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Dissertation Review Report
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Title of Dissertation: 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 Conversion among the Roma in Márov.

Author: Štěpán Ripka
No. of pages: 275
No. of Figures: 10
No. of Tables: 2
No. of Appendices: 0

The history of Christianity indicates that Christians are not born; they are made. From the very beginning of Christianity, conversion has been the primary process for the production and reproduction of Christians. Conversion narratives play important roles in mapping out the dynamics, strategies and patterns of how converts reposition and transform themselves from “outsiders” of a religious group to “insiders”. This process is not a linear but complex and dynamic one; it is filled with divergent contours, new insights, and agency. It is a process of self-disciplining and self-making. Štěpán Ripka’s dissertation documents and critically analyses the conversion narratives among a Czech and Slovak Roma Pentecostal community vis-à-vis the dynamics of autonomy. Ripka’s analysis is deeply embedded and foregrounded in extant theoretical explorations of Patrick Williams (1987, 1991, 1993) but also other scholars such as J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff who relate French Gypsie conversion to the quest for autonomy and personal agency. Ripka does not in his thesis adopt this theory wholesale but interrogates, critiques and modifies it in light of his rich ethnographic data. The thesis draws insight from, and builds upon, his Master’s studies (on Pentecostal Roma in Mexico) and extends it to the Roma of Márov. Although the theory of autonomy is pivotal to the structure and organisation of the central argument of the thesis, there are also some “sub-theories” embedded in the research report such as the theory of, and on, charisma (chapter 8) and the anthropological theory of kinship (chapter 9). This study, therefore, is not only empirically rich, it is also theoretically well nuanced, insightful and dense. It is a multidisciplinary research that triangulates methodologies

and theories to produce a contextualised and discursive report on the dynamics and trajectory of Roma conversion narratives as an act of cultural autonomy.

The dissertation is informed by a critical review of literature on the anthropology of authenticity and dynamics of autonomy within, and relating to, the ethnography of Roma conversion to Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (Christman 2014, Thurfjell & Marsh 2014). The paradox here is that autonomy as self-government (“the respect for decisions a person makes is a principal act of establishing... autonomy” or “a free actor who decides for himself”, pp. 131/2) features greatly in Roma narratives of conversion; however, to convert is to subordinate and subscribe to rules of practice, modes of thought and belonging from outside the self, from religious leaders and from a spiritual entity (God and/or Jesus Christ, in this case). Conversion is the acquisition of a new identity mediated through religious idioms and schema. There is an obvious tension in conversion narratives in respect of the Márov Roma group as articulated by Mr. Ripka: conversion has an otherworldly objective – to be born again as a new creature in Christ – but is expected to bring about this-worldly changes such a new set of moral and political values and increased societal immersion and empowerment (pp. 80-81). Empirically and coherently navigating this tension and expectations among the Roma of Márov is part of the contribution of this dissertation.

The site of the research is Márov, a small town in Czech Republic 8-10% of whose population is Roma (pp. 92-3) and only 12.7% of the inhabitants of Márov are religious believers. Márov is profoundly non-religious, and may in fact be classified as irreligious. Described in bleak terms of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, the Roma of Márov are generally the most marginalised of the poor and down-trodden of the population. The growth and travails of Pentecostalism among this “dreg” of the society — “the plague of Márov” (p. 73) — is at the heart of the dissertation: what factors account for the appeal in conversion among the Roma and how does conversion narratives encapsulate the dynamics of autonomy and subjugation. The case study is a (dysfunctional or conflicted) small Pentecostal community made up of former commercial sex workers, ex-drug addicts or reformed pimps, and other quasi-repentant petty criminals who swing between conversion, reversion and deconversion, some of whom relished telling stories of their gory past (pp. 190-1). The average membership strength of this group is not stated, however, being built around cognatic descent group (*fajta* and their in-laws, p. 230), it may be rightly assumed the population does not exceed 50 members at the best of times.

The sources of data for the study include long periods of ethnographic immersion into the life and everyday world of the small community and the congregation. By far the most important data source was critical observation, followed by *active* participation in building and managing the circumstances of the community, interviews and discussions, many of which were graphically recalled, presented and critically discussed in the dissertation. Active involvement in a research field is not unproblematic – and Mr. Ripka is not unaware of this issue – because some of the discussions and data were actually the consequences of the researcher’s interventions. Action research is directed toward changing or influencing an aspect of a real world situation; however, what is not clear from the design of the study is the purpose to which the actions and interventions (becoming born-again, lending money to the community members, active involvement in the production of religion and religious goods within the congregation, etc., pp. 234ff) of the researcher were directed towards. Incorporation into the research setting or community – as was the case with the researcher (p. 238) – have critical consequences on the results and conclusions of an ethnographic enterprise. The dissertation could, therefore, arguably be considered as a product of (quasi-)action research.

Structured around ten uneven chapters, the dissertation interrogates the construction of the Roma in missionary discourse as a problematic people who need the revolutionary love of God to turn them around and dissolve all their problems. Conversion is not simply turning to God but more importantly, the production of rupture and disruption of social exclusion, alcoholism, structures

of self-sabotage, criminality, lack of self-motivation, aversion to work, unstable family structures, and uncleanness. It is about migrating from the “pocket of sin” (exemplified in “visible sex and drug business” and gambling (p. 79) to a life of hope and happiness in Christ through the agency of Pentecostal mission outreaches. Using the power of images, missionaries graphically exaggerate the poverty and pain among the Roma in order to highlight mission activities and its usefulness and impact. More specifically, creating a high contrast between the deprivations and depravities of the Roma and the opulence of the non-Roma was a game designed “to bring money for the operation of mission” and to generate enclaves of self-importance (p. 214). Media images market the disease of Roma life in order to sell the medicine of Pentecostal salvation. The creation and dissemination of stereotypes, negative labels and misrecognitions are Christian missionary stock in trade. It functions on different levels to create legitimation for the missionary enterprise as well as a contrast of a “before” and an “after” for mission work. The afterlife of missionary work, however, is that the objects or targets of mission activities are often deprived of their humanity and left in depressed self-perception and self-understanding. The dissertation interrogates missionary narratives, or rather rhetoric, about the deprivations in Roma life and society. Based on empirical data from Roma converts, the dissertation argues that Pentecostal conversion narratives deliberately reproduce, intensify and reinforce perceptions and constructions of Roma “undeservingness” and popular image/perceptions of a lost social group which needs redemptive rescue from others, missionaries and the state inclusive. They function as public relations instruments, structures of credibility and visibility and means for fundraising.

On another level, Ripka argues that conversion narratives from the Roma community among whom he worked deviate significantly from the missionary perspectives usually published on mission agency websites or missionary newsletters. For the Roma, conversion narratives revolve around institutional changes and new experiences rather than personal history of evil and laziness and debauchery: “as a rule it can be said that they [Roma converts] were not interested in sharing their histories of conversion with the public” (p. 93). This is a significant finding and critique of Pentecostal missionary practices; the Roma of Márov assert their autonomy and agency by challenging missionary narratives and self-presenting as responsible, independent adults. Active involvement of the Roma of Márov in their self-re-education as Christians is also evident in the manner in which they subversively redirect the function and purpose of the Pentecostal Bible School to serve their own autonomous ends. Because the Roma “inverted dominant value hierarchy” (p. 127), conversion to charismatic Christianity, attendance at Bible School and acquisition of religious knowledge served, not only other-worldly purpose but also to achieve social respect and acceptance, first, within Christian community and second, within the larger Czech society (pp. 122-3). Mastering Bible knowledge is akin to acquiring a new and prestigious language skill which adds value and respectability to a person’s symbolic capital or skills to effectively perform in complex situations. Conversion, conversion narratives, Bible knowledge and new language skills serve the Roma in securing, producing and reproducing social and political relevance necessary for their everyday negotiations in the real world. Consistent with findings elsewhere in Africa in respect to conversion to Pentecostal Christianity, health challenges or illness and the search for health and wellness were pathways to conversion and the quest for radical transformation (pp. 138, 166). Conversion, like learning generally, is directed towards the manipulation of the world in which the Roma find themselves. Effectively manipulating the world through improved language use helps the “Roma to resist relations of domination” (p. 130).

The dissertation concludes with a poignant insight in respect of the ambivalent roles conversion to Pentecostalism play in different societies. Scholars like David Martin claim that Pentecostal conversion positively correlates with social, economic and political development in developing countries; Ripka finds out through his empirical material that this is not consistent with the Roma of Márov: conversion upgrades their social and symbolic statuses and capitals but

impoverishes them economically. By converting the Roma no longer engage in illegal activities that economically sustain them, thereby becoming materially disempowered and dependent on the welfare system. At the same time, conversion empowers them socially to become more responsible, knowledgeable, socially visible and autonomous individuals. Empowerment through conversion comes at the cost of a new layer of disempowerment and oppression through an imposition of hierarchy and subordination hitherto unknown among the Roma. Pentecostal conversion among the Roma (as well as in Africa, for example) rarely pays attention to structural problems of poverty, domination and constraints. Ripka's research contributes to a nuanced reframing of the value and functions of Pentecostal conversion in socially – and economically – challenged contexts.

Critical Remarks

The structure of the dissertation is a little unwieldy. It took nearly 100 pages (pp. 1-96) before the author engages actively with the Charismatic church that was at the centre of the study. Nearly all of the first four chapters were literature reviews dealing with Roma studies and the theory of autonomy. Yet, 75% of chapter 8 (pp. 200-13) was devoted exclusively to the review of literature on charisma and research on, or theory of, charismatic authority. This part of the dissertation would conveniently form part of the earlier literature review chapters while the remaining part of chapter 8 on the structure of authority within the Roma church be integrated with the preceding chapter that constitutes more of data presentation, analysis and discussion. Similarly, much of chapter 9 is devoted to literature review on the theory of kinship and the relationship between kinship and religious conversion, which would have had more traction were it integrated in the earlier chapters on literature review. While no literature review is exhaustive in itself, a critical omission in a study on religious conversion is the now classic text of Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993) and related texts. Rambo's 7 stages of conversion would have further enriched the dissertation in laying the foundation on the dynamics of religious conversion generally and on the trajectory of Roma conversion to Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity specifically.

These and some other issues may require some attention in a final version of the dissertation. In addition to resolving them, I strongly recommend that a competent English as first language user edit the final text of the dissertation in order to address the issues of grammar, syntax and other symptoms of cacography, which detract from the smooth, fluid flow of the text. For example, there are strange words/phrases that need revision: laterafter (p. 148), disciplination (p. 165), I was said (=I was told/informed, pp. 170,158), jealousy (=jealousy, p. 163); paranoic (=paranoid, p. 186); congreg(n)ation; congreg-nation=congregation/nation (pp. 210; 213); "on the other side" = On the other hand (pp. 225, 226, 232, 237); fortang (p. 238).

Conclusion & Assessment: The dissertation is informed by a well-defined set of questions and a well-articulated, appropriate theoretical framework and case study research design. The candidate demonstrated a firm grasp of relevant theories, literature (on Roma studies and Pentecostalism) as well as empirical method of data collection and analysis; above all, there is clear evidence of informed analytical and interpretative skills in dealing with materials in his discipline. The thesis makes original, insightful and significant contributions to knowledge in Roma studies generally and conversion theory and anthropology/sociology of Pentecostalism specifically. With rich empirical material and nuanced, excellent analysis, the thesis pushes forward the debate on the relationship between religious conversion and development. The thesis is vigorously argued and will likely provoke further arguments and debates in the discipline. Demonstrating technical and methodological competences in navigating and reflecting upon complex field situations, the candidate makes strong comprehensive and consistent argument supported by empirical material and well-nuanced analysis. He is courageous and not shy or afraid to disagree where necessary and supported by his empirical material with established scholars and positions. Being aware of alternative interpretations reinforces the strength of his

analysis and conclusion. The conclusions have the potential to exert some influence over the trajectory of the debate on the relationship between religion and development not only among Roma communities but also elsewhere in the developing world where Pentecostal-charismatic conversion is on an upward swing and religion plays ambiguous and sometimes disconcerting roles.

From the foregoing, therefore, I rate Mr Ripka's dissertation as **very good (Magna cum Laude)** and recommend that it be accepted by the Faculties of Humanities of Charles University of Prague, the Czech Republic and Cultural Studies of the University of Bayreuth, Germany.



PD Dr. Asonzeh Ukah