

Nonreligion among Roma – different perception, different context

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Why Roma religiosity (spirituality, nonreligiosity)?

- specific ethnic group within CEE (several hundred-thousand people)
- years of exclusion, discrimination, influenced their life, culture and faith
- SRDA research project RELIROMA



Why Roma religiosity (spirituality, nonreligiosity)?

- According to the 2021 Census, 60.7 % of Romani people are Roman Catholics and 17 % are nones (the population of Slovakia – 55.8 % Roman Catholics, 23.8 % nones) – no specific denominational profile
- At the level of communities, they mostly declare the affiliation of the population of the majority (historical evidence)
- In many cases they also declare as non-religious: either result of long term social and geographical isolation (central Slovakian context)

Why Roma religiosity (spirituality, nonreligiosity)?

- How to approach the scholarship of non-religion and Roma community.
 - Measurement of **believing, belonging, behaving, and bonding** aspects
 - Emic and etic perspective
 - Especially from the etic perspective – many of these aspects are absent, undermined, stereotyped, etc.

Why Roma religiosity (spirituality, nonreligiosity)?

- Non-religion not as an absence, but as a rejection (Campbell, 1971)

- This perspective invites us to consider irreligion not only from the standpoint of **individuals** who self-identify as irreligious, but also from the societal position that excludes **Roma** from religious participation

- forms of exclusions - limited access to **service** attendance, exclusion from **parish management**, and the persistence of **stereotypes and aversion toward Roma religious practices**

Why Roma religiosity (spirituality, nonreligiosity)?

- such stereotypes, and perception of Roma as nonreligious are not new:

Lecoteux (2018) - Roma spirituality reflects a deep syncretism of pagan and Christian elements. This fusion stems from their coexistence with various Christian communities, while retaining ancestral beliefs rooted in nature, celestial bodies, and elemental forces

- Already in 1417 they were described as pilgrims without a homeland, traveling through foreign lands and lacking a formal religion, though they permitted baptism (Bussel, 1919, p. 116).
- G. Smith (1883) - Gypsies in India and throughout their journey across European and Islamic regions professed no religion. He cited examples from Wallachia, including the anecdote that “the Gypsies’ church was built of bacon and the dogs ate it,” suggesting a lack of reverence for religious structures

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- according to Moses Gastel (Bussel, pp. 123–124) Roma lacked ethical principles, did not recognize the Decalogue, and were morally lax.
- Leland (1873, p 10) - Gypsies had “positively no religion,” no spiritual ties, no fear of the afterlife, and only a handful of superstitions and legends that did not reflect deep-seated faith.
- G. Smith (1880, 25) - Hungarian Gypsies had no genuine religious sense, but cunningly professed the dominant faith of whichever country they inhabited
- Augustini ab Hortis, in an 18th-century study of Hungarian Roma (Kozubik et al., 2022), described Roma religiosity as superficial—faith was demonstrated outwardly, but theological understanding was absent. He noted that Roma baptized their children merely because they lived under Christian rule, did not teach them to pray, and that their presence in church did not elevate their spirits. Instead, he alleged that they might contemplate stealing sacred objects

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- In the Balkans, M. Marjanovič (2003, p. 105) documented religiously rooted stereotypes, such as the belief that Roma are descendants of Cain, born from the unnatural remnants of Adam, or that as blacksmiths, they forged the nails used in Christ's crucifixion. These myths contributed to their exclusion from churches (Catholic and Orthodox) and mosques, reinforcing perceptions of Roma as "bad believers."
- E. Horváthová (1964, p. 347) observed that Roma often formally adhered to the religion of the surrounding population, but this affiliation was superficial. Upon relocating, they adapted to new religious environments. While official religious teachings reached Roma only partially, local superstitions were more readily absorbed and integrated into their belief systems.

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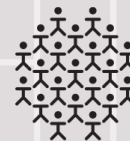
- Elements of religious identity of Roma
 - 1. Critique of Institutional Religiosity: Roma often view church attendance as a marker of privilege, reinforcing social and physical distance due to their segregation.
 - 2. Distrust of Mediated Faith: Faith is rarely mediated through clergy, as priests are often perceived with a mix of fear and reverence, attributed with magical authority rather than spiritual guidance.
 - 3. Intimate and Informal Prayer: Roma spirituality is deeply personal and informal. Prayers are spontaneous and individualized, with limited attachment to formal prayers like the Lord's Prayer or Hail Mary.

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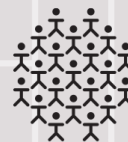
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 - 4. Emic Moral Framework: Moral laws are validated within the community. Transgressions against outsiders may be less sanctioned or even morally justified (e.g., stealing food for one's children).
 - 5. Loose Theological Engagement: There is often indifference toward core theological dogmas such as the Holy Trinity, resurrection, or the Second Coming. Belief in hell is also notably weak, while figures like God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary are vividly imagined.

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 - 6. Present-Oriented Faith: Roma spirituality emphasizes immediate consequences—reward and punishment are seen as occurring in the present. There is strong belief in dreams, magic, and revenants.



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Thank you for your attention!