education. In this way work becomes the transformational community factor, where religion makes every day work have religious significance by becoming a moral qualification of secular life. Max Weber [27] notes that religion in its purest form, as presented by Scripture, has influenced the community bringing about social, economic, and moral revitalization [28].

This phenomenon is also observed by Bulgarian researcher Magdalena Slavkova among evangelical Roma communities. The author mentions that after accepting the evangelical faith, the behaviour of Roma evangelical believers in Bulgaria at work undergoes certain changes. Transformations affect career choices: "they must decide which job is suitable for a believer and which is not, as well as how they should behave at work." [29].

Metanoia Process, an Individual Decision in Collective Transformation Context

In Romanian evangelical churches [30] the concept of repentance or conversion is very much seen as manly an individual decision which a person needs to take some time in life. Within the Roma communities, the "call to repentance" is also an individual act of faith, but the transformative element has a strong collective accent. The salvation is important, but the individual is important in the community, and he receives blessings in the community.

Repentance is considered an individual act, as a personal confession, the book of Psalms, but it also has a collective dimension. In the collective prayers of the Roma were observed the prayers of church leaders who, like Daniel, Ezra or Nehemiah, confessed the daily sins of the Roma, but sins from the more distant past were also mentioned.

Signs of rebirth among Roma, unnoticed by the official radars, Anne-Marie Kool believes that for the Roma, conversion is an act of transformation involving a change of mind: to be transformed by the renewing of your mind [31] and this change of mind produces communal transformation. According to Anne-Marie Kool, official forums are operating with other methods – secular – on *the world that is incapable of understanding the incarnation in Christ* [32].

Conclusions

The spiritual movement, the new religion, conversion or spiritual awakening are aspects mentioned by researchers, specialists in Roma studies, but avoided (intentionally or not) by government radars.

Social transformation in many of the Roma communities, however, should not be seen as a test of a traditional practice or survival strategy. On the contrary, it can represent (and even represents) the expression of a non-secular process that can bring (and in fact brings) alternative forms of political, cultural and social affirmation [33].

On the other hand, evangelical Roma whose concern is religious formalism or nominalism, we would make some recommendations: intentionally assume the personal relationship with God above denominational affiliation; a corroboration of ecclesial religious education, well documented and studied, with formal education [34]. The lack of theological education (even formal), the investment in the education of young Roma could bring new valences in the process of conversion of Roma communities.

In this context, as suggested by Adrian Netedu, Aurora Vatamaniuc, if we talk about conversion narratives, they should be analysed contextually, the explanation of the conversion process is a complex act for most believers.

At the same time, for researchers of the evangelical religious phenomenon among the Roma, we would recommend the research perspective of Melody Wachsmuth, which studies from Christian standpoint position and focuses the study on the dialogue and relational aspects of Christianity as being the centre of religious identity [35]. In this itinerary, Melody is traveling nomadically with her itinerants, and analysing not only from a sociological point of view.

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