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FAITH AND OVERCOMING TRAUMA IN AN EVANGELICAL ROMANI COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses the role of evangelicalism as a means of overcoming the trauma caused by natural disaster or disease. Using an ethnographic approach, it examines the connection between the beliefs of Roma in the Asparukhovo neighbourhood of the Bulgarian city of Varna and the hazards from which they suffered: the flood in June 2014 and Covid-19 during its first wave in 2020. People make sense of tragedy using different interpretations. It is seen as a form of divine punishment, a test for religious people, or it is associated with human negligence. Disaster provokes a variety of reactions among evangelical Christians, ranging from solidarity to distrust. Most importantly, their religious practice provides them with survival tactics and a direction to follow after catastrophe has disrupted their routine.

KEYWORDS: Roma • evangelicalism • Asparukhovo • flood • Covid-19

INTRODUCTION*

Knowledge of disasters and their effects on people's lives, including the opportunity for the creation of social action, has become increasingly multifaceted. In some ways, studies of this phenomenon are more pessimistic than before because hazards are on the rise worldwide (Oliver-Smith 1977; 2002; Gaillard and Texier 2010). Hazards challenge people's viewpoints and create a special need to reconstruct cohesion and social order at least to the extent that existed before catastrophic losses (Ibañez et al. 2004).

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Studies that focus on religion offer insights into the ways in which beliefs influence resilience when people face tragedy (Chester and Duncan 2009; Schlehe 2010; Bhandari et al. 2011). As few studies have focused on the effect of evangelism on perceptions of disaster and post-disaster recovery among communities, this field still needs further investigation (Ensor 2003; Holmgaard 2019 and others).

Research that focuses on evangelicalism (especially the Pentecostal faith) and its multiple roles for Romani believers under uncertain living conditions is scarce but important (Doležalová 2021; Montañés Jimenez 2022; Wachsmuth 2022; Slavkova 2023). In contrast, the Covid-19 pandemic has widely attracted the interests of scholars studying how Roma respond to challenges in their everyday lives (Albert 2021; Doležalová 2021; Montañés Jimenez 2022; Sarafian 2022; Surová 2022; Gay y Blasco and Fotta 2023; Maeva and Erolova 2023 and others). Trying to see the disaster through the eyes of my interlocutors, this paper aims to add new fieldwork results and insights. Thus, I analyse perceptions of disaster and disease as an interpretative process of sense making in a way that is meaningful to the Roma.

THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S MAGNIFYING GLASS

I use the ethnographer's magnifying glass to look at the specific relationship between evangelical faith, disaster, and trauma in Romani communities. Roma are a minority in Bulgaria, with the number officially standing at approximately 300,000 people; it is difficult to indicate how many of them are evangelists, due to the lack of official statistics (for more details on the Bulgarian Roma, see Marushiakova and Popov 1997).

Studies of evangelical Christianity have shown how an ideal of change and discontinuity with the previous way of life is actively promoted through the idea of salvation and blessing both among Roma and non-Roma (Gay y Blasco 1999; Robbins 2004; Thurfjell 2013). The churches in Asparukhovo and in other places in Bulgaria encourage people to turn away from traditional cultural practices, emphasising an ambivalent connection between belief in Jesus Christ and fears of divine punishment. Problems affecting people around the world, such as earthquakes or floods, are topics for religious services and are interpreted as signs of the end of the world, so believers often pray on hearing of such events (Slavkova 2007: 136–137).

The findings discussed in the paper are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in September 2020 and October 2021 in the tragedy-affected area of Asparukhovo; later, additional interviews were conducted with people living outside the area. Asparuhovo is located near the Black Sea along a stretch of one of the largest sandy beaches in the Varna region. This is an attractive tourist destination for foreigners and a weekend stopover for people from the city of Varna and elsewhere. Data was also collected through secondary data material such as electronic newspaper coverage (see also Stoyanova 2023).

The ethnographic examples presented in this article come from long conversations and open-ended interviews with evangelicals. My goal was not to burden people with too much formality, in addition to which I chose to focus on overcoming the disaster rather than on its devastating effects. The study indicates that even small details have the potential to reveal the dynamic nature of people's understandings and interpretations.

Fieldwork with traumatised interlocutors is a challenging task, which needs a special approach. The researcher must consider the dramatic situation and show empathy and respect toward interlocutors (see also Condon et al. 2019). Although I agree that people's quality of life and health was deteriorating because of disasters, I do not perceive them as marginalised individuals. My interlocutors possess a certain agency to take advantage of opportunities and create adequate coping strategies using the help of evangelical religion. Initially, common questions related to their daily life were asked before any conversation about the disaster began, so that I could gain their trust. The conversations that followed used pre-specified key issues related to the understanding of the disaster and people's ways of recovering from it, an approach quite common among researchers (Holmgaard 2019; Maeva and Erolova 2023). My interlocutors were well informed about the purpose of the study and saw in it an opportunity to fulfil one of their important tasks as evangelists: to tell the story of a tragedy as a way to spread the idea of the power of God's love and to help other people in the same situation.

In Asparukhovo, the flood of June 2014 caused damage to houses and infrastructure. 13 deaths were recorded, among them children. I spoke with six interviewees about the flood; with two pastors of Turkish and Romani origin who worked with Romani believers in their churches; a 21-year-old man who lived through the flood as a child and lost his great-grandmother and stepmother (Slavkova 2023); a male informant who recently became a deacon at an evangelical church, although he was not at the time of the interviews, and is the head of a Roma NGO and his wife. I had conversations with Romani pastor from the city of Stara Zagora, South Bulgaria, who arrived with his son from the province to help victims in Asparukhovo with financial aid.

The impact of Covid-19 on the Romani community I am studying is presented through the case of the Pastoral conference held in June 2020 in Perushtitsa, as a result of which some of the attendees fell ill and four pastors died. The conference delegates were mainly Roma from different Bulgarian cities and villages and Bulgarian Roma who live in different European countries. One Roma delegate from Asparukhovo became seriously ill and infected his wife, although both recovered. The Romani preachers who died from complications caused by Covid-19 were from the city of Varna, the town of Perushtitsa, and from two villages in South Bulgaria. The first to die after complications from the disease was a 54-year-old pastor from Varna. The members of his church were from different neighbourhoods, including Asparukhovo. His death had a profound impact in Asparukhovo because the residents were afraid of being infected with Covid-19.

It was a real challenge to ask questions about the events surrounding the religious conference. In some cases the open-ended interviews took longer than I expected because people got so upset when talking about their experiences that we had to stop and continue on another day. In order to grasp the specificity of the case, I conducted the research in person. I spoke with my interlocutor from Asparukhovo, who was the only person to join the pastor from Varna in participating in the conference. I had a chance to interview a female pastor from a village near Plovdiv, who was close to the pastor from Perushtitsa, who also died from complications caused by Covid-19. I also interviewed by telephone a pastor from the Evangelical Baptist Church in the town of Lom, northwest Bulgaria, who attended the conference, to have a slightly different perspective on the event.

The Roma inhabit the Bunkera and Makhalata neighbourhoods,[1] which are parts of the Asparukhovo suburb. Bunkera is home to Romany-speaking families from the *Dasikane Roma* ('Bulgarian Gypsies') group. Traditionally Orthodox Christians, some of them have converted to evangelicalism. The other part of Asparukhovo, where the flood of June 2014 caused the most damage, is Makhalata, where representatives of the *Millet* group live. This group is Muslim, but among them some have become evangelical Christians.[2]

Evangelical Christianity in its various forms – Pentecostalism, Evangelical Methodism, Baptism, and others – has a significant influence on Romani minority groups living in the Varna region. As opposed to the socialist period before 1989, when the practice of rituals was severely restricted for all citizens, today people experience religious freedom. Within the boundaries of both neighbourhoods there could be various evangelical societies following different policies. In some cases, this causes tension between pastors as each of them seeks to be the most respected. Another problem for the evangelical pastors in Asparukhovo is that most of the Roma are Muslim and resist pastors' attempts to attract new believers to the churches. There are two main churches in Asparukhovo, the Sion Christian Church and the Free Christian Church. Both are local branches of other larger Pentecostal congregations with the same names and several other home societies. Many members of the Sion Church belong to one of the risk categories for complications from Covid-19 because of their old age. Most of the believers in the congregation of the Free Christian Church are women and youths.

People in Asparukhovo actively sought to make sense of the hazards, placing the explanation and the impact of these two phenomena within the religious realm. Evangelical Christians often associate the flood in 2014 and the death of Romani evangelical pastors caused by Covid-19 seeing them as consequences of a person's sinfulness. Both were placed within a larger context of signs that the end of the world was near, as evidenced also by climate change and global warming. According to the pastor of the Sion Christian Church, the flood of 2014 and Covid-19 are visible signs of the end of the world:

> Covid – I can't explain it! Since I can't, then it came from God. Covid is one of the signs that the end of the world is coming. Covid is the effect, and the sin of the people is the cause. It is a call for people to repent. The other sign is the flood of 2014. Nothing happens without God. God has allowed it. There is a reason for this flood. The people live in sin. (FM: FT)

Some informants doubt the accuracy of this statement and present other theses. Believers are convinced that suffering is part of reality and a test for religious people, which other authors have also pointed out (see Liang and Wu 2023). My interlocutors said that the area hit by the flood was not a coincidence. An interlocutor with whom I spoke in 2020 had a similar perception, that the tragedy was connected to God who caused the flood to happen in an area where people were very neglectful of their safety. It was a punishment for not properly focusing on God's will.

He was directly affected by his participation in the Perushtitsa conference in 2020 because he and his wife subsequently fell ill with Covid-19. His close friend and evan-

gelical pastor from the Free Baptist Church in Varna died. Despite this, he accepted that the flood of 2014 was the more severe of the two events:

> Covid is like the flood of 2014 but with a different face. The same calamity, but with a different face, although this calamity again separated us. However, the flood of 2014 was more terrible because there were many victims. Children died too, it's not like Covid. That was a lot of stress…. Yes, the flood is from God, but the Bulgarian institutions are also negligent.… Compared to Covid, where the threat is not so specific, you don't see it with your own eyes and therefore we are not so afraid of it. When it rains, we are very afraid. (FM: NN)

For my interlocutors, participation in church services is far-reaching. It is not only a religious rule but also an important means of upholding evangelical culture, something that faced opposition from authorities during socialism. Therefore, they are very suspicious of attempts to limit their religious freedom. That is why my interlocutor, who is a deacon in the evangelical church and head of a Roma NGO, believed that Bulgarian institutions were using Covid-19 to limit the rights of evangelical Christians so that they cannot hold church services. He saw the measures against the spread of the disease as directed against evangelicals. His words highlighted this interpretation:

> With Covid, it is different because the state has made us lepers with this Covid – the state, and its institutions. When they stick the 'crown' label on you, that's it. You become a leper, even friends and relatives forget you and no one wants to help you, as happened to me. Covid is a kind of state-organised repression against evangelists. (FM: NN)

The trauma that the Roma went through in their wish to come close to Jesus Christ was a factor in new insights into the nature of their faith. They became aware that faith is not a straight path but one filled with the entrapments of the 'unbelieving world'. Personal behaviour was often seen as the main source of this entrapment by 'worldly' temptations such as alcohol and drugs, self-doubt, or the struggle with the discrepancy between Roma community expectations and the ideal of Christian life (see also Thurfjell 2013; Roman 2017; Roht-Yilmaz 2019). Nobody expects the struggle to be related to a disaster when they have to think about themselves and their loved ones, but also about the entire affected community. At the same time, believers must keep their faith strong, regardless of whether or not it is accepted that calamities come from God. For members of the churches, religious and non-religious explanations appeared to be complimentary and coexist in making sense of the disaster.

THE 2014 FLOOD AND SOLIDARITY NETWORKS

The flood in Asparukhovo began suddenly and had severe consequences on the health and quality of life of locals. On June 19, 2014, prolonged torrential rain generated landslides. Some Bulgarians and Roma were made homeless and lost their household goods, although the greatest tragedy was the human casualties. Asparukhovo is located in a region where floods had occurred before, in the 1920s (see Kanev 2021) and 1950s. Although communities with prior similar disasters may gain particular knowledge and

sensitivity to hazards that helps them deal with recurring difficulties (Bhandari et al. 2011), this was not the case with Asparukhovo because the inhabitants did not remember such hazards occurring before. Relatives of Romani families had lived in the area during the previous floods, while others had immigrated to Asparukhovo from other settlements. According to a married couple I spoke to, there was no flood in the 1950s, and they were confident of this claim because their grandparents told them nothing of such a calamity (FM: NN; MN). The husband asked the elderly people in the neighbourhood about previous floods in an attempt to explain why the 2014 flood happened. It turned out that they did not know either. Pastor from Sion Christian Church remembered the following about the beginning of the disaster:

> The day the flood happened, Thursday June 19, I was leading my home group worship service. The service was in the evening. It started raining, the electricity went out, but I did not know what was going on. A pastor from Varna called me and told me what he heard the news on TV, which warned that there was a terrible disaster in Asparukhovo. He told me that the neighbourhood was under water. That night I was afraid to go out, but the next day I immediately went to help. (FM: FT)

The recovery activities began the day after the disaster. Representatives of state and local authorities, non-governmental organisations, such as the Bulgarian Red Cross, and volunteers from all over the country were involved in the drainage and cleaning of the neighbourhood. Only a few people were prepared with an adequate response to cope with discomfort and to deal with the recovery process as they did not imagine such a thing could happen to them. A program supporting affected people with the distribution of food and water, and the opportunity to apply for small sums of money from the government to restore the property, provoked tension. However, after the initial shock, more cohesive social relations were achieved. Anthony Oliver-Smith (1977) discussed how a housing program in north central Peru, where an earthquake took place in 1970, provoked social conflict between locals. These problems, however, were overcome by people relying on their basic values in order that society would handle the social change and continue its development in unity.

It was important for my interlocutors that they received help from an evangelical source. The pastor of the Free Christian Church described what his first acts in helping the afflicted people were, emphasising his intention to help evangelists first:

> My help consisted of working for the people. I went from house to house and just cleaned, dug, or collected rubbish. I was just a worker. This lasted for 10–12 days.… There were no Christians among the dead, only Muslims. But we had people from the church who had relatives affected by the flood and I started helping the relatives of the Christians first. (FM: NM)

According to evangelical Christians, on the occasion of this calamity, religious, national and transborder ties were extended even further. Responding to what they saw on the TV news, ministers and ordinary believers joined the relief efforts by sending donations of money, clothes, water, or they came themselves to the scene to help rebuild the neighbourhood with shovels. Marisa Ensor (2003) pointed out that in Morolica in Honduras, several evangelical missions collaborated with the local population on the reconstruction of their community, after the town was swept away by floods in October 1998.

Pastors and regular churchgoers at evangelical churches from the cities of Varna, Sofia and Stara Zagora, and from abroad, including Romania and the United States, provided very important assistance. This dramatic event strengthened old links and developed new ones for the purpose of helping and, eventually, attracting new believers. Fenggang Yang (2002) has made similar observations. He argues that a hazard, such as the earthquake in September 1999 that caused the deaths of hundreds and devastated central Taiwan, provoked the activation of transnational ties in the Houston Christian Chinese Church in response to the call from Taiwan for support. The Houston church sent money and clothes, as well as volunteers to help those affected. (Ibid.: 142) Likewise, there was great empathy and activation of civil society to help the affected community in Asparukhovo, without distinguishing between people on ethnic or religious grounds. Evangelists, for their part, considered it their duty to help those in need. Cleaning up the mud and debris in the neighbourhood continued for several weeks. The pastor from Sion Christian Church described how this worked:

> The first aid came from Stara Zagora. Pastor IK brought 1,000 BGN [around 500 euros], with which we bought food and put the packages in plastic bags, which we distributed to the people.… I did not know him, but he was known to pastor Kosta[3] of the Free Baptist Church and so he came. Kosta from Varna worked the hardest after the disaster. The other pastors also helped a great deal. Kosta brought aid from Romania. The Romanians found out via the television that there was a flood and contacted pastor Kosta by themselves in order to help.… A pastor from Sofia also donated. He came by minibus to bring the products.… The church of Kosta from Varna provided a bus for the people who had to be transported and helped in different places. The volunteers were accommodated for the night in Kosta's church.… The day after the flood, I met with many pastors who came to help, whom I did not know personally but knew only via the Internet. (FM: FT)

The abovementioned pastor IK from Stara Zagora, who came with his son to bring monetary aid to the victims, explained his quick reaction by the fact that what he saw on television touched him so much that he considered it his duty as a Christian to help.

Another interlocutor from Asparukhovo, who lost his great-grandmother and his stepmother, shared a tragic story. He was 14 years old at the time of the flood (Slavkova 2023: 76–83). Before that, he attended the Free Christian Church, but declared he was not a very righteous Christian, nor did he have an evangelical baptism:

> The water was carrying the cars and they were hitting the buildings…. I started praying, "Dear Lord, send this water towards Turkey". I saw women who were praying with the Holy Qur'an in their hands. At the time, I had already deviated from the Church – I could not walk on the righteous path as I was smoking. I prayed again, "God, if you stop this water, I promise You, I will devote myself to You!"… I repeated aloud: "I decide to commit my heart to You". Then, inside of myself, I decided to truthfully follow the path of God… Then came our pastor… When I saw him, I told him: "I want to become a true believer."… I told myself again that I would become a true Christian…. Then the pastor asked me what had I just said, to which I replied with: "I would become a true Christian…" (FM: RA)

The Roma from Asparukhovo coped with their suffering through ritualised practices, such as prayer and participation in evangelical worship. According to Émile Durkheim (1998 [1912]), a religious practice is an action around which people unite for full social interaction. Their beliefs and values constitute a shared understanding the world, which affects the way they behave. In the cases I studied during my fieldwork, religious practice provided people with stability and a direction to follow after catastrophic events disrupted their routines. The interlocutor's account above illustrates the importance of religion: through prayer, people tried to make sense of the tragedy. A study of the ritualised behaviour of people in the city of Lalitpur (Nepal), which has extensive experience with earthquakes, is seen as an action designed through the symbolic practices that people perform (Bhandari et al. 2011). The more the community has experienced disasters and is aware that they can happen, the more influential these rituals are in shaping thinking, beliefs, and social relationships, which are maintained within the community to deal with the destructive effects of disaster. Rituals, as argued by David Knottnerus and David Loconto (2023), provide social life with stability and express symbolic meanings that guide the practices that make up people's everyday reality.

The ritualised actions (in this case visiting an evangelical church and participating in worship services) as a follow-up to the flood were also important because through the pastor's sermons one can find meaning and an explanation for what happened. Other practices that emerged in the post-disaster response and recovery phase, such as the participation of people at the site of the tragedy as volunteers can also be interpreted as being ritualised, although they can be considered standard behaviour when people want to recover normality and order. This participation helps the victims feel support and empathy.

THE ROMANI EVANGELICAL CONFERENCE IN PERUSHTITSA

Perushtitsa, which is a small town located near the city of Plovdiv, South Bulgaria, has a population of 5,000, both Bulgarian and Roma. This town became famous in the media because of the evangelical conference held in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, organised on 6th June, 2020, when the measures against the spread of the infection were relaxed, but not cancelled. In Bulgaria, Romani churches and societies, mainly Pentecostal, exist throughout the country. The Association of Romani Pastors periodically organises meetings, including annual conferences. The host of the evangelical conference was a pastor from Perushtitsa, belonging to the Philadelphia Christian Church. The majority of the delegates were Romani pastors with their spouses from various evangelical denominations in Bulgaria. The conference was attended by representatives from the Pentecostal, God's Churches, Baptist, and others churches. Foreign religious leaders did not attend the event. However, Bulgarian Romani pastors from the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Great Britain – where they lead churches that attract Bulgarian immigrants – did attend the conference.

The conference attendees to whom I spoke, gave me different numbers of delegates, which varied between 50 and 100 attendees. The conference began with a common prayer, presentation of the participants and their spouses, discussions on religious and

practical issues, a keynote speech by the host of the event, speeches by authoritative pastors, singing songs, etc. During the conference, converts were also invited to share narratives of being healed by Jesus Christ or narratives of overcoming everyday problems. The coronavirus pandemic was also discussed. The event ended with a prayer for the health of those present and their relatives, as well as for all Bulgarian citizens who had suffered from Covid-19. My interviewee, who is a co-pastor at the Charismatic church, decided not to go to the conference because she had two small children and was afraid of infecting them with Covid-19. In her words:

> I really wanted to go to the conference because pastor Salcho was a very close friend of mine and my family, but I was afraid of Covid. I have two small children. But then, when I found out what happened, I felt very sad for pastor Salcho […] He passed away. (FM: EG)

Pastors from Asparukhovo, Varna, Lom, Razlog, Perushtitsa and elsewhere attended the conference. Unfortunately, it turned out, that people infected with Covid were present at the conference. Since the first person to die was the pastor from Varna, word quickly spread that he was the main carrier of the infection. My male interlocutor from Asparukhovo joined pastor Kosta from Varna at the conference and was later accused of having brought the infection back to the neighbourhood. Many people, including evangelicals, blamed and shunned him. The informant and his wife were quarantined in their home for 14 days, which was a difficult period for them. Many of their acquaintances and relatives were afraid to approach them, but they needed practical help such as shopping for food. As he said, "That's when I realised how few friends I have" (FM: NN).

Local and national media were quick to articulate news about the event in Perushtitsa (Mihaylova 2020; Yordanov 2020). The president of the Association of Romani Pastors, who also attended the event with his wife, admitted that evangelists naively ignored the danger of Covid-19 and precautions were not followed during the conference. He was admitted in a serious condition to hospital, but recovered. After the first deceased pastor, three more died, including the host of the event. The Romani neighbourhood of Perushtitsa was placed under a police blockade and checkpoints were created. The blockade remained in place until June 25. There were tensions between Bulgarians and Roma, because Roma were not allowed to leave the neighbourhood and go to work, while Bulgarians said they saw quarantined people regularly walking freely around the town centre (Atanasova 2020).

At that moment, the Bulgarian state still used contact tracing but relied more on local authorities to regulate observation of anti-Covid measures. The authority in Perishtitsa said that they had not been informed about the conference and tried not to get involved in the tragedy. This conference was the reason why the Roma were accused of not complying with the anti-Covid requirements (Yordanov 2020).

People still wonder why key ministers in the evangelical movement in Bulgaria died in the heyday of their strength. They explain the spread of the disease among Christians in two ways: because of man's sinfulness, and thus people needed to deepen their faith in God; and because believers ignored the danger of Covid-19. Word among evangelists in Asparukhovo spread quickly and various theories were floated to answer the question of why this disaster happened.

Many people were wondering who brought the infection to the conference: pastor Kosta from Varna or a Bulgarian Romani pastors who lived abroad. Before the Perushtitsa conference, a gathering of Romani pastors took place in France, and according to some informants, the contagion started there. According to others, whose version was the one available in the media, the source of the infection came from the Netherlands. Including the name of the deceased pastor Kosta in our conversations somehow helped to clear his name of the negative suggestions that were being spread about him. My interlocutor, a close friend of pastor Kosta, recalled his life story and dedication to church life with the intention of honouring him. Name-avoiding behaviour regarding the deceased is a cultural feature among Gitanos in Spain (Montañés Jimenez 2022: 91), but my interlocutors were the opposite. My informant from Asparukhovo shared the following:

> I was very disappointed after the death of our pastor because some Christians began to interpret his death as God's punishment for his sin… information spread in the media that pastor Kosta was guilty of everything related to Covid. It turned out that he brought the infection to Asparukhovo. (FM: NN)

Another informant of mine, who is a pastor of a Romani Baptist church in Lom, also attended the conference. During the event, he sat next to two of the pastors who eventually died. He became seriously ill but managed to recover. I spoke to him on the phone when he was sick, as I have known him since 2003. He was very depressed, afraid for himself and his loved ones, and sad because of the death of his fellow pastors. He went through this trial using prayer. As soon as he felt better, he sat down to pray. Prayer at home as a follow-up to Covid-19 was important because one could find meaning and an explanation for what had happened. During his prayer sessions my interlocutor understood that it was God who, through all his fears, was calling him to continue his work as a pastor: "God still has work to do with me and therefore left me alive" (FM: NZ). He agrees that evangelicals neglected the danger of Covid-19, but, according to him, God decided to take the Romani pastors because they had completed their mission on earth. My informant and his wife, who were also affected by and experienced the stress of Perushtitsa's case, relied on prayer twice a day, morning and evening, in order to overcome fear, grief, and sadness. They see the tragedy related to the conference as a way for people to deepen their faith in Jesus Christ while not ruling out human negligence in not complying with Covid-19 restrictions. (FM: NN; MN) Therefore, prayer is one of the most important strategies for coping with the precarious situation brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, as other authors also pointed out (Doležalová 2021).

The event negatively affected Roma social relations in Asparukhovo. Very few people were prepared for an adequate response and to cope with the illness. According to the words of an informant, "People became very suspicious and closed in themselves" (FM: NM). The more the community experienced disasters, the more influential religious rituals such as prayer became. It helped to shape thinking, beliefs, and social relationships within the community, as well as helping to deal with the destructive impact of the disaster. The people in Asparukhovo blamed my informant for participating in the conference and for bringing the infection into the neighbourhood. Prayers helped him shake off what happened and deal with his fears. (FM: NN) An immediate comprehension of Covid-19 was not possible, although the promise to follow God helped

the evangelists after the initial shock and provided them with some reassurance. Kinship and neighbourhood ties and interactions that determined family life played a significant role during this emergency, although they were severely tested regarding the extent of kinship and the desire to help others. At first, no one wanted to meet anyone due to the fear of infection, but gradually old relationships were restored.

Churches were closed in 2020 for a long time. Evangelicals from Asparukhovo quickly adapted to other forms of worship such as online worship services and home churches. To this day, one of the churches in Asparukhovo still organises online services every evening starting at 8pm, for locals as well as for Bulgarian Romani migrants who live in other European countries. One of the initiators is the pastor from Sion Christian Church, who some years before the flood started to share his sermons on YouTube. However, his videos of spiritual hymns and old evangelical songs (some of them even sung during the time of socialism) are becoming more popular because people seem to be nostalgic for the melody and messages that the older songs carry.

Some believers accepted online services very positively, especially those living abroad, because it was their way of communicating with Protestants in their neighbourhood back home. Others had a different view. Some interlocutors accepted that services were a convenient means to adapt to new living conditions, but they also had a negative effect because, as one of my informants told me, an online meeting is "a kind of artificial food for believers" (FM: NN). He added:

> I do a monologue. There is no communication between us. I can't understand people's hopes. There is no communication, which is the most important thing for us. We receive spiritual food through the online service, but that only goes so far, there is nothing more, no fellowship, no personal contact between people. (FM: NN)

Domestic worship services have an important place in the current period affected by Covid-19, as well as a special role in the historical development of evangelicalism in Bulgaria (Slavkova 2007). Before 1989, religious services were most often held secretly in private homes and were attended by both male and female believers, with the number of women exceeding the number of men. Home churches maintain the vitality of the evangelical group as well as maintaining contacts between people who still need the help of their "brothers and sisters in faith". The people of Asparukhovo were familiar with this type of religious gathering from the time of socialism. Some informants even accept that the Bulgarian state's Covid-19 restrictions were stricter than during socialism when it was completely forbidden to hold religious gatherings:

> Covid has had a big impact on religious gatherings, the situation has become worse than under socialism. You cannot gather in the church, because someone will always see you and write a report against you, because you are an evangelist, and you gather in the church with other believers. They will put you under quarantine. Then they put a label on you that you are infected and that's it. (FM: NN)

The pastoral conference had a devastating effect on Romani believers in Bulgaria because they lost some of their fellow pastors and because it created a negative image of the evangelicals as not following social distancing recommendations. It had a positive effect only because the Roma started to take measures against Covid-19 more seriously: wearing masks during the service, maintaining distance in church halls, organising out-

door or online services. However, this stressful situation did not eliminate the existence of home churches; on the contrary, it strengthened their importance. Regarding vaccination against Covid-19, the prevailing opinion among the Roma in Bulgaria is negative (Maeva and Erolova 2023). Among Romani pastors, there are two opposing views on using anti-Covid vaccines, some are strongly in favour of vaccination while others are against it and believe that prayer can help more than vaccination. Participation in home churches, online faith services, and practising prayer improves people's ability to cope with such situations, helps them revive their normal social lives and cope with insecurity. Through intense religious practice, they make sense of the new way of life in which believers must get used to maintaining social distance until everything is over as well as managing to regain a sense of normality in their routine.

CONCLUSION

This paper argued that the interlocutors' perception of disaster is based on Christian belief, which is key to understanding the nature and causes of disasters. People in the study used different interpretations to make sense of disaster. Some saw it as a consequence of a person's sinfulness, while others saw suffering as a test for religious people to see if they would maintain their devotion to Jesus Christ in critical situations. They have an idea of a God who punishes sinfulness. However, they do not doubt God's love for people who believe strongly, even though they too bear the consequences of punishment. Other interlocutors assumed that tragedy was the result of human negligence. The tragedy brought to light what some people saw as problematic in their social lives and provided them with the opportunity to find a course of action according to their explanations of the disaster.

Disasters hit people unexpectedly and the community needed time to realise what happened, calm down and accept the situation. Evangelical communities experience the catastrophic events emotionally, but unlike non-evangelicals rely on faith and prayer to move forward. Attempts at joint social action sometimes failed and support in the form of money, food, or water caused tension and conflict between locals. However, later the desire to restore the social order took precedence over the sense of personal well-being.

The case of the pastoral conference in Perushtitsa adds a nuance to the analysis of the experience of overcoming disaster. The Bulgarian national and local media portrayed Romani evangelical Christians as super-spreaders of Covid-19, which had a negative effect on their image and created division in the evangelical community in Bulgaria, disrupting relations between individuals. Nevertheless, the evangelical Romani community managed to recover gradually through its traditional mechanisms of prayer, worship, organisation of pastors' meetings to resolve ongoing problems, and the provision of care for members of church communities. They took their lesson from what happened and became more responsible in terms of disaster prevention.

Evangelical communities have a strong sense of resilience, and the role of faith must be highlighted since they have nurtured solidarity networks even in the most challenging situations. While the flood provoked large-scale action and activated national and transnational connections to help those affected, Covid-19 seems to have disillusioned people and brought the new challenge of thinking for the entire community.

The Covid-19 crisis, however, created solidarity and everyday communication through virtual space, transforming it into an additional space where Romani believers helped each other and maintained their faith. People realised how much more they had to work to prove their commitment to the evangelical faith. The strong social pressure to behave in accordance with evangelical moral norms could explain the different opinions people had about the reasons for and consequences of disasters and the life-changing effects that they sometimes have.

Evangelicalism, then, provides a medium to deal with the problems that spring from the ambiguous situations that disasters can create. Among others, prayer is the main strategy to deal with the uncertain life brought by the flood and the pandemic. Individual prayer is an expression of one's relationship with Jesus Christ, but communal prayer during religious service creates a sense of overcoming the trauma and of continuity. Religious practice or prayer does not exactly cure the trauma but reframes suffering and makes life more bearable. As a manner of overcoming trauma, believers promise to become more committed to their faith than before the catastrophic losses they experienced.

NOTES

1 The term *makhala* was used in the period when Bulgarian lands were under Ottoman rule (14th–19th centuries). It refers to ethnic areas in cities and villages where a group of people live who profess a common faith, or are of a common ethnic origin, and had autonomous administrative institutions (schools, churches, etc.). The name is still used in the sense of neighbourhood and often in the sense of ethnic settlement.

2 Some of the Muslim Gypsies in Bulgaria, who are Turkish-speaking, use the term *Millet*, which originates from the Turkish word *milliyet* ('nation'), as an appellation of an individual group whose representatives distinguish themselves both from other Roma and from Turks.

3 This is the same evangelical pastor who six years later died of Covid-19 after attending the evangelical conference in Perushtitsa.

SOURCES

FM – Fieldwork materials consist of the following interviews:

EG – born in 1977. Lives in the village of Gelemenovo, Plovdiv region, South Bulgaria. The conversations took place in May 2021 and June 2022.

FT – born in 1959. Lives in Asparukhovo, Varna region, Northeast Bulgaria. Conversations took place in September 2020 and October 2021.

IK – born in 1965. Lives in Stara Zagora, South Bulgaria. The conversations took place in June 2022.

MN – born in 1969. Wife of NN. Lives in Asparukhovo, Varna region, Northeast Bulgaria. Conversations took place in September 2020 and October 2021.

NM – born in 1972. Born in the city of Razgrad. Lives in Asparukhovo, Varna region, Northeast Bulgaria. Conversations took place in September 2020.

NN – born in 1968. Lives in Asparukhovo, Varna region, Northeast Bulgaria. Conversations took place in September 2020 and October 2021.

NZ – born in 1976. Lives in Lom, Northwest Bulgaria. The conversations took place in June 2020 and June 2022.

RA – born in 1999. Lives in Asparukhovo, Varna region, Northeast Bulgaria. Conversations took place in September 2020.

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