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## Antigypsism and Religion

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Dear Participants,

I will start my short presentation with the results of a qualitative study of Romanian Roma published recently in my book "Antigypsism and Religion". It is based on many visits over a period of several years in a Roma-Community (~800 persons) in the west of Romania and on qualitative interviews that were made in 2007. In my opinion this is the most important part of the study, because it is an empiric verification of my theoretical framework, published in 2006 in my book "Antigypsism and Social Work." In the second part I will put these facts in relation to the pastoral guidelines of the Roman-Catholic Church, expressed in several pontifical documents since 1964. And in the third part I will mention the main items of a new pastoral approach of a theology of Roma-Liberation, based on sociological analysis and a profound biblical review. This part will be rather short.

As I mentioned just before this fieldwork emanates from a long lasting work with and for Roma on the outskirts of a village with about 5.000 inhabitants. The situation is similar to many Roma-settlements in Romania and in the former communist states: Separated from the Romanian part of the village, no electricity, no water, no infrastructure, houses built of mud with temporary roof-constructions, often breaking down after heavy rain. We started there soon after the so called "Romanian Revolution" in 1989. First we brought some material help, clothes, shoes, vouchers for bread in the local bakery. We helped financially to repair rotten roofs and so on. After several years we engaged two social workers, one Rom and one Gadge, and they decided together with the Roma living there to focus their work on the papers: to get birth certificates identity cards, residential permits and so forth. We discovered a lot of youngsters up to 18 years, who didn't exist officially. They had no right to go to school. They had no right to get social welfare, no right to be included in the legal health insurance system. After two or three years this problem was more or less solved and we focused on the inclusion into the local educational system. We founded a day-care-centre for the pupils of the primary school, where they get a warm meal a day, support when they do their homework, because at home there is often no table to write on, and leisure activities are offered in the afternoon, plays, excursions etc. In the next months we will try to take the next step: inclusion in the labor market by job-training, micro-credits ... this project will be developed this autumn. So this is the background of my scientific work. I think it is important to explain the interests of the scientist. So I am not pretending to be a totally neutral scientist, by the way I do believe no longer in the so-called objectiveness of science. I am involved in the field and my interest is to reflect what is going on there and to put this reflection into a theoretical framework, in my case it is the sociological theory of Niclas Luhman of inclusion and exclusion into different functional systems. To my surprise, the obvious Antigypsism of the dominant Non-Roma-society in my village was not a total one. They had been included – to a certain degree – into the labor market over a long period. They had had good contacts with the old German farmers of the Banat region, the Swabians. And they are still – at least partially – included in the functional system of work – no longer in the big agricultural cooperatives but as miserably paid day-laborers for 50 Euro-Cents an hour for example, or in the so called "grey labor-market." In my opinion the sociological theory of Niclas Luhman enables us to differentiate the vast concepts of discrimination or racism and to find out, in which system inclusion is possible, is necessary or is unnecessary to improve the living conditions of Roma. This approach makes it possible to avoid the concept of total "integration" into the society of the majority, which leads to an enormous pressure towards assimilation. In our example the analysis following the functional systems showed clearly that inclusion in the system of public governance was prior to the inclusion into the educational system or into the political system: without birth certificate no school, without

identity card no vote for the mayor. And on the other hand the inclusion into the educational system does not automatically lead to inclusion into the labor-market: Roma-children, who finished their school even with good marks often cannot find a job because of public prejudices and stereotypes. So if you are interested, you can find a lot of empiric data concerning family, housing, work, money, education, health, mobility, historical persecutions, identity, language, politics, experiences of Antigypsism and values in the summary of the interviews in the first part of my book.

In this context the role of the religion concerning the problem of inclusion and exclusion of Roma became more and more interesting to me and this will be the second part of my presentation. The key-problem: What is the specific task of religion in the purpose of including Roma more and more into different functional systems? As you see, this question focuses only on the social function of religion, on its visible effects for the social systems, not on the kernel of religion itself, not on the personal believing in God. So the initial question of my investigation was: Is there a visible religious life in "my" Roma-community? Is there a formal or informal binding to the structures of one of the great churches in the village that means the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church? Are there new religious groups as the Neo-Protestant Pentecostal Movements that found ethnical pure religious communities in my village? And the second question was: How do the churches react on Roma? Are there pastoral guidelines for Roma from the established Christian churches?

I will sum up the most important findings of the research in some sentences:

**1. There is a vivid religious life in my community.** Two thirds of the interviewed Roma pray, some of them several times a day, half of them have religious symbols as crosses or icons at home. One day , when I came to a small hut, there was no place inside to sit down, so they put two chairs in front of the house and installed an improvised table made of two boxes to place my microphone on it. Before I could do so, a young girl ran into the house and took the best piece she had for me as a guest from the wall to cover the boxes with: it was a large towel with the face of Jesus on it who folded his hands over his red heart with a nimbus.

**2. The connection to the churches in the centre of the village and to its representatives, the priests, is rather loose.** One third of the interviewed Roma is Roman Catholic, two thirds are Romanian Orthodox. Only two persons go to church on Sunday, only some attend the service on the high days and holidays like Easter and Christmas. Very few are in contact with the priests, the Orthodox one passes by once a year to bless the huts, the Catholic one only comes when he is called which almost never is the case. The feeling of adherence to a special Christian denomination is rather weak. During an interview an 18 year old girl had to ask her mother if she were Catholic or Protestant. Finally she decided to be Orthodox, because at Easter she attends the service in the big cathedral near the town hall that's the Orthodox Church. I will return to this topic a bit later.

**3. The Antigypsism of the dominant society is reproduced in the big Christian churches.** A high representative of the diocese uses spontaneously the term "the blacks" when he speaks about Roma, knowing that this word is very pejorative in Romania. He tells some stories about Roma, where they behaved correctly and concludes: "This was an exception". And so on, I could add a lot of other proofs of his antigypsistic attitudes. The same at local level: Concerning the question, "How many of the Roma in the village are Roman Catholic?" the priest of the parish tells me: "Few, very few, from time to time someone comes and tells me that he is Catholic, but this is seldom, very seldom"

although at least one third of the Roma-Population is Catholic. And he admits openly: “I don’t have regular or direct contact to the Gypsies.” And if there is a contact with Roma, it is a bad experience for him that he ascribes to their racial nature: One Rom left his work unfinished, so he “showed his real face”.

**4. For Roma adherence to a special religious denomination is a trial to overcome the almost total exclusion at least in one functional social system of the dominant society.** Coming back to the uncertain membership to a certain Christian denomination mentioned just above it is very interesting that there are many families, where the children are baptized in different religious denominations. The parents are Catholic, two of the children are Catholic, two are Orthodox. The number of Orthodox Roma is increasing, although many of the old Roma of the village are Catholic, because the majority of the Romanian population is now Orthodox, due to the mass-exodus of the former mighty Catholic Swabians. For Roma-parents it is a chance to tie themselves to the social network of the majority to a certain degree when they baptize their children in the Orthodox Church and when they get a godfather from the now dominant Romanian Orthodox society. This thesis might explain the widespread phenomenon, expressed even among Roma-Specialists in a reproachful tune that Roma wouldn’t have a proper religion but only take over the religion of the surrounding society.

On the local and regional level – as I could proof in this study – the clerical Antigypsism reproduces the overall antigypsistic exclusion of the dominant society. But what about the official pontifical documents, the pastoral guidelines of the Roman Catholic Church?

I will demonstrate this fundamental attitude analyzing the first official statement concerning Roma. It is the famous speech of Pope Paul VI to the Roma in Pomezia near Rome in 1964. There is one sentence that is quoted in every document since: “You are not at the margins of the church, you are – in a certain sense – in the centre, you are at the heart of the church.” But let us read the unquoted sentences too to understand the context: “Best greetings to you, eternal pilgrims, to you, voluntary fugitives, to you, who are always on the run... Best greetings to you, who have chosen your little tribe, your caravan as your separated and secret world, to you, who look at the world with distrust and are looked at with distrust from all, to you who wanted to be foreigners everywhere and forever... “ If you can’t believe it, I can give you the original text in Italian.

The starting point of all theological reflection is nomadism, voluntary nomadism. It is only consequent that almost all biblical references focus on pilgrims: Abraham, who leaves his homeland and becomes the ancestor of the people of God, Moses and the flight from Egypt, Jesus, who has no place to lay down his head etc. Being on the way to the holy land is demonstrated as the ideal Christian existence, the supposed nomadic lifestyle becomes a role-model for all Christians, seeking their salvation settled not here on earth but in paradise. The Roma, exiled from one county to another, outlawed, deported, should be glad to be nearer to God than the saturated settled Christians. This is almost cynical and the result of a wrong sociological analysis: not nomadism is the crucial point, but Antigypsism and exclusion, as I explained above.

So I would suggest – and this is the third and last part of my presentation – I would suggest another biblical foundation of pastoral care: the healing of the leper. Leprosy, illness in general at that time was much more than a medical diagnosis. It was the description of a social phenomenon. Being different was equivalent to being excluded, ostracized, expelled to the outskirts of the village and society. Religion as shown in this biblical story is a way to overcome the segregation. That is why I am

very sceptical about the new Roma-Pentecostal movements, which try to establish ethnical pure religious communities. I doubt that re-ethnicizing is a good development for the Roma-movement. I would appreciate to discuss this later. In my opinion healing the leper is a symbol for getting in touch with the untouchables, including the excluded, overcoming the Antigypsism to found a new solidarity on the basis of equal rights as human beings.