



A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION from the Chaplain - Revd Martin Burrell
"A future & a hope for the Roma" - October 2015

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1] The present impasse in Roma work...

It is widely acknowledged that many of our best efforts to help the Roma have run into the sand. Many Roma activists recognise that no significant and lasting change has happened and that we remain at an

impasse. Before laying out a fresh vision, it is vital to identify some of the key problems that contribute to the present deadlock.¹

a) Roma auto-isolation from the wider community

The Roma are like the Jews in that they see themselves as over against all other peoples. Roma identity is located precisely in not being *gadje*, just as Jewish identity is located in not being *gentile*. The primordial fear of the Roma is therefore of assimilation into the wider community - of being "*gadje*fied". The Roma therefore retain their identity by only engaging with *gadje* to the extent that they need to. Roma, who enter too fully into the wider culture, are often shunned by their own people. Whilst many close friendships and relationships of trust are formed between Roma and non-Roma, the ontological distinction is never compromised.

Roma who have embraced the radical piety of the Pentecostal '*bokoits*' tend to see the wider world beyond their sect as deeply corrupted by sin and thus withdraw yet further from engagement with the wider community.

b) Roma auto-isolation from within their own communities

It is a fundamental mistake to think of the Roma as a homogenous group. Whilst they are aware that there are Gypsies, Travellers and Roma groups all across the world, their own locus of belonging is typically within their own tribal or religious group. There seems little sense of solidarity between Roma tribes and the social life of each group is typically inward-looking and exclusive. Whilst the Roma have much in common, they themselves are only too aware of the differences in Romani dialect, dress code, and traditions, between the various tribes. Marriage across tribes is almost as shunned as marriage to a *gadjo*. Whilst there are notable exceptions, the Roma are thus a people who have a radical commitment to their own extended family groups, and who deeply resistant to engagement with the outside world.

c) Anti-gypsyism

Roma withdrawal is in large measure a consequence of the abominable way they have been treated by the wider community. The very formation of the disparate Roma tribes may well have been the consequence of persecution at the point when the Roma began to migrate out of northern India a thousand years ago. Deep rooted xenophobia is present in both Roma and *gadje* and the litany of failed attempts to integrate the Roma have only exacerbated the situation. Whilst the Jews keep meticulous records, the non-literary Roma deal with their history by choosing to forget it. But - the forced placement of their children in *gadje* families, the banning the use of their language, the *gadje*fying of Roma names, the banning of nomadism, the exclusion of their children from schools, the engaging them as slaves, and the radical ethnic cleansing carried out by the Nazis - are all memories buried in the collective unconscious of the Roma, all the more deeply rooted for not having been brought to the surface. The result is an ever present wall - both seen and unseen - separating them from the wider world.

Ground-breaking discoveries in epi-genetics now suggest that the trauma of holocaust victims is passed into the genetic profile of the children and even the grandchildren of the victims. The Roma carry their history with them, it informs both who they are and how they act at the hidden level of the psyche.

¹ David Thurffjell 2013 - Faith and Revivalism in a Nordic Romani Community - Chapter 3 "Caught in deadlock."

Gypsies, Travellers and Roma have been the victims of racism throughout their histories. It has been said of today's society, that the last acceptable form of racism is the hatred of Gypsies. Racism is indeed often right on the surface, however, the most insidious form of xenophobia lies just under the surface in the very communities that believe themselves to have transcended racism. The ever-growing fears of being overwhelmed by migrants, coupled with the pressures to be politically correct, have created a tense atmosphere redolent with fear.

d) Europe-wide deadlock

Whilst there are many pro-Roma activist groups across the EU funding new initiatives, individual nation states are failing to address the needs of the thousands of Eastern European Roma migrants who have entered their countries. There is thus a wide gulf between EU rhetoric and the reality on the ground:

The Roma minority communities continue to be the most marginalized group in UK society with limited access to the social, economic and political spheres of influence and development resources. The rapidly growing structural problems lead to an even greater exclusion of the Roma people from public life. Observations, analysis and statistical data all show that there have been no considerable changes that have occurred in the UK with regard to the Roma people and their limited life chances. It has to be noted that more and more Roma people come from Eastern European EU Member States on a weekly basis and yet the government is not prepared to acknowledge their difficulties and include them formally within the national strategy for Gypsy and Traveller integration (albeit only when policy areas overlap – See comments below). There are few professional workers attending to the needs of Roma in the UK but their needs are different to traditional English Gypsies and Travellers. There are some well-established mechanisms and practices for local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people but only for educational integration and the other spheres of social indicators such as housing/accommodation, health and employment, are not usually covered. On the 5th April 2011 the European Commission adopted the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, which marks its unprecedented commitment to promoting the inclusion of Roma (including Gypsy and Traveller communities) communities in all Member States. As a way forward, the European Commission has given Member States a wide discretion as to how to implement the EU Framework to tackle the disadvantages faced by Roma communities in their respective countries. Unfortunately many West European member states did not make any efforts in this direction, they just mechanically applied their old policy documents without taking in into account that the situation has changed in many such countries. In London for example, there are not only the sizable traditional Gypsy/Traveller people but also a significant influx of Roma people from Central and Eastern European Member States, who have come to settle and find work.

In the UK, a decision has been taken that the Ministerial Working Group on Preventing and Tackling Gypsy and Traveller Inequalities facilitated by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), should lead on the National Roma Integration Strategy. The Ministerial Working Group has decided to exclude Roma from this strategy, except "...where their issues overlap with those impacting on this country's ethnic Gypsies and Travellers." **In practice this means that apart from education, the complex challenges facing the UK's large Roma population will be ignored.**

e) Abject poverty

Many of our Roma families are trapped in abject poverty and unable to help themselves out of their situation. Most of our interventions deal with crisis management of multiple complex problems, to which there are no simple solutions. Parents have little or no education from their home countries and on arrival in the UK usually have no knowledge of English. They are thus radically dependent on others to solve basic issues of

accommodation, employment, schooling, health, benefits, fines and debt management etc. Having migrated in hope of finding a better life, they arrive in the UK with no resources to begin a new life. Their situation is often economically impossible and they are forced to find illegitimate ways of surviving. The consequences of this often make their situation worse. Unable to step out of this ever-repeating cycle, they hide under the radar and carry out their lives within the micro-culture of their extended families, oblivious to the wider community and hoping to remain undetected. When the authorities catch up on them, they often flee the town or country, carrying their problems with them. For some, this has become a way of life and a means of survival in a hostile and alien world.

Our attempts to alleviate Roma poverty are - at a human level - fraught with difficulty. We find ourselves sucked into a vortex of needs that cannot be met. Every successful intervention is followed by yet another crisis. Patching up the holes in a sinking boat (that miraculously never actually sinks) is heartbreaking work that brings with it a sense of futility. Ever present is the stark economic truth that we, the activists, are rich by comparison. This serves only to deepen the perceived distance between client and field worker. What begins with genuine compassion often ends in a sense of failure. To keep going we set boundaries. But these then feel like new walls of separation.

f) The impotence of the civil sector

With the absence of Roma self-help initiatives, they remain dependant on those outside their communities to speak and act on their behalf. Whilst there are dozens of registered NGOs trying to help the Roma, most do not have the capacity and the expertise to go beyond crisis management and are thus working on a piece-meal basis. Meanwhile, the statutory agencies are overstretched following radical staffing cuts amongst those working with minority communities. There appears to be a total lack of any kind of long-term vision for the Roma and an absence of any coordinated, EU wide strategy. Some individual activists trying to help, become disheartened, cynical and withdraw.

Most voices in this debate fall into one of two categories:
Either the system is blamed, or the victims are blamed.
This deepens yet further the perceived deadlock.

2] A "future & a hope" for the Roma people

It is our belief that attempts to help the Roma people have been in deadlock for centuries. We believe that it is humanly impossible to get beyond the present impasse that has been outlined above. We recognise that in our own strength we are powerless to bring about any significant and lasting transformation of the Roma communities we are trying to help. We have been brought to our knees and believe this is the best place to start.

We are seeking a theological solution to a humanly intractable problem. Whilst we gladly work in partnership with activists of all kinds, our starting point is the gospel of Jesus Christ in whom all things have become possible. Our guiding star is not the academy of secular humanism, nor the aims of political activism, but the conviction that in entering the human predicament, Jesus of Nazareth brings fresh hope to every suppressed group on earth. Our guiding principles do not derive from the Kingdoms of this world, but from the eternal values of the unseen but very real Kingdom of God. Our initiatives on behalf of the Roma are a response to God's prior activity in history to lift up the poor, set the prisoner free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:16-20). Our prayer is that God will break our hearts for what has already broken His. We work not in isolation, but together in step with the same Spirit who guided that great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us: amongst them are Moses, John Wesley, William Booth, Trevor Huddleston, Martin Luton King Jn.

We recognise that prayer and social action are part of the same movement of the Holy Spirit. We believe no real progress will be made if we understand *prayer* as a bolt-on to action, or *action* as an optional extra to prayer. Intentionally we follow the pattern of Jesus, whose interventions were born of his prayerful withdrawal, whose life style was one of action-reflection-action. It is only in this way that we will be able to get beyond the historic deadlock in Roma work, and we will begin to herald a future and a hope for the Roma people. Against all the odds, we have a dream for this people who God has laid on our hearts...

... that they will be set free from the hands of their enemies, free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of their lives ... that the dawn from on high will break upon them, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death ... and that He will guide our feet into the way of peace. (see Luke 1:68-79)

3] **Gospel responses to...**

a) Roma auto-isolation from the wider community

At the heart of the Gospel is the belief that in Jesus Christ there is "no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal 3:28). The walls that alienate us from each other have already been pulled down by Jesus' death on the cross (Ephesians 2:11-22). The very tribalisms that separate one from the other have been overcome through Jesus' great work of atonement (at-one-ment). Whilst the outward reality remains as fragmented as ever, the deeper spiritual reality is that the major battle has already been won. We who were once far off, without hope and without God in the world, have been brought near both to Him and to each other, by the blood of Christ shed on the cross. In our work with the Roma it often feels like we are still standing at an impasse, which we cannot get beyond. With the eye of faith, we begin to understand that the walls that separate us one from another are a human construct, an illusion, a lie, an evil tactic to convince us that no real progress will ever be possible.

The Roma fear of assimilation is, however, as deep as it is real. We therefore proclaim in our next breath that unity in Christ does not spell the end of all diversity in Christ. Quite the opposite is must be proclaimed. Precisely because in Christ all the walls of mutual hostility have been removed, we are set free to celebrate the glorious diversity within the Kingdom of God. The spontaneous rending of the Temple curtain at the moment of Jesus' death is an outward symbol of a spiritual reality: not only have humans now direct access to the holy of holies, but we have in Him direct access to one another.

As we take our first steps forward towards each other, our historic tribalisms begin to crumble. We walk forward in the light of Christ, and that light begins to lay bare in all of us what we bring with us that is of God, and what falls short of His glory. As we each encounter another culture, we begin to see ourselves in a mirror:

As *gadje* meeting Roma, we begin to see how deeply we are compromised to the prevailing culture of individualism, consumerism and rationalism. Meanwhile, Roma meeting *gadje* are challenged to play a positive role as citizens within the wider community. As Roma and *gadje* come together, each of our cultures is sifted. All that is true to the values of God's Kingdom abides. All that falls short has to fall away. It is precisely in our coming together that the deepest sifting and deepest transformation takes place, and we begin to body forth the Kingdom of God in all its fullness.

b) Roma auto-isolation from within their own communities

The Roma are a deeply religious people with a profound awareness of spiritual reality. Many have been rescued from depraved life-styles through the Pentecostal revival movement that has swept across the world. Escaping the waters of destruction, they enter

the ark of salvation and embrace a radical and uncompromising piety. Without a doubt, there is a powerful link between their spiritual passion and their abiding poverty. However, few of them appear to have a heart for those they believe to be still drowning in the waters of chaos. Salvation has come for the Pentecostals not through engagement with the world in all its sorrow, but through radical withdrawal from all those outside the ark. Three core elements of the Biblical vision appear missing here:

- the Pentecostals appear to have forgotten that they were themselves 'once slaves' (Deut 15:15)
- they seem unaware that their new mandate under God is to be a blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen 12:2-3)
- they fail to see in Jesus' own teaching and example as the Good Shepherd, who intentionally leaves the 99 to go in search for the one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7).

Across the fragmented Roma communities, cultural tribalism is thus compounded by religious tribalism. It was into this broken world that Jesus was born. He comes as the Good Shepherd, full of compassion for all, especially the lost. He sees that we are like 'sheep without a shepherd', he sees our spiritual and physical hunger, and having fed the multitude, he commands that all the discarded scraps of food are gathered up into twelve baskets (John 6). Our mandate under God is the same as that of the 12 disciples: to *both* feed, *and* to gather in all that which will be otherwise lost, to work together with God to the end that there will be 'one new humanity' in Christ (Eph 2:15).

c) Anti-gypsyism

Our starting point for dealing with all forms of racism is the fundamental conviction that all people have been made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), and that He has no favourites (Deut 10:17; Rom 2:11). The God of Judeo-Christianity shows no partiality other than to those who are persecuted (Matt 5:10-11), to those trapped in poverty and to those who are shunned as foreigners (Deut 10:18). We see in the interventions of Jesus the reflection of a God whose heart is tilted towards the powerless of all ages.

It will not do for the *gadjo* to claim he is not implicated in the status quo. As *gadje* we share in the collective guilt of failing to embrace the Roma peoples as fellow humans and robbing them of their right to be full citizens of earth. Indeed, the Roma embody a radically challenging paradigm of what it can mean to be a people group. Laying no claims to any territory of their own, they regard every land as a foreign land and every land as a homeland. Thus they carry with them the memory of Eden, and point us beyond the tumult of the nations to a future when our citizenship will be in heaven. There is a sense in which they function as the leaves that bring about the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2).

Our finishing point in dealing with racism is the horizon of God's future to which we are drawn. In partnership with each other, *gadje* and Roma alike work together to bring about the Kingdom of God, not in some remote other-worldly sense, but in the very transformation of the world we now inhabit. Standing before the great impasse that this paper has described, we choose to step forward in the faith, that this work points beyond itself to a wider move of God's renewing Spirit across the whole of creation.

The Roma can spot racism from fifty metres and against the wind. Every gaze of mutual antipathy freezes us before the impasse. But every glance of unconditional acceptance and every deed of selfless kindness brings us one step closer to heaven on earth. Perhaps it is precisely more when we have no measurable outcomes to present to our donors, no substantive change to boast of, perhaps it is then that we follow most closely the pattern of Jesus, whose greatest success was accomplished not in the feeding of the multitude, but when nailed outside the city gate to a cross. We refuse to understand the present deadlock as a reason for despair. In our powerlessness we open our hearts to a saviour who stretched

out his arms to bring back together all mutually estranged peoples. Whose very broken body became the 'bread of life'. When we are weak, then we are strong.

d) Europe-wide deadlock

The lack of a single, overarching vision for all peoples is at the heart of the European deadlock in helping the Roma. The tensions between the interests of individual nation states and the agenda of the EU make it hard for any EU-wide solution to be found and owned by all. Fears of mass immigration from the economic migrants of Eastern Europe have now been eclipsed by the fresh waves of asylum seekers from the middle-East and the South. As we move towards the referendum on the future of the UK in the EU, political polarization coupled with popular anxieties of being overwhelmed by migrants, all conspire to kick the plight of the Roma into the long grass.

Luton Roma Trust brings a fresh perspective into the raging debate. Refusing to attribute blame to any group, our starting point remains the same: we have all fallen short of the Glory of God and are thus all part of the problem. Whether implicitly, or explicitly, we seek to bear witness to the hope that God has put in our hearts for all people. We are happy to work with any group, hoping to be part of a Europe-wide solution. If our starting point is collective failure, our finishing point remains the same: that the suppressed will be lifted up, and the mighty brought down (Luke 1:51-53; 6:20-26).

4] Sacramental Action...

Our actions on behalf of the Roma people are "sacramental" in that they point beyond themselves to the reality of the hidden spiritual world. We act because we see God already active in his broken and suffering world. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Jesus' loving actions point beyond themselves to the eternal heart of Father God, which is love itself. The divine love is made manifest in Jesus' ministry in every human encounter - it is as though love is springing up from the grass roots as it comes to bear in situations that, humanly speaking, seem impossible. Jesus broke through the impasse, bringing healing to the untouchables of his day, and breaking open the deadlock between mutually hostile groups. The same work continues through history as we become his feet, his hands and speak his words of hope. In all sacramental action, there remains however an unavoidable element of sacrifice. St Paul goes so far as to say, "we complete what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24).

In Jesus' ministry grassroots-up action seems to be the starting point and the means through which systemic change takes place. Critically, the transformation of communities came about *after* the death and resurrection of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Our starting point with the Roma is therefore to first build relationships of love and trust with the families we are trying to help. Only through such encounters do we become aware of the depth and nature of the problems they face.

Following grassroots-up action, we are then better equipped to introduce top-down action - the challenging of the power brokers of our day. We recognise the danger of then forgetting of the mandate to help the poor on the ground. "The poor you will always have with you" (Matt 26:11)! As we lay hold of an *action-reflection-action* cycle of ministry, similarly we aim to balance *grass-roots up action* with *top-down action*, recognising that some of us are more gifted in one area than the other. At all costs we avoid the trap of becoming isolated champions of the Roma. Lasting and systemic change will only come through the coordinated efforts of the team. Only together do we become 'the body of Christ'.

a) Grass roots up action - *responding to the poverty trap*

The Roma migrants that arrive in the UK usually have the essential survival elements in place, as they move into relatives' homes. However, we are often called on to try to help

Eastern Europeans who are stranded at the airport, at NOAH, or wandering the streets and sleeping in private cars - sometimes at motorway services stations.

The Roma have remarkable family support networks and so are rarely cut off from family. However, many of our interventions are on behalf of isolated Roma who have been shunned by their own communities - widows, pregnant single-women, single-mothers with sick children etc.

A number of factors make it very hard for the Roma to realise their full potential:

- Lack of English and literacy is a major obstacle for the Roma as they seek work and a life in the UK.
- Lack of employment traps many families in economic crisis with consequences for their housing, diet and health and their ability to transport their children to school.
- Whilst Roma have amazing survival skills, it is clear that the constant crises that they face prevent them from maturing into good citizens who desire to give as well as receive. This impasse is the result of both *gadje* marginalization of Roma, and Roma fear of *gadje*.
- Our Roma children live between two worlds: family and school. At school they are introduced to the reality of the wider community, the need to engage positively with others, and the possibility of fulfilling their educational and career potential. Navigating between the two worlds of family and school, is a cause of great distress for many Roma children and they feel pulled in two directions. This is particularly true for first generation migrant children who suffer the greatest difficulties in integrating. The child who breaks through with a mainstream career is rare and suffers the possibility of exclusion from its own family. This is especially acute for girls about to leave school.

As we stand in the breach, our aim is to help the Roma glimpse the possibility that their children' families could become economically self-sufficient, thoroughly integrated in UK society, without forfeiting their own culture and identity. Luton provides many outstanding examples of migrant communities achieving this very goal.

b) Top down action - *challenging the power brokers*

Close on the heels of our grass-roots up interventions is our commitment to engaging with the statutory agencies, who are often unaware of the predicament of Eastern European economic migrants and especially the plight of the Roma.

Luton Roma Trust currently works in close partnership with professionals within education, police, housing, health and the police. Our "Roma Interagency Team" [RIAT] is based at Beech Hill Primary School - Building Blocks Children's Centre, where we run a weekly drop-in help 'clinic' for Roma (*ajutor pentru Roma - fera programare*).

Most of our interventions deal currently with crisis management for the Roma families. We believe the time has now come to challenge the statutory bodies at a higher level, to bring to their attention the failure of central government and local councils to accommodate the special needs of the Gypsy, Traveller & Roma communities in the UK. We recognise the need to form strategic partnerships with key power brokers with the long-term vision of breaking through the present deadlock. **We need to identify Roma who will act together with us as spokesmen and women for their own communities. "Nothing about them without them!"**

5] Core Gospel values and disciplines

- We uphold the values of the Gospel in all we undertake.
- We set the priorities of the Kingdom of God over those of the prevailing culture (Rom 12:2).
- We seek to redress the injustices of the world, lifting up the poor and marginalized and challenging the rich and powerful (Luke 1:46-55).
- In the face of the poor, we see the face of the crucified and risen Jesus (Matt 25:31-end).
- We uphold the unique place of children and women within the Kingdom of God.
- We believe all are made in the image of God *and* all have fallen short of the glory of God.
- We will show unconditional positive regard for all we work with.
- Our mission is 'holistic' in that we seek to bless the Roma in all areas of their lives.
- We do not promise what we may not be able to deliver.
- We uphold and honour "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" (Phil 4:8) in all cultures and traditions.
- Our weekly team prayer meetings bring the light of the Gospel to bear on the darkness of the lives of many of the Roma.
- We wait patiently for the dawning of the Kingdom of God, aware that we are building on the work of others and seeking to pass on our work to those who will come after us.
- We bring both our failures and our successes into our prayer.
- We embrace a *contemplation-action-contemplation* rhythm of working.
- We avoid the twin dangers of *prayerless activism* and *retreatist piety*.
- We set our sails to catch the wind of the Spirit.
- We seek to join in with the *missio dei*, with what we see the Father already doing.
- We avoid working in isolation. No 'lone rangers'.
- We seek transparency and openness - 'walking in the light' (1 John 1:5-7).
- We avoid favouritism.
- We are inclusive of all, and challenge tribalism and exclusivity in all its form.
- We uphold the principle: "Nothing about them without them."
- We uphold the law of the land, explain its purpose, and challenge double standards (Rom 13:1-2).
- We "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" in which we live (Jeremiah 29:7).
- We are all accountable to the Bishop of Bedford and his successors and the Trustees of LRT.
- We honour all Christian denominations, and respect those of other faiths and none.
- We believe that with God all things are possible.
- At the end, we hope people will say: "we did it together with God's help!"

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