The Roma people, also called Romani or Gypsies, are one of the oldest people groups living in Europe, speaking one of the earliest European languages. Although found on all continents, including the Americas, the majority of Gypsies live in Europe. Having an oriental origin (India or “Little Egypt”), Gypsies came to Europe around AD 1000 and have since preserved their culture and traditions and refused assimilation or integration. Council of Europe statistics estimate a minimum of 6.5 million Gypsies living in Europe, but because many do not read or write, do not apply for identification papers, and thus are not counted in a census, the real figures could easily surpass 16 million (Council of Europe Stats 2009).

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, Gypsies are a very diverse people but with a lot in common. 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).

On their migration to Europe, Gypsies were influenced by Muslims, Tatars, Byzantines, and by the peoples they decided to live with.

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)

Thus, Gypsies presented themselves as pilgrims and conquered Europe without guns or swords.

Because of their Indian heritage, each Gypsy belongs to a caste with a specific trade even today. However, Fraser notes that, although they are no longer pure Indians,

their identity, their culture would, however—regardless of all transformations—remain sharply distinct from that of the gadżé 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 gadżé, centuries later, to rediscover and pursue obsessively their past and their lineage. (1995:44)

Gypsies have a particular word to identify those who do not belong to their ethnic group, gadżé (or gacho/gorgio/busne/gadje/gaje/gagii), 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 was 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 maxrime: polluted. To develop unnecessary relations with them is to risk contamination” (Fonseca 1995:12). As a result, Gypsies isolate themselves from the rest of society and in turn society marginalizes Gypsies.

Although it is difficult to talk about a Gypsy Diaspora since they are a nomadic people, “one cannot cease to wonder at their extraordinary tenacity. . . 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). Referring to the unity of the Gypsy tribes, Isabel Fonseca considers that “the Gypsies have no heroes, there are no myths of origin, of a great liberation, of the founding of a ‘nation,’ of a promised land. . . . They have no monuments, no anthem, no ruins, and no Book. Instead of a sense of a great historical past, they have a collective unease, and an instinctive cleaving to the tribe” (Fonseca 1995a:84).
Gypsies have never claimed a country or a territory and never started a war for one. When persecuted, they moved from one country to another. Today, due to their trades, they travel and preserve the nomadic character of their ethnicity. Some countries have tried to settle them, and some clans or tabors accepted the land offered, but it was mostly on the outskirts of poorer suburbs of cities or villages. However, the settling attempts did not solve the integration problem, for Gypsies were still kept at the margins of the communities. Even when they settle, their trades often require them to travel. Gypsy trades include investing in and processing silver and gold. Goldsmiths and silversmiths travel to fairs and large events to sell their products. The Gabor Gypsies, those who cover the house roofs with tin, go wherever they are needed and whenever they are called, while the Kalderash (coppersmiths) travel through cities and villages patching and selling tins and tubs. They are permanently on the move—nomadic life for them is what settled life is for Western societies.

The integration program of the European Union, “The Decade of Roma Inclusion: 2005-2015,” remains a wish. Stereotypes and even hate toward Gypsies resulted in the recent 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 an official inquiry into a report on the sterilization of Gypsy women in the Czech Republic. Gypsies seem to make the news headlines on a very regular basis. Artists, like Madonna or Bono, have 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 among. Although some countries on the continent have passed laws to support and integrate the Gypsies, there are no real signs of integration and they continue to be marginalized.

Many people believe that what has kept Gypsies distinct from the majority population is 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 that keeps Gypsies distinct goes beyond the cultural or social differences; it has to do with 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 values of honor and shame place Gypsies closer to Mediterranean and Muslim peoples. These 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, but use the Indian greeting based on the pure/impure religious value. The system of trades that divides them is also based on purity criteria while the social structure of the Gypsy population is based on castes, families, tabors, and trades.

Honor unites Gypsies in times of need but divides them in times of peace. As a result, there is no social or civic tradition of unique representation, so each leader 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.

In spite of their faults Gypsies showcase a number of pleasant characteristics. Family loyalty is basic and no effort is spared to defend a member of the family. The keen sense of honor requires that the clan remains united when facing accusations or adversity. The spirit of sacrifice is high when it comes to the needs of an extended family member because the honor of the family has to be protected. However, due to their nomadic lifestyle, the dead are usually buried by the side of the road and their burial place often forgotten. But the memory of the deceased is meticulously preserved and the person becomes the theme of songs and poems, thus making sure that future generations remember their ancestors. Ancestor veneration is not exhibited in relation to a place or a cemetery, but retains the memory for future generations.

Gypsies live for the needs of the day, and do not make long term plans or share a long term vision. The worldview of the Gypsies is 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 express nostalgia for past ages and long passed heroes while their poetry exudes melancholy. Gypsies are also very emotional, impulsive, and short fused; they lack patience, and want things done now or they abandon the project. If they have been shamed, Gypsies react quickly and violently. Feelings and emotions are exaggerated and lived at maximum intensity. Life for a Gypsy has value as long as it brings honor, and any shame needs to be avenged even if it means killing someone. Such behavior is rejected by society which in turn stigmatizes the whole ethnic group.

In spite of a fateful worldview and an orientation toward the past, Gypsies are a happy people. They enjoy the day and the moment, and live the present to the fullest. One can often hear them saying “Better next time.” They sing, dance, play, and laugh, not worrying for tomorrow. “Gypsies enjoy parties of all kinds, and any excuse for a celebration seems acceptable. . . . Like most parties, the integral elements are food, drink, and
music” (Gropper 1975:111). Life for them is a connected series of events added on top of one another.

If laid off from a job, most conservative and traditional Gypsies would not accept the unemployment benefits of the country as this is seen as affecting their honor and pride. They cannot accept the position of unemployed, which is a shame and unthinkable in their communities. On the other hand, less conservative Gypsies, who have renounced their traditional values, prefer instead to live on social benefits as long as they can. Local communities, administrations, and governments in those situations try to officially find ways to encourage them to become employed, but people who live around them simply call them lazy.

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 those from another caste or clan, and discriminate against the “gagii” (gadže), the non-gypsy (see Wedeck 1973:147, 157). History records that Gypsies who traveled through Europe stole from the gadže, but not from their own. They were frequently labeled “the most cunning thieves in the world” (Fraser 1995:72). Martin Block indicates that, “when gypsies are not given easy opportunities of stealing and are allowed to lead their natural life, the nomad life, they are quite able to live honest lives. There are plenty of gypsies living now who hardly ever come into contact with the police” (1939:247). On the other hand, Jan Yoors admits that “the Rom might have as many prejudices against us, the Gaje, as we had against them” (1967:16).

Most Gypsies are uneducated from a Western perspective because they did not go to school and do not have a formal education. Without land ownership, and because of their nomadic lifestyle, they usually do not educate their children scholastically or academically. 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). However, the societal stereotypes mar the life of Gypsy children among their peers.

Gypsy culture is an oral culture. Stories are the main venue of communication for Gypsies. 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 higher education are often treated with suspicion, while those who place value on written documents are considered handicapped or having memory problems. Oral societies with its traditions excluded keeping written documents, and as a result there was no written language until recently and only from gadzé sources. Today there are attempts at unifying their written language and the more than 60 dialects, but the process is hampered by the pride of each Gypsy tribe who claims theirs is the best language.

Without land ownership, Gypsies did not have rights in the lands they passed through. They could not send their children to school, had no right to vote, and were considered pilgrims or travellers. 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. In Walachia and Transylvania, Gypsies were serfs until the mid-nineteen century, and because they were skilled in metal-working they were assigned to manufacture weapons which gave them a royal servant status (Fraser 1995:108). Because of the advantages of protection and gifts, Gypsies often asked wealthy gadzé to become godparents for their children (93).

Under communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the few Gypsy intellectuals banded 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. Prior to this new recognition they could be officers in the army, communist party activists, and have different trades if they never mentioned their ethnicity. However, in the 1980s, they became 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 from the majority population groups increased. Houses were burned, people killed, and Gypsies even had to flee and hide in the forests.

Today, Gypsies are still discriminated against when it comes to employment all through Europe. Although they like to preserve the family and live in their communities, European governments seldom have any plans to support their integration in society. As a result, most Gypsies 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 (like the Bretons) disappeared. In times of crisis they developed a culture of poverty and became satisfied with less in order to be able to survive.

**Gypsy 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. It is not easy to identify the religious side of the Gypsies for one needs to live within their community long enough in order to recognize their religious inclinations and the forms in which these are expressed. Gypsy religious life and worldview is often another reason for keeping them out of Christian communities.

Although the original Gypsy religion is unknown, Gypsies have often 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). Rena Gropper 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).

In Eastern Orthodox countries, Gypsies felt at home because eastern Christianity presented similarities in many worldview areas. However, any change in religious beliefs or belonging is a reason for shame. It is a shame for a Muslim Gypsy to become Christian as well as for an Orthodox Gypsy to become an evangelical Protestant. Anything that requires a change in lifestyle is interpreted as a departure from the traditions of the family. It is considered a shame not to be able to drink a glass of wine any longer with the family, a shame that reflects on the extended clan or family. Anything that distances or separates one from the rest of one’s family is a danger to fight against. As a result, conversion to Christianity often contributes to further marginalization of the Gypsies.

Gypsies find 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 rather than to be in a position of shame in the religious realm. This was one of the reasons Gypsies more easily adopted 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. When the family leader decides to change religious affiliation, most of the extended family follow him and adopt the new religion. This seems to be the reason for the unprecedented numbers of conversion to Pentecostalism in Toflea, Romania.

Protestant churches helped Gypsies change their religious mentality and lifestyle, and also helped them abandon smoking, drinking, and other destructive behavior (beating spouses, stealing, or cheating). Eastern Orthodox society, although calling the Protestant Gypsies names, appreciates the changed behavior and tolerates them. However, those Gypsies 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. When Gypsies adopted the religion of the locals they also retained their own worldview. The result was a syncretistic religion and lifestyle. 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). Baptism became popular among Gypsies, but “they often went their own way in matters of burial and, particularly, marriage” (Fraser 1995:313).

**Gypsy Religious Worldview**

Gypsy religious beliefs are relatively unstructured. They believe in a God who is omniscient and omnipotent but who does not intervene in human affairs except when he capriciously decides to do so. As a result, prayers to God are believed to have no impact since God has already decided the fate of every human being. Gypsies believe in baxt (fate or luck, the most common greeting is avelo bahtalo—have luck), and “even though a person would act responsibly according to Gypsy custom, the concept of fatalism softens the harsh judgment” (Belgum 1999:176). Fate is often the easiest explanation when things go wrong.

Because they believe in fate and luck, Gypsies do not welcome change. “Fate-plus-luck is a convenient explanatory device in Gypsy thinking” (Gropper 1975:117). Although a Westerner may believe this is an excuse for laziness, for Gypsies it provides a face saving mechanism. Fate moves the responsibility from the human being to supernatural forces or beings.

The Gypsy worldview for divinity is dualistic, with Manichaean influences, likely coming from Persian dualism, in which both forces of good and evil, truth and lie, pure and impure are necessary for the world’s harmony (Trigg 1973:165; Grigore 2003:153, 157). These forces are complementary while humans are simply observers of the battle between these two entities which have equal chances to influence the evolution of world phenomena (Cherata 1994:60). In Gypsy tales the devil is often found in the “smart” Gyp-
category, “namely, tales about Rroma who outwit Gadže (often priests), the Devil himself or even God” (Rroma Tales and Stories).

The Gypsy word for God (O Del, with its diminutive O Deloro) seems to have an Indian origin (O Dewel). The meaning of the word is “The Great Spirit” or the Good one, “master over the thunder and lightning, snow and rain” (Block 1939:235). The devil (Beng) is portrayed as a seducer or betrayer of the Gypsy and has less power or influence than the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit is actually responsible for death or other negative things. The devil’s name means “Unclean” and matches the shame and honor worldview of the Gypsy. O Del is believed to be both apart from the physical world and in it at the same time. Gypsies do not have idols or representations of God; however, they are attracted by the moon and the stars, rather than the earth, especially for fortune telling.

Gypsies also believe in fairies (sky-spirits) and nature-spirits (water, tree, forest, or earth spirits) which should be treated with respect or they will punish the offender. The sky-spirits bridge between God and nature-spirits, act as God’s delegates, and are the custodians of unborn souls. When women lose their temper, it is believed that it is because a bad spirit entered them. There are good and bad spirits, almost always female, and some delight in tempting young men to have children with them. Nature-spirits are believed to be very capricious.

The numbers three and nine are important for Gypsies, as well as black hens which are considered responsible for the births of children with disabilities. Fairies are responsible to protect the life of a newborn and to supervise human affairs. Although Gypsies believe in fairies, no human being has seen one. “They are neither immortal nor invincible, but their lifespans are indefinitely long and their powers far beyond human capacity” (Gropper 1975:115). Fairies are believed to be the servants of God, in charge of bridging between humans and the divinity.

The third category of spirits is the Ursitori, or fate spirits. These spirits come in groups of three, three days after birth, and decide the destiny and fate of the baby (Trigg 1973:163). One spirit is favorable to the human being; the second is against the human being, while the third is a negotiator between the two. They decide the amount of luck a person begins life with. Gropper notes that this luck is similar to Hindu karma, and “includes a belief that one’s position in life is in part the result of one’s past incarnations” (1975:117). Merit is accrued and rewarded, while debt from former lives, as well as from one’s ancestors, need to be repaid by suffering.

The fourth set of spirits is ancestor spirits. Special memorial feasts are organized, especially during the first year after a death. “During this period, the soul should be feasted and entertained at proper intervals; after the first year, the soul merges its once-individual identity with the collectiv-
ity of ancestral souls, who are themselves honored annually with a feast” (Gropper 1975:118). The ancestors dwell with the sky spirits (angels) and mediate between humans and God when asked or invited to. It is believed they can also penalize those who break Gypsy traditions.

There is one more entity the Gypsies believe in: the ghosts of the dead. These are not real spirits but embodiments of all the negative traits, like hostility, jealousy, selfishness, or cunning. Their role is to scare people so they will not break Gypsy laws. If a Gypsy discovers he was negotiating with an embodied ghosts, he believes he is doomed and stops eating and sleeping. The family watches the person slowly die, but they do not intervene because dealing with ghosts and their decisions is considered dangerous. The ghosts’ decisions are treated as fate that cannot be changed, because fate is the highest evil Gypsies recognize.

The world of these spirits seems to be separate from the human realm (although they roam the earth) but it is not part of the O Del’s world either. The Great Spirit does not rule over fairies, but these lesser spirits have power to influence humans for good or evil. Although O Del is perceived through nature, the spirits are identified through the results of their influence (especially the evil ones). The influence of the oriental worldview is clearly seen, with Gypsies frequently separating the world into three levels: divinity, fairies, and humans (see Hiebert 1985:148-149; 1994:194; 2008:107, 133), and even when admitting only two levels, the fairies are relegated with the humans (part of the natural world and daily life) and not with the sphere of divinity (Gropper 1975:108).

Gypsies believe in magic rather than reason or logical systems. It is customary for a Gypsy to be interested in miracles, but also to react to them with both respect and reserve. However, the miracle stories of Jesus or the Old Testament prophets draw an audience among Gypsies because they can easily identify with those healed. Unfortunately, the border between spiritualism, magic, and biblical authentic miracles is fuzzy and leads frequently to confusion and syncretism.

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 backsliding or syncretism. Joseph Tson, president of the Romanian Missionary Society and a pastor in Romania, states that “the main challenge in evangelizing the Gypsies is not so much resistance to the gospel, but emotionalism. Gypsies respond very quickly, but it’s hard to know if they’ve responded because they’ve been really affected by the
gospel or if they’ve just been touched by emotion” (Harris 1995:14).

There was a notable conversion of Gypsies to Pentecostalism or charismatic movements during the past decades. For example, Florin Cioaba, the King of one of the Roma tribes, recently became a lay Pentecostal pastor. He is the President of the Christian Center for the Roma, which has over 100 churches under its jurisdiction. His extended family followed him, as well as some Gypsies from other tribes.

Pentecostalism offers Gypsies a kind of Christianity that allows for free manifestation of emotions and sentiments. The emphasis is on experience, not truth. 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 in order 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, and most of them do not read well enough to be able to check things out for themselves. The Bible is treated more as a magic book rather than a source of truth.

On the other hand, Gypsies are more attracted by the biblical stories with which they can easily identify. The story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and the honor that Daniel received as a result of revealing and interpreting the dream is a favorite. 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. They are very superstitious and treat omens, dreams, visions, and spells with utmost reverence, thus being considered too mystical and superstitious for secular societies.

Death is seen by Gypsies as a short sleep, but life never ceases, it just continues on “the other side.” The dead go to the underworld through a hole located in the far West, considered to be the end of the world. It is believed that the spirits from the realm of the dead have power over the living, so Gypsies avoid talking about them or expressing negative feelings about the deceased out of fear of vengeance. “Their concern at death deals almost entirely with the question of what relationship the dead will have with those who remain among the living” (Trigg 1973:96). One never insults a spirit or talks about one’s real feelings about one’s ancestors. One’s duty is to honor them.

Funerals and burial ceremonies are merry occasions where people eat and drink and sometimes play games. If a Gypsy reaches an old age “it is taken as a sign that they are especially in favor with the good fairies, and have been exceptionally successful in conciliating the evil ones. Age is therefore, greatly respected” (Block 1939:241). Birthdays are rarely celebrated, and old people cannot recall their birth date, especially when no
records or birth certificates are kept. However, name days are celebrated, especially of the old people (Gropper 1975:111).

Men usually leave the religious duties to women, especially old ones. 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 people 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. It is believed that “an old woman is in league with the supernatural, she has the gift of second sight. She charms and bewitches, practices as doctor and advises lovers. . . . She can use these powers for good as well as for evil” (Block 1939:241).

It is interesting that in order for a spell to be extra powerful, the old woman goes to church to get the help of God. She sets up icons in the home or store, arranges an altar or a kneeling place before a burning candle, decorates the shrine with flowers, and burns incense. There are no crosses or crucifixion icons due to the Gypsy fear of ghosts, but images of the Holy Infant are more acceptable. There are no images of Christ because he was not yet old, and young unmarried men are not considered wise and responsible enough. On the contrary, images of Mary the mother of Jesus are not a problem since women are related to religious duties and Mary was married and had a child. Images of the Virgin Mary are not considered appropriate (Gropper 1975:110).

Although Gypsies will visit a church, they are not fond of priests whom they believe possess magical powers that can upset the balance of the world. Priests are suspect because Gypsies do not believe in humans who are dedicated to the service of God. “Gypsies believe all adult human beings are equal before God and should serve Him, and they see no reason to accord special respect to the status of priests and nuns” (Gropper 1975:114). Another reason Gypsies do not like priests, monks, and nuns (especially Catholic ones) is their celibacy status which is considered unnatural and against the rules of the universe. For them, adults who do not marry, especially ladies, do not fulfill the destiny of their bodies. This might explain why so many Gypsies in East European countries feel much more comfortable with Orthodox priests who marry and have regular families.

In going to church, the nomadic people do not really look for metaphysical explanations or help. They are satisfied to live the present according to the rules of the past, and are usually afraid of what the future may bring, thus trying to employ the services of witches. “O Deloro zanel” is a frequently employed expression that translates “God knows” (what the future will bring). When inquiring of the future, an old Gypsy woman is always preferred to a gadžé priest. However, in order to be considered
good citizens, Gypsies will often become members of different Christian
denominations and request the presence of a priest for a christening, wed-
ding, or a funeral, but feel happy if he is not available. In the religion they
adopt they are primarily “interested in religious rites at birth and death,
but on their own terms” (Belgum 1999:176). This nonconformist attitude
toward the Christian established traditions is another reason why Chris-
tian communities usually do not welcome Gypsies.

It is good to remember that any change in the Gypsies’ tradition and
rhythm of life leads to an imbalance. Block insightfully notes that “it is for
this reason that gypsies on becoming settled frequently lose their most
attractive characteristics” (Block 1939:243). Gypsies are “fascinated by all
religions, and the subject interests them as a topic for philosophical dis-
course and debate” (Gropper 1975:109). By adopting the religion of the
majority of the land or country they are in, Gypsies avoid religious perse-
cution. Although they easily become Orthodox, Catholic (attracted by the
high rituals and ceremonies that resemble theirs or appeal to their imagi-
nation), Protestant, or Muslim, Gypsies remain Gypsies and retain their
ancient Gypsy beliefs. “They never fail to preserve outward appearances
but their real nature does not change” (Block 1939:244). Therefore, conver-
sion is often superficial at best, and the Hindu worldview shows its flex-
ibility again when Gypsies incorporate the new god beside their ancient
gods, practices, and beliefs.

Since Gypsies believe that truth comes in different shapes and under-
standings, they are tolerant of others’ ways of conduct. However, they
are very strict with their own, especially the extended family. Since they
believe truth may be different for each individual, Gypsies fit in very well
in a postmodern society.

Block suggests that Christian missionaries should try to identify Gypsy
practices and traditions that have Christian meaning. “Dogma still forbids
such methods, and as a result, the door to Christianity remains closed to
numerous gypsies who otherwise pass readily to the new life without any
spiritual upheaval” (1939:243).

No Sin for Gypsies

Gypsy representatives and leaders describe their religion as a “laic reli-
gion” (Cace and Ionescu 2000:8). Grigore explains that “the laic religion of
rroma is Rromanipen, the rromani law, a system of community norms and
concepts, which has the center in the identity cell of traditional culture:
the family” (Grigore 2003:163). Something is considered bezax and wrong
only if it disturbs the peace and order of the family.

A complete presentation of the gospel has to include the seriousness
of sin. A true understanding of the sinfulness and the depravity of human
nature is required in order for the recipients to realize the miracle of salvation. “Good contextualization is aware of the impact of human sinfulness on the process” (Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnel 2005:325). The most important work of the Holy Spirit is to convince about sin (John 16:8). However, in order to quickly see people baptized, evangelists and missionaries tend to forget or neglect the importance of understanding how people think about sin in their culture and what the Bible says about sin apart from one’s own culture.

Dye emphasizes the fact that “one must first determine how sin is defined for any particular culture. . . . Prohibitions against lying, stealing, murder and adultery are virtually universal, although what exactly constitutes each sin varies from culture to culture” (Dye 1999:470). Every culture has a certain ethical system which points out wrong behavior, and this is also true for Gypsies.

The notions of right and wrong in the Gypsy worldview are different than the good vs. evil concepts in Western philosophy. Gypsies believe that “right” means to be in harmony with the universe, even if that includes negative actions. A snake bite is considered part of the natural order of things, and appropriate. “Inappropriateness and/or rarity are suspect and probably wrong. . . . As chickens are birds that do not fly properly, the Gypsies contend that eating chicken is not as satisfying as eating other meats” (Gropper 1975:120).

There is no repentance of sin among Gypsies as understood by Christians. In their language, the word for sin is bezax, but it has a different meaning than for Christians. Rather than being a black or white juridical category with absolute meaning, sin is a relative cultural notion. In the Gypsy court, called kriss, Gypsies allow both parties to be right; there is no absolute truth and justice is distributive (Grigore 2003:153-154, 161).

Regret is unknown among the Gypsies. Due to their merry-go-round and nomadic lifestyle, they do not find time for self-examination or heart-searching. They understand sin as breaking the Gypsy code of behavior for which they receive real, physical punishment. Gypsies also refrain from breaking societal norms when they become aware that the police (law enforcement) are watching. Since stealing, cheating, lying, or other petty crimes are not immediately punished, Gypsies considered these behaviors acceptable. And since the Christian God does not punish them immediately, they can even pray to God to help and support them in such dishonest activities. Such syncretism is frowned upon by most Christian communities.

Gypsies believe that each human being has been endowed with a bit of the primordial energy of the universe. This is the equivalent of the Western conscience, and it is given a lot of respect and credibility. This seed has the
potential to develop into both positive and negative sets of traits. When actions that seem strange happen, Gypsies prefer to witness them but not intervene because it is believed that this might be part of the balance of the universe and that the person acting as such might do so guided by his conscience. “Any human interference thus may upset the divine plan and provoke the wrath of the universe” (Gropper 1975:121). This seed of energy from the universe enables Gypsies to relate to God and receive direct instructions from divinities.

Vows are made and broken with the person invoking the voice of the inner guidance for breaking the vow or promising to make up later for the broken promise. However, promises to never break the Gypsy code of conduct are made public with an oath and rigorously kept as a way to increase their honor quota. Expectant mothers frequently make vows during their pregnancy hoping that their faithfulness in keeping the vows will earn special blessings on the baby. The vows are made to themselves and frequently associated with a fast. Unfortunately, Gypsies no longer feel bound to their oaths once they migrate or move to a new location. It seems that faithfulness to their own promises are linked to the location and to the land they are in, paralleling vows made in the Old Testament (i.e., Jacob in Gen 28:20-22).

Sin as Defilement

Gypsy life is defined by a dynamic expressed in pair words. Such a pair is *uzo* (pure), and *mahrime* or *maxrime* (impure). The whole Gypsy philosophy and worldview is based on this dualism. Much of the distinction between pure and impure “stems from the division of a woman’s body into two parts, above the waist and below the waist. A woman is clean from the waist up and ‘polluted’ from the waist down. . . . The lower part of the body is, however, an object of shame . . . because it is associated with menstruation. The fact that blood flows without injury seems to be the proof of a bodily impurity” (The Patrin Web Journal).

The biblical ceremonial laws of purity found in the books of Leviticus and Numbers parallel the Gypsy worldview. After birth, a Gypsy woman is unclean for forty days (Grigore 2003:39). The same injunction is found in Lev 12:2-4. Gypsies divide animals into clean and unclean (Grigore 2003:41). The Old Testament indicates in Lev 11 the same distinction. Dead bodies are also a factor of pollution for Gypsies (Grigore 2003:152-153) as well as for the Old Testament Jews (cf. Lev 21:1, 4, 11; Num 9:10; 19:11, 13, 16). Those declared impure are excluded from both the Gypsy community (Grigore 2003:155) and the Jewish community (cf. Lev 13:46; Num 5:2, 3; 31:19). As Jiří Moskala points out, in the Mosaic Law “there is a connection between uncleanness and sin. Uncleanness could mean sinful in a moral
sense” (1998:196). But, as Moskala notes, the meaning of sin is only one of the many facets of impurity.

Grigore emphasizes that in the Gypsy mind “the concept of pure, . . . implies both a physical dimension and a spiritual dimension, the second being presupposed by the first, bodily purity being nothing else but a reflection—both cause and effect—of the moral purity (Grigore 2003:130). Ritual purity is preserved by keeping the universal order and harmony, while ritual impurity is attained by breaking the intercommunity balance which is established by a set of laws governing behavior (Grigore 2003:160). If a missionary simply presents sin as impurity, and purity as moral goodness, the result will be confusion for Gypsies. They believe that both pure and impure should be present in their lives and that the goal is to keep them in balance as opposites. Joe Sprinkle concludes that “ceremonial ‘uncleanness/impurity’ cannot be equated with ‘sin,’ since natural bodily functions and other factors beyond human control could (and periodically did) cause a person to be unclean. Nonetheless, there is a strong analogy between ‘uncleanness’ and ‘sin’” (Sprinkle 2000:652). This analogy functions in both the Jewish ceremonial system, as well as in the Gypsy culture.

Although there is no full identification between sin and impurity, “in a culture where ceremonial purity is more important than moral uprightness, salvation needs to be expressed in terms of deliverance from the basic depravity of human nature” (Dumitrescu 2005:35). In Gypsy cultures, which are similar to Muslim and the Jewish cultures in this respect, sin is reflected in the corruption of humanity. Moskala indicates that in the Mosaic Law, “ceremonial uncleanness is also related to sinful human nature, which is the result of the original sin. It reminds humans that they are sinful in all activities even though they are performing acts according to God’s creation order (childbirth, marital intimacy)” (Moskala 1998:193). Therefore, the pure-impure dynamic can be used to illustrate the human condition of sinfulness.

Every Gypsy knows they are susceptible to mahrime. Douglas points out that everybody is liable to be defiled or to defile (Douglas 1993:25). But for Gypsies, one can fall into the state of impurity not only by contact with impure objects or substances, but also by certain actions. “Traitors, those who steal from their brothers, adulterous women, those who break the taboos and norms of shame by their behavior, language, and attitude, those who despise the judgment and will of old men become mahrime by the decision of the kriss, a punishment that in most cases is extended upon the family of the guilty person” (Grigore 2003:130). This punishment is the worst form of punishment a Gypsy can receive, being the equivalent of the spiritual death, a consequence more serious in their understanding than
physical death. Sin is thus presented as a state, a condition.

Sin as Shame

When declared *mahrime* (polluted, impure), one is excluded from the kin group or from the church, based on the impurity or *shame*. The Gypsy term for shame is *Lajavo*. Looking at this concept from another angle, those who do not respect or *honor* the clan are declared impure, and are banned from the communion of their own family. “The honor and trust, which the individual owes to the kin and which one guarantees by living within the spirit of the community laws, is named *pakiv*” (Grigore 2003:101-102, 161).

Being pure means to have honor, while the feeling of shame is induced by the state of *mahrime*. Keeping the laws of purity is one of the most important factors involved in social control in a traditional Gypsy society. It is an individual as well as a collective responsibility to avoid *shame* at any cost. Children, especially girls, are educated to preserve their honor and avoid even the appearances of shame. Just as in Muslim societies, Gypsy children are taught to “have shame,” which means to be concerned about one’s honor, the opposite of shaming or being ashamed (Dumitrescu 2005:15).

The concept of shame for Gypsies cannot simply be substituted for guilt in Western societies. More than a result of sin, and unlike guilt, shame is also an *attitude* toward sin which expresses the *relation* of the person to the concept, rather than the concept of sin in itself. However, together with the purity code, shame could very well be used to illustrate the idea of sin in Gypsy communities. The Western world tends to deal with the concepts of sin in very abstract ways, defining its nature. But in nomadic cultures like Gypsy cultures as well as in Mediterranean cultures, the concepts are to be exemplified by stories, illustrating the person’s *relation* to the concepts. The issue is not to define *what* sin is, but to explain *how* to relate to this reality.

The entire biblical story is written in terms of honor and shame, of purity and impurity. When this perspective is used in presenting the gospel to Gypsies, they will understand much better how to deal with sin from a biblical perspective. This approach will also result in a better understanding of the nature of sin. As Dye says, “God can allow time for converts to realize the cultural implications of being Christians” (1999:472). I agree, but feel that a missionary should move beyond the Gypsy’ concept and understanding of sin and allow the Holy Spirit to bring change. “Unless we have a broken, humble attitude, sin may become the determinant factor in our contextualization rather than the Spirit’s gentle promptings” (Pocock et al. 2005:325).
Conclusions

In spite of being ostracized for their skin color, poverty, illiteracy, and poor living conditions, Gypsies have survived as a people and preserved their culture. They may be a nuisance to Western societies, but they are also a people made in the image of God and therefore worthy of serious witness. Ten aspects need to be considered when working with and for Gypsies in order to facilitate their integration in Western societies and Christian communities.

First, the Gypsy worldview has to be understood before any missionary work is planned. No strategy will result in real conversions unless the message is communicated through their own understanding of the world and cosmos.

Second, one must praise Gypsies for the resilience in preserving their culture. No feeling of superiority should be employed. When honored, Gypsies will respond with honor and hospitality, opening their homes and hearts.

Third, Gypsies need to be encouraged to go to school and get an education. They are capable, and frequently when given the chance are among the best students. A missionary should not forget that Gypsies are already bilingual and often bicultural.

Fourth, a missionary’s goal should be to develop and train missionaries from among the Gypsies. As Jim Whitley noticed, “When the Roma begin to do their own evangelism, they begin to cross barriers so quickly [that] a real indigenous church-planting movement” is started (Davidson 2007:15).

Fifth, the gospel message should be presented in story form. The Bible needs to be allowed to speak directly to Gypsies. Biblical culture is much closer to the Gypsy culture than to today’s Western culture.

Sixth, a missionary should be prepared to adopt a nomadic lifestyle if necessary. In order to be able to offer continuing support and discipleship, the missionary should be able to join Gypsies in their travels for work.

Seventh, the message should utilize an approach that makes it relevant to the extended family. Today’s individualism in the West has shaped much biblical understanding and most commentaries and Bible study series are based on an individualistic approach.

Eighth, the notions of honor and shame should be employed in explaining the concept of sin and its consequences. The Old Testament teaching about defilement offers an excellent basis for communicating the seriousness of sin to Gypsies. Purity is a virtue to be preserved in Gypsy worldview.

Ninth, worship styles should be adapted to the Gypsy manifestation of emotions and sentiments. Although truth should be emphasized, experi-
ence should undergird their understanding of truth.

Tenth, for a true contextualization of the message to Gypsies, one should identify those elements in the Gypsy tradition that have Christian meanings. Although coming from a Hindu background, Gypsies have acquired elements from the religions they have been influenced by.

Works Cited


Cristian Dumitrescu, a native of Romania, is an associate editor of JAMS. He worked as a pastor in a Gypsy context and learned firsthand the differences between the Gypsy culture and the majority culture in Romania. Cristian would like to see an Adventist approach that offers the gospel to the Gypsies in their cultural context while at the same time integrating them into the life and mission of the church.