

Charismatic Christianity among the Roma in Romania

László Fosztó

László Fosztó was born in Romania and obtained his first degree in Hungarian language and ethnography at the Babeş-Bolyai University (BBU), Cluj/Kolozsvár. He was awarded an MA in Nationalism Studies at the Central European University in Budapest in 2000. He worked (2000-2002) as Local Faculty Fellow for the Civic Education Project, teaching anthropology at the Hungarian Language and Culture Department of the BBU. His main research interests are the Eastern European Roma and charismatic Christianity.

The project focused on issues related to religious change in the post-socialist period. The main target of this research was to inquire into the ways religious conversion to neo-Protestant movements alters grassroots social relations and challenges established patterns of religious and ethnic divisions in a traditionally multi-ethnic and religiously pluralistic region of Romania. The main part of the fieldwork was carried out among the Roma in the Cluj area (Transylvania) in both urban and rural settings. Additional fieldwork focused on ‘the local majorities’: Magyars in the rural settlement and Romanians in the urban context.



Symbolic suppression of differences: Roma dress up in local peasant folk costumes during a Calvinist ceremony (Photo: L. Fosztó)

The traditional relationships between religious groups can be described as consisting of monopolistic structures. All of the ‘historical churches’ in Romania have a connection to ethno-national ideologies or identity projects. This is not only true for the connection between the Romanian national identity and Orthodox Christianity; it is also the case with the so-called ‘Hungarian churches’. These are the Roman Catholic, Reformed (Cal-

vinist), Unitarian, and to some extent the Lutheran Evangelical church. Most of these churches have their faithful among the Magyars and are promoting – though there are differences in degree – the Magyar identity. In this region, therefore, belonging to one of these churches is directly linked to Magyar ethnicity just as belonging to the Orthodox Church is equated with being an ethnic Romanian. As the new religious

movements are the only actor in the religious landscape whose demographics do not depend on the faithful being born into an ethnolinguistic group and baptised by parents, but which work rather through converting adults, they avoid – more or less consciously – entering into the ethnic divisions. Their relative success among the local Roma population is apparent.

The Roma I worked with are prone to convert to Pentecostalism. The success of Pentecostalism and the charismatic churches among the Roma has been observed both in Eastern and Western Europe, though few detailed ethnographies have been published. My dissertation will document in depth the process of conversion, paying attention to the particularities emerging from the ethnic and linguistic diversity and the differences between rural and urban contexts. This research demonstrates how this process influences the self-perception and social relations of the Roma as individuals and as a group. It also seeks to explain why the conversions are peaceful among the Roma in postsocialist Romania. The inquiry into the local concepts and practices of civility (even ‘rural civility’) connects this project to the framework of the “civil religion” research group. The focus on conversion is opening up comparative perspectives with other projects in the department that deal with conversion and charismatic Christianity as being one of the most dynamic global religious forces.



Rural civility: burials mobilise the solidarity of the local community beyond ethnic divisions.
(Photo: L. Fosztó)