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“SMUGGLING BIBLES”: EVERYDAY LIFE OF BAPTIST SERBS IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA¹

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Introduction

Various neo-Protestant religious communities, such as Adventists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Nazarenes, Christian Brethren, and others, played an important role in the religious life of different ethnic groups in Romania, not only in the post-communist period, but also during communism. The establishment of the communist regime in Romania particularly influenced the position of minority religious communities, their rights of religious association, education, and employment. The question of religion under communism has been widely discussed by many scholars, along with the processes of secularization and desecularization. Following the collapse of communism in Romania in 1989, the number of those declaring themselves as believers has increased considerably. The upsurge of people living a religious life was typical of the new religious freedom that followed decades of state repression. This growth has also meant a shift from traditional religious forms to new ones. According to the Romanian sociologist, Sorin Gog, “particular shape and form of this religious growth and structural changes of the religious mentalities occurred in the process of transition from a closed, ideologically monopolized society, to [a] pluralist one” (Gog 2006: 37). A certain form of religious pluralism also existed during communism, especially the presence of numerous neo-Protestant communities, but they were more publicly visible after communism.

The majority of Baptist churches in the Romanian Banat consisted of ethnic Romanians; whereas in Transylvanian communities, a great number of believers came from ethnic minorities (e.g. Hungarians and Serbs). This paper seeks to present everyday life experiences of Baptist Serbs in Romania during the specific historical period of communism. It is based on field research conducted in August 2010 within Serbian Baptist communities located in the region of the Danube Gorge of western Romania (Rom. *Clisura Dunării*). According to the 2002 census, 22,561 Serbs lived in Romania at that time; among 19 ethnic minorities, Serbs were the eighth largest minority population. The census shows that Serbs lived throughout the territory of Romania, in all counties, but the largest number of them lived in the counties of Timiș (13,273), Caraș-Severin (6,082), Arad (1,217), and Mehedinți (1,178). Serbs in Romania are mostly Orthodox Christian and there are Serbian Orthodox churches in almost every place they live, while the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese is in Timișoara. Regarding the confession of Serbs in Romania, according to the above-mentioned census, there were about 21,000 members of the Orthodox Church and 284 Roman Catholics, while others belonged to the neo-Protestant communities, the greatest numbers being Baptist, Pentecostal, Nazarene, and Seventh-Day Adventist.

Most Serbian neo-Protestant communities were established due to missionary activities during the inter-war period and the most numerous were the Baptists, who formed their first

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communities in 1936. Although the majority of Baptist churches were active during the communist period, they were not allowed to perform baptism publicly or to organize any sermon activities; furthermore, the distribution of the Bible was limited. In the 1970s, the Romanian Ministry of Religious Affairs allowed the printing of a very limited number of Bibles. In order to obtain them, the Baptists and other neo-Protestants resorted to illegal means. From the 1950s until the collapse of communism, there were numerous Bible smuggling organizations in many Eastern European countries (Gouverneur 2007: 80). This paper focuses on the everyday life of Baptist Serbs, based on collected interviews with informants who were active members of the Baptist Church under communism. Special interest is paid to the connections between Serbs from Romania and Yugoslavia, various missionary activities, and religious experiences of the born-again Christians during communism.

Baptists in Romania: A Brief Historical Overview

According to Parushev and Pilli, the neo-Protestants, such as the Baptists, Nazarenes, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and Pentecostals, made their way to Eastern European countries in the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries (Parushev, Pilli 2004: 157). In Romania, the Baptists established their first German Baptist church in 1856 in Bucharest. According to Earl Pope, in 1864, a group of Russian refugees established a Baptist church in Dobrogea, and during the following years, such churches were founded in Transylvania and Banat. The first Romanian Baptist church was founded in Bucharest in 1912, which would later contribute to the founding of the Union of Baptist Churches in 1919 (Pope 1995: 177).

Most Romanian neo-Protestant communities were established due to missionary activities during the inter-war period. By 1923, as John David Hopper points out, the Baptist movement in Romania was well developed by early German settlers who had also worked actively among the Romanian population. At that time, "there were 800 German, 6,000 Hungarian, a few Russian and 17,000 Romanian Baptists in Romania (Hopper 1977: 59). The Baptist historian, Alexa Popovici, emphasizes that the greatest number of Baptist churches were established between 1920 and 1925; in five years, 957 churches were founded (Popovici 2007: 327). According to Popovici, the reasons for this expansion were the return of hundreds of prisoners converted in Russia and the conversion to neo-Protestantism of demobilized soldiers at the front in Hungary, Italy, and Germany. Upon their return to their native villages, they converted their families and friends, and many new Baptist churches were founded. "In the case of the neo-Protestants, returning home meant also organizing missions in an endeavour to convert and win over new followers" (Popovici 2007: 328). Immigrants from the United States and Australia also helped build new churches in Romania and baptize members. At the beginning, congregations were not numerous, but even when there were no more than a few members, Baptists gathered in private houses and held their religious services in the mother tongue of their members.

As the presence of neo-Protestant churches became more visible and many people from the Romanian Orthodox Church converted, the Orthodox Synod introduced measures against them. In 1921, the Synod prohibited religious meetings outside places of worship and worship was allowed only in buildings particularly made for this, not at the homes of individuals. In 1925, the Romanian Orthodox church was granted the status of the dominant church in the state. In 1928, the Law on Denominations was adopted with the aim of regulating the religious sphere, especially the questions regarding sects and their activities (Fosztó 2007: 47). Massive expansion of the Baptist belief was forbidden, as well as any form of religious propaganda and proselytism (Preda 2011: 61). During the following years, the situation improved and all provisions related to the Baptist church

were suspended. Regardless of their legal status, the stigmatization of Baptists remained and the marginalization of their followers continued.

In March of 1945, a new historical period for the Baptists and other neo-Protestant communities in Romania began when the communist regime came to power. As Annemarie Sorescu Marinković argues, this period was “characterized both by a nation-wide political, economic and social transformation, and even more by profound changes experienced by each and every individual” (Sorescu Marinković 2011: 8). Changes were especially visible in regards to churches and religious communities and the state took control over all religious communities. One of the aims of the communist government was to minimize the number of recognized religious denominations, which were previously recognized according to the 1928 Law (Neagoe Pleșa, Pleșa 2007: 350). Only 14 religious communities were recognized by the state, including several neo-Protestant ones: Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Evangelical Christians. The policy of strong atheism imposed by the communists led to the rejection of any authority of institutionalized religion. The Baptist church, as the most heavily populated among the neo-Protestants in Romania, was prohibited in 1942 during the regime of Ion Antonescu. As of November 1944, the legal status of the Baptists was recognized again by state decree no. 553 (Bodeanu 2007: 18). According to Earl Pope, the year 1948 “was critical for all Romanian churches. A communist government with its Marxist-Leninist ideology was now in full control and a new law of religious cults was established, carefully delineating the relationship between church and state (Pope 1995: 164). In the 1948 Law of Cults, freedom of conscience and religious freedom were presumably guaranteed by the state and ‘confessional hatred’ of any kind was repudiated. The law further asserted that one’s “religious faith could not jeopardize civil and political rights” (Pope 1995: 165).

The period between 1948 and 1971 involved only minimal contact between the neo-Protestant churches in Romania and other neighbouring countries. No religious community was allowed to maintain relations with communities outside the country without official approval. Thus, members of the neo-Protestant churches ran into problems with the communist authorities more often than any other religious group. Although the majority of Baptist churches were active during the communist period, they were not allowed to perform baptism publicly or to organize any sermon activities; furthermore, the distribution of the Bible was limited. According to Pope, members of these churches were most likely to receive Bibles and religious literature through ‘illegal’ channels and to distribute them throughout the country. They were the most likely to have religious meetings outside of officially designated hours and the most apt to disagree with, or strongly resist, ecclesiastical admonitions or discipline. They were also the least inhibited in calling attention to the imperfections they saw and experienced in their society (Pope 1995: 176).

The founding of new Baptist churches was strictly controlled by the communist authorities. Paul Mojzes emphasizes that the expansion of Baptists and other neo-Protestants within small communities throughout the country was inherently difficult to control; accordingly “some of their leaders expressed strongly critical views of the Department of Cults’ supervisory and repressive methods. Therefore, the government unleashed massive persecution of these groups but without much success, because they fed on the dissatisfaction of many people with both the official Marxist propaganda and the predominantly nationalistic agenda of the historic churches” (Mojzes 1999). As Danuț Manastireanu argues, a local inspector for religious activities regularly reported on the number of Protestant congregations and their growth was considered unacceptable: “Therefore, when the formation of a new congregation could not be prevented, the new church received authorization at the expense of a smaller community, thus keeping the total number of authorizations unchanged” (Manastireanu 1998).

Baptist Serbs in the Danube Gorge

Romanian believers spread the Baptist religion among the Serbian minority² in the settlements of the Danube Gorge, though, as Sandi Budimir points out, its adoption there was accompanied by greater difficulties than among Romanians (Budimir 1994: 60). The emergence of Baptists in these areas dates back to 1878 when German colporteurs of the Bible Society arrived in the Banat from Budapest. The Baptist belief was first embraced by Germans; they were subsequently followed by Romanians, whereas the first Serbian Baptist communities were founded in some of the Serbian settlements in the Danube Gorge at the beginning of twentieth century. The first baptisms were performed around 1919 in the Romanian settlements of Moldova Nouă and Coronini, which soon became missionary centers with preachers who were also spreading the Baptist faith in other nearby settlements (Popovici 2007: 167). It should be noted that in some cases members of other neo-Protestant groups, such as the Nazarenes, converted to Baptism and subsequently spread the new religion in their settlements. "In Moldova Veche it was the Nazarene Iva Stefanović who introduced [the] Baptist belief to the village" (Budimir 1994: 86). In the village of Pojejena Sârbă, there were two Serbian families who converted to Baptist Christianity in 1936, but the first baptisms in the Radimna River were performed as late as 1948. In one of the oldest settlements in the Danube Gorge, Radimna, the first Baptist baptism was performed in 1954 and the first gatherings were organized in the house of a believer. The prayer house did not exist and, during the following years, Baptist Serbs went to church at a neighbouring place three kilometers away. Not until 1975 did the church begin to function in Pojejena Sârbă in the Serbian language, after obtaining a license for that. After many problems with authorities, the Serbian Baptist Church was founded in Radimna in 1988. The largest baptism was held in 1993 with about 20 believers present and on that occasion, as Budimir says, two brothers from Yugoslavia were also preaching in the Serbian language" (Budimir 1994: 73). Baptist communities were founded in many Serbian villages after the Revolution of 1989; Divici, Baziaș, Belobreșca, and Zlatița were among these new congregations. Baptism expanded faster in Romania due to missionary work, an increasing number of educated preachers, and the legalized position of Baptist communities.

This paper is based on qualitative ethnographic research conducted during August 2010 in the Serbian settlements of the Danube Gorge in Romania: Radimna (481 Serbs), Pojejena (321 Serbs), Moldova Veche (1423 Serbs), Divici (296 Serbs), and Liubcova (412 Serbs).³ This research covered Baptist Serbs, the most numerous neo-Protestants in the specified region, though the majority of Serbs in Romania are Serbian Orthodox. In the Danube Gorge region, there are several settlements where Serbs constitute more than half of the Baptist community and in some communities, sermons are preached only in the Serbian language. This principally applies to the Serbian village of Radimna, which has about 70 believers belonging to the Baptist church. One of the aims of this research has been to focus on the everyday life of the Baptist Serbs, based on collected interviews with informants who were active members of the Baptist church under communism. Accordingly, the research has been based on participant observation and semi-guided interviews, mostly life stories of the interviewed people. Conversations were conducted with

² Serbs have lived in the territory of Banat since the Middle Ages, with the oldest settlements dating back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Today, Serbs in Romania mostly inhabit western Romania, Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin, and Mehedinți Counties, with Timișoara as the cultural, political and religious center. Over the last few decades, the number of Serbs in Romania has been decreasing due to strong assimilation, as seen from the different census data: 34,037 in 1977, 29,408 in 1992, and only 22,518 in 2002. For more details on census data, see Stepanov 2007. For research on ethnic identity of Serbs in Romania, see Pavlović 2005.

³ The numbers within the brackets refer to the total number of Serbs in the named settlements according to the 2002 census.

members of Baptist communities, usually preachers or pastors and believers. The collected interviews indicate the manner in which the Baptist Serbs relate to their past, their religious community, their memories, and their beliefs, and implicitly portray how they see themselves as compared to others. Special interest is paid to the connections between Serbs from Romania and Yugoslavia, various missionary activities, and religious experiences of the born-again Christians during communism.

Conversion, Missionary Activities and Bible Smuggling in Communist Romania

Missionary activities of Baptist communities have been emphasized since their beginnings, when Johann Gerhard Oncken formulated his famous motto: "Every Baptist a missionary". The primary activities of every newly founded Baptist church and new members of the community were missionary activities and the evangelization of people not belonging to the community. The Baptists have two symbolic acts which mark the end of the old life and the beginning of the new one: embracing the faith (i.e. conversion) and baptism. As they do not approve the baptism of young children, only adult believers can be members of the church. Becoming a true believer requires an experience of conversion, a dramatic change which implies the rediscovery of Christ and faith. By building a new identity on faith as born-again Christians and distancing themselves from traditional religions, they embrace a different way of life. The 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). Ritual, based on community activities such as singing, scripture reading, prayer, and interpersonal relationships with other believers, induces a strong feeling of belonging. In the discourse of our informants, there is a strong emphasis on the Bible and its interpretation, which is of essential importance for all neo-Protestants. The Baptists, as well as other neo-Protestants, stress ethnic equality as an element of cohesion that plays a key role in the expansion of evangelical communities and the universal messages they transmit (Đurić-Milovanović 2012). Thus, in Baptist theology, the emphasis is mainly on moral renewal, evangelization, and general disinterest in nationalism (Mojzes 1999).

The majority of Baptist Serbs previously belonged to the Serbian Orthodox Church, or originated from Orthodox families. There are rare cases of people born into Baptist families, indicating a recent process of conversion. Language had a key role in missionary activities aimed at gaining new members. The majority of Serbs included in our research converted through working with Romanians in the coal mines that were active during communism in the Danube Gorge area. Some informants stressed that they encountered Baptist Romanians who sang religious songs, preached, and read the Bible while working in the coal mine in Moldova Veche. *"Then I looked at them and they were singing, talking of the Bible, talking of church work. They prayed, and I said to my wife, they praised the Lord. They prayed at meals, how nice this was, nice life... I went to work with them in the coal mine and they gave me the Holy Scripture. They had the Holy Scripture in Serbian, but prayed in Romanian. They were Romanian"* (SM, Radimna).⁴ Some of the first Serbian Baptist communities were founded in 1960 and believers mostly gathered in private houses. Baptist believers had difficulty gathering for Bible study at their prayer houses. Sometimes local authorities considered their hymn singing "too loud", so they had to pay fines.

During the interviews, our informants stressed that under communism in Romania some neo-Protestant communities collaborated to distribute the Bible and other religious literature required for religious services. The lack of Bibles and other religious literature gave rise to illegal

⁴ Quotations from the interviews contain the initials of the informant's name as well as the location.

Bible distribution in border areas; many members of Baptist churches from the Danube Gorge were involved in distributing Bibles. The Baptists were severely persecuted and such illegal actions of smuggling religious books were sanctioned by the authorities and the Bibles were confiscated.⁵ When these Bible smugglers were discovered, they were accused of illegal trade (i.e. smuggling) and punished by imprisonment. As Sawatsky notes, "One Romanian Pentecostal was imprisoned for two years in July 1974 for distributing Bibles brought in from abroad" (Sawatsky 1975: 7). Beside the already-mentioned members of the Baptist communities in the border area, there were also trade channels involving foreign tourists who brought literature from the West to Romania between 1948 and 1989 (Bodeanu 2007: 45). The Romanian secret police (Rom. *Securitatea*) took various actions to prevent these illegal imports into the country: two actions named Channel 80 (Rom. *Canalul 80*) and Channel 81 (Rom. *Canalul 81*). During the Channel 80 action at Stamora Moravița, the border crossing authorities confiscated from a German 'tourist' 2,355 religious brochures, 20 audio tapes and 2,000 postcards with images of Jesus (Neagoe Pleșa, Pleșa 2007: 368). With the help of Baptist churches from abroad, the Baptists in Romania managed to distribute a number of necessary religious books within the country, as well as throughout the republics of the Soviet Union. According to Sawatsky, "the unofficial Bibles have gone to the Evangelical or neo-Protestant groups so they are *relatively* well supplied" (Sawatsky 1975: 6). "The lack of printed materials and educational institutions", according to Fosztó, "was counterbalanced by informal meetings of leaders, handwritten notebooks with songs and smuggled Bibles that have been printed abroad" (Fosztó 2009: 53). The following interview fragments with members of the Baptist churches in the Danube Gorge illustrate the collaboration with Baptists in Yugoslavia to distribute Bibles and other religious literature:

"During communism, we were allowed to go only 100 km away from our village. But we went further, crossing the border in Bela Crkva and then going even to Belgrade. It was good. The only problem was that they had Bibles and we did not." (PG, Pojejena) // "In Yugoslavia, they had Bibles. Once when I went there, we had a blessed transport. But when I came to the customs, one Bible that I held under the coat fell down in front of a customs police officer. I was so afraid what would happen but he did not see it. God made that, God made that he did not see anything." (SM, Pojejena) // "My neighbours who were in the faith gave me the Holy Scripture. They had the Holy Scripture in Serbian, in Romanian, in every language." (KE, Liubcova)

For those Baptists living in the border area, going to Yugoslavia to meet *brothers and sisters in Christ* from the neighbouring churches was the usual way of acquiring new literature in different languages. During communism, small-scale smuggling networks often connected relatives and friends living on different sides of the border between Yugoslavia and Romania. Due to Romania's isolation and the low economic standard of its citizens, Yugoslavia was a source of material goods and cultural products for Romania (Archer & Rácz 2011: 69). Interview subjects recall:

"All religious literature for our church came from Yugoslavia. When hymn-books appeared, we gave them to everybody." (SM, Pojejena) // "When somebody heard that we had Bibles, they would immediately come to take Bibles from us. Only Orthodox priests were allowed to have Bibles in churches, not at home." (ŽG, Radimna) // "During Tito's time, in Yugoslavia it was much better than in Romania. We went there often to buy goods." (IC, Moldova Veche)

Small trade and smuggling was a part of everyday life at many borders (Bruns &

⁵ The documentary film *La Frontieră (On the Border)* had its premiere in Bucharest in 2010. The film deals with Bible smuggling in Romania in the 1980s.

Miggelbrink 2011: 11). For Baptist Serbs living in the Romanian Banat, the vicinity of Yugoslavia encouraged their continuous religious and personal connections across the border. This underground evangelism and missionary activity eventually led to an increased number of new believers in this region. In European Baptist history, there were preachers who dedicated their lives to the needs of their Christian brothers in communist countries. One of them was Andrew van der Bijl (known as Brother Andrew), famous Christian missionary who distributed Bibles to communist countries during the Cold War and earned the nickname *God's Smuggler*.⁶ Foreign missionary organizations provided the financial assistance necessary to build new prayer houses as well as print Bibles and religious literature in all communist countries (Wanner 2007: 139). As seen from the archives of the Romanian secret service, the number of newly converted people was increasing. In 1968, as Fosztó stresses, "Baptists were the strongest denomination, with 66,670 members in 862 assemblies, and growth in the church accelerated during the most repressive years of the Ceaușescu regime" (Fosztó 2009: 52).

Concluding Remarks

Describing the religious topography of Eastern Europe, Paul Mojzes argues that neo-Protestant proselytizing activities were aimed at "both the un-churched and the churched members of the historic religions, continuing their pre-war insistence that only by a personal decision for Christ in an evangelical, biblical community could one truly gain salvation" (Mojzes 1999: 7–43). Persistent efforts of the communist regime to sanction missionary endeavours of the Baptists had no effect on the gain of new church members. Even though communist atheism managed to impose secularism as a political medium (Witte 1999), the number of neo-Protestants in Romania was growing considerably, especially after 1970. Although the number of Baptist Serbs was very small compared to the Orthodox Serb majority, their presence indicates the heterogeneity of the religious identity of Serbs in Romania, as well as the presence of different religious traditions and their historical continuity under communism. The conversion of Serbs in the Danube Gorge could have been the result of their contacts with other ethnic communities which brought neo-Protestantism to the Romanian Banat, especially through Romanian missionaries who had well-organized and developed Baptist churches. The increased number of Baptist Serbs could also have been due to mixed marriages between Serbs and Romanians.

This research has revealed some aspects of lesser known history, the ways people constructed their social relations through religion, and practiced their faith in everyday life, transcending ethnic, linguistic and state boundaries during a certain historical period. As a display of faith without borders, the Baptists in the Danube Gorge, as well as in other parts of Romanian Banat, created their own religious networks with churches in Yugoslavia despite the state repression under communism.

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⁶ In 1967, Andrew published the book *God's Smuggler*, dedicated to his life as a Christian missionary with John and Elizabeth Sherrill.

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