

Draft paper for the conference “Religious Conversion after Socialism”
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 7-9 April 2005

László Fosztó

Conversions to Pentecostalism among the Roma in Romania

Introduction

The Pentecostal Church is the biggest neo-protestant denomination in Romania. According to the latest national census it is the fourth church with respect to the number of believers. In the year 2002 330.486 persons declared themselves as belonging to the Pentecostal church that counts for 1,5% of the total population preceded by the Orthodox (86%), Romano Catholic (4,7%) and Reformat/Calvinist (3,2%) denominations. The regions exposed to Pentecostal influence are the western counties of Arad, Bihor and Timiș and the east-northern Suceava. Among the historical regions Transylvania has the highest percentage of Pentecostals. The provincial capital of Cluj (Kolozsvár/Klausenburg) and the area around it has also a high number of converts: Cluj County being preceded just by the west-most counties mentioned above.

The present situation is due to recent growth in the Romanian Pentecostal movement but Pentecostalism is not a post-socialist phenomenon in this part of Europe. The year 1906 Azusa Street 312, Los Angeles is considered as the starting point of the Pentecostal movement (Goodman 1988 pg. 56; Robbins 2004 pg. 120). As early as 1922 the first prayer-house was opened in a village in Arad County (Sandru 1997 pg. 67). After the Second World War Pentecostal movement was reorganized. Soon its center moved to the capital city of Bucharest. During the 1970 there was its first wave of expansion when the membership of the Pentecostal was growing considerably. The second big expansion started after the fall of the communist regime and it is still lasting. Between 1992 and 2002 the number of converts increased by around 50%. And the demography of Pentecostalism is working mainly by recruiting converts.

In this paper I will present and interpret two cases of conversion in order to introduce the problems I am dealing with through my ethnographical material.

The personal experiences, narratives and symbols used by the converts and the church rituals will be only touched upon because here I would like to focus mostly on how conversion alters social relations and commitments. In this way it will be less about the “content” of conversion and more about how the relationships and orientation of the potential convert are influenced by adhering to the Pentecostal church.

During my fieldwork I had contact with several Pentecostal assemblies in the Cluj area, nevertheless most of my ethnography and interviewing was done in two churches in the city of Cluj and in a more loosely organized network of Pentecostals in the nearby villages. Among the villages I choose one as my base where I focused on the Roma community living with a local Roma family. Here my main goal was to understand the social context most Roma converts are coming from. The converts living in the village were integrated to the regional network of Pentecostals and they had their own services and gatherings.

A literature review is missing from this paper, but as much I can I will indicate some points of connection to the theoretical and comparative studies I was able to work through. Case studies also lack the more general context but some more details about regional and local ethnic relations, social history and institutional structures of the churches that I will discuss elsewhere.

Case studies

The cases I will present here are somehow approaching two distinct ideal-types of convert-carrier. The first (David) could be an example of *‘disengaging with the World’* carrier that is characterized by gradual departure from the pre-conversion relationships and commitments for the sake of an internally defined spiritual growth. The second case could be labeled as *accommodating* type that is driven by a strategic attempt to balance the gains of conversion with the values considered important from the pre-conversion (worldly) life. I consider both carriers as *genuine* conversion paths sharing the view of the persons involved. The time frame of both cases (it could be as long as a decade) warn us to hasten in conclusions about outcomes.

Case 1: David

I was conducted part of my fieldwork visiting services and discussing with members in a church situated in a well-off neighborhood of the city. This church was quite non-typical Pentecostal church because as the pastor put it “Most of the other churches say that we have no rules at all.” Indeed the church was very open and liberal about ideas, practices, and behavior or dressing codes. It was also a very young church in both in the sense that it was founded in the mid-90s and also as a low average of the age of the members. Many teenagers and young adults were attending the services and other activities; they also had special programs for small children. Here I will present the case of an older member, I will call him David. He is in his mid-fifties, Romanian by ethnicity.

David was a non-practicing orthodox, and he converted to Pentecostalism in the late '90. His wife and his adult children were not following him in the conversion. During the period of my fieldwork in the church he was a very active member of the community. He was one of the loudest people, during collective prayer sessions, always responding to the call for testimonies and praise prayers launched by the preacher. He also engaged in public exchanges with other members or the preacher when he was touched by the topic discussed. In his interventions a recurrent theme was the need for convert all his family to his new faith. The church community could not respond with a definite advice or practice, since his wife was reluctant to come to the assembly and the members of the church were not welcome in their home.

Though he seemingly was not unsatisfied with his role in the community and the services he decided to move to another church by the second half of the year 2004. The new church was also Pentecostal and belonging to the CoG (Church of God – the main Pentecostal church in Romania) as his former assembly but they were practicing more the gifts (particularly glossolalia and prophecy). I did no research in this church but I was told by Roma Pentecostals that that is a large church with both Romanian and Roma members.

Before his departure he was invited by the pastor to give a testimony in front of the community about his problems explaining the reason why he is leaving the church. David was prepared for a farewell speech. He took his place in front of the assembly and he started with saying that how grateful he is for everything he has got from this church. He was converted and baptized by this assembly they shared the best years after his “rebirth”. He was happy in this assembly but as time passed and he grew in Spirit he started to miss a more direct way to address the Lord. He started to visit other churches and by the beginning of the year he found the assembly he is intending to join now. This new assembly – he feels – suits better his temperament therefore he decided to go there.

As a response the pastor with tears in his eyes confessed that “his heart is broken” by the departure of David and as this assembly was the home of his conversion there will be room for him to return. As Davis already took his decision to leave he can just wish him success in his further spiritual development. The pastor also noted that it is good that

there are churches with different orientation inside the cult and probably David will be happier in his new assembly. With a slight irony the pastor asked David to introduce the young lady besides him and tell the assembly if she will be his next partner (Rou: *noua pereche*). David admitted that: If Lord wills so, she will be his future wife but for the moment they are just friends. The lady was wearing her scarf and skirt like the members of traditional Pentecostal churches, a dressing code that was not observed by members of this assembly.

Discussion:

When discussing the case of David with a friend of mine, a pastor (he is Magyar and Calvinist) I told him, how much I was impressed by the emotional farewell and I could feel that the pastor of the assembly took personal responsibility for the development of David as a convert and I could understand why his heart was broken when he saw David's carrier following its pace without his further input or in fact out of his control. My interlocutor said that probably I am right regarding the emotions but with respect to the responsibility of the pastor he doubt that a pastor can do any more than "opening the road" for somebody. This road opening consists of pointing to the right values. The changes involved in the life of a believer are beyond the pastor's control therefore if the convert is acting according to the true values he has nothing to do. As support for his interpretation he told me about a case in his former parish¹. His understanding might bear the influenced of the Calvinist ethic nevertheless it is tempting to see the case of David as an example for value-rational action as defined by Max Weber (Weber 1978 pg. 25-6).

Still my problem persisted: why David changed his church? What he was looking for when started to attend services in other churches? After all he was already member of a Christian community that put no limits to his value oriented actions. The new Pentecostal congregation was not so much different from his previous church. One could find explanation for his decision to change church affiliation in changes of his personal life (or in more sociological terms in his 'life cycle crisis'), that is the failure of his marriage. I think the pastor put his finger on this problem when asking in front of the community

¹ I will not present his story here but it was basically about a relatively marginal person in the parish that he trusted with important duties in organizing the life of the church and along with his (mostly) administrative work his faith was reinforced but he broke relations with important members of his family who were not honest in their relations with the community. The pastor was aware he will not control the situation anymore since he left the parish but he was also convinced he has nothing to feel sorry for.

who the lady is he came along with. From this angle he “had to change” his community in order to get a more accepting new environment that would not blame him for a perspective remarriage. Nevertheless the fact they show up together and David was eager to take his place on the podium in front of the community and explain some of his motives for departure points in the direction that he felt he is was not guilty, moreover he used his farewell to formulate a covert critique on the “spiritual style” of the church that was not satisfying him. The possibility that he turned strategically his ‘private sin’ into ‘public criticism’ could not be excluded.²

If taking the statement implied in his speech honest it must be admitted that there are differences in between his first assembly and more conservative assemblies where his second church would belong. During my visits to services I was not witnessing a single case of speaking on tongues an event that is common in most assemblies. There were no prophecies, testimonies were rare and without the exceedingly emotional tone I observed in other assemblies. On the other hand the church was well equipped with audio installations the music usually played quite loudly. Whether live or playback it was ‘religious pop’ and the lyrics were projected from an overhead projector on a big screen next to the podium. I found these elements as requisites for making the communication one directional putting the members in a more passive position. The members were also quite self-controlled and their reactions were more resembling to the listeners of pop-concert with involvement than of those who are making the service by themselves. The music and the songs were usually selected and performed by a group of young people the ‘praise and worship group’ (Rou: “*grupul de laudă și închinare*”). And elder members of the assembly sometimes could have different musical tastes.³ Therefore I could understand that David started to look for more direct involvement in services and new spiritual experiences. This search for “experience” it is an important motive in many

² To the problematic private/public distinction I will return later. At this moment I only would like to note that most people who had some experience with the “socialist public sphere” are trained into maintaining the moral distinctions between private and public “virtues”. (see also Jowitt 1992)

³ In fact most members of the praise and worship group were children of the elders and this could enhance their tolerance for the performance, moreover they found special enjoyment in seeing their children’s musical talent. David, who was unsuccessful in attracting his family members, probably could not share the parental joy.

assemblies and the converts attitudes can be often described by an ‘Experientialist’ approach to the sacred (Cox 1995).

As opposed to the this radical experientialist approach that involves an active contribution of the seeker and the awareness of being in the middle of the changes there is the more constraining language of the ideological commitments to other, more-or-less imagined communities among which not the last is the nation. Critiques of the neo-protestant movement often invoke the intimate link between orthodox Christianity and Romanian identity blaming converts of not just leaving the Orthodox Church but also turning away from national values. My intension is to discuss this argument in more detail in another paper but I the case presented can give some reason to think about a major ongoing theoretical debate about how Charismatic and Pentecostal churches influence the political culture of their adherents. Many participants in this debate uses the conservatism/liberalization distinction (Bergunder 2002; Robbins 2004). A more detailed analysis that considers the balance of the old and new commitments of the converts could reveal the limits of ideological labels on their political activism.

Looking at the case from the perspective of shifting commitments David’s wife could be considered as the main looser of the situation. As David was “growing in spirit” they have got separated. To blame the Pentecostals for the divorce could be misleading and I have limited knowledge David’s pre-conversion life and marital problems. On the other hand when talking about non-converted spouses most pastors and believers give the liberal guidelines of 1 Corinthians 7:13-17⁴. Nevertheless the dynamic exemplified by this case is inherent to individual conversion though couples do not necessary end up separated. In most cases the conversion of the other spouse or some accommodating solution will save the relationship. Couples along with the conversion of one side need to

⁴ 1Co. 7.13-17: And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches.

learn to cope with the new commitment and in this process the pastor or some other member of the church could have positive influence.

To put it in a more normative way as the editorialist of a Christian magazine does: “Everyone involved in evangelism has a special responsibility to teach these truths and counsel the newly converted in the dynamics of marital change. When they don’t, they are setting up spiritual newborns for failure and feeding public perceptions that fuel bad headlines.”(Anonymous 2001 pg. 27) I would add that if the new spiritual home, the church community, and particular members of it could have crucial role in providing support for the new member to cope with his formal engagements similar efforts could be identified “on the other the end” of his/her relationships. And these efforts could work quite in the opposite direction. Some consequences of these attempts I will discuss on the margin of my second case study.

Case 2: Rosa

Rosa, a Romni in her sixties was one of my neighbors in the village. For a good part of my fieldwork I was not aware that she is a Pentecostal convert. Just when I found out that she is a convert since in the beginning of the 90s and asked her directly about the circumstances she told me the story of her and her family. In addition to the interview with her I discussed with other members of her family and it seems that they share her view on a good part of the events around her conversion.

Her conversion was triggered by her illness. She was seriously ill and taken to the city hospital where the doctor told her that she has leukemia. Her family was aware that this is a deadly disease and her four daughters were crying and were desperate. She was taken home where she was lying in bed for long months, lost weight and was unable to move by her own. As she put, with de ritual apologies common to a Romni when she is speaking about intimate things, that she was even not able to do her needs alone. Her family was prepared that she will die in few weeks.

It was divine inspiration to seek healing in Pentecostalism. As she accounts the idea came during a long night of “discussions with the Lord”. He told her to go to a Pentecostal church in the city run by Romanians, and during the powerful public prayer session she will be healed. Her family considered that she is confused because of the suffering and they were not willing to take her to the city, moreover one of her married daughters had strong objections on her intension to change her religion. Shortly after this daughter of her decided, under the influence of a dream, that Rosa should be taken to a Pentecostal assembly.

She was taken to the city to her sister's home in preparation to bring her to the church. Her brother-in-law worked in construction industry and had Pentecostal colleagues. He invited them to visit Rosa in order to pray for her. Rosa accounts for a feeling that "the Lord was working" starting from her first contact with the Pentecostals. She could sleep well and rest in a way she was unable for months. After few days she was taken to the church and healed. Her strength was returning as she took part in the collective prayer. She "received Jesus" during the same service and after some months she got the baptism in water.

Her carrier as a convert though could not be fulfilled because when the Holy Spirit came to give her the gift of the tongues and prophecy, she could not get the "baptism in the Spirit". She was still in her sister's house and one evening she felt the Spirit coming but her husband stopped her to "speak" in order "not to frighten the children". Disturbed in this way the Spirit went away and she got only the seal (Hun: "*le voltam pecsételve*"). She blames her husband for not supporting her in getting the baptism of the Spirit but she says (and his husband confirmed this) that he was scared by the changes she underwent during the visit of the Holy Spirit.

Other members of Rosa's family were also adhering to Pentecostalism but none of them got fully converted. Her husband visited regularly the same assembly for months and almost got the baptism in water but "there were no application forms that day" and Rosa's brother-in-law called her husband half seriously to "have some more drinks together and pay some more visit to the chicks". So he stayed non-converted.

Soon after Rosa's baptism her daughter (the same daughter that had the divinely inspired dream) got ill. Her illness was due to satanic influence and could not be identified by the doctors. She was taken to the same church and healed. She received Jesus and she was ready for the baptism but her husband, a musician, told her that he will divorce in case she joins the Pentecostals. Rosa took her daughter's case to the assembly and explained to the converted brothers (Hun: *hívőtestvérek*) that her daughter can't be baptized because her family would be destroyed (they had two little children by that time), and the assembly apparently agreed that it is unwise to break the family apart. "Nevertheless God will not leave her alone." The later material success (house, car etc.) achieved by her daughter's family is attributed this divine help by Rosa. She also fears that the time for the reprimand (Hun: *dorgálás*) will come.

Discussion:

If David followed his way towards a more intimate and experience-rich relationship with the sacred Rosa and her family had to walk on a quite different path. Physical suffering and miraculous healing is part of many conversion narratives and this is not only particular to the Roma. But Rom converts share a common feature in having very direct and intimate connection with the Lord and Jesus. When asked about their belief in God one can often get the answer of "knowing God" ("*me prindzanaw*"). Therefore prayer as

“discussion” with God is not something unusual among Roma converts. In Rosas’ account she had this discussion even before being converted as her daughter had part in a divinely inspired dream when she wanted to prevent Rosa being baptized. Divine signs and answers to questions are at anybody’s grab one should just his/her eyes and heart open. Therefore the moment of conversion as the special connection with the supernatural often is not given too much emphasis. In Rosas case it went along by itself with her healing. The difficult part of the convert-life it had just started by accepting God. The main burden of the conversion process is the working-through one’s new commitments on the densely knot network of social relations. Among them kinship seems to be the most prominent.

Neighbors and friends are just other categories of related persons that should be dealt with in the new situation. The most common blame coming from the non-converted part of the community is that they are *selfish*. This has to do partly with the convert awareness and discourse of being saved while the others could be doomed. It has a more worldly meaning of severing relations and abandoning sharing networks that are outside the faith. This expectation was not met by Rosa and some other isolated converts I know. In fact that I was not noticing her convert identity for a long time was partly because I was concentrating on another cluster of converts in a more distant part of the village but also to the fact that she was not showing too much piety or other signs (dressing code etc.) of being a convert (Rou: “*pocăit*”⁵) and her social relations were not different from the general pattern.

When she is speaking about her unfinished baptism in the Spirit she is aware that her husband skeptical attitude (Hun: “*ne csináld az eszed*”) and the fear of the ecstatic changes are shared by most other members of the family. She has known the ideal scenario of the spiritual support: the members of the family should kneel down around her and praying for her baptism in the spirit when the first signs of the coming of the Holy Spirit appear in her behavior. She is shivering her hands rise without her will, a

⁵ The term Roma are using for this category of people is derived from Romanian ‘*o pocăiti*’ but they sometimes are using a derivate of Hungarian (Hun) term “*hívő*”: ‘*o hívövi*’. Insiders of these churches most often call themselves simply as Christians.

power like a strong wind and fire is coming down to her, and she is starting to speak “big words”. The presence of the small children is also referred strategically by the husband; small children should not be frightened. At this point I would like to recall that the Roma find great pleasure in playing with their small kids, babies and children are sources of great joy. They also have a belief that fright could cause serious illness, belief hold particularly true for children.

Family values and the safety of babies are called upon once more, when Rosa’s daughter is threatened with divorce by his husband. At that moment Rosa takes the responsibility to protect her daughters’ marriage even with the risk of breaching of one of the requirements of Pentecostalism, that of spreading the faith as much as possible. In practice she maintained most of her convert life a rather “low profile” of convert activity hardly doing mission at all. She assumes the tensions emerging from this position and the expectation that sometime her family will pay for the missed opportunities to convert. The fear of divine reproach is translated to the dualistic language of the Pentecostals: God will not leave them alone but Satan will approach them and as non-converts they are vulnerable to his attack.

It is worth noting that the opposition of the Rosa’s son-in-law (*zhamutro*) was not due to his fidelity to some other religious values but simply to the pragmatic considerations that he cannot practice his job as a musician (that involves parties and drinking) in a marriage with a pious converted wife. If there is any ideology involved here it is the bias towards male superiority that characterizes the discourses on gender relations among the Roma. Rosa’s brother-in-law (*kumnato*) relied on the same ideology when tried to withhold Rosa’s husband from being baptized. The underlying idea that conversion is changing gender balance is widely shared by the Rom.

Conclusions

As conclusions that can be drawn from these cases is that conversion should not be viewed as single event and should not be attributed solely to a personal decision. It is more useful analytically if we look at conversion as a process which could be triggered

by an individual choice but the succession of events it is likely to be influenced by the position of the convert in social networks and his/her pre-conversion value set and commitments.⁶ Therefore neither the outcome nor the time span of the conversion process can be determined by analyzing only the structure of the religious system involved or looking for explanations based merely on the social and economic position of the converts.

A second note could be that studying conversion can be useful for understanding more than the religious movement in case. Nonetheless religions could be object of study on their own right and studying conversion could lead to better understanding of the religious phenomena but there is a farther reaching consequence of a social-anthropological study of conversion. The processes involved with individual conversion attempts “open up” the socio-cultural context for the eye of the ethnographer. It can be revealing to larger social system if efforts to cope with changing situations are understood, or the increasing tensions in the social relations are localized.

As both a closure and an outlook I would like to link the grass-root analysis of conversion to more broader social processes and to a theoretical tradition that has the ambition to grasp the World as a unit of analysis. Though it is well founded the critique Ronald Robertson formulates to the school of World-System-Theory, which embraced a strong version of the secularization thesis, and they usually promote a negative view of religion (Robertson 1985 pg. 347-348), some recent analyses point to the direction that there is possibility to integrate the study of religious phenomena to a world-system analysis (Csordas 1992). And the globalization of the Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity can be a suitable object for such an approach.

⁶ Even in such extreme cases when the person is cut off from his/her everyday world it is worth looking at the shifting commitments and values. Therefore prison conversions are of special interest.

References

Anonymous

2001 When a Spouse Converts. *Christianity Today* (Jul 9):27.

Bergunder, Michael

2002 The Pentecostal movement and basic ecclesial communities in Latin America: Sociological theories and theological debates. *International Review of Mission* (Apr):163-186.

Cox, Harvey

1995 *Fire from Heaven. The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century.* Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.

Csordas, Thomas

1992 Religion and the World System: The Pentecostal ethic and the spirit of monopoly capital. *Dialectical Anthropology* 17:3-24.

Goodman, Felicitas D.

1988 Pentecostalism: A new force in Christendom. *In How about demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World.* F.D. Goodman, ed. Pp. 52-63. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Jowitt, Ken

1992 The Leninist Legacy. *In Eastern Europe in Revolution.* I. Banac, ed. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Robbins, Joel

2004 The globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33:117-143.

Robertson, Roland

1985 The Sacred and the World System. *In The Sacred in a Secular Age. Toward revision in the scientific study of religion.* P.E. Hammond, ed. Pp. 347-358. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Sandru, Trandafir

1997 *Trezirea spirituală penticostală din Romania.* Bucuresti: Editura Institutului Teologic Penticostal.

Weber, Max

1978 *Economy and Society. An outline of interpretative sociology.* Volume 1. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.