During my ministerial training in Romania I was assigned to work with an unusual church: a Gypsy church. Although it was organized like all other Seventh-day Adventist churches, things were different. One Sabbath, the elder of the church, a young Gypsy, invited me for lunch. We talked about several issues in the church and I made some suggestions. He was reserved, even hesitant to accept my solutions and finally took me over to the previous elder of the church, the oldest male in the church. I was surprised that the young fellow asked for the blessing of this elderly member concerning our plans before implementing them. Such a procedure is not part of the *Church Manual*, for usually a church elder would consult with the pastor and not with people who held no office in the church. This was only the first in a series of surprises I encountered while working with that Gypsy church.

Later, as a young pastor, I was again confronted with the cultural ways of the Gypsy minority, but in a sad way. Only a week after I was introduced to my district of churches, the board of the largest church informed me that they had to disfellowship a few families. I soon discovered, to my chagrin, that they were all Gypsy families. I visited the families and asked the board for more time to understand the issues involved, but the board decided...
unanimously to disfellowship them for living a different lifestyle than the one recommended by the Bible. To my amazement, Gypsies lived in some respects closer to the biblical culture.

Who Are Gypsies?

The Roma people, also called Romani or Gypsies, are one of the oldest people groups living in Europe. Their language is one of the earliest European languages. Gypsies are found on all continents, including the Americas, but the majority of them live in Europe. Although they have lived in Europe for more than a millennia, Gypsies have preserved their culture and traditions and have refused assimilation or integration. Official figures estimate a minimum of 6.5 million Gypsies living in Europe, but specialists estimate that more than 16 million would be a more realistic figure (Council of Europe Stats 2009). The difference in numbers is due to the fact that many Gypsies who do not read or write, do not apply for identification papers, and thus are not counted in a census.

Gypsies are a very diverse people. Known as Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, Kale in the Iberian Peninsula and Northern Europe (Finland), Sinti in Northern Italy, Austria, and Germany, Romanisael in the Scandinavian countries, Manoush in France and the Netherlands, and Romanichal in England, they share the same roots. Language wise, “after an evolution extending back for more than a thousand years, with no written models to foster uniformity, there is no single standard of Romani speech. Instead, we have a multiplicity of dialects (in Europe alone, something like 60 or more), obviously related to each other to an important degree, but often mutually unintelligible” (Fraser 1995:12).

History tells us that Gypsies left Punjab (in Northwest India and today’s Pakistan) in waves, starting in 1026 because of the Islamic threats and pressure, and conquered Europe without guns or swords. During the 1192 wave they met the Tatars on their way and were deeply influenced by them. In only a few years Gypsies circled the Mediterranean territories and moved on to the Byzantine Empire where they discovered Christianity, then further on to Europe. “As well as words, the Gypsies acquired in Byzantium and Greece a familiarity with the Christian world. On the roads and in the ports, they encountered travelers from all over Europe. They may have learned additional languages. They would certainly have heard of the Holy Land; they had seen that pilgrims were privileged travelers. All this knowledge would be profitable to them one day, when they decided to pursue their
migration into the world of western Christianity” (Fraser 1995:56).

The first document indicating a Gypsy presence in Europe dates from 1068 and refers to events which happened in 1050. Most Gypsies came as Indians, each of them belonging to a caste with a specific trade. However, Fraser notes that

in being uprooted from India and maintaining a mobile existence, a changing identity becomes inevitable. Their ethnicity was to be fashioned and remoulded by a multitude of influences, internal and external. They would assimilate innumerable elements which had nothing to do with India, and they would eventually cease to be, in any meaningful way, Indians; their identity, their culture would, however—regardless of all transformations—remain sharply distinct from that of the gadže who surrounded them and on whom their economic existence depended. They had no promised land as a focus of their dreams and would themselves, in time, forget their Indian antecedents and, indeed, show little interest in their early history, leaving it to the gadže, centuries later, to rediscover and pursue obsessively their past and their lineage. (1995:44)

Some Gypsies today describe themselves as being of Jewish descent. They claim to be the heirs of one of the defeated northern tribes of Israel which migrated to North (India) and then moved to the West. In support of this hypothesis, Gypsies point to several parallels between their history and culture and the Jewish counterparts. Gypsy tribes, like the Jews, survived for centuries while other peoples disappeared (i.e., the Bretons in France). They experienced deportation and annihilation attempts for centuries. Their worldview is oriented toward the past, expressing the same melancholy as the Jewish worldview. The clothes of certain Gypsy tribes still contain the blue border and tassels on the edges of their clothing, as described in the biblical account. Their trades include investing in and processing silver and gold, while their songs, traditions, and customs have similarities with the Jewish ones. Gypsies also have a particular word to identify those who do not belong to their ethnic group, gadže, which is the equivalent of the word Jews use to identify non-Jews, goim (gentiles). The non-Gypsy is seen as impure, but not based on a theological concept as is the case for Jews. “The passionately held view of most Gypsies is still that gadje are dangerous, not to be trusted, and, in the interest of the survival of the group, they are to be avoided except for dealings in business. Indeed, in the most general sense, gadje are considered to be mahrime: polluted. To develop unnecessary relations with them is to risk contamination” (Fonseca 1995:12).
However, there are also differences between Jews and Gypsies. “One cannot cease to wonder at their [Gypsies’] extraordinary tenacity. The Gypsies’ diaspora has sometimes been with that of the Jew; however, theirs was a diaspora of a people with no priestly caste, no recognized standard for their language, no texts enshrining a corpus of beliefs and code of morality, no appointed custodians of ethnic traditions” (Fraser 1995:44). There is even a legend which says that Gypsies were the makers of the four nails ordered by the Romans and used to crucify Jesus. However, Gypsies stole one and the Romans ended up driving only one nail through Jesus’ feet.

Often described as a people without a country, Gypsies have never asked for a country and never started a war for one. Known as a nomadic people, they are found all over Europe today. Persecuted, they moved from one country to another. Due to their trades, they travel even today and preserve the nomadic character of their ethnicity. Some countries tried to settle them, and some clans or tabors accepted the land offered. However, the settling did not solve the integration problem. In those countries where Gypsies were forced or helped to settle down, they chose areas that favored their trade. The Rudari tribe settled by the river beds to collect silver and gold from the flooding areas. They sold it to goldsmiths and silversmiths in another Gypsy tribe, who traveled to fairs and large events to sell their products. The Gabors, those who cover the house roofs with tin, go wherever they are needed and called, while the Kalderash (coppersmiths) travel through cities and villages patching and selling tins and tubs.

The European Union launched a project called “The Decade of Roma Inclusion: 2005-2015,” but at midcourse the project is a failure. The deportation of Gypsies from France, the demolition of Gypsy settlements in Italy, the burning of Gypsy houses in Hungary, the shooting of Gypsy families in Slovakia, and a report on the sterilization of Gypsy women in the Czech Republic have brought the Gypsies to the forefront of media attention. Artists, like Madonna or Bono, supported them publicly in their European concerts. Gypsy bands are becoming stars in the postmodern society. Several renowned artists claim Gypsy heritage. But this people remain different than the rest of the population they live with. Different countries on the continent passed laws to support and integrate the Gypsies. But there are no real signs of integration. Many people believe that what kept Gypsies distinct from the majority population were their language, culture, and folkways or “their migrancy, the mobility of their dwellings, and . . . their reliance on family-based self-employment” (Mayall 1988:181). In this article I suggest that the main factor is deeper than the cultural or social differences; their distinctiveness is rooted in their worldview.
The Gypsy Worldview

The Gypsy worldview is based on different values than the Western worldview and the two worldviews frequently clash in societies where Gypsies are present. The Gypsy worldview is built on shame and honor and comes closer to the one shared by Mediterranean peoples. For example, Gypsies are very superstitious and treat omens, dreams, visions, and spells with utmost reverence. They believe in fate and luck and this may be one of the major reasons Gypsies do not welcome change and are very fatalistic. Although Gypsies are a people without their own particular religion, Gypsies have often adopted the religion of the locals but retained their worldview. Since most Gypsies are located in countries where the majority of the population is Eastern Orthodox, they found it easier to become Orthodox Christians because eastern Christianity presented similarities in many worldview areas. However, to become a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, for example, is not easy since it causes shame not to be able to drink a glass of wine any longer with the family, and this shame impacts the extended clan or family. From this perspective, even to become a Christian sometimes brings shame, a view shared by Jews and Muslims. Anything that distances or separates one from the rest of one's family is a danger to fight against.

Shame and honor values are often expressed by a fairly rigid purity and pollution ideology that is also found in Islam and Judaism. For example, Gypsies do not greet each other by shaking hands, as Romans do, but use the Indian greeting based on the pure/impure religious value. The purity value is also seen in the system of trades that divides them and which reminds one of the Indian caste-based society from which they originated. Today, the social structure of Gypsy population is unchanged, and Gypsies remain divided by castes, families, tabors, and trades. Even the non-governmental organizations run by Gypsies cannot come under the same umbrella. There is no social or civic tradition of unique representation, so each of them tries to represent their family, clan, tribe, or trade. Gypsies do not have political parties, institutions, or any type of structure. As a result there is no Gypsy church either. Each family and clan has its own pride and individuals try to defend the honor of their extended family.

Gypsies are oriented more toward the needs of the day, and do not make long term plans or share a long term vision. They are oriented toward the past, not the future. The past is the source of their pride and honor which they defend at any cost. Their songs exude nostalgia for past ages and long passed heroes. Gypsies are also very emotional, impulsive, and short fused; they lack patience, and want things done now or they leave the project. If they
have been shamed, Gypsies react quickly and violently. One day I traveled in a bus with a Gypsy driver. When one of the travelers complained about the bus being late and made reference to the ethnic origin of the bus driver being the cause, the Gypsy driver got angry and fought visibly to control himself and keep his emotions under control. For the rest of the trip he was shaking and very nervous. Life for a Gypsy has value as long as it brings honor, and any shame needs to be revenged even if it means killing someone.

If laid off from a job, most conservative Gypsies would not accept the unemployment benefits of the country as this is seen as affecting their honor and pride. They cannot accept the stigma of being unemployed, which is a shame in their communities. Gypsies like to fight in order to defend their honor, but do not like competition between equals as a societal or cultural value. They discriminate between each other, do not marry one from another caste or clan, and discriminate against the “gagii” (or gacho/gorgio/busne/gadje/gadźé), the non-gipsy (see Wedeck 1973:147, 157). History records that Gypsies who traveled through Europe stole from the gadźé, but not from their own. They were frequently labeled “the most cunning thieves in the world” (Foster 1995:72). Yoors admits that “the Rom might have as many prejudices against us, the Gaje, as we had against them” (1967:16).

On the other hand, Gypsies are very impressed by suffering, by stories about suffering, and are very receptive to solutions that provide an end to suffering. The story of Jesus’ sufferings and death is very appealing to them and they shed lots of tears. It is not difficult to convert Gypsies to Christianity; it is difficult to keep them Christian. When conversion implies only the acceptance of a set of beliefs, without changing the deep seated values, the result is frequently either backsliding or syncretism. Recently, there was a notable conversion of Gypsies to Pentecostalism or Charismatic movements. For example, Florin Cioaba, the King of one of the Roma tribes, became a lay Pentecostal pastor. He is the President of the Christian Center for the Roma, which has over 100 churches under its jurisdiction.

Pentecostalism offers Gypsies a kind of Christianity that allows for free manifestation of emotions and sentiments. This is a problem for Adventists when introducing Gypsies to a set of doctrines or intellectual propositions. The classic Adventist evangelistic approach of presenting historic timelines based on the book of Daniel to prove the reliability of Scripture has little impact when used with Gypsy groups. Gypsies do not ascribe value to books since their culture is an oral culture. However, Gypsies are more attracted by the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and the honor that Daniel received as a result of revealing and interpreting the dream. Joseph’s story and his
capacity of interpreting the dreams keep Gypsies on their toes and stretch their emotions for Gypsies believe in dreams and are receptive to messages that come to them in this way.

Miracles are something normal for Gypsies. They believe in magic and attribute special powers to witches or old ladies who know how to cure diseases or foretell the future (Fraser 1995:71, 122). If they have a marriage problem, they go to an old woman, recognized by the community to have supernatural powers, who gives them a special potion or an amulet to cast away the spell. “An old woman is in league with the supernatural, she has the gift of second sight. She charms and bewitches, practices as a doctor and advises lovers” (Block 1939:241). However, the stories of Jesus’ or Old Testament prophets’ miracles get an audience among Gypsies because they can easily identify with those healed. However, the border between spiritualism, magic, and authentic miracles in the Bible is fuzzy and leads frequently to confusion and syncretism.

Stories are the main venue of communication for Gypsies. Most of them are uneducated from a Western perspective because they did not go to school and do not have a formal education. There are no words in the Gypsy languages for “write” and “read.” “Gypsies borrow from other languages to describe these activities. Or else, and more revealingly, they use other Romani words” that refer to reading the palm rather than a written text (Fonseca 1995:11). Some Gypsy tribes allow their kids to go to school only until the fourth grade to learn the basics of reading, writing, and calculation, after which they join their parents and perpetuate the trade of the family or clan. Schooling is seen as a concession or adaptation to the local culture that will allow their kids to be able to cope and survive in it. Emancipation of individuals is sacrificed in favor of preserving the group (Fonseca 1995:16).

Gypsy culture is an oral culture, and their history is transmitted to the next generation by stories, poems, or songs. Children are taught to memorize long poems which praise the heroic acts of their predecessors. Most Gypsies do not sign documents, their word being the seal of an agreement and carrying important weight. Those who decide to pursue a higher education are often treated with suspicion, while those who place value on written documents are considered handicapped or having memory problems. The oral traditions excluded keeping written documents, and as a result they did not have a written language until recently and only from gadjé sources. Today there are attempts at unifying their written language and the more than sixty dialects, but the process is hampered by the pride of each Gypsy tribe who claims theirs is the best language.
Without land ownership they did not educate their children scholastically or academically. When life was difficult, Gypsies preferred to become slaves or serfs in order to be under the protection of nobles, kings, or monasteries, as a way to survive. This was a widespread phenomenon among the Gypsies. In Valachia and Transylvania, Gypsies were serfs until the mid-nineteen century, and because they were skilled in metal-working have been assigned to manufacture weapons which gave them a royal servant status (Fraser 1995:108). Because of the advantages of protection and gifts, Gypsies asked wealthy gadže to become godparents for their children (93).

Under communism, the few Gypsy intellectuals got together and decided to fight for the right to be recognized as a separate ethnicity and people. At the end of the 1970s, Romania’s dictator Ceausescu wanted to be known as a promoter of ethnic and cultural diversity, so Gypsies were encouraged to develop, and to display their cultural traditions. Up to that point they could be officers in the army, communist party activists, and have different trades without mentioning their ethnicity. In the 1980s, however, they were free to admit their Gypsy origins. The communist government protected their villages, allowing them to have their own organization and structure, but intervened when ethnic or clan conflicts became violent. After the fall of communism life for the Gypsies did not improve and ethnic conflicts increased. Houses were burned, people killed, and Gypsies had to flee and hide in the forests.

Today, Gypsies are still discriminated against when it comes to employment all over Europe. Although they like to preserve family and live in their communities, European governments seldom have any plans to support their integration in society. As a result, most of them live in shantytowns or illegal settlements on the outskirts of large cities. This is considered the secret of their survival, not fighting the majority, but retreating to the margins and preserving their identity in community, family, or clan/tribe. By separating from the rest of society (like the Jews), Gypsies survived as an ethnic group or a people while other peoples disappeared. In times of crisis they developed a culture of poverty, became satisfied with less in order to be able to survive.

**Religious Life**

In spite of the popular belief that Gypsies are not interested in religion and being labeled “heathens,” “Saracens,” or “Tartars,” they are a religious people and often have embraced the religion of the locals in order to be accepted
and survive. “Thus there are Catholic Gypsies, various types of Protestant and Orthodox Gypsies and, throughout the Islamic world and those parts of south-eastern Europe where the Ottomans recently ruled, large numbers of Muslim Gypsies” (Fraser 1995:312). Groper notes that in the U.S. “the Rom usually follow the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, mainly because so many of them came to this country from areas of Europe in which they were practiced” (1975:109). The Gypsy religious worldview considers that spirits and powers are part of the natural world (108), but men do not perform religious rituals since these are left to the women.

Gypsies found it humiliating and shameful to worship in small churches or house churches probably because their ancestors used to worship in large temples in India. They often prefer to join the religious majority that worship in large churches than be in a position of shame in the religious realm. This is one of the reasons they more easily adopt the religion of the masses. They believed that if you do like the majority, you will be honored—the main motivation is to get honor—and their religion is based less on a conviction that the chosen church faithfully follows the Bible. The same criteria may be noticed when Gypsies join Protestant churches for they prefer the ones with large numbers of members, like the Pentecostal or charismatic churches.

Protestant churches helped Gypsies change their religious mentality and lifestyle, and also helped them abandon smoking, drinking, and other destructive behaviors (beating spouses, stealing, cheating). Those joining the Eastern Orthodox Church live more of a nominal and mystical type of Christianity, being attracted by rituals, by religious traditions, and by the mystical side of Orthodoxy. Certain foods are forbidden and people who deal with body secretions (i.e., midwives, doctors) are declared impure. Ancestors are worshipped out of fear, so the prayer to saints is not foreign in their midst (Lucassen et al. 1998:47). Eastern Orthodox society, although calling the Protestant Gypsies names, appreciates the changed behavior and welcomes them. Baptism became popular among Gypsies, but “they often went their own way in matters of burial and, particularly, marriage” (Fraser 1995:313). The following is a description of marriage and burial traditions of Gabor Gypsies as witnessed by the author and confirmed by his Gypsy friends (Gabor Gypsies are 85-90 percent Seventh-day Adventist).

Engagement and Wedding Customs

Gypsies marry their kids early, in their early teen years. They argue that the young ones will leave the family and traditions if they do not get married
early enough. Girls are usually married when they are 12 or 13, while boys are 14 or 15, but they could be promised years before, when the kids are only 8 or 9 years old. Marriages are arranged by parents who get special honor the younger the newlyweds are. The girls’ parents start planning and looking for appropriate partners in terms of social and economic rank, as well as the honor position in society and the level of conservatism and faithfulness to tradition. It is an issue of honor to keep one’s promise as a parent, and once the marriage arrangement becomes public other offers become inappropriate and must be rejected. The friendship relations of the parents and their character traits are the basis of the marriage arrangement.

A liberal minority among some Gypsies no longer keep their agreement; many times they change their minds in favor of a better offer. Sometimes they go so far as to offer their daughters to simply shame the initial bride’s family or get revenge for an issue from the past. Honor and shame are still the basis of the agreement, but these values are often used in a negative way. Most of the negotiations are conducted by males, while women are only informed about the decision. However, women have the right to express their opinion. Very rarely do Gypsy women present a strong enough argument to change the mind of their husbands.

The engagement ceremony takes place at the future bride’s house where both extended families witness the agreement, although the date of the wedding may be ten years in the future. There is no written or signed document, but the given word seals the honor-based agreement. However, the father of the future groom has the possibility to annul the agreement if something dishonorable is found in or happens to the future bride. The father of the future bride can break the agreement only if the girl is abducted and dishonored. Sometimes a plan is purposely designed for abduction so the father can save face when the agreement is broken.

Most of the time an advance from the dowry has to be paid the day of the engagement as a warranty that the agreement will not easily be broken. The engagement cannot be made on Mondays or Thursdays due to a superstitious belief that such days do not bring luck. The food offered at this event must be traditional Gypsy food, the father of the bride brings chicken and the guests are advised not to bring expensive gifts to the families but only symbolic gifts to the future bride. The males traditionally gather together in one room and the ladies talk about the future of the couple in another room. The couple may not even stay with the party; sometimes they take a walk or go shopping, or play in the courtyard if they are too small. When they are very young (6 or 7 years old) they may not even be aware of the significance of the ceremony.
Gypsies practice endogamy. The identity of the group is preserved by marrying someone from the same extended family or clan. The Gypsy clan of the Gabors preserves their identity by not marrying their kids outside the clan or tribe. If a Gabor marries someone from another Gypsy clan or a non-Gypsy, the person is excluded from the clan and disowned. This parallels the Amish closed communities or many Muslim traditions. If a young Gypsy decides to fall in love with an outsider, that person is perfectly aware that this will bring shame on the family and clan. Although the person will not be killed, the relations with the other Gabors become as with an outsider.

Love is not a requirement for marriage. It is assumed that the parents know what is best for their kids and the kids are taught to trust and respect the parents’ decisions. They do not learn to love in order to marry but marry in order to learn to love. Up until the wedding day the bride and groom have no specific responsibilities in the families except to learn a trade. However, after marriage they continue to live from the groom’s parents who take care of all their needs. This is a period of “formation” for the young couple, who do not have any say yet in the major decisions regarding their own family. In fact, as long as the father is alive, he will have the last word. The authority of the eldest in the extended family is faithfully preserved. Even if three or four generations are living, the last word in choosing a partner for the youngest belongs to the eldest male.

If the father of the groom decides to make no arrangement until the boy is 14 or 15 years old, he usually receives several offers from families who have girls. The father chooses the girl who has the best “pedigree” (looking at the families to which her parents belong), and who also shows more flexibility in accepting to be “formed” or shaped in the future family. The mother of the groom has the responsibility to teach her daughter-in-law the secrets of life. Since the father of the girl pays a dowry, sometimes the marriage becomes a chance for the parents of the groom to get out of poverty or to make a good financial deal.

The wedding usually takes place close to an important holiday, like Christmas, New Year’s Eve, or Easter, because this is the time when the extended family comes home. Due to their trades and nomadic lifestyle, the males or sometimes the whole family are gone for most of the year. The males in the groom’s family go to the bride’s parents to ask that the girl be given in marriage. Usually this is done with short notice, the ceremony taking place during the week after the initial contact. There are no expensive gifts involved, but the groom’s family brings 4-6 chickens, fresh fruit, and drinks as a sign of deference and respect. Food is a very important part of
the ceremony, and the host family prepares plenty of food in order to honor
the guests.

The ceremony lasts a few hours, and during this time the groom sits with
the males, while the bride and the females eat in a different room. They all eat
traditional Gypsy food, which consists of chicken stew with vegetables. The
discussion includes the presentation of the extended family and their past
important and honorable events, culminating with the request for marriage.
At this moment both the males and females come together and the groom's
father asks for the bride to be “released.” In this traditional speech, the father
of the groom has to “convince” his future in-laws that he will take care of
and protect the girl. Symbolically, he has to “pay” a toll in order to take her
beyond the gate, and the groom's family can leave only after this traditional
ceremony is enacted.

The girl will live with the females in her new home until the ceremony of
covering up of her hair. Until that time the girl wears her hair in braids and
is not allowed to cover it up. During this period the young couple spends
time together and learns to like and love each other. The wedding ceremony
takes place at the groom's house. The extended family and the guests have to
be at the groom's house at 9:00 in the morning to attend the symbolic rite of
passage as the bride transitions from childhood to maturity as symbolized
by the covering of her hair. It is considered a shame to come late or to miss
the ceremony, and if this happens the guests do not attend at all. This is the
moment when the ladies play their important role. The mother of the bride
and the mother of the groom start combing the bride's hair and re-braid it
with red bands. Then the mother of the groom gathers the bride's hair in a
traditional bun, and the groom brings the covering that signifies that from
this moment on she is his wife. The bride does not wear a white dress but a
brightly colored one, and only a Gypsy can usually distinguish the difference
between the bride and the rest of the ladies present at the wedding.

The family and guests then begin to eat traditional Gypsy food consisting
of two or three main dishes based on chicken or calf meat. No potato salad
or corn is included since these are considered the food of the poor. In the
past there was no special dessert or cake served, but today’s ceremonies have
added the wedding cake. Again, the females and males sit in different rooms.
The ceremony culminates with the showing and paying of the dowry to the
groom's father. The dowry includes traditional clothing for the bride, bedding,
shoes, kitchen utensils, etc. Gypsy clothing is usually very expensive. If the
bride's family is poor, they borrow money and purchase the dowry in order
to preserve their honor in front of the groom's family and the guests, even
if they have to work hard to pay back the money for years and years. If the dowry is in the form of money (usually a considerable sum), it will be saved until a house will be purchased or built for the young couple. If the groom's father already has a house built for the couple, the money is kept until the groom proves himself to be on his own and mature enough to wisely invest or use them for at this stage the couple is not considered mature enough to be let alone, so they do not even go on a honeymoon.

Christianity has changed or influenced some of the Gypsy traditions. Most Christian families marry their kids when they are at least 16-17 years old, and the importance of the monetary dowry is diminished. However, the virginity of the bride is still considered a sign of honor for her family, and the morning after the wedding the two mothers visit the bedroom of the young couple. If the bride was not a virgin at the time of her wedding, the two mothers try to cover up the fact by not telling their husbands. If the bride was a virgin, the bedding sheet is exposed outside the house so the whole community witnesses the honor of the family. If they cannot produce the proof, the community understands the message but nobody says anything publicly. Everyone understands the shameful situation, and this is considered one of the possible reasons for divorce. However, Gypsies can accept the situation and live with it, but the families will insist on divorce if the bride is not faithful or if she cannot have children.

If the new family cannot produce children 5 to 8 years after marriage, the parents are expected to separate the couple and begin divorce proceedings. Although the emotional distress will be great for the couple, it is considered more shameful to have no children as a family than to remarry or even remain single and stigmatized by society. The bride is considered the guilty party in this situation, and her only chance to restore her honor is to remarry a widower who already has children. Gypsies consider having boys to be a blessing because they carry the family name. Elwood Trigg states that a simple separation is considered sufficient to effect a divorce, without any ritual being required. . . . If, however, the wife is young, it may be necessary for the matter to come before the council of elders for their consideration. . . . With few exceptions, it is usual for such a court to decide in favor of divorce. The court's purpose is chiefly to determine responsibility for the breakup of the marriage, and, if the woman is young, and there has been some financial arrangement made between the former parents-in-law, to make an appropriate adjustment. (1973:90)

Christian Gypsies usually postpone the wedding so the young couple can
marry within the legally designated age and also receive the blessing of the church. If, however, the couple is too young to marry legally, it is considered that God can still bless the couple directly and an elderly male prays for them instead of the pastor. The church is not allowed to give its blessing to a couple until they are married legally, and this comes in conflict with the Gypsy tradition of marrying before the legal age.

Death and Burial Traditions

Today, when a Gypsy dies, within a few hours of the death, all the members of the extended family or clan all over Europe are informed by phone. All come, even from far places or countries, to support the family, regardless of age or social status or even family relationship. It is also a moment when the quota of honor can be increased for one's participation at a wedding or funeral creates an honor obligation to attend the other's life events in response. Those who have embraced Christianity quote, “Weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice,” but the gathering has to do more with the cultural tradition than the biblical text (which was, surprisingly, written in a shame and honor culture).

The Gypsies keep watch over the dead person, but the tradition differs here between those who watch only two nights and those who watch three nights. Friends, relatives, and visitors gather at sunset and begin wailing and singing sad songs that tell the story of the deceased. Different people are invited and given the honor to say something, and most of them say it in song form. The deceased is praised and the highlights of his or her life are included in the songs. Later in the night, the eldest male Gypsy present begins telling stories about the family of the deceased and the rest of the extended family. The others join in and continue the story.

Those Gypsies who have accepted Christianity do not praise the deceased but sing songs that praise God for his goodness. They tell stories, not about the merits of the person who died, but about what God has done for them and for the extended Gypsy family in general. They use this occasion to acquire more honor. At each funeral at least a few hundred people come together, and when the deceased is young or the person died in an accident or in a special situation it is not uncommon for a few thousand people to gather from all over Europe. In the past, the family prepared food and snacks for the participants at the funeral who ate all night long. Today this custom seems to have been abandoned.

Depending on the number of participants, at least three or four and
up to twelve people are asked to serve as organizers of the night watches. The organizers serve tea, juice, or water and keep order because Gypsies often have the tendency to talk all at once. The close family members stay in the room where the corpse is kept, while the males (with the older ones in the middle) sit in the adjacent room. Christian Gypsies talk about God and everyone who wants to say something that praises God is welcome to dialogue with the elders. Non-Christian Gypsies talk about their clan and the traditions associated with it, but only the elderly ones are allowed to speak because it is considered that they are the keepers and preservers of the traditions. Such gatherings provide an occasion for the younger ones to learn about their history and culture.

The funeral begins at noon, but the family gathers earlier in the morning to spend the last hours with the deceased. If the dead person was a Christian, the church takes over the funeral program with the pastor or priest being present. After the religious ceremony, a farewell letter is read. For Christian Gypsies the farewell is written in the friends’ and family’s name. Non-Christian Gypsies read a letter in which the deceased is supposedly saying good-bye to each of the clan’s families and close friends, and also to all the cities, villages, and places where the dead person lived, worked, or traveled. This is an honor response to the honor brought by those who came to the watch and the funeral.

Those clans who keep watch for only two nights over the dead person do not allow the thousand of guests to come to the interment ceremony; there only the close family joins. The guests remain at the home and are served a meal at which the family does not participate. Those who keep watch for three nights allow everybody who wants to come to be with them at the cemetery. Christian Gypsies no longer light candles by the coffin as the tradition requires to provide light on the path of the deceased person’s soul, but they still put soap, antiperspirant, a comb, money, and spare shoes (so the person will not be ashamed to walk barefoot), the traditional hat, and many other things traditionally believed to be necessary “on the other side” in the coffin to show the deceased person’s status and the fact that the person owns things and has money that brings honor even beyond the grave. Although Adventist Gypsies no longer believe in an immortal soul, they still follow the traditional customs that emphasize honor. People in the audience may even bring money to the coffin for other deceased relatives and some may shout messages to be taken over to other dead relatives.

During the grieving period, which lasts at least a year, all the women in the extended family wear black or dark colored clothes if the deceased was
under 50 years old when he or she died. If the deceased was older, the women in the family wear their regular colored dresses, and only a black or navy blue scarf to cover their heads as a sign of grieving. Men in the immediate family do not shave or cut their hair for a year, while relatives more removed do so for only six weeks. During the period of grieving the TV is not only turned off and unplugged but also covered so nobody in the house would be tempted to smile, laugh, or have joy. Entertainment is seen as incompatible with the traditional grieving attitude. Weddings initially scheduled during the time of grieving are postponed and members of the extended family do not attend other weddings. Sometimes traditional families place food and water at the entrance of the house to attract the soul of the deceased. If the soul returns it is considered an honor for the family. On New Year’s Eve the family pours a bucket of water on the ground so that each deceased in the family will have enough water for the coming year.

Another tradition supposed to enhance the honor of the dead person (and implicitly the remaining family) is to bring a band to the funeral, the equivalent of the honor showed at military funerals. Each family is supposed to bring a large flower wreath, so an honored person could end up with hundreds of wreaths that would go before the coffin as a sign of great honor. As a sign of mourning, the family members do not take a shower and the women do not comb their hair. After forty days (six weeks), and after a year, a remembrance meal is offered in the name of the deceased to whom the food is dedicated. Even Christian Gypsies continue to keep some of these traditions for which they find biblical support (time of grieving for Moses, Jacob, etc.).

The day after the funeral the elders in the community gather together and the amount of money spent and the number of people who attended is announced. This increases the honor of the deceased and the family. The whole community is waiting for this announcement for it brings honor to the whole community, not only to the dead person’s family. No donations or contributions are accepted because these are considered shameful and humiliating. If the family does not have enough money, they will borrow but will not accept any monetary gifts. Only those who do not have children or a family are buried based on the donations of the community. In such a case it is mandatory for the community to step up and cover the costs, otherwise it is shameful to not care for the poor in their midst.
Conclusions

In light of the above description it is clear that the Gypsy worldview, based on honor seeking and shame avoiding, informs their lifestyle, including their religious ceremonies and practices. When conversion to Christianity implies only a public statement of belief the result is syncretism or nominal Christianity. Christian mission should be an informed mission that changes the whole person for God’s Kingdom.

For centuries many have tried to integrate Gypsies into Western society but those attempts have largely failed. Stereotypes about Gypsies abound even today and their culture often clashes with the host cultures where they live. The secret is that the deep-seated values of their worldview have not been changed and apparent changes are only superficial. Christians did not fare any better in their attempt to introduce change. The flexibility of Gypsies to adapt to the local religion and say what the majority wanted to hear has prevented real conversion. Many Christian denominations failed to notice that the Gypsy traditions were far more powerful than the adopted religion.

On the other hand the church should not rush to disfellowship Gypsies, but should seek to understand them first and work with them from within their worldview. A Western-based small group approach may not work for honor-seeking Gypsies. Local church structure should be adapted to the Gypsy culture and should build on their value of respect for age. If the way to their heart is through the eldest male in the village or the chief of the clan, the gospel has plenty to say about such cultural traditions. Christian mission should not cause unnecessary shame, but point to the real cause of pollution—sin—and should seek to attract Gypsies to the honor God promises everyone who overcomes a shameful past. God has a solution for Gypsy suffering and the Adventist Church should offer them not only a message of spiritual healing but also a message of physical and emotional health.

An oral people need an oral gospel. The audible Word should be equally powerful as the written Word. Biblical stories that resonate with the Gypsy worldview should become the framework for presenting biblical values. The possibility that God might reveal himself to them in dreams should be acknowledged. At the same time, Gypsies need to be encouraged to send their children to school to learn how to read and write. They should be able to check for themselves the truth of the Scripture. Pentecostal-types of approaches that allow emotions to be manifested during worship, although useful, should be cautiously employed, always checking for syncretistic influences. Since some of the Gypsy tribes are still nomadic, incarnational
mission requires that Christian witnesses become like them. The old adage is more than true in the case of Gypsies: “If your pulpit can fit on a horse, you are welcome to preach to us!”

Gypsy culture and worldview resemble in so many ways the Muslim worldviews and cultures. The two groups share the concepts of shame and honor, hospitality, and many family values. The work of Jerald Whitehouse and the missionary methods he advocated for Muslims apply equally to other ethnic groups that live in the Western world but who preserve their Eastern mentality. Those working with Gypsies will greatly benefit from the experience and wisdom of a missionary whose life was dedicated to understanding, adapting, and presenting the gospel to people with a different worldview.

Works Cited