"How long have you been in the truth?"
Expressing New Forms of Religiosity:
Romanian Neo-Protestants in Serbia

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Abstract

According to many anthropologists and sociologists, the collapse of communism and the emergence of a new nationalism in a number of post-communist countries resulted in a religious revival. In 1989/90 in Romania and Serbia, the number of those declaring themselves to be "believers" increased considerably. This religious growth also meant moving away from traditional religious forms to new ones. Focussing on conversion to neo-Protestantism in the post-communist era up to the present day, this article presents the results of ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2008 in various Romanian villages in Vojvodina Province, Serbia. The article explores how different religious groups – such as Nazarenes, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals and Baptists often stigmatized in public discourse – influenced religious change in the last decade. Even though these religious communities were already established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they are often perceived as new forms of religiosity in the area, becoming more visible and numerous in the post-communist period, especially among ethnic minorities. In addressing these issues, this article explores the role of new religious identities that have emerged in the region, the historical continuity of neo-Protestant communities and the question of conversion to neo-Protestantism.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, heterogeneity is a characteristic of non-static contemporary religious cultures, which to a certain extent could be said to be constantly evolving. According to many anthropologists and sociologists, the collapse of communism and the emergence of a new nationalism in a number of post-communist countries resulted in a religious revival (Barker 1999, Borowik 2006, Tomka 2011, Fosztó 2009). While religious pluralism is nothing new, the emergence of new forms of religiosity, however, has been very marked in the last fifty years. The question of religion under communism has been widely discussed by many

scholars, along with the processes of secularization and desecularization.[1] The upsurge of people living a religious life was typical of the new religious freedom that followed decades of state repression. Between 1989 and 1991, following the collapse of communism in Romania and Serbia, the number of those declaring themselves to be believers increased considerably.

This growth also entailed moving away from traditional religious forms to new ones. In the case of the neo-Protestants, it meant setting to work to organize missions in an endeavour to convert and win over new followers. The neo-Protestants (Adventists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Nazarenes, Christian Brethren and others) played an important role in this increase in post-socialist religious life (Gog 2011). Since the changes in Eastern Europe, there has been a massive "invasion" of evangelical missionaries.[2] Romanian sociologist Sorin Gog argues that many of the new religious movements that appeared in Romania after the fall of communism were the manifestation of a distinct form of social pluralism that unleashed great tension in some segments of society (Gog 2008: 2). According to Angela Ilić, in Serbia, as in other East European countries, there has been an influx of new religions since 1990. Ilić, too, mentions one of them, the Faith Church (Hit Gyülekezete) which spread from Hungary, along with numerous other neo-Protestant communities (Ilić 2010: 29).

The majority of neo-Protestant communities were established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nonetheless, they are often perceived as new religions. As Ina Merdjanova (2001) comments:

> "In countries which are fairly homogeneous both ethnically and religiously, and where the traditional faith has a historically approved role and place in national self-identification, the common perception places all religious denominations and groups other than the 'traditional church' on the list of new religious movements, no matter how long they have been present in the particular country" (Merdjanova 2001: 271).

Thus traditional churches usually consider that the new religions appeared or became more numerous after the fall of communism and that they are generally of foreign origin (ibid.). Post-communist societies, as Eileen Barker points out, now host both "old new religions" and "new new religions" (Barker 1999: 54).

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[1] More on religion under communism see Wanner 2007, Mojzes 2008, 2011; Borowik 2006. For a more detailed perspective on Protestantism in Eastern Europe and Russia during and after communism see Ramet 1992.

[2] The terms evangelical and neo-Protestant are more or less synonyms. I prefer neo-Protestant because its meaning is closer to how the informants see and define themselves. As a broader term, it includes communities which are not necessarily evangelical, such as the Nazarenes or Jehovah's Witnesses.

Old new religions are now into their second or even third generation. This is the case with all neo-Protestant communities in Serbia, referred to as small religious communities, and in public discourse often by the derogative term "sects". This negative perception of minority religions resulted in their being marginalised, while they themselves later came to isolate themselves from others. Explaining the similar position of the neo-Protestants in Romania, Gog points out that

> "suffering persecution and marginalization for the sake of one's faith was seen as the true Christian way that each believer should follow. This theme of following the way in spite of all opposition and constraints was accompanied by an outer-world hope that eschatological redemption is more important than success in everyday life" (Gog 2011).

2. Methodological observations

This contribution is based on field research conducted together with a team of anthropologists, linguists, and ethno-linguists from 2008 onwards in several Romanian villages in the Serbian Banat, as part of several research projects for the Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA). One of the aims of the research was to problematise the emergence of new forms of religiosity among Romanians in Serbia in the post-communist period, and the changes in Romanian religious identity influenced by conversion to neo-Protestantism. The study included various neo-Protestant communities, such as Nazarenes, Adventists, Baptists and Pentecostals among the Romanian minority in Serbia, which numbers around 35 000 people in over 40 localities in the central and southern part of the Serbian Banat, in northern Serbia.

The methods used were participant observation and open-ended interviews, where our informants usually chose to relate their personal narrative or life story. This indicates the manner in which they relate to their past, the community, memory, religious beliefs, and implicitly portrays how they see themselves as compared to others. Conversations were conducted with members of neo-Protestant communities, usually the preacher or pastor and believers. The interviews were largely conducted in Romanian (the mother tongue of our interlocutors), although a few were conducted in a combination of Romanian and Serbian. Qualitative analysis used for this type of interview shows that autobiographical stories of the community members promote the identity profile better than strictly controlled interviews (Sikimić 2007: 401). During fieldwork in Romanian neo-Protestant communities, our informants, narrating their life stories, tried to explain

some basic elements of dogma, their conversion, their way of life in the community and relationships with other communities in the region.

3. Religious communities in Serbia

When speaking of religious minorities, it is important to clarify the relationship between the state and the various religious organizations. This is normally articulated through the relevant legal provisions. We must point out that church-state relations in all post-communist countries have been undergoing radical redefinition.[3] Commenting on the main problems facing the churches in post-communist countries, Ina Merdjanova (2003) writes:

> "Today the mainline churches in Eastern Europe find themselves in a complex situation. On the one hand, they have to recover from the spiritual and institutional stagnation they experienced under communism. On the other hand, they have to come to terms with the new social realities they face and to respond to the new challenges, the greatest of which is perhaps that of religious pluralism" (Merdjanova 2003: 281).

At the moment in Serbia, there are only seven officially recognized traditional religions, while the majority of the other "small religious groups" are of Protestant origin. In Serbia today according to a 2006 law, the status of traditional church is recognized for churches with centuries of historic continuity: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovakian Evangelist Church, the Christian Reformist Church, the Evangelist Christian Church, the Islamic Religious Community and the Jewish Religious Community.

Laws on religious communities have very restrictive conditions for registration; these are sometimes hard to fulfill, especially for new religions. The majority of registered religious communities are not recognized by the Serbian Government and only these seven are considered traditional, officially recognized religious communities. According to the Serbian Constitution, religious communities may work without official registration, while those who register have the status of religious associations. The national church and others considered to be traditional might be said to enjoy special status. This guarantees them maximum privileges, such as special state funding, greater access to the media, and the teaching of religion in schools.

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[3] For more information on the attitude of the state towards religious organizations in Serbia as well as problems in the categorization of religious organizations see Sinani 2010.

Beside the seven "traditional" communities, there are 16 registered confessions which include various neo-Protestant communities. It is important to emphasize the difference between Protestants and neo-Protestants. In ethnic terms, the congregations of the traditional Protestant churches come mainly from the Hungarian and Slovak minorities. Mainline Protestant churches have also warmly embraced their role in representing and preserving their Hungarian and Slovak heritage. Lutheran and Reformed churches in Serbia are closely linked to the cultural institutions of the Slovak and Hungarian minorities (Ilić 2008: 477–478). This ethnic element also determines the language used in the liturgy.

Other neo-Protestant communities tend to be transnational, having believers from different ethnic backgrounds and holding religious services in many languages. The northern Serbian region of Vojvodina is well known in the history of South-Eastern Europe for its good intercultural relationships, due to its ethnic diversity and the special rapport existing among the various communities. Today in Vojvodina there are twenty-five ethnic groups, six official languages and a number of different religious communities. The majority of Romanians and Serbs are Orthodox, Hungarians are Catholics or Protestants, Slovaks are Protestants, but in recent decades neo-Protestantism has spread among these and other ethnic minorities and even among the majority Serb population. Conversion to neo-Protestantism has been greater in multi-ethnic and multi-confessional areas such as Vojvodina.[4]

4. Religious identity of the Romanian ethnic minority in Serbia

The majority of Romanians in Serbia are Romanian Orthodox. A very small number are Greek Catholic (Uniate). The Romanian Church United with Rome is an Eastern Rite or Greek-Catholic church, ranked as a major archiepiscopal church, which uses the Byzantine liturgical rite in the Romanian language. In Serbia today, there is only one active parish in the village of Markovac near the Romanian border, with a congregation of about 200.[5] Until 1963 there was also a parish in the village of Jankov Most in central Serbian Banat. These two parish-

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[4] According to the 2002 census data the main religious groups in Vojvodina are: Christian Orthodox 68.97 %, Catholics 19.11 %, Protestants 3.55 %, Muslims 0.40 %, Jews 0.002 %.

[5] Field research in the village of Markovac near the town of Vršac (September 2007) was carried out by a team of researchers of the Institute for Balkan Studies, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) in Belgrade, together with researchers of the Institute of Linguistics "Iorgu Iordan – Al. Rosetti" in Bucharest. Information regarding the number of Greek-Catholic believers in Markovac has been obtained from the priest Mihai Gherghel. See also Sikimić 2011.

es belonged to the Eparchy of Lugoj which is a diocese of the Romanian Church United with Rome, established in 1853. Unlike the Romanian Orthodox Church, which until 1863 officially used Church Slavonic in its Byzantine liturgy, the Romanian Church United with Rome has always used the Romanian vernacular.

Neo-Protestants such as Nazarenes, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists, who emerged in Serbia in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, usually did so through the work of foreign missionaries. The appearance of the Christian Nazarenes dates back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire of 1856, where they were the first Protestants whose teachings were embraced by both Orthodox Serbs and Romanians.[6] The special characteristics of the Nazarenes such as their pacifism and refusal to bear arms led to severe persecution during the First and Second World War. After World War II their refusal to vote, resistance to the collectivization and distribution of land previously owned by native Germans and their refusal to join political organizations led to fresh persecution and imprisonment. While all this contributed to a decrease in numbers, the closed nature of the community itself and its non-proselytism meant that the Nazarenes have increasingly fewer converts. They remain numerous only in few Romanian villages and ethnically mixed urban areas, but the figure for the entire country is only about 900.[7]

In the early 20th century, other neo-Protestants, first Baptist then Adventists and Pentecostals, also appeared among Romanians in Serbia. Their communities developed swiftly and were more numerous than the Nazarenes, their beliefs spreading through the preaching of missionaries from abroad, who introduced more aggressive strategies, had stronger support networks in Romania, and wrote and distributed publications in Romanian.

The field research showed that the most numerous neo-Protestants among the Romanians are Baptists and Pentecostals, followed by Adventists, the very closed and conservative community of Romanian Nazarenes, and finally by a small number of Jehovah's Witnesses. In the last ten years, a number of Baptists and Adventists converted to Pentecostalism, especially in urban areas. Baptist and Pentecostals have their prayer houses in a majority of Romanian settlements in Banat.

Further, the ethnographic fieldwork showed that every Romanian village had one or more neo-Protestant community. In villages where, for instance, Nazarenes were more numerous, other neo-Protestant communities would acknowledge problems with establishing new churches in that particular area.

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[6] For a more detailed history of the Nazarenes among the Serbs between 1850 and 1914 see Aleksov 2006.

[7] Data collected during fieldwork research from Nazarene community elders. Communities have their own data based on the number of christenings.

Picture 1: Pentecostal christening

Communities in urban settlements have congregations of around thirty and are usually ethnically mixed: mostly Serbs, Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma. Rural communities are smaller, the usual congregation being about five, except for the Nazarenes in the Romanian village of Lokve in central Serbian Banat which consists in 400 members, making it the most numerous in Serbia.[8] From interviews with informants in Serbia, it is clear that even under communism in Romania, some neo-Protestant communities collaborated in distributing the Bible and other religious literature required for religious services. Language also plays an important role in all neo-Protestant communities. In ethnically mixed communities, services are usually bilingual and held in Romanian and Serbian.

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[8] Aleksov, for example, represents statistical data from 1925 when the Nazarene community in Lokve had 295 members (Aleksov 2010: 307).

5. Double minority: Romanian converts to neo-Protestantism

The dynamic relationship between religious and ethnic identity may be observed in the case of the Romanian minority in Serbia. Members of the Romanian ethnic minority often find themselves torn between the religious identity of the majority, i. e., the Romanian Orthodox Church, and new forms of religion, which in recent years usually emanate from Romania. As the ethnic minority to which they belong is mainly mono-confessional, it is the confessional identity that dominates among Romanian neo-Protestants.

The history of neo-Protestantism among Romanians shows how new beliefs spread during different socio-historical periods. Most Romanian neo-Protestant communities were established due to missionary activity in the inter-war period. In the beginning, congregations were not numerous, mainly because of the strong Nazarene influence among Serbs and Romanians. On returning to their native villages, Romanian immigrants from the United States and Australia helped build new churches and baptize members.

The numbers of these faithful increased in almost all communities following the end of communism. Pentecostals in particular attract new converts because of their charismatic nature, acceptance of baptism of the spirit and "gifts of the spirit". In recent years, official collaboration between churches in the Romanian and Serbian Banat have enabled continuous evangelization by both the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches. These visits from the Romanian side resulted in more numerous religious communities in some rural areas and in activities for young people and children.

Neo-Protestants have two symbolic acts which mark the end of the old life and the beginning of the new: embracing the faith (conversion) and baptism. Building their new identity on the basis of the new faith as *born again Christians* and distancing themselves from the traditional religions, they embrace a different way of life.

Conversion is a complex process and, as Catherine Wanner argues, "an experience that gives life meaning by changing the way an individual perceives reality and the intellectual and social tools he or she has to respond to it" (Wanner 2003: 276). All neo-Protestants convert to the new religion through baptism. As they do not approve of the baptism of small children, only adult believers can be members of the church. This fragment from an interview with a member of a Baptist church illustrates the community growth which led to the establishment of a new church after communism:

> From 1975–1988 there were no christenings, then three women converted from the Orthodox Church, in 1989 we were baptized and in 1993 the church had 20 members, we had evangelization, we had the christening

Picture 2: Baptist christening in 1989

in the river. There were many young people there. Then we started to make a new church *(Baptist)*.

The majority of informants were baptized (mainly as children) in the Romanian Orthodox Church and through re-baptism as adults, they changed their religion to neo-Protestantism. The narratives of converted neo-Protestants indicate that Bible reading is a central element in their discourse, a moment of revelation. The following sections briefly introduce some important elements of "being in the truth" (being in the true faith).

How I converted? I converted, actually, I read the Holy Scriptures. You can't become a neo-Protestant just because I try to convince you, it's when the Bible comes into your hand. A man who turns Protestant knows how to explain the Holy Scriptures to himself, not everybody becomes neo-Protestant *(Baptist)*.

My neighbours who were in the faith gave me the Holy Scripture. They have the Holy Scripture in Serbian, in Romanian, in every language *(Baptist)*.

From these interview fragments we can see a strong emphasis on the Scriptures and their interpretation, which is of essential importance for all neo-Protestants. Neo-Protestants usually use certain concepts such as *repentant* or *believer* to emphasize the differences between themselves as the new religious world, and those who do not share their beliefs, the world of *worldly* people.

> The power of God is great for those who believe. We don't force anybody, we just say. Not like others who say, come with us, in our church is repentance. Repentance is not in any church, but in my heart. If the heart is pure, then you will find the Lord. Two groups are made, it says in the Bible, a blessing for the just to go to heaven, and the others who are sinful and go to hell. Jesus will judge who goes to heaven and who to hell. The great thing is to repent *(Pentecostalist)*.

Language is the only distinctive element which differentiates them from Serbs or others, binding them in a single, ethnically determined community of Romanians. Religious services are mainly in Romanian and if communities are ethnically mixed, in Serbian and Romanian. As interlocutors stressed: everybody understands the word of God in their mother tongue.

Furthermore it is characteristic of neo-Protestants to emphasize transnationality among believers, i. e., confessional identity comes above ethnic identity. Stressing ethnic equality in transnational neo-Protestant communities as an element of cohesion on religious grounds plays a key role in the expansion of evangelical communities and the universal messages they transmit:

> There is no difference in the church, it's important that we are in the faith, God doesn't know the difference *(Nazarene)*.

> God doesn't know about nationalities, only if you are in the true faith, if you believe in the second coming of Christ *(Adventist)*.

Distancing themselves from the traditional religions, emphasizing the distinction between "ourselves" as the world of believers, and "others" as the world of worldly people or the secular world, neo-Protestants provide a system of values that, once embraced, leads to a new way of life. Interaction within the community is very important as well as the attention paid to the newcomer, the care and interest shown to him/her. The warmth and support offered by the community are only some of the elements that have a great impact upon those who visit the congregation (Pitulac, Năstuță 2007: 86). This faith-as-lifestyle is reflected in behaviour, in relations in the family and community. The egalitarian ethos in neo-Protestant communities takes the form of calling one another "brother" and "sister".
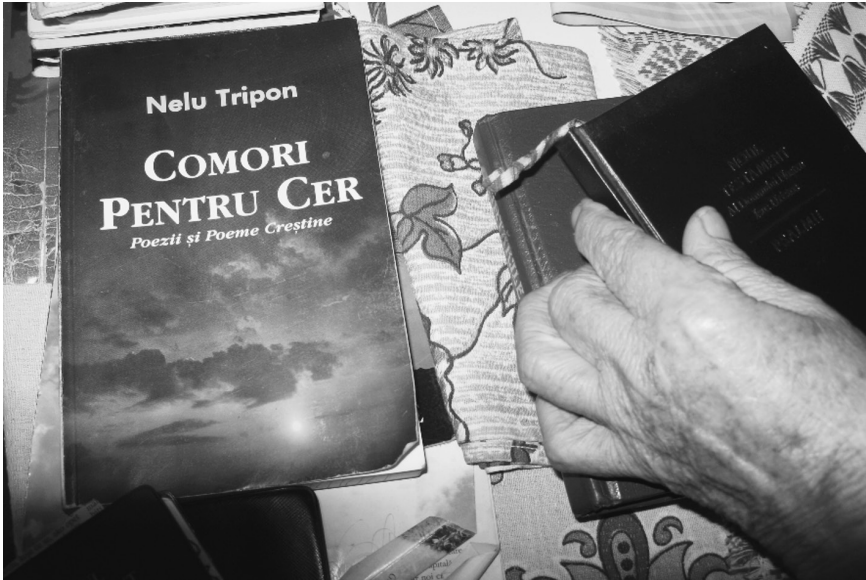
Picture 3: Neo-Protestant literature in Romanian language

A change in behaviour becomes a marker of the true faith, as all neo-Protestant communities forbid smoking, alcohol, drugs, abortion, divorce, and sometimes certain styles of dress. There are certain elements that introduce the person to his or her new religious affiliation: ritual, social relationships, rhetoric, and roles. By accepting all these elements, the person converting to neo-Protestantism expresses a new form of religious identity and separates him or herself from those who are not in the "truth". Ritual, based on community activities such as singing, scripture reading, prayer and interpersonal relationships with other believers, induces a strong feeling of belonging.

In conversion, learning the new religious language of a group is very important. Special rhetoric within the community includes different linguistic interpretations of their teachings. Repetition of religious language, as Dumont argues, can be interpreted as a confirmation of identity (Dumont 2003: 377). Creating a new universe of discourse, this new language induces the feeling of demarcation from other groups, and they adopt terms which are unknown to, for instance, the Romanian Orthodox, such as "friend of God", "new world", "repentant", "worldly people". Such elements of religious discourse can lead to

a supra- or meta-ethnic self categorization (Dumont 2003: 379).[9] In neo-Protestant communities, members often ask newcomers the question: *How long have you been in the truth?*, assuming absolute conviction based on the revealed message, and also the period of time spent "out of the world".

> People rarely come. I mean, those from the world. It's hard to leave behind all the customs of your old life. Young people don't like it when it's strict, and our faith is like that *(Nazarene)*.

For interlocutors, understanding religious experience takes place through self-transformation and committing oneself to a religious group. In many situations, converts experience a negative reaction from their society, which can also become a confirming experience and support the truthfulness of biblical prophecies (Pitulac, Năstuță 2007: 88).

> My family told me that the greatest sin is to go from one faith to another. There is only one God. Me, to leave my faith, I did not leave my faith, I believe in the Lord Jesus *(Baptist)*.

These are only some of the examples that illustrate modes of expressing the new religiosity of neo-Protestants. Conversion to neo-Protestantism in the Serbian Banat is a consequence of contacts and mixed marriages among the various ethnic groups, but also of contact with Romanian missionaries who have developed their missionary activity well over the last ten years.

6. Concluding remarks

Although the number of neo-Protestant Romanians in Serbia is very small compared to the Orthodox majority, their presence indicates the heterogeneity of Romanian religious identity as well as the presence of different religious traditions which have won considerably more public space for themselves in recent years than was the case under communism. Stigmatization of the neo-Protestant communities, regardless of their legal status, is a consequence of the long-standing negative position they occupied, and the marginalization of their followers. The Romanian group illuminates the position of small and minority religious groups in Serbia in general, and also the position of double minorities, both ethnic and

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[9] Dumont defines supra-ethnic identity as "switching from the ethnic to the religious, the ethnic component disappears, and thus no longer plays the greater role in the life of faithful", while meta-ethnic identity means "that one stays 'objectively' within an ethnic category but in self-classification people identify themselves no longer in terms of ethnicity, but in terms of religion" (Dumont 2003: 382). See also Leman 1999.

religious. Neo-Protestant identities transcend the strict barriers of belonging to a particular national community, which leads usually to the marginalization of their members (Flora et al. 2005: 45). The issue of complex types of identity such as double minorities, indicates a need for on-going research, which can in time show the changes that have occurred in the cultural identities of the members of transnational religious communities, and whether such changes influence ethnic identity.

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