**Evangelical Christianity and Patriarchal Family Practices among Roma in Post-Socialist Bulgaria: Report of Preliminary Fieldwork Findings**

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Research Question, General Background, and Short Description of the Project

The central research question of my research project is whether, when, and how the recent adoption of Evangelical Christianity by Roma in post-socialist Bulgaria has impacted the status and engagement of Roma women in their families, communities, and the larger society. Answering this question has important implications for the broader and seemingly intractable problem of the social, economic, and political marginalization of Roma in the country and in the region. The "vicious cycle of Roma exclusion" (Warlick 2010) here presents growing political and ethical concerns both locally and internationally, and the United States has appealed frequently for more governmental and non-governmental efforts to break it.

The labels "Roma" and "Gypsy" are used to describe fragmented communities that vary substantially in terms of location, identity, language, religion, socio-economic status, culture, and lifestyle. The vast majority of Roma – about eight of twelve million – live in Eastern Europe, where they have been social pariahs for centuries. Estimates suggest that nearly ten percent (or 800,000 people) of Bulgaria's population are Roma, and to the chagrin of nationalists prophesying about the "nation's" extinction and subordination to "the Gypsies," this percentage is growing. Compared to members of other ethno-national groups in the region, Roma have been hit disproportionally hard by the post-1989 economic and political transformations, albeit in different forms and to varying degrees (Ladányi and Szelényi 2006). In response to intensified marginalization, many members of this racialized underclass have retreated into segregated communities whose cultural "otherness" has reinforced the cycle of exclusion even further.

A crucial element in the cycle of exclusion, especially among the most disadvantaged Roma groups, is the persistence of patriarchal family structures and practices (Ceneda 2002). The customs of pulling girls out of school and arranging to marry them while they are "pure," of pressuring teenage couples to have children they cannot support, and of placing women under the control of their husbands' families, where they remain isolated from society and from the labor force, contribute significantly to some of the most notorious manifestations of Roma marginality: high rates of illiteracy, massive unemployment, abject poverty, crime, domestic violence, broken families and child abandonment, and morbidity and mortality (Guy 2009; Tomova 2009). Still, most governmental and non-governmental "integration projects" avoid tackling directly these cultural practices.

Against the background of a tough economic and political environment, complex hierarchical interethnic relations, extreme marginalization, an indifferent state, often ineffective NGOs, a changing religious marketplace, and patriarchal culture, I am interested in the effect of Evangelical Christianity – to which many Roma have turned since the change of regime – on the position of women in Roma communities. Although Evangelical Christianity is widely understood as a conservative ideology justifying women's subordination to men in the public and private spheres (Diamond 1989; Ingersoll 2003), scholars have shown that it has, in fact, facilitated women's advancement in some patriarchal societies in the developing world (Dollar and Gatti 1999; Martin 2001). This raises the question of whether faith-based organizations might have a similar impact among Roma in Eastern Europe. Based on my research findings, I argue that the impact varies across Roma communities: paradoxically, while participation in Evangelical churches enhances women's status discernibly in more integrated Roma

communities, where females enjoy a relatively high standing to begin with, it has a minimal

impact in the most marginalized communities, where women could benefit the most.


## Summary of Findings

My original intent was to study the social effects of Evangelical Christianity on

disadvantaged Roma communities more generally.  Informed by scholarship in the Weberian

(1996) tradition and by comparative literature examining the relationship between neo-

Protestantism and emerging civil societies in developing regions (Hefferan, Adkins, and

Occhipinti 2009), I hypothesized that conversion would impact marginalized Roma in two ways:

first, by introducing teachings that foster a heightened sense of self-worth (Corten and Marshall

2001; Gifford 1998), personal growth and development (Martin 1990), and internal discipline

and work ethic (Annis 1987); and second, by providing an institutional framework necessary to

instill these attitudes (Gorski 2003), to nurture a culture of participation, and to facilitate

collective action (Huff 2007).  However, in the course of a year-long immersive study in the

Bulgarian town of Sliven, which is distinctive for its large and heterogeneous Roma population, I

observed changes among more integrated Roma that were absent among the most marginalized

Roma.  In seeking to explain this divergence, my attention was drawn increasingly to patriarchal

family structures and behaviors.  For example, I noticed that church leaders in more segregated

communities did not discuss school attendance, career planning, child rearing, or problematic

household dynamics because doing so would challenge traditional marriage practices and

gendered roles and expectations.  At the same time, local and visiting religious leaders in more

integrated Roma communities did not hesitate to address such sensitive subjects.  Thus, I decided

to examine the interplay among the uneven introduction of new ideas, social practices, and

institutional models through the global spread of Evangelical Christianity, on the one hand, and the cultural and social dynamics in local Roma communities that vary in the extent of their marginalization and in the degree to which they embrace traditional patriarchal attitudes and behaviors, on the other hand.

To identify the conditions under which Evangelical churches have the most and least impact, I compared two Roma groups in Sliven: the most disadvantaged "Naked" Gypsies living in the walled-in Nadezhda ghetto and the most integrated "Bulgarian" Gypsies living in the working-class Nikola Kochev neighborhood or amidst members of the ethnic Bulgarian majority. Supplementing this core comparison, I conducted observations among Sliven's "Turkish" and "Musician" Gypsy communities also. Over the past twenty years, foreign visitors and Bulgarian denomination leaders have offered a plethora of spiritual, social, and economic incentives for locals to found numerous (and often competing) new churches in all of these communities. Most Naked Gypsies – whose long-term socio-economic and cultural isolation has facilitated the preservation of patriarchal family structures – lack structural opportunities, communication skills, and cultural predispositions to encounter, engage, and absorb more egalitarian ideas about gender and family practices.  At the same time, socio-cultural and communication barriers make it hard for most outsiders to engage meaningfully in how religion is practiced, in how churches are run, and in what (if any) social agendas they pursue.  This leaves local religious leaders – who are personally invested in traditional institutions and wish to avoid alienating members in a competitive religious marketplace – simply reflecting and reinforcing old cultural norms.  Thus, they do not encourage women to partake prominently in organizational and worship dynamics, to build social networks within or across churches, or to pursue personal growth through individual

or group learning, nor do they attempt to change patriarchal attitudes, practices, and relations outside of church.

The introduction of Evangelical churches to the more integrated Bulgarian Gypsy community, on the other hand, has affected women's lives more discernibly. Having better education and access to communication technology, men *and* women are more likely to absorb novel perspectives on gender and family relations through encountering egalitarian interpretations of Bible texts or through interacting with many visitors who practice "pragmatic [gender] egalitarianism" (Gallagher 2003) in their professional, social, and family lives. Also, while most Naked Gypsy pastors are poorly educated, some Bulgarian Gypsy religious leaders – including a few women – train in elite theology schools in Bulgaria and abroad. There, they learn to establish organizational structures that encourage all members – including women – to participate, to form stable social networks of support, to learn through discussion groups and seminars, to develop a sense of personal self-worth, and even to call into question some patriarchal ideas and practices (e.g., whether married adults should break with custom and seek independence from their parents).

Relevance and Contributions

The intensifying marginality of Roma in post-socialist Bulgaria and elsewhere in Eastern Europe has generated much public and political discourse and a vast body of academic and expert literature. The central contribution of patriarchal culture to the dynamics of marginalization, however, has not been widely recognized or studied (but see Kyuchukov 2004; Mitev, Tomova, and Konstantinova 2001; Pamporov 2010), despite the comparative research on the relationship between gender inequality and economic underdevelopment (Hausman, Tyson,

and Zahidi 2010).  Nor have Roma religion and religiosity, including their recent turn to Evangelic Christianity, been of central concern to policy makers and academics (for exceptions, mostly in anthropology, see Dordevic and Todorovic 2004; Marushiakova and Popov 1999; Slavkova 2007), despite recent interest in the political, socio-economic, and cultural effects of religious networks spanning diverse societies (Thomas 2004).  My research will contribute to the body of knowledge on Eastern European Roma by shedding light on the interaction among Roma marginality, gender and patriarchy, and Evangelical beliefs and institutions that are relatively new to the local religious marketplace.  It proposes that policies and initiatives targeting Roma marginality should tackle gender dynamics directly, and that they could benefit from recognizing and engaging the peculiar potential of religious institutions to affect tenacious cultural beliefs and practices in encapsulated communities.

Beyond its contribution to the body of knowledge on Roma, my dissertation seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of the contradictory cultural, socio-economic, and political impacts of the globalization of Evangelical Christianity more generally (for a review of this literature, see Robbins 2004) in three ways.  First, it will discuss a region of the world where this phenomenon remains overlooked and under-examined (but see Wanner 2007).  Second, it will address the debate of whether and how local churches foster cultural homogenization or appropriate and "indigenize" imported ideas and practices (for an overview of this debate, see Coleman 2003) by underscoring their embeddedness in larger cultural, social, and organizational networks.  And third, it will engage and qualify the findings of numerous scholars who stress the positive effects of Evangelical Christianity on the status of women in patriarchal societies in the developing world (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1998) by specifying the conditions under which that positive impact is likely to occur.

<u>Data and Methods</u>

   I collected the bulk of my data in Bulgaria between July 2009 and October 2010.  I spent three months in the capital Sofia, interviewing denominational leaders, government officials, NGO staff, and scholars, as well as gathering Bulgarian academic literature, statistical data, and governmental and non-governmental reports pertaining to the national ethno-religious field.  I spent the remaining twelve months in Sliven, doing intensive immersion fieldwork among various groups of Roma, especially the most isolated and marginalized Naked Gypsy community. Besides getting to know Evangelical lay church members and local and visiting religious leaders, I also engaged with members of other religions (Islam and Bulgarian Eastern Orthodoxy), non-church-goers, government officials, NGO staff, and social-service providers (e.g., doctors, teachers, and policemen) who interact with Roma regularly or offer useful perspectives on Roma-related issues.  Interactions covered a wide array of topics and assumed various formats: casual chats, semi-structured and informal interviews, focus groups, and spending consecutive days together.  I also conducted extensive participant observation in the context of churches, homes, public evangelizations, camps, seminars, congresses, water baptisms, private celebrations, and funerals.  Finally, I gathered local church and academic literature and statistical and archival materials.

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