

Milan Kováč, Arne B. Mann (Eds.). *Boh všetko vidí /O del sa dikhel. Duchovný svet Rómov na Slovensku / Romano pa'áviben pre Slovensko* (God Sees Everything. The Spiritual World of the Romanies in Slovakia). Bratislava: Chronos, 2003, 346 pp.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Samuel Augustini ab Hortis argued that the Romanies do not have their own religion in the Hungarian territories but they live according to “the habits of the people and the country where they live”. Even the research conducted about two hundred years later did not disprove the argumentation of the Evangelical scholar either: however, on the other hand, no possible specific manifestations of the Romany religiosity or the folk faith intertwined with the official church doctrine or aspects of everyday religious faith have been investigated (with the exception of several partial studies). This deficit was remedied by the Slovak–Romany collection of studies ‘*Boh všetko vidí*’ (God Sees Everything) with a subtitle ‘*Duchovný svet Rómov na Slovensku*’ (The Spiritual world of the Romanies in Slovakia) published last year by the Publishing House Chronos.

The book was published as the outcome of the 2001-2002 research project “Religiosity of the Slovak Romanies” sponsored by the Open Society Institute and Roma Culture Initiative in Budapest. A group of Slovak religionists, ethnologists, and Roma activists took part in the project. Milan Kováč from the Department of Comparative Religion and the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University in Bratislava was coordinator of the project and, together with Arne B. Mann (Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences) was also the editor of the book. The authors try to capture the “colourful” spiritual life of the Romanies and to enrich the numbers of statistics, which show that between 80 and 90 percent of the Romanies declare themselves to belong to the Catholic Church, part of them to Evangelical church, and an increasing number of the members of the Romany communities also to new religious groups (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Word of Life).

The book contains nine material studies by nine authors based on field researches of the particular members of the team. The research project respected the regional and denominational heterogeneity of Slovakia: contributions monitor the spiritual life of (more or less segregated) Romany communities in the villages of the regions of Spiš, Šariš, Abov, Horehronie, Gemer, Záhorie, Trnava and Nitra. From the perspective of denomination, there are Roman and Greek Catholics, Evangelicals, Calvinists, and members of new religious organizations (Word of Life). Although the book is mainly about the current state of Romany religiosity, for the purpose of understanding of some problems it was necessary and useful to direct attention to changes in religious affiliation and to respect the diachronic dimension. The reaction of the particular members of the research project and also authors of the studies to the “offer of the field” was flexible and opened up several new topics: new Romany spiritual songs, religious polarization inside the Romany community, the phenomenon of oath, changes in the Romany community caused by the activities of the Churches.

The editors tried to characterize several generally valid features of the current spiritual world of the Romanies in the introductory chapter “The Romanies and the faith”. The chapter also contains details about historical changes in the religious identification of the Romanies in the process of their migration. In her contribution, Zuzana Palubová deals with the phenomenon of death in the folk religion of the Romanies living in the region around Trnava and Nitra, Jakub Mináč analyzed Romany spiritual songs created in the spirit of the current popular music style in Rankovce, a village in eastern Slovakia. Attila Kovács presents a problem of the relation of the three Romany and one non-Romany communities to religion and a religious feast—pilgrimage, under the name “Bôrka: communities, identities and religion in the upper Gemer place of pilgrimage”. Anina Botošová investigated the social and religious life in the village of Lomnička in the region of Spiš containing a number of traditional superstitious concepts. Arne B. Mann brought together material from research

focused on the protection by use of magic of new-born Romany children in six localities of the Spiš region. The potential of the church to bring about changes in the Romany community was evaluated by Danijela Djuršičová by examining the example of a postwoman in Bardejov and nearby Zborov. Rastislav Pivoň conducted his field research in the district of Hlohovec. He concentrated on the Romany concepts of the activities of the negative forces. Milan Kováč describes a variety of aspects of the spiritual life of the Greek-Catholic Romanies in the upper Hron village of Telgárt placing emphasis on the phenomenon of the oath in his contribution "The sun for the just". Tatiana Podolinská highlights a situation when the existence of the two religious doctrines within the Romany community brings about polarization.

The authors used a variety of topics and approaches and the editors put it forward as a purpose of the book. Particular contributions suggest the existence of a sort of a joint unit (framework questionnaire, minute anthropological probe at the beginning of each study with basic characteristics of the local society). The book obviously reflects a variety of methods applied by particular authors in the research into and the interpretation of the material. The majority of authors used in their research the method of simple or participant observation and structured interview. Greater methodological differences are particularly evident in their approaches to the material. The character of contributions varies between essays, often directly citing respondents (Palubová, Pivoň), through narratives (Botošová, Djuršičová), proposals for the categorization of the 'discovered' material (Mináč, Kováč), attempts at methodological change (Kovács), interpretation of the problem on the basis of the strict adherence to the chosen methodology (Podolinská) and an extensive comparative study (A. Mann).

'The Spiritual World of the Romanies in Slovakia' is an appropriate umbrella subtitle for the problems presented in the book and is much better than the term "religiosity" used in the project. The interest of the research group focused thus on the one hand on the reflection of the official church doctrines in the Romany communities, and, on the other hand, particular research did not avoid manifestations of the traditional Romany (folk) faith, with the typical strong belief in the comeback of the dead (mulo), superstitious concepts and narratives concepts of the next world, and belief in demonic creatures. Such a broad-minded coverage of the topic was shown as prolific because it indicated a real interconnection between the two lines in the life of the Romanies in Slovakia (for instance rich and hierarchized system of oaths and curses realized with "participation" of devotions, like pictures of saints, including large paintings on the walls of their homes, holy water, rosary, etc.). Despite the particularity of some contributions, they share some common motives: the discrepancy between deep religiosity of the Romanies and their absence in the official cult caused particularly by accepting the church as a non-Romany space, the connection of the apparently controversial units (oath under the pictures of saints) as an expression of the continuous feeling the God's presence, "non-Christian" practices regarded today as a phenomenon typical of the Romanies, which are also characteristic of traditional "religiosity" of the local non-Romany community. Research projects indicate that the "Romany dimension" of our society is often delimited violently (often also in drawing up research projects) and that there are much more issues they have in common rather than differences. "Folk religion of the Romanies has special features: but its specificity does not consist so much in the originality of phenomena (it is not necessary to seek sensations, exotica) but in their intensity, incidence, in the expression (emotive demonstration of sorrow), in the external form and/or in the way of expression and the meaning in the particular society" (p. 33).

The book has no ambitions (and, as has been shown above, relevant possibilities either) to construct a united and generally valid model of the spiritual world of the Romanies; on the contrary, the book shows its wealth and it is a signal for the church and lay public that it is necessary to get to know and accept this diversity in collaboration with the Romany communities. Although it was not the aim of particular contributions to make any

generalizations or to apply any clear theoretical conclusions, the editors tried to indicate three key concepts in the introduction, which, in their opinion, should help with the characterization of the contemporary spiritual world of the Romanies: syncretism as a connection of mutually exclusive moments, adaptability as a capability to react flexibly to the new stimuli from the outside, and identity in terms of the denomination-based self-identifying process (p. 11). A broad spectrum of topics with the defined problems offered is a challenge for new in-depth researches of multi-layered religiosity of the Romanies with a possibility of theoretical outcomes and efforts to elucidate some processes and factors influencing the spiritual life of the Romanies and to penetrate “as deep as possible into the fount of the Romany spirituality of today” (p. 13).

The appearance of the book *Boh všetko vidí / O del sa dikhel* also brings a practical message at the time when an input is expected from the local churches in the form of their work with the Romany communities. It can serve as a “manual” to many ecclesiastical representatives showing the way of acquiring knowledge and an effort to understand the multi-layered spiritual world of the Romanies before its unequivocal and non-instructed rejection. In this way, the book is a topical testimony (supported by the attitudes of the Romany believers) of the controversial tendencies of the church in relation to Romany communities. On the one hand, there are activities valued positively by both Romanies and non-Romanies; on the other hand, there are a number of generally-held negative stereotypes strengthened and spread by the church, often leading to declarations close to those of Samuel Augustine ab Hortis from the eighteenth century: “Be that as it may, there is little devoutness in the behaviour of this people and still less respect for the commands of the reason and divine providence.” The book shows that the Romanies living in the localities investigated evaluate often critically the offer of particular churches chiefly perceived through particular priests.

The book as a whole, with its diversity of contents and topics lacks, in my opinion, a unifying line at least on the formal side: “introductions” and “conclusions” appear only in some cases, the formulation of titles of some studies lies between literary and scientific style, the titles of the majority of contributions are “very” informative. The attractive graphics of the book cover cannot be overlooked by the reader. Thirty-five black-and-white photographs as a supplement divide the Slovak and Romany mutations. Pictures of frescos with religious motives on the walls of the Romany houses are particularly impressive (the holy family, scenes from the life of Christ, an angel with Romany features) taken by D. Rusnoková (as the only not dated). Another group of photographs contains the documentation from the research of particular authors: some illustrate directly the topic of the research, some the locality or its inhabitants. The book has an English resume and each contribution contains information about the author.

The book *Boh všetko vidí / O del sa dikhel* fulfilled undoubtedly the stated aims of the authors: “to convey the acquired knowledge to those who do not know the spiritual world of the Romanies or they still refuse to get to know it” (p. 14). Moreover, the book brought many inspiring ideas addressed to a wide spectrum of readers. It is highly praised by the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences as an “outcome of a unique innovative research project” in the category of the most significant results of fundamental scientific research. An equally high level of praise will be bestowed by readers who come into contact with the Romanies more often and whose lack of knowledge often leads to the refusal to accept “other” manifestations of living the faith will also bring great satisfaction.

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