

Tomáš Hrustič's assessment of PhD dissertation by Mgr. Štěpán Ripka

Pentecostalism among Czech and Slovak Roma: The religiosity of Roma and the practices of inclusion of the Roma in the brotherhood in salvation. Autonomy and Conversions among Roma in Márov

The dissertation thesis *Pentecostalism among Czech and Slovak Roma: The religiosity of Roma and the practices of inclusion of the Roma in the brotherhood in salvation. Autonomy and Conversions among Roma in Márov* by Štěpán Ripka is very well-written and well-argued text. The author makes extremely insightful contribution to academic discourse on Romani Pentecostalism well grounded in his thorough and detailed field work in community of Roma converts on borders of Western Bohemia. As such, Ripka's dissertation is a valuable account of a charismatic mission and establishing a Roma congregation while questioning concepts of autonomy, leadership, education, charisma, and kinship.

Apart from Introduction and Conclusion, the text is divided into 8 rather independent chapters focused not only on main thematic issues but also other necessary accounts in which Ripka describes methods of his field research and theoretical background. In this form, the text does not follow an usual structure of dissertation with introduction, chapters describing field methods and theories and then actual findings and discussions. Author decided to use, in my point of view, much more reader-friendly structure and at the same time the text keeps its high academic standards.

I especially value deep self-reflection of Ripka's field research and ways how his interaction with informants influences the field and many other numerous accounts of his field findings and complex interpretations based on systematic field-work. The parts of the dissertation where the author speaks about his methodological dilemmas and problems with confirming his original research question (chapter 5) leading to breakdown and ways how he solved this challenge belong to the most valuable parts of the text. Ripka describes and analyzes his methods in complexity and details. At the same time, he thoroughly describes his ethnographic evidence focusing not only on religious aspects of the community but also other circumstances which directly and indirectly influence religiosity and perspectives of religious conversions in the locality. I appreciate chapters which describe economic strategies, leadership and kinship structures and their effects on ways how religion is perceived and performed in this particular community.

Further in my assessment I will focus on few comments and questions which, in my point of view, could be interesting for the discussion. At first, I already mentioned that I liked the way how Ripka openly accepted the research question breakdown and how he solved this dilemma. He came to the field with hypothesis that the process of learning and leadership training in congregation (mainly by attending the Bible school) leads to autonomy and their need for self-government would be empowered. However, what he encountered was in fact the opposite from his perspective - Roma converts were encouraged to accept their life in poverty and inferiority as a divine principle. In fact, author's solution comes to the conclusion that Roma converts keep attending Bible school because it offers them something else apart from religious education - the language code of middle class, or education as such, which can contribute more to their chances of upward social mobility. Moreover, Ripka also admits other serious research problems. At first he had complicated

relationship with the pastor of the congregation and he was not allowed to attend (enroll to) the Bible school. Instead, he focused on closer contact with the Bible school attendants and his informants which enabled him to gain their perspectives of the Bible school. He then describes this position on several pages of the chapter 5 (pp. 119-128). However, what I lack more in this part of the dissertation is the way HOW they gained this knowledge, in other words, more detailed description of the process of mastering middle class knowledge.

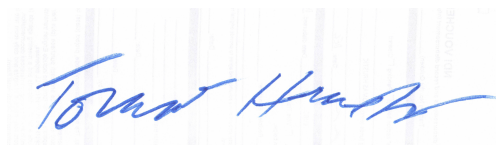
I would also appreciate more information about author's relation to the pastor Waleri. Stepan Ripka admits that Waleri did not accept him in the congregation without reservations and this fact is apparent in some parts of the text. Moreover, I lack more information about, from my perspective, one of the crucial moments of the short history of this particular congregation - about the split and Waleri's departure. This breakpoint is very well analyzed from the perspective of Míša, Ruba and Michal and this explanation is very well grounded in the ethnographic evidence and for the sake of this dissertation it is completely sufficient. However, I am curious also in Waleri's account of this case (since I have encountered something similar in my field research) and in the text this moment is described very briefly: "*Waleri decided not to get into conflict with Míša and left the congregation immediately. He also gradually stopped all the financial support...*" (p.233). We do not know anything about Waleri's perspective in this conflict and we can imagine that after investing three years of systematic effort into building this congregation this "immediate" departure must have more dimensions and the other side of the coin would be also very interesting.

Regarding Waleri, I have another question which perhaps could bring more insights into his position within the congregation. In the part about relief from prostitution, the author is writing: "*And Waleri was also sceptical about their possibilities - what should he tell to a mother with children who does not have what to cook? Should he prevent her from going with the Germans? He did not have anything to offer them*" (p.190). From the text it is not clear whether these are Waleri's words and Ripka refer to them based on the interview with Waleri, or it is Ripka's interpretation of Waleri's position?

In some instances, while reading the dissertation, I have an impression that the author sometimes balances with judging statements, for example in places where he asks whether "*was the convert sincere in his conversion and change*"? (p.227). I understand the author's question in relation to kinship factor and its influence on the conversion process. However, even from dissertation's point of view, the sincerity of accepting Jesus is not the predisposition of "true conversion" (just note part about Ripka's dilemma to accept or not to accept Jesus on pp. 33-38) because after accepting, the individual is under influence of the Holy Spirit: "*I learned about the theology which allows the "yet unconverted" people get involved in the conversion process, without any preparation, performatively opening their hearts to the Holy Spirit to clean them. It allows overcoming moral dilemmas about motivations to conversion, because Jesus is supposed to work in the hearts of all people who accept him*" (p.37). From this perspective, it is also disputable whom to consider for "a convert", or how to define "conversion". It is not clear whether Ripka considers conversion for a process of several stages or as a one-time process, or based on self-declaration of an individual - therefore, a short part on methodology and literature about religious conversions would be useful in this dissertation. I rather understand religious conversion as a process of several stages and from my field I have many experiences where it was sometimes difficult to say about somebody if she or he is converted or not. This dilemma then has clear implications for many statements in Ripka's dissertation.

This debate about process or stages of religious conversions can lead also to broader perspectives related to other Romani charismatic congregations. Ripka's dissertation is indeed a unique and detailed analysis of one particular pentecostal mission and congregation. However, the history of this particular congregation was rather short and was not completed (at least I understand it in this way) because the founding pastor departed and left the congregation. Štěpán Ripka supported all his key arguments by condense ethnographic evidence and indeed proved that his findings are valid for this specific congregation. However, trying to broaden the discussion to other Romani charismatic congregations in Czech republic and Slovakia, I would like to ask the author whether he thinks some of his key findings have more general validity, whether they could be applicable also to other Romani congregations. Or, similarly, what would happen with the leadership and autonomy if Waleri was able to continue his work in this congregation for more years?

In general, Stepan Ripka's dissertation meets all criteria for granting its author PhD title. It is well-written, based on thorough and systematic ethnographic research and all key arguments are well addressed and supported.



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