

**THE GYPSIES**  
(2/2)

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**SOME ETHNOLOGICAL REMARKS.**

For the outsider, Gypsies or Travellers give the impression of being one uniform group. In reality this is not true at all, and it is very rare to see groups of different ethnic backgrounds mixing indiscriminately on a camping site. Briefly, the following distinctions can be made:

– The Tziganes, originally from India, immigrated to Europe some 5 or 6 centuries ago, and are made up of a variety of ethnic groups. These include especially the Manouches, the Romanies and the Gitanos. While the Romanies have settled down for the most part in the east suburbs of Paris and have kept their own language, Romany, and customs, the Manouches continue to live in caravans on the roadside in the absence of other available sites. Just in the Paris region it is calculated that there are 20,000 of them, while in the whole of France there about 250,000, all of them of French nationality.

In the Paris region there are not many Gitanos. These lived in Spain for a long time, and are to be found mostly in the south of France.

– The Yeniches, who also are travellers, are of Germanic origin, who deal mostly in scrap metal and do not mix with other ethnic groups.

– More recently, the Romanies, of Yugoslav origin, have come to work in the less peripheral suburbs of Paris. A very small number of them, not at all representative of the group as a whole, "operate" from time to time in the Underground or in public places to the detriment of the hardworking majority. Unfortunately, the mass media by lumping all Gypsies together contribute to discredit further people who are already rejected and marginalised.

**A TERRIBLE HANDICAP: ILLITERACY**

The rate of illiteracy among Gypsies is as high as 80%. Unlike the unlettered of our society who have lost the habit of reading, the majority of Travellers have never had access to schools and to learning, although the right to education extends to all French people, whatever their origin. Their essentially oral culture deprives them of all access to written material, which has an extremely damaging effect on the human development of these people.

This state of affairs has led the A.S.E.T. (Association to help with the schooling of Gypsy children) to adopt innovative measures with regard to instruction.

Consequently, every year, we enrolled Gypsy children, who were keen to learn how to read and write, in schools near their camping sites. Unfortunately, because of the lack of structures adapted to the needs of these children, results obtained were more or less non-existent. Camping in one place, which was allowed or tolerated for only a few weeks, made it impossible to provide effective schooling.

That is why in 1982, in collaboration with some schools in the Paris suburbs (St. Joseph, Pantin, St. Louis, Pointoise, Passy Buzenval), the A.S.E.T. created some mobile schools which, while moving around the same area practically all year round, could follow the same family group for a sufficiently long time. These school-buses are officially recognised by the education authorities of Bobigny, Pontoise and Nanterre. At present, there are 6 in the Departements of Seine St. Denis, Val d'Oise and Hauts de Seine.

They are characterised by:

– A kind of welcome specially tailored to the needs of the Travellers. \* A teaching team composed solely of volunteers conversant with the Gypsy way of life. \* A pedagogical approach based on the specific needs of the Travellers (first and foremost practical reading needs). It is by listening to Gypsy children that the teacher manages to fine-tune his methods and make them effective.

This type of approach implies the formation of small groups of 8 or 10 children, based as far as possible on ability. Special attention is given to older pupils who can subsequently teach reading and writing to their family circle.

Above all, however, KNOWLEDGE is communicated among the Travellers through a knowledge and love of their background, because there more than anywhere else, you do not give what you know, but what you are.

## **THE GYPSY AND HIS GOD**

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The Gypsy has a heart which is sensitive to religious values. Materialism does not satisfy him: As one Gypsy said: "I feel God. I don't need anyone to be with him". A Gypsy has, as it were, an instinctive feeling for God. His religion is simple and direct. It has few dogmas and even fewer structures created by Churches.

As one said: "When I go out touting for business, and I earn a bit of money, I say: 'God helped me!'"

It should be noted that the faith of the Gypsy has a family and collective dimension. To go on a pilgrimage fits in with their nomadic instinct, and enables them also to meet relatives and friends from far and wide.

This faith in a providential God who provides good things is often accompanied by superstition: they believe in bad luck and in the evil activity of the devil.

For the Gypsy, the world is divided into two parts: the sacred, which includes the divine, the marvellous, and which inspires feelings of fear, and whose favour has to be cultivated; and the other, which is banal, daily, which includes misery, suffering, and about which you pray to the God of providence.

Thanks to the remarkable work done by the Catholic Chaplaincy to the Gypsies over the last 20 years, this "natural" religion in which Christ hardly figured has now begun to include the search for a personal God who has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ to help us each day along life's road.

As one Gypsy said: "God is not a word, is not an idea, is not a picture. God is the Father who is always with us."

## **TO WHICH CHURCH DO THE GYPSIES BELONG?**

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Thirty or so years ago, all Gypsies were Catholics. Baptism was and still is the only sacrament required, as the nomadic form of life and marginalisation make all forms of religious education impossible.

However, in the course of the last 20 years, Gypsies have become the target of a number of Churches, in particular of the Pentecostals, and an appreciable number of them have been converted to this religion based on the literal interpretation of the Bible, having no fixed dogmas, and whose assemblies bring Gypsies together in a warm emotional atmosphere in which cures by the imposition of hands are frequently demanded.

The Catholic Gypsy and Travellers Movement is training more and more "militants" who study their faith more deeply so as to serve their brothers, helping

them to pass from a vague deistic belief to faith in Jesus Christ.

Their progress in the faith and in their life in Jesus Christ will depend to a great extent on the fraternal welcome offered them by our Christian communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

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This article has tried to show that the life of the Gypsies is quite different and far removed from that of our more numerous society, because of its origins, way of life, values, etc.

For many centuries now, ever since the Gypsies arrived, they have been the object of rejection and marginalisation in France.

And yet, Travellers are human beings just like anybody else and have the right to be accepted and to have a decent life, even if it is different from ours. Their basic and inalienable rights must be recognised:

- the right to education
- the right to be free to live according to their aspirations (the right to travel which implies, ipso facto, the right to stop).
- the right to respect and human dignity which condemns the relegation of these people to areas lacking in hygiene, security, social benefits, etc.

Everyone, especially the Christian, must help to repel all forms of discrimination and racism. All of us, whether we have fixed homes or move about, have to live together with all our differences, in a spirit of mutual respect and collaboration. Let us try to get to know one another better by taking a first step towards one another. Many prejudices and myths will disappear as a consequence.

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