

Glen Randolph Robertson, *The Romani People and Selected Churches in Slovakia. A description, analysis and interpretation of their relations (1989-2007)*, Mission 49, Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer 2009, 236 pages.

In July of 2010 France announced plans to evict Roma from illegal settlements in France and to expel them from the country. French authorities have expelled approximately 8,000 Roma. In 2009 roughly 10,000 Roma were already expelled from France. The Roma problem is a very hot item indeed nowadays and not only in France, but in the whole of Europe.

If you are sent to Slovakia as an American missionary, it seems to be an enormous task to investigate the present situation of the Romani people and their relationships to selected churches in that country. It was the Dutch Professor Anne-Marie Kool, working in Budapest who inspired G.R. Robertson to do so. It is quite a performance that the author succeeded in delivering his study in order to get a PhD degree. He defended his dissertation in 2009 at the Utrecht University in the Netherlands, under supervision of Professor J.A.B. Jongeneel. It is clear that a lot of translation was needed for this investigation. A glossary of listed terms with Czech, Greek, Indian, Latin, Romani and Slovak origin is therefore included. Because of the fact that Romani people do not have written languages or dialects Robertson's fieldwork had to be done with mainly oral sources. Another difficulty was that time was limited, since the author had to move over to another country (Greece). Therefore he could do some of his interviews only by e-mail and/or telephone calls. The result is an interesting study that provides us a lot of information about the Roma and their relationships with churches in Slovakia.

Because of many prejudices the Roma in Slovakia are marginalized in many ways, both in church and society. Could the influence of Christianity reduce this? Could it be so that Christianity — as a non-syncretistic religion — has a positive influence, diminishing this marginalization in such a way that the Romani people can take part of church life in a better way? This is the main question to be answered in this study and the answer to it is yes. Christianity can help indeed, if both — church and Roma — recognize their own prejudices and if there is an atmosphere of acceptance. For a better understanding: the word 'Roma' (plural; Rom singular) is used here not only for a specific group or tribe, but in a wider sense, meaning all gypsies in general and avoiding pejorative language as the Hungarian *cigány*, which has a connotation of 'lying' or 'deceiving'. The question of the position of the Roma in Slovakia (such as lack of adequate housing, education, work and satisfactory healthcare) is mentioned of course and has been dealt with, but no new material is brought up.

The author starts with a survey of the historical developments, in order to reach better understanding of the depth of the Romani problem in Slovakia from a historical perspective. Following D. Kenrick (*From India to the Mediterranean*, Toulouse, 1993) Robertson states that the Roma were nomadic people travelling from India — via Persia, Armenia and Constantinople — to Europe. It is not entirely sure when they showed up in Slovakia. After the year 1416 — according to Kenrick (p. 27), or already in 1217 — according to Emília Horváthová (p. 29)? After their arrival they were persecuted and in 1427 some were excommunicated by the Archbishop of Paris for reasons of infringing on Christian morality. On

the other hand King Matej Korvín, king of Hungary in 1458-1490, used the Roma in his military campaigns against the invading Turks. This king was born in Kolozsvár (today: Cluj Napoca, Romania). He also ruled Bohemia and Austria (1469-1490) and was of Hungarian/Romanian, not of Polish origin, as the author seems to think, due to an inaccurate quote.¹

During the Habsburg Era (1740-1918) the Roma were restricted from living a nomadic life. Therefore a law forbade them to own or trade horses and they were not allowed to use their own Romani language. A Rom was even not allowed to marry another Rom. A decree dated 13 November 1761 called for the Roma no longer to call themselves Gypsies but 'new peasants' or 'new Hungarians'.² For the Southern part of Slovakia was part of Hungary in those days. The Roma were told to pay taxes and their children had to go to school.

After World War I the Habsburg Empire ceased and Czechoslovakia came into existence. In 1921 the Roma were hopefully recognized as a separate nationality, but this did not stop the problems. During the Nazi Era (1938-1945) Czechoslovakia was split up and Slovakia became an independent state for the first time. The Nazi ideology encouraged pejorative attitudes towards the Roma and thus heightened the problem. They planned a 'final solution' in order to eliminate all Roma. Between 70% and 80% of the Romani people in Europe were killed, this means between 500,000 and 600,000 men, women and children.

During the Communist Era (1945-1989) the Czech and the Slovak Republic were united again. For the Roma life conditions improved a bit, because every citizen had a right for a salary and a job. Nevertheless the communist government wanted to eliminate the nomadic lifestyle of the Roma again and made plans for ongoing assimilation. A *World Romani Congress* in Geneva in the 1980s asked the Czechoslovak government to give the Romani people minority status. This request was rejected. After the big change of 1989 Slovakia became independent again.

During the government of Mečiar the Roma were accused of being poor and socially non-adaptable. They were seen as a burden for society because of the high 'gypsy crime rates'. In the post Mečiar Era (after 1998) things changed positively, although the Roma situation is still not sufficient. A *Council for Minorities* was formed. A regional conference on Roma was held in Budapest in 2003, together with Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. The *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015* was adopted. In May 2004 Slovakia became an official member of the European Union, which means that the EU minority right standards must be followed now and several NGOs are sustaining Romani interests. The historical part of the study ends with a political, socio-economical and cultural overview of the present situation of the Roma in Slovakia. Romani life is characterized by traditional patriarchal family structures, male domination, superstition, bad housing, a lack of education, employment, healthcare etc.

¹ Robertson quotes Michal Vašečka, Martina Juršková, and Tom Nicholson (eds), *Ľudia pal o Roma, A Global report on Roma in Slovakia*, where is said on page 20: "In the 15th century the Roma were used by Matej Korvín, by the Polish house of Jagelov, and especially by the Transylvanian Baron Jan Zapol'sky".

² This reminds me to the terminology of "nieuwe Nederlanders" today in my own country.

P. 60 presents an unofficial table of the unemployment rate of the Slovak Roma in 1991-1998, and p. 61 shows a table of the unemployment rate for all of Slovakia in 1999-2006. At a first glance this is a bit confusing. The author however states on p. 61 that there is no way to truly know the Romani unemployment rate, because they are no longer registered as such. Since the fall of communism the government has stopped keeping statistics (including health statistics) based on ethnicity of individuals.

The second part of the study focuses on the reality of Romani religiosity. What is the impact of Christianity on Romani spirituality and what is the position of the Roma in the Slovak churches? Traditional Romani religiosity is in essence of syncretistic nature, the author states. It bears elements of the old Indian Hindu syncretism, of Persian dualism, of Byzantine Christian faith and icon worship and also of old animism, completely with belief in bad and good spirits. One of the good spirits, *Butyakengo*, protects against evil. Yet the majority of the Slovak Roma considers themselves to be Christians and specifically Roman Catholic, which is the dominant church in Slovakia, but it also seems that the closest spirituality for the Roma is Pentecostal-charismatic. Despite the religiosity of the Roma a growing number of Roma becomes secularized.

Three different levels of Romani spirituality are distinguished: a multi-faith level, a transitional-faith level and a single-faith level. Most Roma are religious on a multi-faith level. Some Roma are looking for a new relationship with God, which means that they are looking for contacts with priests, ministers and other Christian believers. They find themselves on a transitional-faith level. The Roma who experience their belief in a single-faith level are mainly active in local churches. The evidence shows that it is in an atmosphere of acceptance that Roma can develop a single-faith lifestyle. On p. 21 the author states that it is not possible for the Roma to stay in the transitional-faith level. But I actually don't see why that should not be.

Participation of Romani in church life during communist times was not easy. Under communism churches had to survive and to keep their own identities. The churches themselves were needy and overlooked the plight of the Roma. In 1990, one year after the fall of communism, each diocese within the (Slovak) Roman Catholic Church was asked by the Bishops Conference to appoint priests to care for the Roma. Several initiatives followed, such as a '*Council for Ministering to the Roma*' and a '*Pastoral and Evangelization Plan*', including a section on the Roma, but the Roma were never a priority. After 1989 the Slovak Lutherans took also some initiatives with regard to the Roma, but they did not develop a specific written policy regarding ministry to the Roma, neither did the Reformed, the Methodists, the Baptists and the Apostolic Church of Slovakia. Robertson states (on p. 135), that the Reformed bishop Géza Erdélyi told him, that to his knowledge no Reformed church was working with Roma. The only exception the author himself could locate is Juraj Brecko, pastor of the Reformed Church in Tušice. I can add to this, that the Hungarian Professor László Medgyessy from Budapest told me, that the local Reformed pastor in Deregyo (South Eastern Slovakia) was proud of the fine work his church did with the Roma under the condition that they refrained from stealing and send their children to the local Hungarian Reformed schools. Ministry to the Roma is also done through church charity by the Slovak Methodists. They have one church in Slavkovce, which is primarily Roma. The Slovak Baptist and Apostolic Churches encourage their churches to

reach out to the Roma. In 2004 an American Baptist missionary moved to Košice to coordinate Roma ministries.

The author asks what is more important: Romani participation within a church or reduction of the marginalization of the Roma within the church? From a Biblical perspective both of course, but it raises for me the question of the catholicity of the church. I would have expected, that in a study like this one, the catholicity of the church would have been discussed or at least should have been mentioned. This is not the case. I also missed a Biblical foundation. On p. 158 we find according to Manuel Ortiz three scriptural concepts describing multi-ethnic congregation models indeed, and on p. 165 is shortly dealt with (and warned for one issue) contextual theology, but theologically, I think, we need more.

In many European countries we have to face a lot of political problems of ethnicity. Robertson states on p. 51, that in July 1997 the EU hesitated to allow Slovakia to the European Union, because of the fear of mass Romani migration to the West. Glen Robertson helps us to put the very actual problem of (Romani) ethnicity also at the theological agenda. He gives us a lot of historical, anthropological, sociological and linguistic backgrounds. Hopefully new studies will follow dealing with the very fundamental and Biblical aspects of the subject. — MARGRIET GOSKER, Venlo, The Netherlands.