

**Regarding the Rites of Others:  
An Analysis of Responses to the Serpent-handling Sects**

by

© Robyn Cossitt

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## Abstract

Serpent-handling sects are a subset of the Church of God and Holiness Movements of Pentecostalism. These sects are famous for their “bizarre” serpent-handling ritual, which has drawn significant attention from scholars, legislators and media organizations. Societies define themselves through comparison with others. In order to underscore the power of the modern, secular American culture, the serpent-handlers have been constructed as an “internal other” that represents the antithesis of the majority culture’s values, beliefs, and practices. This thesis explores the othering process of serpent-handlers through sensationalist and primitivist narratives perpetuated by early academics, state legislation, newspapers, magazines, and television. The narratives constructed about the serpent-handling sects mark the boundaries of normative culture.

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## Introduction

Scattered throughout the Appalachian Mountains in the United States of America are minority Pentecostal Christian groups best recognized for their ritualized handling of venomous snakes. These serpent-handling churches have received considerable public attention since the mid-twentieth century due to the spectacle-like nature of their ritual practices. The serpent-handling practice is rooted in a literal understanding and elaboration of Mark 16:17-18 (King James Version):

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Glossolalia, speaking in an unknown language, healing, and exorcising demons are commonly found amongst Pentecostal groups. However, few Pentecostals recognize and practice all the signs depicted in the book of Mark. The serpent-handling sects are distinguished by their observance of taking up serpents and hence surrounded by an aura of controversy, disdain, and curiosity.

The serpent-handling sects have been the subject of scholarship; they have also been heavily mediatized and receive attention in popular culture. Representation of these sects varies depending on who is discussing them and what their agenda is. Frequently, the depictions of these sects are derogatory in nature, perpetuating the stereotype that ritualized serpent-handling is a “crazy, frenzied, lunatic religious practice” performed by

uneducated, red-necked hillbillies.<sup>1</sup> Popular media, scholars, mainstream Pentecostalism, and mainstream American culture variously perpetuate such negative representations. In a study about external perceptions of religious beliefs, researchers found that the religious beliefs held by members of serpent-handling sects are often dismissed as being less legitimate and less grounded than more mainstream or orthodox beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Appalachian states have proscribed the handling serpents, and those who do violate the law may face fines or jail time.

This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the representation of regional snake-handling churches and the place of these churches in academic, legal, and popular public narratives about religion and modernity. I examine in detail the representation of serpent-handling in mainstream media, as well as the legal efforts to criminalize the practice. I also discuss several scholarly works that perpetuate stereotypes and I problematize naïve, prejudiced representations of serpent handling. I argue that serpent-handling churches have provided secular culture with an ‘internal other,’ a group within the modern, secular nation-state that has been stigmatized, stereotyped and caricatured, in service of underwriting the worldview and power of secularism.

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<sup>1</sup> Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, "The Appalachian ‘Other’: Academic Approaches to the Study of Serpent-handling Sects," *Religion Compass* 10, no. 3 (2016): 48, DOI: 10.1111/rec3.12193.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph W. Jr. Hood and W. Paul Williamson, *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2008), 179, ProQuest.

## Key Framing Concepts

There are three key concepts framing the thesis: the insider/outsider debate, othering, and the idea of a ‘social imaginary.’ One of the significant tensions in religious studies is the ‘insider-outsider’ debate. At the crux of this debate is the question, “Can we ever fully understand someone else’s experience?”<sup>3</sup> The debate forces scholars to consider the “extent and limits of our knowledge and understanding. It invites [scholars] to consider whether or not [their] field of study is scientific. It is central to our methodology. It has an ethical dimension and a political one.”<sup>4</sup> The ideal resolution for the insider/outsider debate currently favours two approaches: a secular, scientific method and a reflexive approach. When using the secular, scientific approach, the scholar should acknowledge religion’s social nature.

Furthermore, the scholar cannot assume a universal human nature or experience. The study of religion should be undertaken with the same attitudes and approaches as any other ideological system or institution. As Kim Knott argues, “[t]he aim of the scholar of religion should not be to get inside the experience and meaning of religious phenomena, but to build upon the benefit of critical distance to explain religion from the outside.”<sup>5</sup> This approach relies heavily on objectivity.<sup>6</sup> This approach has been criticized for insufficient reflexivity. Reflexivity requires the awareness of the dialogical nature and the limitations of the scholarship conducted on other human beings. Reflexivity includes self-

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Knott, “Insider/outsider perspectives,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), 243.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



reflection, criticism and engagement with issues relating to identity, power and status.<sup>7</sup>

Serpent-handling is, on the surface, such a seemingly unusual practice, that it is difficult to bracket one's preconceptions and assumptions. By maintaining awareness of the insider/outsider debate and using a reflexive approach, I can help protect against othering in my writing.

Othering is the process in which members of societies are divided, categorized and often pitted against each other in a "we" versus "they" dynamic. As defined by Colleen MacQuarrie in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, "Othering is a structurally based process that underscores the privilege of the dominant group."<sup>8</sup> Groups may be the target of othering due to their race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, and religious belief. The process of othering is one of intentional hierarchal categorization which relies on enforcing strict binaries. The othered group is usually perceived negatively, often decried for being different, backwards or primitive. Occasionally, 'othering' is premised on positive stereotypes, which may also be harmful. In the modern west, in fact, in defining the modern west, othering often takes the form of "'We' are enlightened, rational, modern, while 'They' are primitive, irrational and backwards."

Dominant groups use negative perceptions of a defined 'other' to bolster their own self-image of being variously civilized, modern, progressive, righteous, or morally proper. The diversity within each insider and outsider group is flattened and, in essence, generalized, ignoring any differentiation that does not align with the essentialist narrative

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Colleen MacQuarrie, "Othering," in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Elden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012), 637, DOI: 10.4135/9781412957397.

of the binary categories. Othering is a common way in which societies and smaller groups define and reify the bounds of their identity through delineating societal norms shaping beliefs, values and practices. Othering may be seen as a version of scapegoating, creating societal cohesion and common purpose within a specific group by channelling or projecting internal negative energies and qualities on to others. The concept of othering alerts us, in a psychoanalytic sense, to the ways in which ‘we’ groups define and (unknowingly) deceive themselves in service of a stable self-image.

As Richard Kearney has discussed, othering takes place at many levels, including the level of the nation-state: “Most nation-states bent on preserving their body politic from ‘alien viruses’ seek to pathologize their adversaries.”<sup>9</sup> For example, as I write, in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, President Trump has referred to the disease as a “foreign infection” originating in China. The self, inside group or “we” is typically defined in relation to the other, with the other being, in various ways, pathologized. As geographers Johnson and Coleman argue, “just as nation-states have often created an external “Other” in the pursuit of nationalist agendas, societies have often created an “othered” region within the borders of ostensibly unified polities in the pursuit of nation-building.”<sup>10</sup> The nation-state, in other words, is created in part by defining both external and internal enemies, deviance, pathology, and threat.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Kearney, “Stranger and Others: From Deconstruction to Hermeneutics,” *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (2002): 7-36.

<sup>10</sup> Corey Johnson, and Amanda Coleman, “The Internal Other: Exploring the Dialectical Relationship Between Regional Exclusion and the Construction of National Identity,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no.4 (2012): 863.

The “internal other” is a group that exists within the dominant larger group and perceived as being “different from, perhaps antithetical to, national norms and values” in service of further nation-building.<sup>11</sup> Internal othering or “internal orientalism” is described as “a discourse that involves the othering of a (relatively) weak region by the more powerful region (or regions) within the state.”<sup>12</sup> The othering of a geographic-cultural region and its people create “powerful and often enduring narratives, which often become the cornerstone of regional and even national identity.”<sup>13</sup> These narratives are singled out “as repositories for backwardness and consequently become the spatial containers that are home to impediments to national progress.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, this group inside the more extensive group becomes a scapegoat for the dominant group or is depicted as needing to be reformed or rehabilitated to fit with the normative group-- hence the trope, ‘the enemy within.’ Language organizes our thoughts and perceptions. The language of othering essentializes, homogenizes, and exoticizes the differences of the othered group. What could once be interpreted as a relative difference becomes absolute.

Societal groups and collective identities are social constructs. These constructs are subjective, continually being defined, interpreted, reinterpreted and redefined. The demarcation of “we” and “they” is contingent and serves as a tool used to help determine relative status and location in a society. Philosopher Charles Taylor coined the term “social imaginary.” A social imaginary includes

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 864.

<sup>12</sup> David R. Jansson, “Internal orientalism in America: W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* and the spatial construction of American national identity,” *Political Geography* 22, no. 3 (2003): 296.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson and Coleman, “The Internal Other,” 864.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 865.

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.<sup>15</sup>

A social imaginary is, therefore, the perception of one's social surroundings. Taylor posits that a social imaginary is not a social theory.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Taylor

[adopts] the term imaginary (i) because [his] focus is on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the passion of a small minority, whereas, what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.<sup>17</sup>

A social imaginary creates a sense of normative expectations of ourselves, other members of our society, and how we fit together as a whole. The social imaginary is not merely content but also provides tacit interpretive tools—a background matrix of how to conceptualize and understand social practices.<sup>18</sup> As Taylor writes, “If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding.”<sup>19</sup> Each member of a society has a “repertoire of social actions,” which tells us what practice is acceptable where and why.<sup>20</sup> This repertoire serves as a social map that helps individuals determine what kinds of people they should interact with, when, where, why and how.<sup>21</sup> This shared social imaginary tells us not only what constitutes acceptable or ideal normative behaviour, and how things ought to be, but also

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

what constitutes unacceptable or unideal behaviour out outcomes, therefore imparting a moral order.

The moral order is the ideal which members of society strive to embody. Taylor believes that only a minority of individuals are able to follow this order, “at least under present conditions.”<sup>22</sup> Central to the modern moral order is the normative principle “that the members of society serve each other’s needs, help each other, in short, behave like the rational and sociable creatures they are.”<sup>23</sup> Respect and mutual benefit for other individuals and society as a whole is the basis of the modern moral order. According to Taylor, the respect and mutual benefit work to serve the goals of ensuring “life, liberty, sustenance of self and family.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the ideal social order is one in which the members of a society cooperate, and their purposes align.<sup>25</sup> This moral order is not necessarily geared towards maintaining the status quo and can be revolutionary depending on the situation. The moral order shapes the social imaginary:

The modern theory of moral order gradually infiltrates and transforms the social imaginary. In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones but, ones often transformed by the contact. This is crucial to what [Taylor calls] above the extension of the understanding of moral order. It couldn’t have become the dominant view in our culture without this penetration/transformation of our imaginary.<sup>26</sup>

Social imaginary is contingent and relies on the moral order that helps shape it.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

Even though, as Taylor argues, diversity and tolerance are part of the modern west's social imaginary, national cultures nevertheless define normativity through reference to beliefs, values, and practices deemed non-normative. As we shall see, representations of Snake Handling churches are one way that marks these groups as deviant and outside the ideal social imaginary.

### **Methodology**

My thesis uses a broad-based social-cultural methodology, a case-study informed by the tools of discourse analysis and othering, set inside a comparative framework. I have relied significantly on the model proposed by Helen Simmons.<sup>27</sup> The cases examined in this thesis are representations of serpent-handling practitioners, shaped by the recent renewed interest in snake handling in the media and public discourse following the death of a snake-handling pastor in 2014. Robert Stake distinguishes between “intrinsic” and “instrumental” case studies; the former focuses on a particular case, in and of itself, while the latter uses a case to examine a particular issue.<sup>28</sup> My thesis is closer to the “instrumental” type, using the case of snake handling to examine processes of othering. In developing this approach, I explore the social context in which the serpent-handling sects developed historically and how their practice has been received and portrayed in scholarship and broader cultural currents across a large slice of time. I provide summaries of the conclusions made by other scholars. At the heart of the thesis is

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<sup>27</sup> Helen Simons, “Case Study Research: In Depth Understanding in Context,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 455-470.

<sup>28</sup> Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (London: Sage, 1995).

a new contribution to the discussion, a close examination of historical and recent media portrayals and the public debates surrounding legislation to prohibit serpent-handling to determine how the serpent-handling tradition is variously sensationalized or normalized.

Discourse analysis examines how actions and events are given meaning in and through language, and how language works to produce identities. Far from merely objectively describing the world, language constitutes and constructs the world. This method calls for identifying patterns and recurring tropes and themes in a given body of material. Although there is no fixed set of rules defining the practice discourse analysis, generally speaking, the method has several elements:

- (1) Converting primary texts (text here includes visual and material culture, ritual practice and cultural performance) into notes that break the text down into specific elements, such as recurring words or ‘plot’ structures. For example, the use of the language of infection and disease to describe the ‘social body.’
- (2) Identifying the subjects, protagonists and antagonists in a text. For example, in President Trump’s speech on COVID-19, China, rather than the disease, emerges as the enemy.
- (3) Thinking about how particular texts ‘address’ the reader, suggesting a certain preferred way of receiving and thinking about a topic. For example, framing the outbreak of COVID-19 as China’s effort to compete with the United States

plays into the target audience's nationalist thought patterns, sowing mistrust of China and affirming the United States' superiority over foreign powers.<sup>29</sup>

(4) Reflecting on the social, institutional and economic interests served by a text.

For example. For example, Trump's desire for America to surpass China's global economic power and influence.

(5) Identifying the potential harm and benefit of particular representations. For example, the framing of China as the enemy results in increased xenophobia and racism against Asians.

I have drawn on works by Jorgenson and Phillips<sup>30</sup> and Barker<sup>31</sup> to provide a basis for developing and applying a discourse analysis methodology to the case under study here. Discourse analysis is not without limitations. For example, Barker notes three significant problems common to discourse analysis:

1. The *problem of the unity and coherence of the 'research object'*, leading on to (a) the problem of *readers' genres*, and (b) implicit claims of *cumulative influence*.
2. Presumptions about *persuasiveness* and associated *concepts of power*.
3. Issues of *investigative completeness and testability*, leading on to (a) researchers' responsibility for their claims' implications, and (b) *visibly trustworthy* methods of analysis.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bret Baier and Gregg Re, "Sources believe coronavirus outbreak originated in Wuhan lab as part of China's efforts to compete with US," *Fox News*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/coronavirus-wuhan-lab-china-compete-us-sources>.

<sup>30</sup> Marianne Jorgenson and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002), DOI: 10.4135/9781849208871.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Barker, "Analysing Discourse," in *Research Methods for Cultural Studies*, ed. by Michael Pickering (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 150-172.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 163.



Discourse analysis tends to assume that there is coherence within the research material, makes presumptions about the pervasiveness of thematic concepts and their power, and may lack the ability to test the claims being posited as a complete representation of the phenomenon.<sup>33</sup> I employ discourse analysis not to explain a phenomenon, but to help understand a dimension of it. Naturally, I cannot discuss everything that has ever been written, filmed or otherwise about the serpent-handling sects. I present in this thesis material that is illustrative in nature. Discourse analysis generally relies on naturally occurring data: books, journal articles, newspaper columns, documentary video, and newscasts. To limit the range of data, I examine select historical cases and then move on to the period after 2014, when Pastor Jamie Coots was bitten and killed, an event that stimulated a renewed interest in serpent-handling in the public domain.

Another important source in developing the discourse analysis approach used here is found in Ronald Grimes' book, *Rite out of place: ritual, media, and the arts*. Grimes provides a detailed outline of how to analyze film representations of ritual practices:

In short, the method requires mimetic criticism of the rites to which the film refers, formal criticism of the rite in the film, source criticism of the ritualization in the production of the film, and reception criticism of ritualization in the consumption of the film.<sup>34</sup>

Grimes' methodology requires careful examination from a perspective located both inside the film and around it, recognizing the social and transformational processes of cinematic representations of ritual.<sup>35</sup> Mimetic criticism focuses on the rite that the film depicts.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Rite out of place: ritual, media, and the arts* (Oxford; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 41.

Does the film representation of the rite adequately mirror the real rite? Filmic treatments or scenes of ritual within a film, for example, are often shorter than the ritual itself. This means there is a concentrated process of selection. Scenes are selected and edited, we surmise, to further the director's narrative, whether that be plot, agenda, character or mood development.<sup>36</sup> Source criticism is comparative, where recurring tropes are categorized into archetypes and clichés.<sup>37</sup> Expressive/Production criticism analyses the film as an expression of its creator. Reception criticism explores how a film is viewed and used by its audiences.

As previously discussed, othering is the process in which individuals or groups are negatively stigmatized and objectified as an act of underscoring the power and worldview of the dominant group. Othering in case study research is often detected through awareness of the potential for essentialized, oversimplified representations of the objectified group or through ignoring similarities in favour of focusing on differences. Academic research, positioned along the fault line of the insider-outsider debate, must strive to avoid the process of othering in the very act of identifying it. There may well be reasoned criticism. Not every act of critique is a form of hegemonic dominance.

Ethical research acknowledges that researchers hold a position of power compared to the subjects of inquiry. The researchers' assumptions and choices influence how their research project develops and how the studied group is depicted; therefore, a reflexive approach is crucial. Reflexivity is the circular process in which researchers question how

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 50.

they are “implicated in the research process and reporting.”<sup>38</sup> At each stage, researchers should consider, explore and challenge the assumptions, motives, and identities that shape their research and how their research further shapes their assumptions and purposes. Researchers should consciously implement tools to prevent othering in every step of the research process. My methodological approach to minimalizing the chance of othering in my thesis is informed by MacQuarrie’s chapter in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*.<sup>39</sup>

Ideally, members of the studied group will collaborate with the research team allowing emic voices to influence, inform and shape the development of the research project. Since I will, for practical reasons and considerations of time, not be working ethnographically with members of serpent-handling sects, I will critically examine previous field-based research, to reflect on how various scholars may have reduced or enabled instances of othering. Through a critical examination of other research projects, my goal in this thesis to develop and present an unobjectifying, fair representation of the serpent-handling sects, as well as reflect and on how people or groups from culturally dominant positions have represented the sects, and what ends these representations may serve. Any given research project can only offer a partial account of the group in question’s reality and should include room for alternate views and critical analysis.

I will also be using a comparative methodology that takes as quasi-normative several detailed, comprehensive ethnographies of serpent-handling as a baseline for analyzing and evaluating representations of serpent handling, including non-ethnographic

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<sup>38</sup> MacQuarrie, “Othering,” 637.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

scholarship.<sup>40</sup> One of the fundamental tensions in religious studies, as discussed previously, is the ‘insider-outsider’ debate: the case of serpent-handling is exemplary of the issues informing this debate as representations of the sects (including academic descriptions) are typically that of the pure outsider.<sup>41</sup> In ethnographic research, while the etic researcher stays in the community for a long time, they do not fully penetrate the community and remain on the perimeter. Etic researchers may be alienated and never fully grasp the experience of the emic group. Another issue with ethnographic research is the idea of “going native.” Going native is becoming too involved in the community of study. Going native is

politically and theoretically limited and may result in [researchers] simply producing a collection of pretty butterflies, for other people to collate, theorize, and act on; rendering what [researchers] do as not much more than laboratory specimens for other disciplines and their theoretical suppositions.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, ethnographers may fail to contribute anything new to the academic discussion of the subject themselves. The possible lines of inquiry when using the ethnographic approach are infinite, whereas the ability to observe and report is finite. Because of the limitations of the human condition, ethnographers must judge where and how they can limit their observations and reports. In choosing on what to observe and report, the researcher is reflecting their own bias and risks failing to represent the subject of study adequately. The researcher may ignore key elements an experience while over-emphasizing the importance of another.

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<sup>40</sup> Oliver Frieberger, “Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion,” *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018): 38, DOI: 10.3390/rel9020038.

<sup>41</sup> Knott, “Insider/outsider perspectives,” 243-258.

<sup>42</sup> Alpa Shah, “Ethnography? Participant Observation a Potentially Revolutionary Praxis,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 54.

Despite ethnography's challenges and problems, ethnographies do go some distance to overcoming the split between etic and emic perspectives. For this thesis, I assume that serpent-handling ethnographies represent a more nuanced, accurate depiction of what is "really" happening in the serpent-handling sects than those found in, say, the productions of popular culture or the media. My thesis assumes that, at the very least, they provide first-hand accounts and narratives from practitioners, uncommonly found in popular and social media. By prioritizing ethnographic studies about the serpent-handling sects, I expect to find that representations of serpent-handling are, in comparison, plagued by narratives informed by a mix of primitivism and secularism; the serpent-handling sects are an 'internal other' for the mainstream, dominant culture.

# **Chapter 1: The Cultural and Historical Contexts of America's Serpent-Handling Churches**

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I describe the cultural and historical contexts of the serpent-handling sects. I provide a brief history of the Pentecostal movement, which led to the development of the serpent-handling sects. I discuss the beliefs and practices shared among the serpent-handling sects and describe a typical serpent-handling service followed by the effects of snake bites on the human body.

Serpent-handling sects belong to the Pentecostal Holiness Movement, which originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ritualized handling of snakes did not begin until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While there is some debate about its origins, serpent-handling is mostly accredited to George Went Hensley. Hensley preached serpent-handling across the southern United States and is responsible for the wide-spread adoption of the ritual. Serpent-handling churches are found mostly in the Appalachian Mountain region of the United States. Appalachia has a unique cultural tradition and history that distinguishes it within the broader American culture. Against this background, I will present some emic understanding of the serpent-handling sects.

## **Serpent Handling Sects**

Serpent-handling is most commonly found in subsets of the Pentecostal Holiness Movement, particularly within the Church of God, the Church of God of Prophecy, and the Church of God with Signs Following denominations. The Holiness movement grew

out of a dissatisfaction with 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodism's lack of commitment to the notion of "Christian Perfection" or "sanctification." Followers of the Holiness movement understand Christian Perfection as the pursuit of a pious life "through careful self-examination, godly discipline, and methodical devotion and avoidance of worldly pleasures."<sup>43</sup> To cultivate Christian Perfection, followers of the Holiness movement, including the serpent-handling sects, follow strict ascetic moral codes because they believe modern, secular society to "corrupt and utterly beyond redemption."<sup>44</sup> For example, women do not cut their hair and only wear long skirts while men keep their hair cropped, are cleanly shaven, and wear long-sleeved shirts.<sup>45</sup> Most believers abstain from smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol, tea, and coffee, dancing, taking physician-prescribed medication, and some have refused to enter ice-cream parlours.<sup>46</sup> Members of serpent-handling sects view themselves as being distinct from modern, secular society saying that "we are *in* the world but not *of* it."<sup>47</sup>

There are roughly 125 serpent-handling sects scattered across the United States of America, mostly found in the Appalachian Mountain region.<sup>48</sup> The exact origin of the serpent-handling ritual is the subject of debate among scholars.<sup>49</sup> Most commonly, scholars believe that George Went Hensley of the Church of God is responsible for the

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<sup>43</sup> Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Steven M. Kane, "Ritual Possession in a Southern Appalachian Religious Sect," *The Journal of American Folklore* 87, no. 346 (1974): 294.

<sup>45</sup> Gray-Hildenbrand, "The Appalachian 'Other'," 53; Julia C Dunn, *In the House of the Serpent Handler* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Steven M. Kane, "Holy Ghost People: The Snake-Handlers of Southern Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 1, no. 4 (1974): 256, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40931991>.

<sup>47</sup> Kane, "Ritual Possession," 294.

<sup>48</sup> Gray-Hildenbrand, "The Appalachian 'Other'," 48.

<sup>49</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 39.

origin of the practice having ritualized the religious handling of serpents during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>50</sup> Some scholars suggest that the handling of serpents was a folk tradition that was already widely practiced even before the emergence of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> Some Native American tribes (Cherokee, Navajo) have ceremonies that use snakes, and these may have also influenced the adoption of snake handling among white Pentecostals.

### **George Went Hensley**

In 1908 a Holiness-Pentecostal revival group of the Church of God constructed a church in Owl Hollow, Tennessee. Having been inspired after reading the story of Nicodemus in John 3, Homer Tomlinson, son of A. J. Tomlinson, called those who sought to be saved, sanctified and baptized with the holy spirit to come to the altar.<sup>52</sup> Hensley and four other men obliged. After his experience at the Owl Hollow church, Hensley adopted a moral code in which “he willingly forsook tobacco, moonshining, and “worldly” friendships and fully embraced the Holiness-Pentecostal doctrine and zealous ways of godly life it stressed.”<sup>53</sup> Soon, Hensley became troubled by the lack of adherence to all of the signs depicted in Mark 16:17-18. Speaking in tongues, casting out devils and healing were commonly accepted and practiced. Serpent-handling, however, was not. Hensley climbed the nearby White Oak Mountain, where he prayed to relieve his spiritual distress. While on the mountain, Hensley was confronted with a rattlesnake. From this

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 43.



encounter, Hensley resolved that the manifestations of the signs in Mark 16:17-18 are commands. Obedience to the commands is required to reach eternal salvation. Hensley descended the mountain grasping the rattlesnake. Some days later, Hensley began evangelizing his community in Grasshopper Valley, Tennessee.

Hensley preached the adherence to all signs presented in Mark 16:17-18. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of his early evangelization, but it likely took place between 1908 and 1914.<sup>54</sup> Hensley preached, with minimal success, in Grasshopper Valley in community churches, brush arbours, and homes.<sup>55</sup> In 1912, he officially joined the Church of God sect. Between 1912 and 1914, Hensley attracted the attention of the Church of God leaders and the attention of the media. Hensley and Bishop M. S. Hayes held a revival meeting in the South Cleveland Church of God, which was featured in the Cleveland Herald in September of 1914.<sup>56</sup> Skeptics challenged Hensley to fulfil his claims of protection while handling serpents. Hensley and his followers obliged, successfully handling the serpents.

Impressed, Tomlinson gave Hensley and G. T. Brouayer, the Tennessee State Overseer, space to preach outside at the next General Assembly of the Church of God. By the time of the General Assembly of the Church of God, Hensley had been mentioned by name five times in the Church of God's official publication, *Evangel*.<sup>57</sup> *Evangel* mentioned serpent-handling itself in at least 25 articles.<sup>58</sup> After this event, Hensley had

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

been mentioned at least four more times in the publication while he was involved with the church. Hensley received his licence as a Church of God minister on Christmas Day, 1915.

Hensley was only a member of the Church of God for ten years before leaving the church in 1922. Hensley resigned from his role as minister and left the church due to family issues. Hensley gave up his moral code returning to his pre-serpent-handling lifestyle and grew estranged from his wife, Amanda Winniger and their seven children. In 1923, only one year after leaving the church, Hensley was arrested for moonshining and was sentenced to time in a county workhouse near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Hensley fled custody while on an errand and escaped to his sister's home in Ohio.<sup>59</sup> Soon after, Hensley rediscovered his faith and resumed "preaching, holding revivals, and faith healing."<sup>60</sup>

Hensley divorced his estranged wife and remarried to Irene Klunzinger. Hensley moved to Pineville, Kentucky, where he began the East Pineville Church of God and served as pastor. After this point, Hensley proselytized throughout the Appalachian states with great success. One noteworthy sermon that Hensley held in a tent in Bartow, Florida, attracted a crowd of seven hundred people.<sup>61</sup> The group included the faithful, skeptics, journalists and photographers.<sup>62</sup> Swayed by his charisma, scores of people joined Hensley's movement taking up serpents. Some of these converts took up serpents, were bitten and died from their injuries.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas G. Burton, *Serpent-handling Believers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 44.

<sup>61</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them that believe*, 46.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

One of these unfortunate converts was Alfred Weaver, aged 27. Weaver was bitten during one of Hensley's services and died after refusing medical attention. As Weaver lay dying, Hensley guaranteed that the young man would survive.<sup>63</sup> The coroner's jury decided within minutes that Hensley's "personal carelessness" was the cause of Weaver's death.<sup>64</sup> After this incident, the town of Bartow enacted a town ordinance that prohibited the practice of handling serpents. The town's ordinance was the first among many regulations prohibiting or limiting the handling of serpents and was the beginning of serpent-handlers' difficulties with the law. With this incident, Hensley left Florida.

Hensley spent most of his time on the road evangelizing in Appalachia rather than working to procure an income to support his family. As a result of his failure to provide for his family, Hensley and Irene separated in 1941. The family reconciled the following year but dissolved again shortly after. When Irene died in 1944, Hensley paid her his final respects and had no further contact with their four children.<sup>65</sup>

Before Irene's death, but after their separation, Hensley returned to Grasshopper Valley region to preach serpent-handling. He was initially unsuccessful. Serpent-handling had fallen out of favour, and Holiness believers were wary of Hensley given his "suspicious family history."<sup>66</sup> When the charismatic Raymond Hayes came to Grasshopper Valley, in 1943, he and Hensley managed to rekindle the faith in the serpent-handling practice. Hensley and Hayes established the Dolly Pond Church of God with

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 48.

Signs Following. Weekend services at the church were filled to capacity.<sup>67</sup> A wave of believers' deaths in 1945 caused local opposition to serpent-handling to grow.<sup>68</sup> The public opposition is partly responsible for the prohibition of handling serpents by the state of Tennessee.

Despite the anti-serpent-handling legislation, Hensley continued his evangelical mission, and believers continued to handle serpents. Hensley remarried for a third time to Inez Riggs Hutcherson. Their marriage only lasted six months before it dissolved as Hensley was not the man Inez thought he was.<sup>69</sup> In 1951, Hensley married a fourth and final time to Sally Moore Norman, who joined him in preaching throughout the South Eastern region of Appalachia. The couple moved to Albany in Georgia and held meetings on both sides of the Georgia, Florida border.

Hensley held his final meeting in Altha, Florida. On July 24, 1955, a five-foot rattlesnake was brought to their meeting. Serpents had not been handled for the three weeks leading up to this particular service. Hensley handled the giant rattlesnake for a few minutes before it struck him on the wrist. Reportedly, Hensley said, "The snake would not have struck- if fear had not come over someone here."<sup>70</sup> Within hours of the bite, at 75 years of age, Hensley was dead. Hensley was said to have been bitten 446 times by serpents.<sup>71</sup> The final bite he received was ruled a suicide by the Calhoun County Sheriff.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Burton, *Serpent-handling Believers*, 57.

<sup>71</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Burton, *Serpent-handling Believers*, 57.

The origin of the serpent-handling ritual and George Hensley is not well known by many modern serpent-handlers.<sup>73</sup> Serpent-handling sects do not belong to a single, unified group under one central authority; instead, the sects tend to operate independently of each other.<sup>74</sup> Many of the serpent-handling sects are unaware of just how far-reaching the serpent-handling practice is across the United States of America.<sup>75</sup>

### **Geographic location and demographic of serpent-handlers**

The serpent-handling practice is mostly found in rural Appalachia, which is a region in the eastern United States. The Appalachian region is comprised of 13 states, 420 counties and is home to over 25 million people. The area follows the Appalachian Mountains starting in southern New York, extending over 1000 miles into northern Mississippi. The 13 Appalachian states are Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, a partnership of federal, state, and municipal governments for regional economic development, 42% of the Appalachian population lives in rural areas compared to the national average of 20%.<sup>76</sup>

Appalachia has a distinct cultural environment, complete with unique traditions and folklore. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Appalachian religion has blended various traditions,

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<sup>73</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 49.

<sup>74</sup> David G. Bromley, "On Spiritual Edgework: The Logic of Extreme Ritual Performances," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 3 (2007): 298, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00359.x.

<sup>75</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 259.

<sup>76</sup> "The Appalachian Region," Appalachian Regional Commission, accessed January 27, 2020, [https://www.arc.gov/appalachian\\_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp](https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp).

adapting them to meet the challenges of the demanding terrain. Religion in Appalachia “came to depend on a mysticism-oriented religion, rooted in heartfelt conversion, that equipped them for the emotional demands of challenging mountain life.”<sup>77</sup> Residents of Appalachia express a robust, regionally shaped cultural identity (much like Newfoundlanders, in Canada).

In the early days of serpent-handling, residents of Appalachia were predominantly of Scotch-Irish and English heritage.<sup>78</sup> Serpent-handlers made their livings through manual labour as the predominant industries were mining, forestry, agriculture, heavy and chemical industries. Typical jobs were small scale farmers, factory or mill workers and coal miners.<sup>79</sup> Their socio-economic status was low, as was their level of education. Poverty was rampant. In 1960, the regional poverty rate of Appalachia was 31%.<sup>80</sup> Of the 420 counties in the region, 295 were “high-poverty” counties where the poverty-rate was one and a half times the national average.<sup>81</sup>

Pentecostals and members of the serpent-handling sub-sects are said to “mirror their local culture.”<sup>82</sup> In more recent years, the socio-economic and education levels of the serpent-handlers are more disparate, reflecting the socio-economic statuses of the general population of the location. Some serpent-handlers remain poor and uneducated while others have completed post-secondary degrees and have amassed enormous wealth.<sup>83</sup> Between the years of 2013 and 2017, the rate of poverty in Appalachia fell to

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<sup>77</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Kane, “Holy Ghost People,” 255.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission, “The Appalachian Region.”

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 19.

<sup>83</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 20.

16.3% and 98 counties were considered to be “high-poverty” counties. In addition to the previously mentioned industries, manufacturing and professional service industries have also become regional staples. The Appalachian region is diverse; some states and counties are economically diverse, while others are not.

### **Beliefs and Practices**

The serpent-handling sects are biblical literalists, believing the King James Version of the Bible to be the infallible, literal word of God.<sup>84</sup> Devotional adherence to what is written in the KJV in terms of the law and accounts of the apostles is believed, by the faithful, to promise salvation, protection, and order.<sup>85</sup> It is through a literalist lens that the serpent-handling ritual is justified.

While there are several biblical passages that the serpent-handlers say support and even demand the practice, Mark 16:17-18 is the single most cited passage used to justify the ritual practice of handling serpents. Mark 16:17-18 reads

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Mark 16:17-18 discusses the various signs that accompany Jesus’ apostles. This passage is seen as prescriptive by believers of the serpent-handling tradition due to the imperative “shall.” Therefore, practicing the signs of casting out devils, speaking in new tongues,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

taking up serpents, and healing the sick are all crucial aspects of the religious practice of the serpent-handling sects. The only section of this passage that is open to debate revolves around the drinking of deadly things. Not all serpent-handling sects ritually drink poison. Due to the conditional “if” clause, the drinking of poison is not a command and therefore, not all serpent-handling sects interpret drinking poison as being required for their practice.

Further justification for the serpent-handling practice is found in the Book of Acts 28:3-5:

And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.

The apostle Paul was not harmed by the viper’s bite, which strengthens the serpent-handlers’ belief that they will be unharmed or protected when they take up serpents in a religious context. Believers also quote Luke 10:19, “behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you” to show that when someone is anointed, they are safe from danger.

The most crucial spiritual goal of these serpent-handling sects is to receive several “gifts,” which are given to believers by the Holy Ghost through a process of “anointing.”<sup>86</sup> Serpent-handlers believe that during anointing, the Holy Spirit descends upon and takes control of the individual. It is the Holy Spirit that allows the ritual

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.



participants to carry out divine mandates, such as taking up serpents. These gifts are considered by believers to be the very proof of their salvation. Believers who display one or more of the gifts are considered to have “the power,” which grants the believer enormous, albeit unintentional, prestige and respect within their community.<sup>87</sup> The outward demonstration of the gifts is seen as evidence of the person’s internal, spiritual devotion. Some of the desired gifts include the ability to lay hands to cure the sick, to speak and interpret “unknown tongues,” to prophesize, to exorcise demons, to drink poison, to handle venomous snakes or even fire; the signs depicted in the book of Mark 16:17-18.<sup>88</sup>

The beliefs and practices of modern serpent-handling sects are vastly different from typical modern Pentecostalism. Serpent-handling today resembles more closely the Pentecostalism of the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>89</sup>

## **History**

Pentecostalism grew out of John Wesley’s Methodism, which was in turn a response to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, and a general dissatisfaction with the spiritual and moral state of the church. Contrary to Calvinism’s belief that only the elect could be saved, Methodism accepted that salvation could be open to anyone.

Foundational to Wesley’s theology were two defining experiences. First, a person must experience salvation in which the believer or convert confesses their sins to gain

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 20.

forgiveness and justification before God. After the initial experience, the believer is justified but maintains their sinful “Adamic” nature. Second, the believer must purge their sinful nature through sanctification, sometimes known as “second blessing,” or “holiness.”<sup>90</sup> Wesley believed “this second blessing was not a deliverance from temptation and human failures but an instant transformation of inner motives-- a change in personal desires from pleasing the flesh to pleasing God.”<sup>91</sup> Therefore, sanctification was the pursuit of a pious life “through careful self-examination, godly discipline, and methodical devotion and avoidance of worldly pleasures,”<sup>92</sup> and leading a life without “willful transgression of a known law of God.”<sup>93</sup> This pursuit of sanctification is what is known as “Christian perfection.” Wesley’s version of Methodism grew in popularity, particularly in the areas known for their rampant debauchery.

Settlers in America wanted to free themselves of the Anglican Church’s influence. Settlers often blamed the depraved conditions in the colonies on the Anglican Church due to a perceived lack of moral convictions and failure to supply opportunity for personal religious experiences.<sup>94</sup> As Hood and Williamson say, “The early pioneers had need of a rugged, emotional religion to suit the challenges of a rugged, emotional life in the wilderness.”<sup>95</sup> The heightened levels of emotion in early Methodism were antithetical to the less embodied and emotionally reserved style of high church religions. The Holiness movement was born out of a dissatisfaction with Methodism’s tempering or lack of

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<sup>90</sup> Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 23.

<sup>92</sup> Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 23.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

commitment to Wesley's rigorously embodied notion of Christian Perfection.

Theologically, the Holiness movement subscribed to a pre-millennialist doctrine which believed in the literal, imminent return of Jesus and the rapture before the period of God's judgement of Earth.

The origins of Pentecostalism are traced to the Azusa Street revival, which occurred in Los Angeles in 1906. The Azusa Street revival promoted egalitarianism, ethical restoration in which discrimination based on race, education, socio-economic status and gender were ignored during worship allowing for ecstatic, spontaneous religious experiences.<sup>96</sup> In April 1906, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the Azusa Street revival. The article, which described the "frenzy and religious zeal" of the revival's supporters, included the revelation of one supporter. The supporter claimed, "In his vision, he saw the people of Los Angeles 'flocking in a mighty stream to perdition.' He then prophesied, "an awful destruction to this city unless its citizens are brought to a belief in the tenets of the new faith."<sup>97</sup> Soon after the story's publishing, on April 19, 1906, San Francisco and the West Coast of the United States experienced a catastrophic earthquake. The earthquake was perceived by the religious as divine providence, which then helped legitimize the Azusa Street revival as preparation for the imminent apocalypse.

Concurrent to the Azusa Street revival, the Church of God was in its infancy. The Church of God grew out of the Holiness revival of Camp Creek, North Carolina of 1895.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>97</sup> Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, 97.

In Appalachia and the greater southeast, Pentecostalism with ecstasy and spontaneity in worship was considered to be a direct experience of God. A third blessing of baptism with “fire” was adopted to Wesley’s theology. Those who experienced the third blessing would “shout, scream, speak in other tongues, fall into trances, receive the holy dance and holy laugh, and even get the ‘jerks.’”<sup>98</sup> While some joined the evolving movement, others responded with hostility and criticism. For instance, a popular log church in Camp Creek was dismantled and destroyed.<sup>99</sup> When believers moved to private homes, the homes of supporters were burned.<sup>100</sup>

On May 15, 1902, Richard G. Spurling Jr. organized his congregation as “the Holiness Church at Camp Creek” to protect against persecution. One year later, the charismatic A. J. Tomlinson, a salesman with the American Bible Society, joined and became pastor of the Holiness Church at Camp Creek the day he joined, June 13, 1903.<sup>101</sup> While some congregants experienced glossolalia, the Church of God did not accept speaking in tongues as “the doctrinal sign of the Holy Ghost baptism or possession” until after the 1906 Azusa Street revival.<sup>102</sup> In January of 1908, Tomlinson experienced baptism with tongues, and the “Holy Ghost baptism, uniquely evidenced by glossolalia, became widely preached in the Church of God.”<sup>103</sup> In the years to follow, thousands of people converted, experienced sanctification and were “filled with the Pentecostal

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<sup>98</sup> Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition*, 52.

<sup>99</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 31.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

blessing, and joined to the church.”<sup>104</sup> Despite the wide acceptance of baptism with tongues, it was not until 1911 that the Church of God officially accepted the practice.<sup>105</sup>

### **Church-sect-cult Typology**

Typology refers to the classification of social phenomena based on their organizational structure, acceptance of and adherence to the prevailing social order, and mode of recruitment.<sup>106</sup> In my thesis, I use the terms “church” and “sect” interchangeably; however, there is a standard sociological distinction between “church” and “sect.” The original sociological concept of “church” was developed by Max Webber (*The Sociology of Religion*, 1922) and Ernst Troeltsch (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 1912).<sup>107</sup> They argued that the “church” type attempts to welcome all members of a society, is a bureaucratic organization with a formalized orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and priesthood.<sup>108</sup> The church type recruits members through socialization as opposed to evangelical conversion. According to John Scott, a church “is in political terms accommodated to the state and in social terms predominantly conservative in its beliefs and social standing.”<sup>109</sup> The church type accepts, works with or accommodates the social order. A sect is informally organized, recruits members through evangelical conversion

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>105</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> John Scott, "taxonomy," in *A Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.001.0001/acref-9780199683581-e-2329>.

<sup>107</sup> John Scott, "sect," in *A Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199683581.001.0001/acref-9780199683581-e-2040>.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

and “adopts a radical stance towards the state and society.”<sup>110</sup> Serpent-handling churches are a sect due to their informal structure (e.g., lack of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and centralized leadership), recruitment through evangelical conversion, and their rejection of society (e.g., “we are *in* the world but not *of* it.”<sup>111</sup>).

As mentioned previously, there is no “orthodox” serpent-handling sect, they are independent of each other, and specific beliefs vary while core beliefs and practices remain the same or similar. Generally speaking, the serpent-handling sects all practice each of the signs represented in Mark 16:17-18. Another core element of the serpent-handling sects is some form of a charismatic leader. The serpent-handling sects are millennialists believing in the imminent return of Jesus.

Serpent handling was popular among Pentecostals and Holiness sects through the 1920s and 1930s, but the practice was mostly abandoned by the 1950s.<sup>112</sup> Currently, the serpent-handling churches are considered by the Holiness and Church of God movements to be “renegade churches” despite their early acceptance and even promotion of the ritual practice.<sup>113</sup> As the Church of God’s desire to be recognized as a legitimate, viable denomination of Pentecostalism grew, the practice of handling snakes as a religious ritual became increasingly unpopular since religious rituals involving the risk of bodily harm were (and remain) unacceptable in mainstream American culture.<sup>114</sup> The “orthodox” groups claim that the practice of handling serpents is based on an “erroneous

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Kane, “Ritual Possession,” 294.

<sup>112</sup> Bromley, “On Spiritual Edgework,” 292.

<sup>113</sup> Hood and Williamson, 13.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Silver, Ralph Hood, and W. Williamson. “The Differential Evaluation of Religious Risk Rituals Involving Serpents in Two Cultures,” *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellonskiego Studia Religiologica* 46, no. 1 (2013): 9.

interpretation of scripture.”<sup>115</sup> Currently, the mainstream Church of God’s understanding of the section of Mark 16:17-18 that discusses the handling of snakes is understood as being conditional, as is the part discussing drinking poison, while still claiming to be literalists. Other Pentecostal sects focus on and practice the signs in Mark 16:17-18, such as speaking in tongues and laying of hands to heal the sick but ignore the imperative to take up serpents.<sup>116</sup> Mainstream Pentecostal sects and theologians take issue with the translation from Greek of “take up.” They say that the original word, *airo*, means “take up, remove, take away, destroy, put away, do away with, kill,” and therefore, there is no command to handle snakes.<sup>117</sup>

### **The Serpent-Handling Ritual**

At least once or twice a week, but often more, members of serpent-handling sects will gather to hold their religious service. Boxes filled with rattlesnakes, copperheads, cottonmouths, and pit-vipers are placed at the front of the church. The snakes are typically caught locally, but sometimes a non-local species will be procured for the purpose of the service.

In some serpent-handling churches, a small vial of poison is provided for the believers to drink. As mentioned previously, not all serpent-handling churches have a bottle of poison, but in those that do, strychnine (a potent pesticide used to kill small birds and rodents) is the poison of choice.<sup>118</sup> The service begins with the pastor welcoming his

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<sup>115</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 258.

<sup>116</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 14.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

congregation. Musicians play hymns on guitars and drums with parishioners singing, clapping and stamping their feet along to the rhythm. Some worshippers begin to cry, pray, shudder or speak in tongues. A believer approaches the wooden box and removes a snake, holding it aloft, draping it around their shoulders or simply holding it in their hands. Both men and women participate in the serpent-handling ritual. The serpent-handling ritual itself only lasts for a few minutes of a multi-hour-long service.<sup>119</sup> The serpent-handling ritual does not happen every service, nor does everyone in the congregation participate. The serpent-handling ritual is dependant on members of the congregation reaching an “anointed” status. If none of the congregation is anointed, the ritual will not happen.

The ritual itself is not a test of devotion but has been described as a declaration of faith.

### **The Snakes, the Biochemistry of their Venom and their Effects**

The most common snakes used in the serpent-handling ritual are typically rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths, and pit-vipers. The snakes used during the serpent-handling ritual are venomous, which means that they present a real danger to anyone who is bitten.

There are two types of venom found in snakes: hemotoxic venom and neurotoxic venom. Hemotoxic venom attacks the blood, prevents it from clotting, and destroys blood

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<sup>119</sup> Kane, “Holy Ghost People,” 256.



vessels.<sup>120</sup> Neurotoxic venom attacks the nervous system, paralyzing the muscles involved in the respiratory and cardiovascular functions of the body.<sup>121</sup> Both hemotoxic and neurotoxic venoms are found in the snakes handled by the serpent-handling sects. A snake's venom is used to help incapacitate and/or kill its prey. While a snake's prey is typically much smaller than a human being, the venom still has the potential to cause severe damage to the human body. Those who have been bitten and suffered envenomation (when venom is injected into the body), experience swelling and immense pain at the site of the wound. The venom causes cell membranes to break down, and the victim's immune system is flooded with histamines and bradykinin, polypeptide hormones that dilute blood vessels of injured tissue.<sup>122</sup> Fluids, blood, and plasma collect at the site of the wound because of the disintegration of lymphatic vessels and cellular membranes.<sup>123</sup> Excruciating pain is often followed by acute necrosis or tissue death. Other effects of snake venom are severe headaches, nausea, impaired locomotion, visual and auditory functions, and abdominal cramping.<sup>124</sup> The severity of the bite depends on a variety of factors; for instance, a bite on the hand will be less severe than a bite on the face.<sup>125</sup> If left untreated, a bite from a venomous snake can be lethal. Despite the risk associated with bites from venomous snakes, few believers have lost their lives. As of 2013, there have been only 92 recorded deaths since the 1920s attributed to snake bites during religious services.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 76.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>126</sup> Silver, Hood, and Williamson, "Differential Evaluation," 10.

It is hard to accurately judge if these statistics represent mortality in ritual serpent-handling because persecution from outsiders has forced many serpent-handling churches underground.<sup>127</sup>

### **Emic Understanding**

The ability to handle snakes is seen as a gift from God bestowed by the Holy Spirit, and as such, handling a snake during the religious service is an inherently positive experience. After successfully completing the ritual, some believers report feelings of empowerment, control, peacefulness, energy, joy, humbleness, physical numbness, and others describe experiencing a “haze” or a bright light.<sup>128</sup> Whether the ritual actor was bitten or not during the ritual is mostly irrelevant for *some* serpent-handling sects because, for the brief period in which the ritual actor had the snake in their hands, they were sanctified. In some groups, the very ability to hold a snake is taken as proof of that person’s spiritual prowess.

For some serpent-handlers, the complications that arise from being bitten during the ritual show that the Holy Spirit was not present with the ritual goer when they went to pick up the snake. Some groups believe that if someone is injured in their attempt to handle snakes, it means that they acted egotistically rather than spiritually, while others believe that the injured party did not have enough faith.<sup>129</sup> Still, others believe that the person may have had enough faith, but witchcraft can “zap” the Holy Spirit’s anointing

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<sup>127</sup> Gray-Hildenbrand, "The Appalachian ‘Other’,” 48.

<sup>128</sup> Bromley, "On Spiritual Edgework," 294.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 299.

“off” the person.<sup>130</sup> During doctoral fieldwork conducted by Steven Kane, an interviewee said that “if no one ever got bit, what kind of sign would serpent handling be? The Lord sometimes lets the snakes bite to show unbelievers we don’t pull their teeth out or milk the poison out of them.”<sup>131</sup> Those unlucky enough to not have enough faith demonstrate the real threat that is snake venom while also reinforcing the spiritual superiority of those who handle without consequence. The exact understanding of why the person was bitten varies from church to church, but what remains consistent is that the devotion and spiritual prestige of those who successfully handle snakes is never questioned. Failures may even reinforce the esteem awarded to those who successfully handle snakes without being bitten and that the positive interpretation of the event reifies both group and individual identity and cultural understanding.

If someone is bitten during the serpent-handling ritual, regardless of the final judgement of the bite, the community rallies together in support of the injured person in lieu of seeking medical care from a physician. The injured person receives immediate and continued prayers from the congregation as well as personal contact and support until the person has either recovered or died.<sup>132</sup>

During the mid-1920s, reports of deaths by snakebite in religious settings began to surface. The media sensationalized the serpent-handling sects, choosing to only report on the injuries and deaths linked to the serpent-handling ritual practices. The media circulated the notion that the ritualized handling of snakes is “a bizarre practice initiated

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 300.

<sup>131</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 260.

<sup>132</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 71.

by a deviant sectarian group within the Church of God, and that it is abnormal enough to require an explanation for why it persists in Appalachia.”<sup>133</sup> For instance, the media caught wind of a six-year-old little girl who was bitten during a religious service.<sup>134</sup> It was reported that the little girl had died, fanning flames of hatred, sensationalism, and intolerance. The little girl, who was the pastor’s daughter, was indeed bitten but did not die from her injury. The little girl made a full recovery from the bite she received.<sup>135</sup> The media misrepresented the purpose of the serpent-handling ritual, claiming it to be a test of faith, rather than a demonstration or proclamation of faith. Early media discussion opened the serpent-handling sects up to wide-spread scrutiny, having perpetuated stereotypes of serpent-handlers being uneducated hillbillies.

The reality television show *Snake Salvation* on National Geographic attempted to depict the serpent-handlers’ story from their point of view without judgement, to humanize them, and show how important their religion is in their daily lives. The television show followed serpent-handling pastors Jamie Coots and Andrew Hamblin and their way of life. The show’s producer, Matthew Testa, said that he is fascinated by the serpent-handling ritual because “it’s such an extreme gesture of faith.”<sup>136</sup> *Snake Salvation* ended with an episode in which Jamie Coots was encouraging his son to take over his church, the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name, should anything happen to him. Shortly after this episode concluded, Coots was bitten by a rattlesnake during one of his

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> John Burnett, “Snake-Handling Preacher Opens Up About ‘Takin’ Up Serpents,” *NPR*, October 4, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/10/04/226838383/snake-handling-preachers-open-up-about-takin-up-serpents>.

sermons. Coots succumbed to the bite and died February 15, 2014, at the age of 43 years old. Coots' death rekindled media interest in serpent-handling.

## **Chapter 2: Scholars and Legislators on Serpent Handling Sects**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss two kinds of external “authorities” on serpent-handlers, scholars and legislators. My aim here is to outline several prominent stereotypes presented by this sort of literature. Scholarship conducted before the 1980s perpetuated primitivist stereotypes of serpent-handlers being mentally ill or suffering from maladaptive behaviours. After the 1980s and the rise of the insider/outsider debate, scholars focused on ethically representing the emic experience rather than imposing their assumptions and biases in efforts to explain the experiences of the serpent-handlers. Scholars working after the 1980s have critiqued the early work conducted on serpent-handling sects.

### **The Major Scholarly Works on Serpent-Handling Sects**

#### **La Barre’s Analysis**

The academic study of the serpent-handling sects began in the mid-twentieth century. Psychologists and sociologists were among the first academics to study the serpent-handlers.<sup>137</sup> Drawn to the sects due to their deviation from normative religious practice, early scholars pathologized the serpent-handling tradition, focusing on their mental health and social status. Using Freudian Psychoanalysis, the anthropologist

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<sup>137</sup> Gray-Hildenbrand, “*The Appalachian ‘Other’*,” 48.

Weston La Barre decided that the practice of handling serpents was “not an intellectual (cognitive) *deficit* but an emotional (affective) *misgrowth*.”<sup>138</sup> According to La Barre, the serpents represented unacknowledged desires or evil and phallic imagery, and he reduced the practice of handling serpents to an unrefined attempt of remedying repressed personal feelings. La Barre presents the serpent-handlers as lacking a “higher degree of sophisticated self-awareness,” which is the result of their “sadly neurotic and archaic and unhappy culture.”<sup>139</sup> He accuses the serpent-handlers of not having “any knowledge of who they are, what they are like, and what they are really doing.”<sup>140</sup>

In his analysis of the serpent-handling sects, La Barre places himself and his readers in a position of superiority over the subjects. La Barre’s interpretations have been rightly criticized for being reductive and oversimplifying both Appalachian culture and the serpent-handling sects.<sup>141</sup> La Barre’s primitivism is not uncommon when studying rituals that deviate from normative religion.

### **Gray-Hildenbrand’s “Appalachian Other”**

As Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand reports, some scholars of the serpent-handling traditions such as Nathan Gerrard, suggest that the practice is a form of compensation for low-socioeconomic status.<sup>142</sup> Scholars who offer compensatory interpretations of the

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<sup>138</sup> Weston La Barre, *They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-handling Cult* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 137-138.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Gray- Hildenbrand, “*The Appalachian ‘Other’*,” 49.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

serpent-handling rituals suggest that “social and cultural position determines the type of religious practice an individual finds fulfilling.”<sup>143</sup> Gray-Hildenbrand says that the compensatory approach results in the scholar suggesting that serpent-handlers participate in dangerous religious rituals as a way to cope with their social and socioeconomic struggles as opposed to emotional maladaptation.<sup>144</sup> This compensatory approach places the serpent-handling sects, once again, outside of normative religion and offers a reductive explanation for why people do the things that they do and believe the things that they believe.

While it is not pathologizing in nature, the compensatory approach also relies on and perpetuates negative stereotypes and assumptions about the serpent-handling. The compensatory approach focuses, in particular, on the socioeconomic and birth statuses.<sup>145</sup> The line between “us” and “them” in the compensatory approach hinges on socioeconomic circumstances. In this case, serpent-handling is seen as a way of dealing with social issues of poverty and underemployment. This compensatory approach evokes images of “white trash,” poor, uneducated hillbillies with missing teeth who make poor life choices.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.



## The Turn to Emic Experience

According to the religious scholar Robert Orsi, theorizing about “religion” has embedded moral assumptions within it.<sup>146</sup> Scholars of religion are called to determine what is “good religion” and what is “bad religion.” The history of the academic study of the serpent-handling sects shows implicit bias, morality and qualifying of good and bad religion among scholars. Religious serpent-handling is often deemed to be “bad religion.”

Orsi writes:

the tools that scholars of religion use to make moral distinctions among different religious expressions were crafted over time in the charged political and intellectual circumstances within which the modern study of religion came to be, and before introducing or reintroducing moral questions into our approach to other people’s religious worlds, before we draw the lines between the pathological and the healthy, the bad and the good, we need to excavate our hidden moral and political history. Otherwise, the distinctions that we make will merely be the reiteration of unacknowledged assumptions, prejudices, and implications in power.<sup>147</sup>

Scholars of religion should deconstruct the political and moral assumptions which influence how they interpret religions before they draw conclusions, which simply reiterate implicit bias. Through the reiteration of implicit bias, scholars such as La Barre and Gerrard redefine the boundaries of normative society while creating an “other,” reifying an “us” in contrast to a “them.”

As discussed previously, I prioritize ethnographies of serpent-handlers, assuming that they provide reliable representations of serpent-handling sects and minimize the risk

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<sup>146</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 178.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

of furthering the distance between “us” and “them.” The ethnographies I rely on to inform my analysis were all published after the 1980s. I choose these ethnographies because, during the 1980s, scholars’ motivations and their contributions to knowledge began to be questioned.<sup>148</sup> With the rise of the insider/outsider debate, any researcher worth their salt adopted a more empathetic methodological approach when conducting ethnographies. Ethnographic researchers were challenged to balance emic and etic, objectivity and subjectivity, experience-near and experience-distant, empathy and critical analysis, and perspective and reflexivity.<sup>149</sup> Modern ethnographies are careful to bridge gaps between cultures and do not rely on primitivist interpretations.

Ethnographic scholarship studying the serpent-handling sects after the 1980s tend to distance itself from the primitivist and othering approaches undertaken by earlier scholars. Without abrogating much critique, scholars such as Ralph Hood Jr., W. Paul Williamson, Steven M. Kane, and David Kimbrough favour ethnographic methods that prioritize representing emic understandings and allow for the individuals being studied to speak for themselves.

Ralph Hood Jr. is a professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga. Hood specializes in the psychology of religion, philosophical psychology and religious serpent-handling. Hood has worked extensively with serpent-handling churches and has authored, co-authored and edited several peer-reviewed articles and books on the subject. Hood collaborated with W. Paul Williamson to write *Them That*

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<sup>148</sup> Knott, “Insider/outsider perspectives,” 243.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

*Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition. Them That Believe* is one of the main sources that informed this thesis.

W. Paul Williamson is a psychology professor at Henderson State University. Before pursuing his doctoral degree, Williamson was a full-time clergy for 17 years in a Pentecostal denomination.<sup>150</sup> Williamson studies the psychology of religion with interests in mysticism, religious fundamentalism, serpent-handling sects and spiritual transformation.

Together, Hood and Williamson spent years developing a comprehensive data-base of the serpent-handling sect. At the time *Them That Believe* was published, the data-base, the Hood-Williamson Research Archives for the Holiness Serpent Handling Sects of Appalachia, consisted of DVD and VHS footage of interviews with serpent-handlers, complete unedited services, the rise and fall of individual churches, and individual testimonies.<sup>151</sup> In developing their data-base, Hood and Williamson expanded their understanding of the serpent-handling sects which they share with curious audiences in their book, *Them That Believe*.

David Kimbrough is an independent researcher with a PhD in history from Indiana University. Kimbrough obtained his data through participant-observation, where he gathered oral histories of the serpent-handling tradition. Similarly, Steven Kane is also an independent researcher but has since left academia. Now, he is a pastoral counsellor. The works of these two scholars provide rich narratives that meticulously document

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<sup>150</sup> “Paul Williamson,” The Religious Studies Project, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/persons/paul-williamson/>.

<sup>151</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 10.

services, rituals, beliefs, and lifestyles without relying on stereotypes or sensationalism. The ethnographies of Kimbrough and Kane inform Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Both Kimbrough and Kane quote serpent-handlers themselves and refrain from making grand generalizations or judgements about the serpent-handlers. These scholars commit to providing ethical representations of the serpent-handling sects.

Scholarly agendas, attitudes towards and representations of serpent-handlers have shifted. Where early presuppositions were justified, modern scholars seek to deconstruct their biases. Reflexive ethnographies have countered early scholars' efforts to explain the practice as deviancy and maladaptation. Now, researchers prioritize the emic voice and work to minimize or eliminate representing their own biases in their studies. The methodological approaches of the scholarship of the serpent-handlers have shifted. Gone are the days of armchair psychoanalysis conducted by academics.

### **Serpent-handling and the law**

The *Constitution of the United States of America*, ratified in 1788, delineates the supreme law of the United States. According to the White House, "A chief aim of the Constitution as drafted by the Convention was to create a government with enough power to act on a national level, but without so much power that fundamental rights would be at risk."<sup>152</sup> Religious belief is protected by the constitution of the United States of America, while religious practice is not.<sup>153</sup> In response to public outcry against injuries and deaths

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<sup>152</sup> "The Constitution," Our Government, The White House, accessed February 22, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/the-constitution/>.

<sup>153</sup> Silver, Hood, and Williamson, "Differential Evaluation," 8.

occurring in serpent handling, one after another, Appalachian states made serpent-handling illegal.

### **Overview of the history of legislation**

Serpent-handling religious Americans are free to believe whatever they wish without state interference. The same, however, cannot be said for how those religious beliefs are expressed as the Constitution of the United States of America protects religious beliefs but not necessarily practice.<sup>154</sup> American courts have ruled that religious behaviours can be regulated by the state “if they have an overriding interest.”<sup>155</sup> Protecting people from being maimed or killed during religious rituals overrides rights to religious freedom.

In response to public outcry against injuries and deaths occurring in serpent-handling sects, many Appalachian states made serpent-handling illegal.

The first law against serpent-handling itself was enacted in June, 1940, by the state of Kentucky after a man complained about his wife participating in the serpent-handling ritual. The legislation set out that “Any person who displays, handles or uses any kind of reptile in connection with any religious service or gathering shall be fined not less than fifty (\$50.00) nor more than one hundred dollars (\$100.00).”<sup>157</sup> Under this law, not only were the venomous snakes banned from being handled, but the law extended to ban lizards, turtles and any other animal classified as a reptile. Kentucky was the only state to make reference to a religious service or gathering, and by prohibiting handling reptiles in

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 14.

<sup>157</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 173.

religious settings, the implication was that handling reptiles in secular settings remained legal. Serpent-handlers interpreted Kentucky's law as being a violation of their constitutional right to religious freedom. Serpent-handlers challenged the law in the case of *Lawson v. Commonwealth*.<sup>158</sup> In its ruling, the appellate court affirmed the constitutional right of freedom of religion but not the right to freedom of practice.

Other states followed Kentucky's lead, prohibiting serpent-handling outright, but without making specific reference to religious settings. Georgia was second to ban the handling of snakes in 1941. Unlike most other states, Georgia made the handling of snakes a felony and, in April, 1949, prohibited the encouragement or incitement of anyone from holding a snake.<sup>159</sup> For many years, Georgia held the most severe punishment against serpent-handling. If anyone died as a result of handling snakes, the preacher responsible would be sentenced to death unless "the jury trying the case should recommend mercy."<sup>160</sup> In 1938 a preacher by the name of Warren Lipham was charged with murder and subsequently acquitted, as was Charlie Hall in 1960.<sup>161</sup> Georgia was unable to convict anyone under this law and eventually removed it during a rewriting of state code in 1968.<sup>162</sup> North Carolina adopted laws similar to those in Georgia.

North Carolina enacted its first anti-serpent-handling legislation in 1949, decreeing that

- (a) It shall be unlawful for any person to handle any reptile regulated under this Article in a manner that intentionally or negligently exposes another person to unsafe contact with the reptile.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Silver, Hood, Williamson, "Differential Evaluation," 10.

<sup>162</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 176.

(b) It shall be unlawful for any person to intentionally or negligently suggest, entice, invite, challenge, intimidate, exhort or otherwise induce or aid any person to handle or expose himself in an unsafe manner to any reptile regulated under this Article.<sup>163</sup>

Exposing others to unsafe contact with venomous reptiles, constricting snakes or crocodilians is illegal. Like in Georgia, inducing others to handle serpents is also a crime. Violation of any of the laws is considered a Class 2 misdemeanor. If someone other than the owner of the animal is injured, the owner is guilty of a Class A1 misdemeanor.<sup>164</sup> Assuming the individual has no prior convictions, a Class 2 misdemeanor carries the punishment of one to thirty days in prison and may include a fine of up to \$1,000.00.<sup>165</sup> Under the same circumstances, a Class A1 misdemeanor carries the punishment of one to sixty days in prison, and the amount of the fine is left to the court's discretion.<sup>166</sup> Since incitement to handle the dangerous animals is prohibited in North Carolina, as Hood and Williamson suggest, preaching from Mark 16:17-18 could be interpreted as being illegal.<sup>167</sup>

Tennessee proscribed the practice of handling serpents after several deaths occurred in one year, including the death of a pregnant woman and her baby, which was born prematurely soon after she was bitten.<sup>168</sup> Tennessee's law, enacted in 1947, did not specify setting but simply placed a blanket ban on “[exhibiting], [handling], or [using]

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<sup>163</sup> “NC General Statutes – Chapter 14 Article 55,” North Carolina Legislation, accessed June 26, 2020, [https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter\\_14/Article\\_55.pdf](https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_14/Article_55.pdf).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> “§ 15A-1340.23. Punishment limits for each class of offense and prior conviction level,” North Carolina Legislation, accessed June 26, 2020, [https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter\\_15A/GS\\_15A-1340.23.html](https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_15A/GS_15A-1340.23.html).

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 215.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 174.

any poisonous or dangerous snake or reptile in such a manner as to endanger the life or death of any person.”<sup>169</sup> This law placed emphasis on dangerous snakes or reptiles specifically, whereas Kentucky banned handling reptiles outright. Handling snakes in Tennessee was considered a misdemeanour, which could result in monetary fines ranging between \$50 and \$100, six months jail time or both.<sup>170</sup> Tennessee’s law became the model which most states followed when developing their own anti-serpent-handling legislation. Following Tennessee’s model, Virginia banned serpent-handling in the same year, and Alabama prohibited the practice in 1950.

In Virginia, twenty-six-year-old Anna Kirk was bitten three times on the wrist when she attempted to touch the serpent her husband, Reverend Harvey O’Kirk, was handling. Kirk refused medical attention, opting instead to rely on the prayers of her fellow-believers and God. Kirk’s hand turned black. Three days later, she gave birth to a child without medical supervision. The baby died within moments after birth, with Kirk herself dying an hour after having given birth.<sup>171</sup> Despite the excruciating pain Kirk would have felt, O’Kirk held on to her faith in her final moments and “Her family reported that she died singing hymns.”<sup>172</sup> The state attorney ordered O’Kirk’s blood to be analyzed in a laboratory to determine the cause of death.<sup>173</sup> Unsurprisingly, Kirk’s blood revealed that she had indeed died from the snake bite. Kirk’s husband and the three men who brought the snakes into the church were placed in Wise County Jail. The charges

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<sup>169</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 174.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> David L. Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Chaple Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 137.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*



against the three men who brought the serpents were dropped. Rev. O’Kirk was indicted for murder and later convicted of voluntary manslaughter to which he pled guilty. Rev. O’Kirk was sentenced to three months in prison.

In Virginia, state police were sent to monitor serpent-handling services and arrest anyone caught handling serpents. Handling continued despite the knowledge of why the police were there. On one occasion, believers handled eight snakes, and four men were arrested and subsequently shoved into the waiting police cars. Three of the snakes were clubbed to death by police. One of the arrested men hid a snake in his shirt. When the police discovered it, they killed it. Believers saved the remaining four snakes during the chaos.<sup>176</sup> Later, Virginia state troopers returned to intervene. Fifteen people handled serpents before the troopers could stop them. In this instance, the snakes were not killed but confiscated. Once confiscated, officials sent the snakes for examination, which determined that the snakes’ venom sacs and fangs were intact.<sup>177</sup> In Cumberland, Kentucky Rev. Oddie Shoupe was arrested 50 times and jailed nine for handling serpents. Another man was jailed for 35 days, and it was reported that

Every night he would hold a one man preaching service in his cell. He’d pray, sing and shout for hours. Finally, the strain became too much for the other prisoners and the jailer. The man was told bluntly to get out of jail and go off somewhere. But he refused to leave. The jailer compromised finally by leaving his cell unlocked at night so he could go out and do his singing and regular Holiness meetings and then return.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 136.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 138.

The harassment from the police and the threat of legal trouble did not deter the serpent-handlers, and it could be said that their persecution made them more determined than ever.

Much like Georgia, the state of Alabama made serpent-handling a felony when they outlawed the practice in 1950. The Alabama law stated, “Any person who displays, handles, exhibits, or uses any poisonous or dangerous reptile in such a manner as to endanger the life or health of another shall be guilty of a felony.”<sup>179</sup> Punishment for violating the law would result in a sentence of one to five years in jail.<sup>180</sup> Only three years after it’s addition to the state code, Alabama revisited the anti-serpent-handling law reducing it to a misdemeanour. As of 1953, handling serpents held a punishment of up to six months in prison or a fine between \$50.00 and \$150.00.<sup>181</sup> The law was revisited a final time in 1975 and was removed from state legislation. While serpent-handling laws no longer exist in Alabama, serpent-handlers still face persecution by state law enforcement. Serpent-handlers can be charged under the state’s laws against reckless endangerment and menace. Reckless endangerment involves “conduct which creates a substantial risk of serious physical injury to another person” and is classified as a Class A misdemeanour.<sup>182</sup> A crime of menace is “if, by physical action, [a person] intentionally places or attempts to place another person in fear of imminent serious injury” and is classified as a Class B misdemeanour.<sup>183</sup> Charges and convictions of serpent-handling

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

were rare in sympathetic states; however, Appellate courts would uphold other laws making it harder for members of serpent-handling churches to practice. The laws were largely ineffective in stopping the practice of handling snakes.

As serpent-handling spread across Appalachia, so too did the anti-serpent-handling legislation. By 1950, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, North Carolina and Georgia had enacted anti-serpent-handling legislation. The classifications of crimes associated ranged from misdemeanours to felonies. Some states were more lenient than others in terms of the severity of consequences. West Virginia tried to enact anti-serpent-handling legislation but failed. West Virginia is home to several serpent-handling churches, “some of which have long histories of notoriety.”<sup>204</sup> Furthermore, many of the churches in West Virginia received significant media attention, such as the churches in Jolo and Scrabble Creek. Anti-serpent-handling legislation has never been successfully enacted in West Virginia, though not for lack of trying. In 1963, the West Virginia House of Delegates proposed to make serpent-handling a misdemeanour with accompanying fines of \$100.00 to \$500.00. The State Judiciary Committee refused to act on the bill, and no further attempts to outlaw serpent-handling were made in West Virginia.

### **Emic and Etic Critiques of Legislation**

The anti-serpent-handling legislation is not without controversy. Critiques come from both the serpent-handlers themselves and outsiders. I cannot attest to the legitimacy

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

of the anti-serpent-handling legislation vis-à-vis the constitutional right to freedom of religion. Still, legislation underscores the state's worldview and particular vision of secularism through defining and enforcing normativity. The process of secularization flows through a series of channels, one of which is law. Laws help shape the social narrative, reinforcing cultural notions of what constitutes "us" and "other." To illustrate this process, we can examine Western secular debates revolving around Islam.

Islam is seen as incongruent with modern Western secularism. In 2011, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that new Canadians would not be permitted to wear the niqab during the oath swearing ceremony. Zunera Ishaq contested this rule, and in 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada deemed that the ban violated the Citizen's Act. The debate carried over into the 2015 Federal Election campaign, where Harper doubled down and promised that if elected, he would maintain the ban. He also proposed opening a dedicated police hotline for reporting "barbaric cultural practices" to protect women and "Canadian values."<sup>205</sup> This rhetoric led to an increase of Islamophobia and targeted hate-crimes, including the attack on a pregnant Montreal woman perpetrated by a gang of teenage boys.<sup>206</sup> Throughout the 2015 election, debates over the niqab were heavily mediatized. Quebec's Bill 21, which came into law in June of 2019, prohibits public servants from wearing anything that suggests religious affiliation.

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<sup>205</sup> Lucas Powers, "Conservatives pledge funds, tip line to combat 'barbaric cultural practices'," *CBC*, last updated October 2, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-barbaric-cultural-practices-law-1.3254118>.

<sup>206</sup> John Barber, "Canada's Conservatives vow to create 'barbaric cultural practices' hotline," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/02/canada-conservatives-barbaric-cultural-practices-hotline>.

Banning religious symbolism naturalizes a specific iteration of Christian normativity and secularity. Christianity, particularly Catholicism, remains in the public sphere but is effectively invisible, as is the case with Quebec's road-side crosses.<sup>207</sup> Any religious symbolism that does not align with acceptable "secular" Christianity becomes hyper-visible. Muslim women, in particular, are racialized depending on their choice of attire. The secular west construes Veiling as being a "backwards" and something from which Muslim women need to be saved. By removing the choice, Quebecois secularism robs women of the freedom it claims to protect. Women who wear hijab or niqab lose their humanity and reducing them to the garments they wear.

I do not suggest that cases of Islamophobia and sexism are the same as anti-serpent-handling sentiments. Serpent-handlers remain in a place of power compared to visible Muslims in that serpent-handlers are still part of the inside group of white Christians. Nevertheless, efforts to legislate religious and cultural practices illustrate how institutional marginalization of a religious minority publicly and overtly distinguishes them from an imagined majority, normative culture. I draw comparison between the serpent-handling sects and Islam because they share the same Abrahamic god that is accepted by mainstream secular culture, the rhetoric surrounding these religious groups highlights the location of the practitioners, and are recognised for practices that distinguish them from mainstream Western, (North) American culture. The god of Islam and the god of the serpent-handlers are, in origin, the same Abrahamic god. That Abrahamic god is the same god that the religious majority of America worships. Despite

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<sup>207</sup> Hillary Kaell, *Everyday Sacred: Religion in contemporary Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 129-156.

the homogeneity of deities, the general perception is that the God of Islam and the God of the Serpent-Handlers is different from the American, acceptable Christian God. The God of Islam is foreign, and the serpent-handlers are robbed of their Christianity, as I will explore in Chapter 3. Rhetoric about Islam others Muslims by locating it on a map-- the Middle East. Muslims, regardless of nation of origin, ethnicity, etc. are regarded as foreigners, clinging to their imported religion from “barbaric” regions. The inside group-- Western secular culture places itself on a pedestal above Islam. Similarly, the serpent-handling sects are located on a map to distinguish them from mainstream secular culture. In the case of serpent-handling sects, they are not entirely foreign. They are, however, located in Appalachia-- America's “backwards cousin” that clings to out-dated traditions. Both Islam and serpent-handling can be easily identified by their practices that differentiate them from mainstream secular culture. For example, women wearing the hijab or niqab and the act of handling serpents. While the repercussions and circumstances of othering are not the same, Islam and serpent-handling sects share similar elements that the mainstream secular culture targets to underscore its power.

Imposing legislation to curb the serpent-handling practice draws attention to those practices and places them outside of the normative law-abiding culture. When legislation is introduced, increased hostility often follows. Serpent-handlers are the object of protested and challenged in ways “orthodox” Christian communities are not. For example, “unbelieving sinner-men” provide “mean” snakes to the churches in hopes

members will be bitten.<sup>208</sup> Another wave of opposition from locals followed the death of Lewis. F. Ford, which garnered national media attention in the *Associated Press*.<sup>209</sup>

In his article “Targeting Religion: Analyzing Appalachian Proscriptions on Religious Snake Handling,” J.D. Matthew Ball argues that the various prohibitions of handling serpents by Appalachian states in some of its manifestations, “run afoul of either the federal constitution or the state [Religious Freedom Restoration Act Statutes (RFRA)].”<sup>210</sup> Ball argues that the banning of handling reptiles in a religious setting is unconstitutional due to its being neither neutral nor generally applicable. He also suggests that Virginia and Tennessee violate the state RFRA statutes and the Constitution's Free Exercise Clause with their bans. Common law approaches are so specific that they evade generalities, meaning the proscription of handling reptiles in religious settings is itself illegal.

The late Jamie Coots, star of National Geographic’s reality television show *Snake Salvation* had several run-ins with the law due to his serpent-handling. In 2008, he was arrested for having 74 snakes on his property. Coots vocally questioned “America’s commitment to religious liberty,” in his article “The U.S. Constitution Protects My Snake-Handling,” published in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>211</sup> He argued that religious freedom is only awarded to well-known faiths.<sup>212</sup> Coots commented that the law does not

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<sup>208</sup> Kane, “Holy Ghost People,” 259.

<sup>209</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 48.

<sup>210</sup> Matthew Ball, “TARGETING RELIGION: ANALYZING APPALACHIAN PROSCRIPTIONS ON RELIGIOUS SNAKE HANDLING,” *Boston University Law Review* 95, no. 4 (2015): 1437, ProQuest.

<sup>211</sup> Jamie Coots, “The Constitution Protects My Snake-Handling: It’s an exotic religious practice to some, yes, but no less deserving of protection,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-constitution-protects-my-snakehandling-1380842432>.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*.

persecute individuals within the Christian Science faith who refuse medical attention, nor does it persecute Jewish families for withholding food and water from their children during Yom Kippur. He claimed that the only difference is the commonality of fasting during Yom Kippur versus the rare practice of religiously handling venomous snakes. He claimed that due to the serpent-handling sects being located in areas with economic hardship and drug abuse, churches like his are easy targets for police. He said that being targeted is why “protecting worshipers like [him] and [his] congregants from religious intolerance is essential.” Further, Coats says that religious freedom is “a principle that is codified in the U.S. Constitution, and one that Americans have sought to uphold even when they find it inconvenient or distasteful.”<sup>213</sup>

Despite opposition from legal scholars, serpent-handlers and their sympathizers, the Supreme Court of the United States maintains that the proscriptions of serpent-handling by Appalachian states are legitimate.

Legislators gleaned their information from incomplete media reports that failed to contextualize the serpent-handling practice or discuss the sincerity of the serpent-handlers’ beliefs. As Hood and Williamson note,

It is unlikely that the states’ claim to an overriding “compelling” interest would carry much weight if the sincerity of handlers in terms of both belief and practice was acknowledged. On the other hand, the states’ conspicuous tolerance for numerous activities in the secular world that entail the risk of maiming and death-- from hang-gliding to rock climbing to football to NASCAR racing-- seems curious. Cannot believers die from their faith as legitimately as others die in high-risk secular activities that are deemed legal?<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 182.



In the absence of understanding the sincerity and contexts of serpent-handling, legislation robs serpent-handling believers of their autonomy and ability to provide informed consent to engage in dangerous behaviour. Are serpent-handlers perceived as being less competent than their secular peers? What about the religious practice draws the states' compelling overriding interest?

If we accept that these laws are strictly about maintaining health and safety, why are other 'dangerous behaviours' not proscribed as well? Take, for example, the sports of hang gliding and paragliding. Hang gliding and paragliding are not illegal but are without question dangerous. In 2016, the US Hang Gliding & Paragliding Association (USHGPA) reported four paragliding and eight hang gliding fatalities in the United States.<sup>215</sup> According to USHGPA, pilots do not require licencing to fly hang gliders, but training is recommended.<sup>216</sup> If you can consent to hang gliding knowing the risks, why can you not consent to handle venomous serpents knowing the risks? Why are certain risky behaviours targeted, while others are ignored? This would mean that the motive behind these laws is not really about health and safety concerns, but something else.

The intent of banning dangerous activities on the surface seems like a good idea, but if the intention was really maintaining public safety, any kind of dangerous activity would be prohibited. The banning of serpent-handling or dangerous activities in a religious setting defines what 'acceptable' religiosity and religious behaviour are. These

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<sup>215</sup> "Fatality Reports," US Hang Gliding & Paragliding Association, accessed June 27, 2020, <https://www.usgpa.org/page/fatalities>.

<sup>216</sup> "Hang Gliding Frequently Asked Questions," US Hang Gliding & Paragliding Association, accessed June 27, 2020, <https://www.usgpa.org/page/hang-gliding-frequently-asked-questions>.

laws that control what is allowed to happen in a religious setting, whether explicitly or covertly, targeting the religious group, reifying secular normativity.

## **Chapter 3: Serpent Handling in Mass Media Pre-2014**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss serpent-handling in select media reports, from before 2014. The media I explore in this chapter includes articles from documentaries, newspaper and magazine articles. I choose 2014 as a pivotal date because Pastor Jamie Coots' death brought a new wave of media interest in the serpent-handling sects. Using discourse and historical analysis, along with Grimes' analytical framework of the tourist aesthetic/educational aesthetic, I show how mainstream media has presented the serpent-handling sects. I expose common tropes and language used in each aesthetic. Through this analysis, I show how the aesthetic adopted by the media shapes and informs the perception of serpent-handling groups. We begin with a brief overview of the social-historical context, and then examine specific cases of media reporting on the serpent-handling churches.

### **The 1920s**

The "Roaring Twenties" are marked by two distinct cultural events: the end of the First World War in 1918 and the Wall Street Crash in 1929, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression. The 1920s brought novel means of communication in radio programming and film, the rise of psychoanalysis, suffrage, and popularized jazz music. It also brought unprecedented representations of racial and nativist ideologies in popular

culture, the prohibition of alcohol and gangsters.<sup>217</sup> The roaring twenties are “often characterized as an era of apolitical individualism, an era of business culture, hedonism and political retreat, [but] the period can more accurately be seen as an era of cultural renaissance created from the very ambivalence, the irresolvable tensions, over ideas about the past and the possibilities of the future.”<sup>218</sup>

The general Americans’ faith in democracy was severely damaged after World War I. Furthermore, the nation’s continued military involvement in Russia and Latin America, and the inadequacies of the Treaty of Versailles “created an overwhelming sense of continuing world and domestic instability.”<sup>219</sup> Intellectuals and artists were disillusioned with society and incorporated it into their work. By the mid-1920s, “intellectuals, scientists, feminists and civil libertarians were all scrutinized for anti-American sentiments, and the investigation of radical activities as criminal ones persisted under [J. Edgar] Hoover’s [(who was an anti-communist investigator at the Department of Justice; later Federal Bureau of Investigation)] leadership for the next four decades.”<sup>220</sup>

The election of Warren G. Harding in 1920 thrust the United States into a new business era. Technology and new means of production helped the United States become “the most productive and prosperous nation in the world.”<sup>221</sup> With the economic boom came increased anxiety. Many believed that science had replaced governing philosophies

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<sup>217</sup> Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 1; Carl Abbott, Stephen J. Leonard, and Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado: A History of the Centennial State* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013).

<sup>218</sup> Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s*, 1-2.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

making the future uncertain.<sup>222</sup> Modernists called for a new culture that could blend progress, science and practicality with tradition, creativity and spirituality. The new business culture brought materialism, anti-intellectualism and corruption.

Despite the dissatisfaction with the new American culture, a return to the past seemed hopeless. As one commentator summed up the situation, “We have no heritages or traditions with which to cling except those that have already withered in our hands and turned to dust.”<sup>223</sup> The present failed to compensate for this loss, leaving a sense of “emotional and aesthetic starvation’ characterised [sic] by the spiritual poverty of a regimented, shallow, materialistic industrial society.”<sup>224</sup>

With psychoanalysis’s new-found popularity, “rebellious intellectuals” used psychoanalytical theories to turn against the traditional values of Puritanism and Victorian values.<sup>225</sup> According to Currel, many believed “psychoanalysis had replaced religion as Freud presented Americans with a ‘sustained plea for a heroic and defiant atheism’ through which the tension between the past and the future could be expressed and resolved.”<sup>226</sup>

Prominent American philosopher John Dewey provided the solution to the tension between the past and the future. Dewey posited that “[c]onceptions of possibility, progress, free movement and infinitely diversified opportunity have been suggested by modern science’, but that society was afflicted by ‘the heritage of the immutable . . .

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

ordered and systematized' that lay 'like a dead weight upon the emotions, paralyzing religion and distorting art'<sup>227</sup> He argued for a social stability that was not reliant on dogma or tradition. Instead, social stability would be constructed through "intelligent and rational responses to the needs of societal progress in the present."<sup>228</sup> In other words, society's woes were due to the limitations imposed by strict religious dogma and tradition. After the war, the United States needed to use rationality, intelligence and technology to create the future the country needed. Dewey's notion of pragmatism meant that society was not in decline and provided hope to the people. Dewey's ideas seeped into all aspects of society and gained traction. Science, not religion, became the solution to society's decline.

Rising costs of living and mass immigration to the United States spurred increased racial and class tensions. America erupted into strikes, protests and race riots.<sup>229</sup> The anti-modernist Ku Klux Klan (KKK) "voiced white working-class grievances against big businesses and economic exploitation as well as appealing to white supremacy with attacks on African Americans, immigrants, Jews, Catholics, feminists and radicals."<sup>230</sup> By 1924, the KKK had reached the height of its power with as many as five million followers.<sup>231</sup> The 1920s were the most dangerous times for African Americans since slavery had ended. Between 1918 and 1927, 456 people were killed by lynch mobs.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 3.

Furthermore, with the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920, women won the right to vote. The industrial boom and mass production enabled the flapper culture to thrive. Many women rejected traditional Victorian values and embraced sexual freedom (though only heterosexuality was permissible) and personal freedom of the flapper culture. Some suffragettes saw flapper culture as a contradiction of the earlier women's rights movement.<sup>233</sup> Other women used their new-found political freedom to promote traditional (patriarchal and racist) values.<sup>234</sup>

With everything going on in the 1920s, religious thought became entwined with emerging ideas. Shailer Matthews of the University of Chicago's school of divinity created "theological 'scientific modernism'" which aimed to apply the scientific method to theology resulting in "theological liberalism."<sup>235</sup> Fundamentalism grew from the opposition to currents of theological liberalism in 1920. Fundamentalists fought to maintain the integrity of Protestant belief and a literal interpretation of the Bible. By the mid 1920s, anti-science religious convictions were circulating in the fundamentalist sphere. Fundamentalists blamed technological advancement for immoral behaviour.

### **Reports on Serpent-Handling in the 1920s**

Reporting on serpent handling dates to the very origins of mass media in North America, which most historians date to the post-WWI years. Indeed, the rise of serpent-handling churches under Hensley, along with the birth and growth of Pentecostalism,

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 15-16.

coincided with the explosion of mass media and popular culture. Radio, cinema, and print built a national media culture in the United States. It is in this climate that during the mid-1920s, reports of deaths by snakebite in religious settings began to surface.

It is difficult to have firm estimates of the numbers involved in snake handling. Still, all indications are that in any era, only a few hundred individuals actually handled snakes in the context of church services and worship. We know that Overseers in the Church of God were actively involved in snake handling, as well as promoting the practice and offering theological justifications for it. In the early Pentecostal movement, there was an emphasis on the importance of signs, “indisputable proof” of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The most popular form of this proof was speaking in tongues, but it was a short step from this to incorporating other elements from the Book of Acts and Mark’s Gospel, including the handling of serpents. “The earliest Pentecostals saw the Mark 16 text as a kind of litmus test for the authenticity of their experience.”<sup>236</sup> The body itself became a kind of sign, allowing members of the church community to literally see proof and presence of the spirit among them, signifying belonging but also stature and status within the community. The embodiment of these “Markan signs” served as an index of authentic Christian life. One member of the Church of God, writing in their magazine *Evangel*, noted that Christians are “living signboards” with the most prominent signage

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<sup>236</sup> John C. Thomas and Kimberly Ervin Alexander, “‘And the Signs Are Following’: Mark 16:9–20: A Journey into Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 150.



being “speaking in tongues and taking up serpents.”<sup>237</sup> Here, the body itself is like an advertisement broadcast to the world: “The world is reading your sign.”<sup>238</sup>

The growth of Pentecostal and holiness churches, as this article in the *Evangel* indicates, was driven by the use of mass media. The Church of God’s central print organ was *The Church of God Evangel*; by 1914, it became a weekly news publication, and by 1920 there were more than 15,000 subscriptions. From 1927 to 1936, membership in the Church of God doubled to 57,417 members.<sup>239</sup> Part of the appeal of the Church of God was the shifting focus towards the social values of “education, modern worship facilities, affluence and ecumenical concerns.”<sup>240</sup> Believers regularly submitted editorial pieces to *The Church of God Evangel* and often reported favourably on serpent-handling experiences in their community. As we read in one such submission from 1918:

Fire was handled and also a large copperhead snake, one of the largest kind. It was made as angry as possible before being presented, but God gave us power over it and it seemed as harmless as a ribbon, and was.

This is the first meeting I was ever in where a snake was handled. I have always wanted to see it done. When preaching on the signs I never boasted for I was afraid of them, and did not know whether I’d handle them or not. But, hallelujah! He gave me power, other saints also took it up. Some were made to believe some were driven away by this demonstration of God’s power.<sup>241</sup>

Despite the Church’s early endorsement of serpent-handling, not all members of the church of God were convinced about the signs. Though some were driven away from the church, as the report cited above indicates, others were “made to believe.”

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<sup>237</sup> W. W. Harmon, “Signboards,” *Church of God Evangel*, February 25, 1928, 1-3, cited in Jesse C. Donahue, Conor Shaw-Draves, *Snakes in American Culture: A Hisstory* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Publishing, 2019), 24.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 65.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> B. L. Shepard, “Report.,” *Church of God Evangel*, October 5, 1918, 3.

Both Church of God devotees and those outside the church often created false or sensationalized reports attacking serpent-handling and serpent-handlers or expressing concern over the practice. One front-page headline from the September 18, 1920 edition of the *Evangel*, demonstrates how the church attempted to respond to what it perceived as malicious or false reporting: “SNAKE BITTEN CHILD REPORT: Such Reports are Thrusts at the Church of God.: WE REPUDIATE THEM WITH NO UNCERTAIN SOUND.”<sup>242</sup> The *Evangel* editorial complains that over the course of several weeks, reports had emerged that

a man and his child were bitten by a serpent and the child died from the effect of the poison. It was reported in flaming head lines[sic] in the papers that this was the result of [their] people taking up serpents and handling them in [their] meetings, and that this man became so bold about it, and concluded he had sufficient faith to let the reptile bite his own child believing it would not hurt it.<sup>243</sup>

The editors of *The Church of God Evangel* publication received so many letters from people both inside and outside of the Church of God that they had to investigate the claim, which they later deemed to have been fabricated. Fabricated or not, the practice was always divisive within the church. Many of those who sent letters to the *Evangel* felt that “the taking up of serpents [brought] more reproach on the Church than glory.”<sup>244</sup>

The *Evangel* devoted considerable attention to serpent handling, but secular media also started to give the phenomenon attention. The earliest discussion of serpent-handling

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<sup>242</sup> “SNAKE BITTEN CHILD REPORT: Such Reports are Thrusts at the Church of God.: WE REPUDIATE THEM WITH NO UNCERTAIN SOUND,” *The Church of God Evangel*, September 18, 1920, 1.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

in secular media (that I was able to find) was in the July 30, 1927 edition of the *Lebanon Daily News* out of Lebanon, Pennsylvania:

Dunn, La., Today- The Rev. Bob Williams' arm was badly swollen Friday and his hand was useless as the result of a bite by a moccasin last night. He let the reptile sting him to prove to his congregation that he could not be harmed because he was a child of God.

He allowed the snake to bite him during services at the Apostolic Church, of which he is the pastor. He has refused to call a physician.<sup>245</sup>

This short article discussing the injuries Rev. Bob Williams' injuries after being bitten during a service at the Apostolic Church in Dunn, Louisiana, provides little information. At first glance, the tone of this article could be considered neutral, but a closer reading shows the journalist's judgement. For example, Williams' hand was rendered "useless" because he "let the reptile sting him to prove to his congregation that he could not be harmed because he was a child of God."<sup>246</sup> "Useless" conveys that something does not fulfil its expected potential or is lacking in ability. It is an odd descriptor for the result of an injury in formal writing such as a newspaper. If anyone outside of the church had been bitten, the journalist would not have included that their hand was left useless. Saying Williams "let" the snake bite him places judgement on him; he enabled the snake to bite him or did not resist the bite. While he did "let" the snake bite, the term "let" is loaded and bordering on accusatory. The verb "let" is in the active voice, saying someone has done something, whereas if the author had said "the snake bit Williamson," the verb "bit" would have been in the passive voice. The passive voice is used for something that

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<sup>245</sup> "ALLOWS SNAKE TO BITE HIM TO SHOW HIS FAITH," *Lebanon Daily News. and the Lebanon Daily Times.*, July 30, 1927, 10.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

happens to someone. The use of the active voice or passive voice influences how the sentence is received. A “normal” person would never “let” a snake bite them; they would be bitten. Allowing the snake to bite sets the serpent-handlers apart from the normative secular person. Furthermore, “[letting] the reptile sting him to prove to his congregation that he could not be harmed because he was a child of God” highlights the “comedic” irony of Williams’ actions. Including the reasoning that Williamson believed that he would not be injured because “he was a child of God” elicits a tone of mockery, suggesting that because Williams was injured, his belief is false. Mention of his refusal to seek a physician suggests a rejection of modern medicine. Even though a surface reporting of the facts, this short newspaper article reveals an implicit judgement through the journalist’s choice of words and subtle tone--other publications are not so subtle.

The following month, on August 26, 1927, the *Anniston Star* out of Anniston, Alabama, published the story “FAITH TOO WEEK[sic] FOR SNAKE BITE.” Unlike the *Lebanon Daily News* article, this one is more overtly pejorative:

Baker’s Chapel, Ala., Aug. 27, (LP)- John Rice is in a serious condition here today from snake bites received at a Holy Roller revival near Diamond Saturday night.

Rice allowed the snake, a copperhead moccasin, to bite him twice in the arm and once in the thigh to show the strength of his faith.

He attended the meeting again Sunday, but has been in bed since.<sup>247</sup>

First, the journalist referred to the serpent-handler John Rice as a “Holy Roller,” a pejorative term referencing the jerking and convulsing many Holiness Pentecostals exhibit when they experience “anointing.” As in the previous article, the author adopts an

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<sup>247</sup> “FAITH TOO WEEK FOR SNAKE BITE,” *Anniston Star*, August 26, 1927, 8.

accusatory tone saying, “Rice *allowed* the snake” to bite him. While technically correct, saying Rice handled the snake to show the strength of his faith fails to convey the sincerity of the belief, and meaning and importance of this ritual. In the absence of contextualizing the ritual, it seems like a flippant or arbitrary act. The title of the article is inflammatory, ridiculing and misunderstanding the serpent-handling ritual. Being bitten is not necessarily emically understood as a weakness in faith, and reporting it as such is reductive. The failure to address other emic possibilities for injuries ignores the heterogeneity in beliefs of the individual churches, tarnishing them with broad generalizations. The “lack of faith” response to injuries is dismissive and makes the injured party a scapegoat.

Furthermore, the “lack of faith” response can reinforce notions of serpent-handlers being primitive and naïve as if saying sarcastically “well, of course, Jim was bitten, he just didn’t have enough faith. If he had faith, maybe God would have spared him.” Some serpent-handlers believe that being bitten means the person did not have enough faith, handled the serpent egotistically, was “out of the will of the Lord,” or failed to wait on the anointing.<sup>248</sup> Others believe that maleficent external forces may be the cause believing that “you might be anointed when you take up a serpent... but if there’s a witchcraft spirit in the church, it could zap your anointing and you’d be left cold turkey with a serpent in your hand and the spirit of God gone off you.”<sup>249</sup> Others still believe that “if no one ever got bit, what kind of a sign would serpent-handling be? The Lord sometimes let the

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<sup>248</sup> Kane, “Holy Ghost People,” 260.

<sup>249</sup> Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 155, cited in Bromley, “On Spiritual Edgework,” 300.

snakes bite to show unbelievers that we don't pull their teeth or milk the poison out of them."<sup>250</sup> There is a certain irony in publishing an article that mocks a member of a group stereotyped as stupid while they fail to check for spelling mistakes in the eye-catching title.

The media sensationalized the serpent-handling sects, choosing to only report on the injuries and deaths linked to the serpent-handling ritual practices. The media circulated the notion that the ritualized handling of snakes is "a bizarre practice initiated by a deviant sectarian group within the Church of God, and that it is abnormal enough to require an explanation for why it persists in Appalachia."<sup>251</sup> The language used to describe the events begs the question of their difference from modernity. The ritual is removed from its theological context and rendered meaningless, making the serpent-handlers appear reckless and deviant. The Holiness and Church of God movements grew in opposition to the developing culture of the 1920s. As discussed, members of the Holiness movement refrained from the worldly frivolities that became increasingly popular with roaring twenties economic boom, such as smoking, dancing, and cosmetics, to name a few.<sup>252</sup> Highlighting and mocking the serpent-handlers for their primitivity and stupidity encourages confidence and solidarity in the emerging worldview among those who do not share the serpent-handlers' beliefs in a period of cultural change and uncertainty. Defining the margins of society and what constitutes appropriate religious practice provides individuals with something to define themselves against; we don't let

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<sup>250</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 260.

<sup>251</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 17.

<sup>252</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 256.

snakes bite us so; therefore, we are not them. The language around the ritual being a “show of faith,” followed by the believer being bitten and injured, reflects the cultural shift away from a perceived ‘blind faith’ towards an embrace of science. The rhetoric distinguishes the serpent-handlers as antiquated, ignorant and incompatible with modernity, which was moving away from blind adherence to religion and tradition, which was blamed for society’s decline.

While the serpent-handlers considered themselves to be “in the world but not of it,” they did not retreat entirely from society.<sup>253</sup> Serpent-handlers refrained from the frivolities of the 1920s, carrying their strict moral codes with them through industrialization, where they worked as coal miners, mill, factory and farm workers.<sup>254</sup> Many serpent-handlers adapted and accepted modernization as the years progressed. For example, in its early days, television was proscribed. However, later generations began to accept it.<sup>255</sup> Early serpent-handlers may have been uneducated, but like the rest of Appalachians, more and more youth completed secondary and post-secondary educations.<sup>256</sup> Some serpent-handlers remained poor while others amassed riches.<sup>257</sup> Despite what the narrative suggests, serpent-handlers are not incongruent with modernity but live and practice their faith in a manner that does not conform to recognizable, conventional secular societal norms.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, 256.

<sup>256</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them that Believe*, 19-20.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> I could only find two articles from secular news sources referencing serpent-handling in the 1920s. There may be more examples, but due to limitations imposed by Covid-19, my search was restricted to online archival databases. At the time of writing this thesis, examining microfiche and inter-library loans

## The 1940s

The Second World War dominated the 1940s in America. Having already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles by invading Poland on September 1, 1939. This act of aggression snowballed into what became the Second World War. Some argue that this event marked the beginning of the 1940s.<sup>259</sup> In the 1930s, the United States adopted a series of Neutrality Acts in hopes of keeping the country out of foreign conflicts. In essence, the United States would remain neutral and not engage with any nation at war with another. Americans debated whether they should join in the fight or if they should stay isolationist and let Europe wage their wars without the United States. These acts were adjusted and readjusted since, as Jacqueline Foertsch notes, “whatever the United States would do or would not do affected the conflict across the Atlantic, positioned it as one country’s antagonist and thus the other’s defender; there was no sure footing economically, politically or morally until one reached the front lines of war.”<sup>260</sup> In the early days of the war, many saw the war as an excuse for British imperial conquest or “as a bonanza for war profiteers” rather than an act of genocide perpetrated by the Nazis.<sup>261</sup> The debates about isolation in times of war ceased on December 7, 1941, when Japan landed a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. The

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are not possible. Based on the two articles I found online, we can see the beginnings of the othering narrative that secular discussion of serpent-handling sects propagates.

<sup>259</sup> Jacqueline Foertsch, *American Culture in the 1940s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 4.



attack killed 2,400 military service personnel and sank 21 American ships.<sup>262</sup> With that, America entered the Second World War to fight against the Axis powers.

After the attack on Pearl Harbour, the United States was preoccupied with how to win the war. The war effort employed almost every American and drafted/deployed roughly 16 million troops.<sup>263</sup> The war effort was so desperate that even retirees and eventually those in “The traditionally ‘unemployable’ sectors – white middle-class women, poor whites, Americans of colour, and the physically-impaired – had opportunities for meaningful, lucrative work.”<sup>264</sup>

Not everyone was pleased as the ‘unemployables’ joined the workforce, and opposition to integrated assembly lines was fierce. Race riots erupted in Harlem, Detroit and Los Angeles as racist white locals clashed with the influx of people of colour moved to Harlem, Detroit and Los Angeles to work in their factories and shipyards.<sup>265</sup> American soldiers of colour were not exempt from the racist attacks. For example, numerous black soldiers were attacked abroad by their white counterparts for dancing with European women, well-trained combat soldiers were removed from combat to work on docks, unloading and transporting equipment, personnel and supplies, and on American soil, black soldiers were assaulted and lynched.<sup>266</sup> Japanese-Americans were subjected to verbal and physical attacks in the days following the attack on Pearl Harbour. The Japanese-Americans were prohibited from displaying patriotism by the paranoid white

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, 13.

Americans.<sup>267</sup> In 1942, 112,000 Japanese-Americans on the west coast of the United States were forced into detention camps “for their protection.”<sup>268</sup> The move to detain the Japanese-Americans “was made to assuage the groundless fears (and thirst for revenge) of the white mainstream.”<sup>269</sup>

The sense of unity that compelled Americans to enter the war in 1941 crumbled when the United States dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 6, 1945, and August 9, 1945, respectively. Compared to the 24,000 military personnel killed in Pearl Harbour, 100,000 military personnel and civilians were killed at ground zero of the blasts, and tens of thousands more were affected by radiation-related illnesses and deaths in the following decades.<sup>270</sup> Many of those who supported the bombing of Japan came to regret their endorsement of the attack.<sup>271</sup> Fearing a Western Empire based on atomic intimidation, scientists Klaus Fuch and Theodore Hall shared their knowledge of the atomic bombs with the Soviet Union to help level the field.<sup>272</sup>

Soon the atomic arms race leading to the cold war was in full swing. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were conducting tests of atomic weapons. The United States (and the USSR) were suspicious of any scientists with leftist sympathies. Scientists were forced to give loyalty oaths and to undergo House Un-American Activities Committee investigations. When espionage was exposed, scientists fell under further scrutiny.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 17-19.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 20.

After the Second World War, Americans supported the establishment of Israel in Palestine, the Berlin Airlift of 1948 and provided financial aid in the reconstruction of Europe with the Marshall Plan. The United States secured a presence in Western Europe and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in where the countries involved “pledged to defend each other on the occasion of outsider aggression, especially that coming from the Soviet Union.”<sup>274</sup>

After the men returned home from the war in the late 1940s, they resumed their jobs. The “unemployable” were out of the workforce again.

The war heavily influenced American popular culture in the 1940s. In the literary culture, “the dominant emotion is a new sense of dread, a haunting sensation of radical evil both without and within.”<sup>275</sup> Artists and intellectuals probed into questions around existential guilt, the nature of man, racism, homophobia, ecology, fascism (seen in America as anti-black and anti-Semitic sentiments), misogyny and the survival of the human race.<sup>276</sup> It was during the 1940s that the genres of *film noir*, abstract expressionism, and post-modernism evolved and gained popularity. “Pulp” fiction spread into literary fiction, and for the first time, novels written by African Americans became bestsellers; the paperback revolution was in full swing.<sup>277</sup> Art, literature, film, music and other cultural forms served as escapism and entertainment. Still, entertainment reflected the major themes discussed by politicians: “isolationism, patriotism, equality for all

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>275</sup> George Hutchinson, *Facing the Abyss: American Literature and Culture in the 1940s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid, 8, 11.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, 9.

Americans, the realities of war, and the sublimities and absurdities of the atomic age.”<sup>278</sup> Anti-German and Anti-Japanese sentiments common. Superheroes like Captain America served as propaganda.

New York replaced Paris and London as the cultural capital of the Western World, and the United States became the dominant cultural force.<sup>279</sup> Politically, the United States veered towards the right, but “modern jazz, post-war visual art forms, and even Hollywood’s social problem films constituted progressive, if not radical, alternatives to the accessibility and patriotism of their war-era precursors.”<sup>280</sup>

By the 1940s, the practice of serpent-handling was losing its popularity. In a time characterized by war, and fear of internal and external threats, deviance from the normative “American” culture was dangerous. Furthermore, with the significant increase of new converts during the 20s and 30s, “values and behaviours once held sacred by the church—the taking up of venomous serpents, the casting out of devils, the more ecstatic forms of worship—were now found unappealing and too costly when considering denominational prospects” as the Church of God transitioned from sect to denominational status.<sup>281</sup> By the mid-1940s, serpent-handling was eliminated from the Church of God practice. The serpent-handlers were alienated by their denomination, pushing them further into the margins of society and further into the realm of the other.

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>280</sup> Foertsch, *American Culture in the 1940s*, 32.

<sup>281</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 65-66.

## Reports on Serpent-Handlers

During and following the Second World War, the anti-cult sentiment was high, “focusing variously on Nazi sympathizers, African American new religions, Jehovah’s Witnesses, polygamist Mormons, and Holiness-Pentecostals.”<sup>282</sup> Americans were particularly frightened of the possibility of subversion. Reports about serpent-handling are examples of mainstream media’s efforts to find and identify deviance. For instance, the *New York Times* caught wind of a six-year-old little girl who was bitten during a religious service.<sup>283</sup> The *Times* reported that the little girl had died. The reported death of an innocent child (who could not make informed decisions to consent) fanned flames of hatred, sensationalism, and intolerance of the serpent-handlers for child-abuse. The little girl, who was the pastor’s daughter, was indeed bitten but did not die from her injury. The girl made a full recovery from the bite she received, as documented in the August 5, 1940 edition of the *Anniston Star*.<sup>284</sup>

The *Times* falsely report that the little girl had died, they misrepresented the purpose of the serpent-handling ritual as a test of faith, rather than an act of faith. Calling the ritual a ‘test of faith’ title opened the serpent-handling sects up to wide-spread scrutiny, having perpetuated stereotypes of serpent-handlers being uneducated hillbillies. The serpent-handlers are not “testing” their faith when they handle serpents, nor are they attempting to prove anything to anyone. The serpent-handling ritual is motivated by dedicated obedience to God’s Word. When a serpent-handler takes up a serpent, they

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<sup>282</sup> Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, & Journalists, 1955-1993* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>283</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them that Believe*, 172.

<sup>284</sup> “Faith Wins Over Serpent To Prove Father’s Belief,” *Anniston Star*, August 5, 1940, 1.

believe themselves to merely be obeying God's command: "They shall take up serpents."<sup>285</sup> To the serpent-handlers, taking up serpents is as much God's Will as any other commandment.

The *Times* article is representative of the discourse around snake handling in popular media. Let us consider one such piece in detail, from the *Science News Letter*. The *Science News Letter* was an American magazine that positioned itself as the voice making information about new scientific, medical and technological advances accessible to the general public. Newspaper magnate E. W. Scripps and zoologist W.E. Ritter created the non-profit Society for Science & the Public in 1921 in hopes of improving the quality and accuracy of science journalism. The following year, they released the first issue of The *Science News Letter*. The publication remains active but changed its name in 1966 to *Science News*.

The following article (reproduced here in full), "Snake-Handling Cultists Resemble Other Groups," was published on August 17, 1940:

SNAKE-handling religious cultists of Georgia are "all of a piece" with followers of other cults who go to unusual lengths to show their faith or their access to supernatural powers. The same thing, with or without snake-handling, has been seen in various cultures and various times, according to Dr. Winfred Overholser, superintendent of St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D. C. The activities of the Georgia group would not be "news" in Haiti, Dr. Overholser pointed out. Such goings-on only surprise us when they appear in the midst of our own culture.

The development of these strange cults rests on the credulity that characterizes groups of people living at a low cultural level. Such people are ready to believe what a leader tells them because they lack the knowledge or means of learning whether or not he is right. Copperhead snakes are less deadly than rattlesnakes, water moccasins and coral snakes. This may explain why followers of the cult have been able to handle copperheads in their church rites with apparently few fatalities.

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<sup>285</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them that Believe*, 67.

The bite of the coral snake is very dangerous because the venom of this reptile attacks the nerve centers. The venom of rattlesnakes, moccasins and copperheads, on the other hand, destroys red blood cells and breaks down the walls of the blood vessels. Serious as this condition is, it takes a little longer period before it becomes fatal, giving a chance for the victim's recuperative powers and medical aid to overcome the effect of the snake venom.

Copperheads are very dangerous and there are records of deaths from the bite of this snake, but such deaths are not common. The reasons why the copperhead is less dangerous than the rattler are that the copperhead has shorter fangs, less virulent venom, and, because of its smaller size, injects a smaller amount of poison into a bite. The habits of the copperhead may also have helped to protect those who handled it in religious rites. This snake is very quiet, seldom striking unless very definitely annoyed or attacked.<sup>286</sup>

The article "Snake-Handling Cultists Resemble Other Groups" is categorized in *Science News Letter* as 'ethnology' and 'herpetology.' By today's standards for ethnographic studies, this article is unethical.

The authors show their bias using exoticized and loaded language to describe the serpent-handlers. By manipulating the language describing the serpent-handling sects, the authors are actively creating an image of the serpent-handlers for the readers that reflects their own biases. The negative connotations of the loaded language used to discuss the serpent-handling sects renders them suspicious, mysterious, and exotic.

Ignoring the academic interpretations of the word "cult" (which had been developed by Ernst Troeltsch in 1912), the article traffics in the general public's associations to the word, namely, that cults are dangerous. Words can not only be used descriptively but also as weapons. While not perfect synonyms, "cult," "sect," and "church" carry different weights. "Church" does not carry the same negative connotations

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<sup>286</sup> "Snake-Handling Cultists Resemble Other Groups," *Science News Letter* 38, no. 7 (August, 17, 1940), 103.

as “sect” and “cult.” For example, “snake-handling religious church of Georgia” creates a very different image than “snake-handling religious cultists of Georgia.” The authors used the term ‘cult’ to illicit specific images and reactions in their readers.

The term “cult” is derived from the Latin word *cultus*, which means adoration or care.<sup>291</sup> *Cultus* is historically associated with cultivation, refinement, and worship of a particular deity.<sup>292</sup> The historical association of the word is positive, as opposed to the modern popular association that is negative. Culturally, “cult” is synonymous with deviance and danger.

Cults are depicted in a variety of media from newspapers to film, and in genres from horror to comedies such as *The Wicker Man* and *The Simpsons*, respectively. The media’s anti-cult sentiments reflect and reinforce the opinions of the general public. The social imaginary of cults is decidedly outside of normative mainstream culture and bad. The term cult is loaded with negative connotations, which is then placed onto the group ascribed to this title.

The authors refer to the serpent-handlers as cultists. Culturally, “cult” is synonymous with deviance and danger. When we think of cults, we often think of brainwashing, mental illness, coercion, or destructive activities that could negatively impact non-believers.<sup>293</sup> A cult member is characterized as being a “young, gullible, maladjusted, marginal ‘loser’ who finds a ‘safe haven in the controlled life of a cult.’”<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> David Scott Diffrient, "The Cult Imaginary: Fringe Religions and Fan Cultures on American Television," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 30, no. 4 (2010): 464.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 463; In the 1940s, ‘cults’ were suspicious and dangerous. The term ‘cult’ was applied to non-Christian or heretical Christian groups, but was not associated with ‘brainwashing’ until the Cold War Era.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, 464.



Stereotypes surrounding serpent-handlers and Southerners are similar, gullible, naïve, uneducated, maladjusted, “losers” who cling to the past or seek compensation through serpent-handling. Designating serpent-handling sects as cults serves to re-affirm existing stereotypes about Southerners. Cults are established as being exotic and dangerous, decidedly in the realm of the other.

In a direct attempt to exoticize the serpent-handling sects, the author of this piece goes out of his way to avoid labelling the Georgian ‘snake-handling’ cult as Christian. If he had included this church within the orbit of Christianity, he would have brought them closer to the realm of “familiar” American religion, but this would have softened what appears to be an agenda of exoticizing serpent-handling. “SNAKE-handling religious cultists of Georgia are "all of a piece" with followers of other cults who go to unusual lengths to show their faith or their access to supernatural powers.” Furthermore, “supernatural” is not a term typically associated with mainstream, “non-cult” religions. Something that is supernatural cannot be explained by science and thus mysterious.

Furthermore, the article never mentions what the snake-handlers actually believe, only that they believe in “supernatural powers.”<sup>300</sup> Needless to say, anything supernatural is mysterious, further exoticizing and distancing the serpent-handlers from mainstream American culture. Failing to disclose that the serpent-handling cultists self-identify as Christians removes any common ground with the Christian-majority American population.

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<sup>300</sup> “Snake-Handling Cultists Resemble Other Groups,” *Science News Letter*, 103.

The authors make generalizing statements saying that the snake-handling cultists are “all of a piece” or the same as other cults which have been “with or without snake-handling, [and] has been seen in various cultures and various times.”<sup>301</sup> Generalizing removes individuality and dehumanizes the group to a faceless monolith. The presumed expertise of Dr. Overholser bolsters the authors’ generalizing claims. Dr. Overholser is a superintendent at St. Elizabeths Hospital. What makes him qualified to speak about this group of serpent-handlers, and why should we believe this superintendent? The man is a doctor, someone of authority, so his comments must carry weight and accuracy. *Right?* The authors exploit the power and respect of the title “Dr.” to convince readers instead of providing evidence for their claims.

The author positions himself, Dr. Overholser and the readers as intellectually superior to those serpent-handling cultists in Georgia. The author says, “The development of these strange cults rests on the credulity that characterizes groups of people living at a low cultural level.” In other words, the reason these strange cults exist is that poor or uncultured people are gullible. He goes on to say that the people who join these “strange cults” are too stupid to think critically about what the leader tells them and too stupid to learn how to think critically. His argument is, in essence, ad-hominem.

His conclusions about “why followers of the cult have been able to handle copperheads in their church rites with apparently few fatalities” is that the cultists simply chose a snake that’s venom takes longer to kill someone (to allow for medical intervention or the victim’s own recuperative powers to health them) and is less likely to

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

bite them anyway. This is almost a mockery to them, saying, “oh, silly cultist, science is protecting you, not these supernatural abilities.”

Borders literally mark where something begins and ends. The author localizes the serpent-handling sects in Georgia. By locating them geographically, the author can say, in essence, “these strange, stupid, ‘low cultural-level’” snake handling cultists only exist within the borders of Georgia. It is not a stretch to see the implicit us versus them mentality expressed in this piece. The ‘snake handling’ cult in Georgia is strange and exotic, while our non-cult religion outside of Georgia is familiar. Outside of Georgia are the rest of us, and subsequently says that their actions are noteworthy specifically in the United States but “would not be “new” in Haiti.”<sup>302</sup> As previously discussed, serpent-handling sects are found across the United States; they are not confined to the state of Georgia.

The authors say, “The activities of the Georgia group would not be “news” in Haiti [...] Such goings-on only surprise us when they appear in the midst of our own culture.”<sup>303</sup> It is worth noting that America had occupied Haiti in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and racist tropes that Haitians were irrational, savage and primitive were not uncommon in America. Dr. Overholser’s point is that it would be expected and ordinary if such strange cultic activities were happening in a country such as Haiti. He is surprised, though, that the strange cultic behaviours associated with “savagery” and “primitivism” would be found in the modern, rational United States. Not only is this extremely racist towards the Haitians, but it is also categorizing the serpent-handlers as primitive and

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

savage. He is also saying that the snake-handling activities are not America, better suited for primitive foreign nations, making these Georgians un-American.

Earlier, I said that this article would be considered unethical ethnography by today's standards. Modern ethnographers such as Hood and Williamson prefer neutral language that is free of any connotations; for example, they say "serpent-handling sects" instead of "snake handling cults."

The terms "serpent" and "snake" evoke different connotations. Both conjure images of deceit and treachery. For instance, if someone betrays your trust or has a reputation of "throwing others under the bus," you may call them a snake. While both "serpent" and "snake" carry negative connotations, "serpent" seems to be a more loaded term. The term "serpent" seems to be reserved for something with an extraordinary characteristic beyond the name of an animal. *Rattlesnake*, *corn snake*, *king snake* are names of animals while the rainbow *serpent* is the name of a divine, mythical animal. The term used in KJV Mark 16:17-18 is "serpent." In an interview with *The Tennessean*, Hood reports that serpent-handlers prefer the word "serpent" to "snake," which can be considered offensive language.<sup>304</sup> The use of "snake" instead of "serpent" is a subtle way in which the serpent-handlers are removed from outsiders' narratives, silencing their voices and reinforcing the author's power over the othered group.

Written during a time when Americans feared subversion and cults, the article posits that the members of Georgian snake handling cults are on a low cultural level,

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<sup>304</sup> Holly Meyer, "Documentary about 'snake-handling' Kentucky church fails to grasp tradition, expert says," *Tennessean*, September 2, 2018, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/religion/2018/09/02/life-inside-documentary-snake-handling-church-cody-coots/1116357002/>.

uneducated, unable to learn. The belief was that the only reason serpent-handlers are not dead is that they use less-dangerous snakes in their ritual practice. This article others the serpent-handlers while also ridiculing them to compensate for fear of cults and subversion. Marking what makes these “cultists” other allows the mainstream to define itself in contrast to the other. Shaping how others view the “subversive cultists” gives power to the person doing the shaping, replacing fear with control.

Let us turn to another article from this era, titled “COURT RULING HITS AT SNAKE HANDLING,” published August 15, 1947 in *Decatur Daily* out of Decatur, Alabama. The article was occasioned by Judge Hamilton’s ruling that being injured when handling snakes is not an accident, and therefore potentially criminal behaviour. His verdict had the practical outcome that one Mrs. Ressie L. Ford was unable to pursue her lawsuit against the Standard Life Insurance Company, who refused payout of the policy following her husband’s death:

A fatal snake bite received while handling a poisonous reptile during religious services is not an accident, the Eastern division of the Tennessee court of appeals ruled today.

Mrs. Ressie L. Ford, widow of Lewis F. Ford, who died last year after being [sic] bitten by a rattlesnake which he was handling in church sued the Standard Life Insurance Company for payment of double-indemnity on a life, insurance policy.

Judge Hamilton S. Burnett ruled that “one voluntarily handling a poisonous serpent is not accidentally injured when bitten by the snake.”<sup>305</sup>

Ford’s death could not be ruled an accident as he was voluntarily handling a snake.

While the overall tone of this article is neutral, it does reflect the general negative attitude towards the serpent-handlers. If a serpent-handler gets bitten and is injured during

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<sup>305</sup> “COURT RULING HITS AT SNAKE HANDLING,” *Decatur Daily*, August 15, 1947, p.2.

a service, it is their own fault and cannot be considered accidental. This article validates the belief that the serpent-handlers bring this upon themselves. Since serpent-handlers are responsible for being bitten, unlike those of the majority culture, it is alright for serpent-handlers to be treated differently by the law and insurance companies. One might make a comparison, say, with car accidents, since we know that riding in a car carries with it a certain statistical probability of being injured. The underlying message is the serpent-handlers are responsible for their injuries because if you handle snakes, of course, you are going to be bitten-- it's common sense!

Less than one year later, the same newspaper published "Snake Handler is Bitten at Church, Dies Hours Later," on August 9, 1948, which reports the death of serpent-handler Harvey Bell. The article is much less neutral in their discussion and takes a more judgemental tone:

Weird religious [sic] rites of a serpent-handling sect of the Church of God claimed the life of a 32-year-old Lindale man near Chattanooga Sunday night.

The victim was Harvey Bell, son of Mrs. Nancy Bell, of Lindale. He had been a member of the Church of God for 20 years. He died about 10 P.M. Sunday at the home of William Harden, self-styled "preacher" of the Dolly Pond Church of God.

Bell was reportedly bitten by a rattlesnake during services at Dolly Pond earlier in the evening, and became the third snakebite fatality since the founding of the church three years ago.

Lewis Ford of Daisy, and Clint Jackson of the Grasshopper community near Birchwood, died of rattlesnake bites during the church's short history. Dolly Pond is a serpent-handling branch of the more orthodox Church of God. No comment was forthcoming regarding the death from Hamilton county attorney general, the sheriff or Tennessee patrol, although snake handling in Tennessee is said to be illegal through recent legislative enactment, No [sic] action had been taken today, Chattanooga sources said.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> "Snake Handler is Bitten at Church, Dies Hours Later," *Decatur Daily*, August 9, 1948, p.2.

The author does not attempt to conceal his bias, literally calling the serpent-handlers' ritual a "weird religious rite." Furthermore, the author manipulates the readers' emotions vilifying the serpent-handlers in the eyes of the broader community. Saying the life was claimed due to this "weird religious rite" has an accusatory tone that elicits anger in the readers. The "victim," a young man- only 32-years old- had joined the church when he was 12-years-old. The author tugs on the heart-strings of the reader; the young man died tragically in his prime years mere hours after being bitten. The "victim" is juxtaposed with the "self-styled" preacher, William Harden. "Self-styled" is not a term associated with mainstream preachers. "Self-styled" means that Harden is using a title he gave himself, which evokes suspicions of illegitimacy, manipulation and deception. We are left with the impression that Harden was responsible for Bell's death. Harden's illegitimate role and the age of Bell at his death and entrance in the church reinforce cult stereotypes that serpent-handlers are ignorant and manipulated by a sinister leader. Three deaths in the church's short three-year history averages to one death a year. One can imagine that the body count will only increase with time. The author distinguishes the serpent-handlers as being outside of the "more orthodox Church of God." These serpent-handlers are not part of acceptable orthodox religious groups. This comment pushes the serpent-handlers further into the margins of society. Finally, the author reveals that "no action had been taken." After the playing Bell's death as a tragedy that occurred at the hands of the self-proclaimed preacher, we are left without closure and a feeling of justice being served. A reasonable emotional response would be anger and mistrust towards the serpent-handlers.

According to the 1947 article, serpent-handlers are responsible for their own injuries, while in the 1948 article, the fatally injured party is a victim, and the illegitimate

preacher is presumed responsible. While we cannot make sweeping conclusions based on only two articles, we can see that in less than one year, some of the rhetoric about serpent-handling sects has shifted. The perceived identity of the individual responsible for injuries changes, but the main message remains constant; serpent-handlers are different from “us” and are held to different standards.

### **The 1960s**

Determining the “beginning” and the “end” of the 1960s is the subject of debate among scholars.<sup>307</sup> While this debate is beyond the scope of my thesis, in essence, the question hinges on should the era be marked with the Gregorian calendar (January 1, 1960, to December 31, 1969) or with cultural events that proceed into the 1970s. If one assumes the “cultural” era, what events are included, and where is the cut-off?

Among the defining events of the American 1960s were the fight for civil rights, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the “War on Poverty” and the space race. According to Sharon Monteith and Martin Halliwell,

often regions were the scourge of national faults. As the nation’s mirror, its national conscience and the site of quintessentially ‘American’ dilemmas, the South was the primary testing ground for sixties ideology. The region would be demonised as America’s ‘counterpoint’ with white southerners and African Americans – conceptualised as ‘the South within the North’ when residing outside the region – eluding assimilation into ‘American’ culture.<sup>308</sup>

During the 1960s, the United States was divided into the North and the South. The South was distinguished as the “internal other” and became the nation’s scapegoat. The South

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<sup>307</sup> Sharon Monteith and Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 2.



was characterized as ‘savage,’ and the people who lived there were “the nation’s backward cousin” stuck in the past.<sup>309</sup> The North, on the other hand, was characterized as being modern, urban, and liberal.<sup>310</sup> Editors of *Time-Life* noted that “The rest of the United States has been almost as ready to explain itself by contrast with Mississippi as by contrast with Russia.”<sup>311</sup> Like the rest of the country, the South was not a monolith, even if it was characterized as such.

Some Southerners were instrumental in the grassroots organizations that would become the Civil Rights Movement, while others were instrumental in the conservative backlash against the Civil Rights Movement. Racism was and has remained a national problem in the United States. In the 1960s, the North’s rhetoric was that racism was only a Southern problem.<sup>312</sup>

The boundaries between “high” and “low” culture deteriorated. “Culture” was no longer confined within the limits of theatre, universities and art galleries.<sup>313</sup> Counterculture infiltrated the mainstream through transgressive spaces like comedy clubs.<sup>314</sup> The emerging counterculture was one of subversion, “containing the tension between democratic ideals and undemocratic practices, a disillusion with a national or ‘official’ culture as signified by government, the military and ‘the establishment’ – in all its forms from stifling parents to party politics.”<sup>315</sup> The sixties “also contained optimism

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

about the idea of renewing that same culture by reinvigorating as well as condemning the status quo.”<sup>316</sup>

Media depictions of the “fringe” of American culture in the Cold War era focused on working-class whites and African Americans and some religions found in California.<sup>317</sup> Prominent newspapers of the day, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*, played up themes of exoticism, subversion and sometimes cynical comedy.<sup>318</sup> While reports about mainstream religion focused on individuals, reports about fringe religious movements rarely focused on individuals.<sup>319</sup> Instead, individuals of fringe religions were “namelessly grouped as indistinguishable, often fanatical “true believers” in mass movements.”<sup>320</sup> Sometimes, newspapers and magazines would characterize fringe religions as being un-American, *i.e.* having traits that do not fit with American democratic capitalism.<sup>321</sup> While many writers dismissed the oddities of the fringe, others considered zealous, emotional groups as being unhealthy and associated these movements with particular groups of people.<sup>322</sup> As McCloud says, “articles symbolically “contained” religious zealotry and spiritual exoticism to certain classes of people and a particular region of the country, just as American containment policy sought to restrict and contain the spread of communism at home and abroad.”<sup>323</sup> Religious fringe groups were often

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>317</sup> McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe*, 3.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid, 3, 33.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

localized to specific regions, even if the group was established in other areas across the United States. As Sean McCloud says,

Labeling [sic] the exotic is a crucial step in identifying its opposite, the domestic—that constituted as “normal” and “everyday.” During the 1950s and early 1960s the boundaries between exotic and domestic and between mainstream and fringe religions were in flux. Depicting certain religious groups—or more accurately, the characteristics of certain groups—as marginal established new boundaries around a changing, vaguely defined conception of “mainstream.” This occurred during a time when Henry Luce’s publications, as well as Cold War politicians, sought to assert an American cultural consensus.<sup>324</sup>

During the 1950s to early 1960s, discussions of the fringe were used to reify normative mainstream American culture during the time of societal change. The internal other, characterized as exotic and outside normative secular American culture, implies by contrast what behaviour and practices are accepted.

The following article, “Snake Handling Fatality,” was published on September 8, 1960, in the *Thomasville Times Enterprise* out of Thomasville, Georgia:

SNAKE HANDLING AS a religious rite has resulted in the death of a man in Berrien county, and now a warrant [sic] has been issued for a preacher in connection with the ceremony in which the fatal snake bite occurred.

This is not the first instance of the kind, but it serves to point up the dangers of a religious rite which calls for the handling of rattlesnakes, as a matter of testing one’s faith.

The wife of the victim is quoted as saying he had been bitten nine times by snakes in earlier ceremonies, but this time it proved fatal.

Arrest of the preacher is not in an effort to interfere with religious service but in keeping with a state law, the Solicitor handling the case says.

A state law making it a felony in the handling of poisonous snakes was enacted in 1941 after a woman was fatally bitten in Ray City, Ga. Under the law the death penalty can be invoked against the violator in event of death of a snake-bitten victim.

Our own idea has always been that everyone has a right to his own religious ideas, and we certainly reserve that right to ourselves. but [sic] we have

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 36.

never thought we should test our faith by handling rattlesnakes, anymore than we should defy the laws of gravitation in a test of faith.

Fact is, we don't like snakes of any kind, and have a mortal fear of rattlesnakes, and want no part of them.<sup>325</sup>

“Snake Handling Fatality” is one of the articles that misrepresent the serpent-handling ritual as a test of faith rather than a form of sacrament. The author suggests everyone deserves the right to their religious ideas and expressions except when they involve handling serpents. He appeals to science; it is just as unreasonable to test gravity as it is to test serpents in a test of faith. If you test faith with gravity, you will fall, likewise, if you test faith with snakes, you will get bitten. The author says, “we don't like snakes.” “We” is inclusive of the reader and assumes they do not handle serpents. Mainstream culture adamantly stays away from snakes and fears them. The final sentence of “Snake Handling Fatality” leaves no place in the mainstream culture of “us” for the serpent-handlers.

*Time* does not allow space for serpent-handling in modern mainstream culture, either. *Time* is a weekly American news magazine based out of New York that was first published in 1923 by Briton Hadden and Henry Luce. The following article, “Snake Power” was published November 1, 1968:

Last August, during an evening service at the white frame Holiness Church of God in Jesus' Name at Big Stone Gap, Va., Oscar Pelfrey, 65, stood before the congregation holding a pair of writhing timber rattlesnakes. "I believe, Jesus, O Jesus, I believe—thank you, Jesus!" cried Pelfrey, a lay minister of the church. Suddenly, one of the rattlers struck him on the left temple. Taken home, he refused medical attention and died six hours later.

Last week a Virginia Circuit Court of Appeals convicted a member of the Big Stone Gap congregation, Roscoe Mullins, 50, of violating a state law against handling snakes "in such a manner as to endanger the life or health of any person." (Another defendant, Kenneth Short, was acquitted

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<sup>325</sup> “Snake Handling Fatality,” *Thomasville Times Enterprise*, Sept. 8, 1960, 4.

of the same charge.) The prosecution claimed that Mullins had also handled the snakes at the service, thus endangering other worshipers. He was sentenced to 30 days in jail and a \$50 fine. Released on \$2,000 bond, Mullins said that he would appeal all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary, on the ground that the Virginia law violated his constitutional rights to religious freedom.

Mostly Illegal. Mullins' conviction—the first under Virginia's snake-handling law in 21 years—was a reminder that the use of serpents in worship is still alive in the mountain villages of Southern Appalachia. Across rural Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina, dozens of small fundamentalist churches regularly include the handling of rattlers or copperheads as part of their services. How many snake handlers there are is not really known. Generally they are as secretive as moonshiners, and for much the same reason: the cult is illegal except in West Virginia.

Snake handling, which has been practiced in the South since the turn of the century, is based on Jesus' words in Mark 16: "In my name they will cast out demons; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them." The snakes, which are kept in special boxes by leaders of the congregation, are usually brought out as the climax to frenzied revival meetings that may last for as long as four hours. "When the ecstasy of the Lord is upon you and you take up serpents," explains Mullins, "you have no fear. You got to believe this yourself. If you move too fast sometimes, or too slow, you'll get bit. But if you are under the anointing power of God, the serpent won't hurt you."

Amputations and Death. Of course, God does not always provide his anointing power. Mullins' right hand was amputated in 1953 after he was bitten by a rattler, and some church experts estimate that there may be as many as 75 snakebites a year as a result of the services. Nonetheless, the snake handlers' faith remains unshaken. They argue, in fact, that the deaths are simply God's way of answering detractors who accuse the sects of using defanged serpents. As for the late Oscar Pelfrey, says Mullins, "he died 100% in his faith." Why, then, was he bitten? "I can't explain it. That is between him and God. It was God's will."<sup>326</sup>

When the article says, "Mullins' conviction—the first under Virginia's snake-handling law in 21 years—was a reminder that the use of serpents in worship is still alive in the mountain villages of Southern Appalachia" it is placing serpent-handlers outside of

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<sup>326</sup> "Snake Power," *TIME*, November 1, 1968.

the mainstream culture. First, saying that the use of serpents in worship is “still alive” means that the practice should have died off and that it represents a bygone era. The “still” marks the serpent-handling practice as being primitive in contrast to the implied modern normative society. Second, the author regionalizes the practice. He uses words like “mountain villages” and “rural,” which further evoke images of primitivism when compared to the implied urban norm. By describing where people are geographically located marks boundaries. Maps have been used to other cultures and emphasize power for as long as maps have existed. If you look at a standard North American world map, North America is positioned at the top left of the image. If you look at a world map created in South Korea, for example, North America is located on the right-hand side of the image. If you compare the actual scale of landmasses with those found on world maps, you will find that the sizes on maps do not align with the reality of the space.

Again, we see the word “cult,” which elicits ideas of brainwashing, coercion, fraud, perversion and in this case, illegality.<sup>327</sup> The author’s words are not apolitical. “Frenzied” means something uncontrolled or wildly excited in a way that connotes levels of madness or chaos. The author chose this word over something like “enthusiastic,” which would describe the practice without the negative connotation attached to frenzied. The tone of this article is sarcastic as evidence by “Of course, God does not always provide his anointing power.” This sarcasm again pushes the serpent-handlers further into the realm of the other in making them a mockery. The author implies that the serpent-handlers’ belief is irrational, and by contrast, normative secular society is rational.

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<sup>327</sup> By the Cold War Era, ‘brainwashing’ had been linked with the term ‘cult’ in the public perception.

## Film: Holy Ghost People

*Holy Ghost People* is a documentary film directed and narrated by Peter Adair and produced by Blair Boyd. The black and white film from 1967 runs for 53 minutes and has in the public domain, so it is accessible online. *Holy Ghost People* includes four interviews with members of the serpent-handling church and a church service in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia.

*Holy Ghost People* opens with shots of a church service with the credits overlaid on still images. Adair introduces the serpent-handlers of Scrabble Creek, West Virginia.

Adair explains that followers of this faith

share a literal interpretation of the bible and an informality of approach, but each is independent, emphasizing its own particular passages of scripture. Certain verses are regarded by various sects as injunctions to the specific acts of worship, which include anointing, speaking in tongues, and handling poisonous snakes.<sup>328</sup>

Adair goes on to discuss how handling serpents is an expression of faith. Serpent-handling sects believe that the Holy Spirit manifests in them, granting them the power to handle serpents. Similarly, the Voice of God is being transmitted through the believer. Their experiences of the Holy Ghost awarded the serpent-handlers the derogatory title of “Holy Rollers.”<sup>329</sup> He discusses social pressures and the persecution of the serpent-handlers and provides a brief overview of their praxis. The serpent-handlers in Scrabble Creek holds four to six-hour meetings and has no designated minister. The faithful “spontaneously decide the direction each meeting will take and participate as the Lord

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<sup>328</sup> *Holy Ghost People*, directed by Peter Adair (1967, *Thistle Films*), film.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

calls them to do so.”<sup>330</sup> The snakes are caught locally, kept in the homes of the serpent-handlers. The serpent-handlers only take the serpents out when the group is called to handle them. Adair acknowledges that “snake handlers are frequently bitten and rarely accept medical aid. Although snakebite is not usually fatal, many handlers have died.”<sup>331</sup> After the beginning of the narration, which contextualizes the subjects of the film, the narrator does not speak again. Instead, members of the community speak for themselves.

There are four unnamed individuals, two men and two women, that talk about their experiences with the Holy Ghost and their salvation. Both men talk about praying to find God. The first promised to repent when he was released from jail. He experienced the “quicken power that comes with the Holy Ghost, but [he] didn’t have the evidence of speaking in tongues like [he] had before.”<sup>332</sup> He “prayed to God for right near the year and seeked [sic] the Lord,” then he laid hands on a girl who went to repent, and both of them spoke in tongues.<sup>333</sup> The second man searched for God and finally found an experience that suited him in the Holiness tradition. He prayed for God, and one night, a loud sound and wind rushed through his bedroom window, through his body and then out through the other window. He explains that this experience left him paralyzed and unable to speak as “it was just [showing] him what was going to happen when [he] got the Holy Ghost.”<sup>334</sup> The first woman explains that when she receives “the Holy Ghost, [she feels] so happy and [it seems] like there’s nothing in this world can [sic] bother me.”<sup>335</sup> She

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.



experiences a tingling feeling in her stomach when the Holy Ghost is upon her. She shouts, speaks in tongues and handles serpents and under this feeling. The week before this interview, she drank the poison Strychnine for the first time. She would like to help others receive the Holy Ghost and hopes to raise her children to want this experience for themselves. In the final interview, another woman testifies about her experience of the Holy Ghost. She twitches and breaks into glossolalia during her testimony. These interviews set the stage for the focus of the film, the service.

As they enter the church for the service, the men kiss other men on the lips. The service starts with people singing and clapping. The camera pans around the room, focusing on individuals briefly before continuing onwards. All ages from infants to seniors attend the serpent-handling services. A man who appears to be the pastor calls those with the Holy Ghost to share it and calls those without the Holy Ghost to seek it. The congregation starts to pray. The pastor asks the group to pray for a woman who is losing her eyesight. As the camera pans around the room, the different approaches to prayer are visible. Some appear to be praying loudly, calling out, while others pray quietly. Some stoically kneel while others are jerking about or lay on the floor convulsing. The congregation breaks out into song once again, and members of the group testify. More people are jerking about or writhing as a man picks up several snakes. Both men and women take up serpents in this church. The camera jumps between serpent-handling believers and other believers dancing, singing or convulsing.

The music trails off, and serpent-handlers place the serpents back into their boxes. The pastor asks his congregation to donate money to give to another believer with a large family. The collection plate passes about the church. The pastor takes up a serpent saying,

“And that’s God’s word, good folks. If I die from snake bite, it’s still God’s word. Just the same.”<sup>336</sup> The snake bites the pastor on the hand. He questions why the snake bit him but echoes his earlier sentiments saying, “It’s God’s word just the same. Whether we die by it or live by it, still God’s word.”<sup>337</sup> The film ends with a close-up shot of the pastor’s hand. *Holy Ghost People* has received praise for its representation and portrayal of the serpent-handling sect in Scrabble Creek, West Virginia. W.V. has no laws prohibiting the acts seen in this documentary and “[the documentary provides] a useful complement to the present [sic] interest in illegal and socially disapproved activities- where many problems of privacy or the actual safety of participants are involved.”<sup>338</sup>

*Holy Ghost People* represents what Ronald Grimes, in his analysis of media portrayals of ritual, terms an ‘educational aesthetic.’ There is no discernable ulterior motive in the film. The production crew merely documents what they see without judgement of illusion. We only hear the narrator when he speaks at the beginning to contextualize the serpent-handling sect that the documentary explores. He does not talk over serpent-handlers, nor does he pose any rhetorical questions. Stereotypes are addressed while maintaining a non-biased stance. The production crew is removed from the situation, recording without participating. The documentary follows each aspect of a typical serpent-handling service without disrupting the rhythm of the ritual with editing. There is no discernable prioritization of events or individuals as the camera pans around

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Margaret Mead, “Holy Ghost People. Filmed in 1966-67 by PETER ADAIR with NATHAN GERRARD as consultant. Produced in 1966-67 by BLAIR BOYD,” *American Anthropologist* 70, no. 3 (1968): 655.

the room slowly and gives the same amount of attention to aspects of the service that could be categorized as “exotic” or “mundane.” The camera provides those handling snakes or convulsing as those praying silently roughly or singing hymns the same screen time. The focus on any given individual or scene is long enough to glean what is happening without feeling like voyeurism. “Average-looking” people are given the same amount of screen time as those who look like the stereotypical southerner missing teeth. The film crew does not overstate the importance of the serpent-handling ritual. The audience gets its’ first glimpse of serpent-handling happens around the 37-minute mark, which is relatively close to the end of the 51-minute documentary. There is no rush to get the snakes out in front of the camera, as it appears to be the natural progression of the service. The “climax” of the ritual does not disrupt the camera’s motion. The camera focuses in on the serpent-handling, backs off, and then changes its subject even when someone gets bitten. Just as the camera angles are not manipulated, neither is the sound. The soundtrack is natural to the serpent-handling sects. Whatever the audience hears, whether music or ambient noise, is what one would hear if they were actually present during the service. The only etic audio is the narration at the beginning of the documentary. Since there is minimal editing once the service starts and the participants are presumably acting naturally (as requested by the leader), which is consistent with later ethnographic documentation, we can interpret the film as an appropriate representation of the “real rite.” The film crews’ tone and filming method remain consistent while the service itself is dynamic.

In her 1968 review of the film, anthropologist Margaret Mead said, “This is a first-class anthropological film on exciting contemporary subject matter.”<sup>339</sup> She praises Adair for his successful application of the anthropological tenant of full disclosure while still providing entertainment

The film makers came in and out of the community and were welcomed by the church members. Their filming was entirely open, and fulfils better than any modern film I know, the basic anthropological tenets of full disclosure of purpose. It contrasts sharply with the current cinematographic rage for presenting scenes and postures that could never be viewed by participant observers, and which are, therefore, a violation of the privacy of both subject and viewer. It also contrasts sharply with films in which the abnormal is stressed without wider context in which such behavior occurs.<sup>340</sup>

The filmmakers do not exploit their relationship with the church to show scenes that would violate their privacy. Furthermore, the film focuses on the abnormal while providing the context for the event, whereas other films capitalize on the unusual without giving proper context. Adair refrains from adopting a condescending, sensationalist attitude towards the serpent-handlers, providing neutral documentation in the ethnographic method instead. If we were to apply one of Grimes’ aesthetics to this film, *Holy Ghost People* would be of the educational aesthetic, rather than the tourist aesthetic. (We will further develop Grimes’ approach in the next chapter.) Furthermore, by refraining from judgement, providing context for the “bizarre” images, and allowing members of the community to speak for themselves, this ethnographic film does not contribute to othering. *Holy Ghost People* humanizes the serpent-handlers where other documentations fail.

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

Common tropes associated with serpent-handling are similar to those associated with cults. Members of fringe religious groups are characterized as deviant, stupid, or naïve. Sensationalist media representations present serpent-handlers remove the serpent-handlers from their context and push them further into the realm of the other by exploiting stereotypes. In pushing the serpent-handlers outside of normative practice, secular mainstream culture can define itself against the fringe religious minority.

## Chapter 4: Serpent-handling in the Media Post-2014

In this chapter, I discuss serpent-handling in select media reports following Jamie Coots' death in 2014, which, as previously discussed, renewed media interest in serpent-handling. Due to Coots' celebrity, and the nature of his death, both national and international news outlets reported the incident providing detailed descriptions of Coots' death and interviews with family members. These stories drew the public's curiosity and, subsequently rekindled the interest in the serpent-handling sects. The media I explore in this chapter includes newspaper articles and documentaries. The newspaper articles are from both reputable news sources and tabloids. Some news agencies misrepresented or sensationalized the serpent-handling sects. The documentaries I examine include National Geographic's television series *Snake Salvation* and Barcroft TV's series *My Life Inside: The Snake Church*. Continuing to use discourse analysis and Grimes' analytical framework of the tourist aesthetic/educational aesthetic, I will describe each video and further illustrate how mainstream media has presented the serpent-handling sects in light of Coots' death. I will expose common tropes and language used in each aesthetic. Through this analysis, I show how the aesthetic adopted by the media shapes and informs the perception of serpent-handling groups. We begin with National Geographic and their television show *Snake Salvation*.

## *National Geographic's Snake Salvation*

National Geographic is a media corporation owned in part by National Geographic Partners and Disney Publishing Worldwide. National Geographic produces television channels, programming, travel, books, photography, and events, but is best known for their magazine *National Geographic*. The National Geographic's magazine was originally produced by the National Geographic Society, a not-for-profit organization, and has been in circulation since 1888. The magazine focuses on geography, history, nature and science. National Geographic says that “Every asset and every story entertains, enlightens, and enables people to better understand the world and their place in it – our core purpose.”<sup>341</sup> National Geographic television channels are available in 172 countries, and their publications are printed in 41 languages.<sup>342</sup> National Geographic claims to be committed to “diversity, equality, and inclusion” and “embrace each person’s identity, experiences, and abilities, and [they] commit to cultivating an environment where everyone benefits from opportunity, mutual respect and a sense of belonging.”<sup>343</sup> Despite their current commitment to inclusion and diversity, National Geographic has not always had this worldview and struggles with its legacy and ongoing role in colonization, racism and primitivism.

In April of 2018, the National Geographic Magazine released “The Race Issue.” Since its founding in 1888, Susan Goldberg is the 10<sup>th</sup> editor of the magazine but is both

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<sup>341</sup> “About National Geographic Partners,” National Geographic Partners, retrieved on June 16, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographicpartners.com/about/#:~:text=About%20the%20National%20Geographic%20Society,our%20education%20initiatives%20and%20resources.>

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> “Our Commitment to Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion,” About Us, National Geographic, retrieved on June 16, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/about-us/>.

the first woman and the first Jewish person to hold that position. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, Goldberg formally addressed *National Geographic's* racist past in print. Before the 1970s, *National Geographic* had ignored mainly racial and ethnic minorities living in the United States, "rarely acknowledging them beyond laborers or domestic workers."<sup>344</sup> In contrast, *National Geographic* depicted "natives" from around the world through a stereotypical lens. The indigenous people of far off lands were presented through the "noble savage" trope and were often photographed unclothed reiterating notions of primitivism. The magazine fetishized beautiful women from "exotic lands" and failed to mention a culture's problems painting each culture as "happy hunters." *National Geographic* did not allow emic voices to speak for themselves. Goldberg admits that *National Geographic* did little to dissuade the white American audience's stereotypical understandings of the cultures explored.<sup>345</sup>

*National Geographic* was created at the height of the colonial period and drew stark lines between the colonizers and the colonized or "us" and "them," respectively. *National Geographic* held the role of the colonizer. The magazine referred to the "others" in racist primitivist terms such as "South Australian Blackfellows: These savages rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings."<sup>346</sup> *National Geographic* finally allowed the people they report on to speak for themselves in 2015 when they gave young Haitians cameras and instructed them to "document the reality of their world."<sup>347</sup> Introducing the

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<sup>344</sup> Susan Goldberg, "For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It," *National Geographic*, April, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/from-the-editor-race-racism-history/>.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.



emic perspective was a pivotal moment for *National Geographic*. Confessing and denouncing its racist history, *National Geographic's* "Race Issue" aimed to decolonize the world-renowned organization. The process of decolonization is complicated, and hundreds of years of oppression, racism and othering cannot be undone in one issue of a magazine. Decolonization requires continuous effort not just to include diversity, but to *promote* diversity. "The Race Issue" is only one aspect of decolonizing their platform. Further effort is required to reduce the romanticization of the majority culture, including the romanticization of our past and of internal others.

Pastor Jamie Coots starred in the *National Geographic* television show *Snake Salvation* along with fellow pastor and mentee, Andrew Hamblin. *Snake Salvation* follows the pastors as they struggle to maintain their respective churches and overcome the main obstacle of procuring the snakes for their services. The show premiered in 2013 and originally ran for 16 episodes. In response to Coots' death, *National Geographic* released a 17<sup>th</sup> episode that examined Coots' life.

The producer of National Geographic's television show *Snake Salvation*, Matthew Testa, is upfront about what piqued his interest in the serpent-handlers. He freely admits that he is fascinated by the serpent-handling ritual because "it's such an extreme gesture of faith."<sup>348</sup> Is this 'extreme gesture' of faith any more extreme than other risky behaviour that has been normalized like hang gliding? The distinction here is between description and attribution. In calling it extreme, serpent-handling becomes extreme. One can detect in Testa's narrative of serpent-handling a certain nostalgia, from the perspective of

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<sup>348</sup> Burnett, "Snake-Handling Preacher."

postmodernity, of a lost era of convictions and certainties which he brings to *Snake Salvation*.

Testa's goal with *Snake Salvation* was to tell the serpent-handlers' story from their point of view without judgement, to humanize them, and show how important their religion is in their daily lives. *Snake Salvation* embodies the tourist aesthetic despite its 'good intentions.' While Testa succeeds in humanizing the serpent-handlers and showing the importance of their religion in their daily lives without overt judgement, *Snake Salvation* nevertheless represents a heavily edited, one-dimensional side of the serpent-handlers, lacking nuance. The show's original finale, titled "Deadly Legacy" centred around preparing 'Little Cody' to take over the family church (The Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name) should anything happen to his father, Jamie. The secondary plot followed Pastor Andrew Hamblin as he prepared a service for a struggling friend.

### ***Snake Salvation: "Deadly Legacy"***

There are two plotlines in "Deadly Legacy," the primary storyline involving the Coots family and the secondary plot involving Hamblin's church. The scenarios are presented in a story-like manner. The settings, characters, and conflicts are established early in the episode and reach a satisfying resolution by the end of the episode. Following the typical reality television show formula, the episode mixes real-time events with individual 'interview' or 'confessional' segments where the stars speak their minds. The episode jumps between each story, mixing 'real-time' with 'interview segments, starting with the Coots in Middlesboro, Kentucky.

“Deadly Legacy” opens with an emotional sermon presented by Cody Coots. He shouts, “If you start putting things before God, you’ll die and bust Hell wide open!”<sup>349</sup> The ‘real-time’ Cody pauses to take a breath. In a juxtaposing voiceover, Cody says, “One day, I’ll become the pastor.”<sup>350</sup> After his pause, the ‘real-time’ Cody continues shouting, “You are breaking the commandment. I don’t care if you like it or not!”<sup>351</sup> In a second voice over transitioning to the interview style frame, Jamie Coots says, “To be a pastor, he needs to learn to be more compassionate of other people.”<sup>352</sup> The screen jumps back to Cody, holding a live flame with the overlaid audio of him saying, “If I have to live right, you have to live right. And if you don’t want to live right, there’s the door, don’t let it hit you on the way out.”<sup>353</sup> The introduction continues showing Cody and another man handling snakes in their snake room. The camera breaks away to a Jamie Coots in front of a black background. Jamie shakes his head, saying, “Little Cody is not ready to be a pastor right now. He’s got a lot of things to learn,” and the camera jumps back to Cody and the other man handling the snakes in the snake room laughing.<sup>354</sup> The opening song is upbeat with an Appalachian twang, clips of serpent-handling, the church, the pastors and their families, and the snakes quickly flash on the screen.

The Coots story officially opens with Cody and his friend Kenny washing the Coots’ snakes to prevent belly rot, which Cody says kills nine out of ten snakes. Cody and Kenny appear to be carefree and jovial. Jamie says that Cody needs to learn to be more

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<sup>349</sup> Snake Salvation, “Deadly Legacy,” *National Geographic Channel*, October 23, 2013.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

compassionate towards others and that he is not always reliable. After a quick series of transitional images, the show picks up with Andrew Hamblin. Hamblin explains that he fears one of his close parishioners, a close friend, is sliding back into drug use.

The focus returns to Middlesboro. Through the camera lens, the viewer goes along with Cody and Jamie as they embark on a father-son hunt for venomous snakes, which the narrator points out as an opportunity for Jamie to “groom Cody for the pastorship.”<sup>355</sup> Showing the same presumed recklessness he displayed when washing snakes, Cody rushes off ahead of his father to search for snakes. The narrator comments that “Cody’s hunting style, like his preaching style, can be impulsive. A dangerous quality for a snake hunter and a pastor.”<sup>356</sup> Jamie gently chastises his son for lacking patience and mercy. Cody agrees that he does not have much mercy but does perceive it to be detrimental. He believes that corruption can quickly spread throughout the church, saying, “If I was you, I’d even kick me out for committing fornication before I got married. So if I don’t cut slack on me, I don’t cut slack on anybody else.”<sup>357</sup> Jamie reflects that he wished Cody was more like him, and maybe, one day, Cody will be.

Returning to LaFollette, the film crew accompanies Hamblin on his own hunt for snakes to use in his tent service. The narrator reports that hunting snakes is illegal in Tennessee without a permit. Hamblin does not have a permit but hunts them anyway. A truck pulls up, and a man informs Hamblin that he is hunting on private land. In a cut-away scene, Hamblin says that he was worried he’d be forced to leave. Hamblin is

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

allowed to hunt on the property and manages to find a couple of snakes. Unfortunately for him, they are common black rat snakes, which are non-venomous. Hamblin's church does not handle non-venomous snakes, so he releases them back into the wild. Hamblin's initial hunting trip is unsuccessful.

Once again, the episode jumps back to the Coots' story-line. We learn that Cody is responsible for taking care of the snakes even after their deaths. The Coots freeze, skin, and sell their dead snakes. While working in the snake room, Cody unplugged the snake freezer. The snakes thawed and refroze, destroying the corpses' integrity and sale value. Even though they are 'ruined,' the snakes are still dangerous as their fangs retain venom even after the snake's death. In total, the Coots lost 42 snakes, a squirrel and a rabbit. Jamie laments that Cody needs to become responsible. Cody's mistake lost the snakes Jamie was going to barter for a new custom hat, costing him about \$250 - \$300.

Over lunch at a food truck, Jamie tries to convince Cody to be more lenient with others. Cody does not know if he is ready to take up the mantle of pastor and take over the church; he needs to get serious about things.

The episode returns to Hamblin, who is once again hunting for snakes. Hamblin "[strikes] the motherload" at his brother Charlie's secret hunting spot that "always produced good snakes."<sup>358</sup> He finally has the snakes for the tent service.

Little time has passed, and the viewers are transported back to Middlesboro. The narrator announces, "Despite his shortcomings, Cody has been deeply serious about one part of his life, his daughter, Sydney."<sup>359</sup> The audience learns that Cody and his wife,

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

Brittany, suffered a devastating miscarriage. For weeks, Cody wept bitterly and prayed “for a little girl with blue eyes.”<sup>360</sup> Cody reflects, “God worked it out to where he gave me exactly what I asked for right to the last detail. Sydney changed my outlook on life for everything. It taught me a lot of responsibility.”<sup>361</sup> Sydney has health problems that required surgery during which time, the family “prayed real hard that God would just guide [the surgeons’] hands and get it done right. And [their] prayers [were] answered.”

Back in LaFollette, Hamblin begins the “service to save Daniel’s soul.” Hamblin says they are all like family, and “we’re not ashamed to show the world. We’ll shout, speak in tongues, handle serpents, whatever it might be.”<sup>362</sup> The camera cuts away from the service to Hamblin saying that he worries it might be too late for Daniel as he has never seen him so low before. Hamblin feels it is his role as Daniel’s best friend and pastor to help him and make sure he does not return to his previous lifestyle and drug use. Hamblin believes God is urging Daniel to get help. The camera focuses on Daniel’s father, present and emotional during the service. We finally hear from Daniel: “They strengthened me. I could use a whole lot more strength, but they strengthened me along the way enough to make it to tomorrow.”<sup>363</sup> This storyline ends with a close up of men holding hands in a prayer circle with Hamblin saying, “some times there’s people just needs a little [sic] extra boost and help and that’s what I wanna do as a pastor. Help my people.”<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

Cody takes the pulpit to preach. Rather than taking up serpents, he takes up his daughter and speaks about her illness. Voice quivering with emotion, Cody cries, “This is my testimony right here.”<sup>365</sup> The camera cuts away to Jamie, saying, “Cody probably is more gentle since Sydney’s been born. It took a lot of the hardness out of him. He shaped up to realize that this is what I’m [sic] gonna be doing.”<sup>366</sup> The narrator continues, “Inspired by the selflessness he has for his daughter, Little Cody may have found the key to one day being a pastor.”<sup>367</sup> Returning to the service in progress, Cody recites from the Bible, crying, “forgive and you shall be forgiven.” The camera transitions to Cody, alone, confessing, “I, you know, read that, and I begin to cry because I finally realize that it’s about helping people. Once you help people and everything else just comes to [sic].”<sup>368</sup> As the credits roll, we are brought back to the service where Cody is filmed handling snakes. In a voice-over to interview segment, Cody relays that “God, praying, and that little baby has what’s carried me through to where I am right now. I believe I’m ready to take this over. I believe Dad’s taught me just enough, and the rest of it, I will just turn to God for inches.”<sup>369</sup>

Mike Testa wanted to tell the serpent-handlers’ story in their own words through *Snake Salvation*. Testa meets his goal in that *Snake Salvation* is a story about serpent-handlers told by serpent-handlers, but it is not *their* story. In “Deadly Legacy,” Testa presents a heartening tale of emotional growth, taking up a mantle, and compassion.

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

*Snake Salvation* empathizes with and humanizes the Coots men and Hamblin. Ultimately, however, *Snake Salvation* is a narrative rather than the documentation of the real daily life in serpent-handling churches. The scenarios playing across the screen may be ‘real’ in that these events have happened or do happen, but the episodes read like narratives. Furthermore, *Snake Salvation* is the story of two specific serpent-handling churches and can not be extrapolated to represent all serpent-handling churches.

Stories follow a particular formula with key elements that are all present in *Snake Salvation*’s “Deadly Legacy.” Stories require at least one or more characters, settings, conflicts to fuel the plot, and the resolutions of such conflicts. While they are real people, the ‘characters’ or protagonists in “Deadly Legacy” are Jamie Coots, Cody Coots, and Andrew Hamblin. Two different story-lines are being told in “Deadly Legacy” that occur in two distinct settings. The first and primary story-line follows the Coots while the second story-line follows Hamblin. The Coots’ story revolves around Jamie Coots and his son Little Cody while Hamblin’s story involves himself and Brother Daniel, Hamblin’s best friend and parishioner.

The driving conflict of the Coots’ story-line is that Cody is not ready to be pastor because he is irresponsible and lacks emotional maturity. At the beginning of the episode, the producers highlight Cody’s rigidity and recklessness through his opening sermon, his destruction of the snake skins, and Jamie’s lamentations. The conflict is abruptly resolved with the introduction of Sydney, Cody’s daughter. According to the narrator, “Inspired by the selflessness he has for his daughter, Little Cody may have found the key to one day being a pastor.” Sydney is a toddler when she is suddenly introduced. Sydney is credited with being the reason for Cody’s sudden emotional maturing, almost as if she did not



exist for the first half of the story when the producers are emphasizing Cody's irresponsibility and lack of compassion.

The secondary story follows Hamblin as he prepares for the tent service to keep Daniel from slipping further back into his previous life of drug misuse. In this story, there are two plots; the subplot of finding snakes and the main plot of saving Daniel. Hamblin worries that the service is not enough to keep Daniel from relapsing. Daniel, however, believes that the service and his community strengthened him while still acknowledging that he will need strength moving forward. Hamblin seems pessimistic, while Daniel looks hopeful.

In reality, maturing and recovery from drug use take time and much more effort than can be adequately shown in a single television episode. The reality is that this episode represents a story, something deliberately crafted and edited by the production crew to be wrapped up neatly in a single episode. This narrative plotline takes the viewer on a tour of what life *might* be like inside a serpent-handling church rather than educating viewers as to what life *is* like in a serpent-handling church. While National Geographic claims to be educational, *Snake Salvation* does not represent Grimes' model of the educational aesthetic.

The educational aesthetic requires examination of each aspect of the ritual, from set-up to tear down. While *Snake Salvation* clearly shows the in-between phases, we do not see enough of the ritual to actually get a complete picture of what happens during a service. During the short but provocative shots of the serpent-handling services, we hear music and witness emotional preaching from Cody and Hamblin, jerking movements, dancing, serpent and fire handling. *Snake Salvation* only tells the viewer what is relevant

to their interests, drama and intrigue, rather than showing a complete picture. The camera moves too quickly to glean any meaningful information, and the dramatic music manipulates the viewers' perceptions about what the screen presents. Since we only see glimpses into the specifically exciting, awe-inspiring aspects of the ritual and more extensive service, the ritual and services presented to the viewer are not 'real.' We do not see the 'mundane' aspects of the services. For example, "Deadly Legacy" does not show the collection of monetary donations that *Holy Ghost People* documented. *Snake Salvation* is fabricated, discarding normalcy and the mundane to draw the viewers' attention and drive the producer's narrative.

To craft the episode's narrative, the production team cobbles together choice segments and flashy camera shots that convey the story the producers hope to tell. For instance, the episode opens and closes with Cody Coots' sermons. In the first sermon, Cody is seen preaching full of intolerance and heated emotion. Cody's final sermon is equally as emotional as his first, but rather than aggression, Cody demonstrates compassion and love. It is during this tender sermon that Cody reveals he is confident in his readiness to take over his father's role. Compare Cody's first sermon with his last. The editing presents to us a story of "the character," Cody Coots' emotional growth and coming into his own as a pastor. Cody's portrayal in "Deadly Legacy" is a one-dimensional caricature, and likely does not adequately represent his authentic personality or struggles with becoming the pastor.

*Snake Salvation* does not provide much contextualizing information about the serpent-handlers in "Deadly Legacy." The narrator explains that if someone in the church is known to be sinning, a pastor can kick them out of the church or forgive them. I have

not come across this in any of the ethnographies, but it seems plausible. *Snake Salvation* presents that members of the serpent-handling churches procure their own snakes, which is corroborated by ethnographic studies.<sup>370</sup> *Snake Salvation* is less about serpent-handling as a whole and more about the protagonists who handle serpents. Likewise, the issues presented in “Deadly Legacy” are the issues of specific people rather than the issues facing the greater community.

*Snake Salvation* presents a romanticized image of quaint, wholesome Appalachian Americana. The problems in “Deadly Legacy” are shallow and are thus solved quickly and easily. There is little substance, and the narrative is primitivistic. While we can relate to Cody’s youthful severity, Jamie’s fatherly concern about his son’s irresponsibility and Hamblin’s concern for his friend, the shallow narrative removes the complexity of the serpent-handlers and their humanity. Without the nuance of their belief, practice, and individuality, the serpent-handlers are objects. *Snake Salvation* tries to bring us into the world of serpent-handling, showing us relatable *and* exciting content but does not grasp the nuances of the community. Without nuance, the serpent-handlers are one dimensional; simple, almost a relic from a pre-urbanized America. *Snake Salvation* presents enclaves, protecting themselves against the plights of modernization, where families were connected and involved in each others’ lives, where the church was the pillar of the community and wherein neighbours strengthened each other. Their purported simplicity is primitive and nostalgic of a pre-industrialized, family and community-oriented

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<sup>370</sup> Kane, “Holy Ghost People:” 259.

idealized American lifestyle, which the modern, fast-paced, disjointed American lifestyle lacks.

### **The Resurgence of Interest in Serpent-handling Sects after Coots' Death**

Mere months after the finale of *Snake Salvation*, on Saturday, February 15, 2014, Coots was bitten by a rattlesnake while leading a service at his church in Middlesboro, Kentucky. An ambulance was called, but by the time it arrived at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name, Coots had gone home.<sup>371</sup> The ambulance proceeded to Coots' home, where like other serpent-handlers, he refused medical attention. An hour later, police, emergency officials and a deputy coroner arrived at Coots' house to find that he had succumbed to the snake bite.<sup>372</sup>

In a statement about the 17<sup>th</sup> episode of *Snake Salvation*, which was dedicated to examining Coots' life, David Lyle, CEO of *National Geographic*, remembers Coots as “a lovely, kind man who was good to our crew during the shooting. ... And while it may be hard for some to understand the choices he made due to his deeply held convictions, one cannot help but admire his dedication and bravery. We want to air this episode tomorrow night [February 20, 2014] as a way to give perspective to the world-wide discussion his death has caused.”<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> John Bacon, “Reality show snake handler dies from snakebite,” *USA Today*, last modified February 17, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2014/02/16/snake-salvation-pastor-dead/5532531/>.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> “National Geographic Channel Presents Special Highlighting Pastor Jamie Coots of Snake Salvation: “to Me it’s as Much a Commandment from God when He said ‘they Shall Take Up Serpents’ as it was when he said ‘Thou Shall Not Commit Adultery.’” –Pastor Jamie Coots,” *PR Newswire*, February 19, 2014, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/national-geographic-channel-presents-special-highlighting-pastor-jamie-coots-of-snake-salvation-246198411.html>.

## Reporting on the Death of Pastor Coots

Coots' death was widely covered in mainstream news media like the Huffington Post, Global News, the National Post, and The Washington Post.<sup>374</sup> Here, I consider two articles from mainstream media, the first from CNN, the second from ABC News. CNN is an American news television channel that politically leans towards the left. The following article, "Reality show snake-handling preacher dies -- of snake bite," is written by Ashely Fantz of *Cable News Network* (CNN).

A Kentucky pastor who starred in a reality show about snake-handling in church has died -- of a snakebite.

Jamie Coots died Saturday evening after refusing to be treated, Middlesboro police said.

On "Snake Salvation," the ardent Pentecostal believer said that he believed that a passage in the Bible suggests poisonous snakebites will not harm believers as long as they are anointed by God. The practice is illegal in most states, but still goes on, primarily in the rural South.

Coots was a third-generation "serpent handler" and aspired to one day pass the practice and his church, Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name, on to his adult son, Little Cody.

The National Geographic show featured Coots and cast handling all kinds of poisonous snakes -- copperheads, rattlers, cottonmouths. The channel's website shows a picture of Coots, goateed, wearing a fedora. "Even after losing half of his finger to a snake bite and seeing others die from bites during services," Coots "still believes he must take up serpents and follow the Holiness faith," the website says.

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<sup>374</sup> Cavan Sieczkowski, "'Snake Salvation' Preacher Jamie Coots Dead From Snakebite (VIDEO)," *Huffington Post*, February 16, 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/jamie-coots-dead-snakebite\\_n\\_4799851?ri18n=true&guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/jamie-coots-dead-snakebite_n_4799851?ri18n=true&guccounter=1); "Snake-handling pastor dies from snake bite at church," *Global News*, February 17, 2014, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1153511/snake-handling-pastor-dies-from-snake-bite-at-church/>; "U.S. snake-handling churches not deterred by pastor's rattlesnake bite death," *National Post*, February 26, 2014, <https://nationalpost.com/holy-post/u-s-snake-handling-churches-not-deterred-by-pastors-rattlesnake-bite-death/wcm/91ce0cd6-4129-480f-a161-c6332b92b4fd/>; Bob Smietana, "Jamie Coots, co-star of 'Snake Salvation,' dies of a snakebite," *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/jamie-coots-co-star-of-snake-salvation-dies-of-a-snakebite/2014/02/17/a735c49a-980f-11e3-ae45-458927ccedb6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/jamie-coots-co-star-of-snake-salvation-dies-of-a-snakebite/2014/02/17/a735c49a-980f-11e3-ae45-458927ccedb6_story.html).

On Sunday, National Geographic Channels spokeswoman Stephanie Montgomery sent CNN this statement: "In following Pastor Coots for our series Snake Salvation, we were constantly struck by his devout religious convictions despite the health and legal peril he often faced.

"Those risks were always worth it to him and his congregants as a means to demonstrate their unwavering faith. We were honored to be allowed such unique access to Pastor Jamie and his congregation during the course of our show, and give context to his method of worship. Our thoughts are with his family at this difficult time."

In February 2013, Coots was given one year of probation for crossing into Tennessee with venomous snakes. He was previously arrested in 2008 for keeping 74 snakes in his home, according to National Geographic. Tennessee banned snake handling in 1947 after five people were bitten in churches over two years' time, the channel says on the show site.

On one episode, Coots, who collected snakes, is shown trying to wrest a Western diamondback out of its nook under a rock deep in East Texas. He's wearing a cowboy hat and a T-shirt that says "The answer to Y2K - JESUS."

The pastor is helped by his son and a couple of church members.

"He'll give up, just sooner or later," one of the members says. "Just be careful. Ease him out."

The group bags two snakes, which a disappointed Coots says hardly justifies the trip to Texas.

"Catching two snakes the first day, 'course we'd hoped for more," Coots says in the video. "We knew that the next day we was gonna have to try to hunt harder and hope for more snakes."<sup>375</sup>

Fantz' article is sensationalist, highlighting the bizarre acts and their illegality.

The title reduces Coots to a 'reality show' pastor which, while true, delegitimizes him to the readers since reality television is not known for being "highbrow." In theory, reality tv is supposed to document the unscripted 'real-life' situations of 'real people' rather than actors. Successful reality tv shows follow the lives of some sort of 'exotic' other, someone who deviates from the mould of normative societal expectations in some way or another. This deviance may be in the form of wealth such as Keeping Up with the Kardashians, criminality such as Mob Wives, sexuality and relationships such as 90 Day

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<sup>375</sup> Ashley Fantz, "Reality show snake-handling preacher dies -- of snake bite," *CNN*, last modified February 18, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/02/16/us/snake-salvation-pastor-bite/index.html>.

Fiancé, mental illness such as Hoarders: Buried Alive, bizarre objects such as Pawn Stars or fringe beliefs and theories such as Ancient Aliens. Reality television shows us a world that is removed from our own. Reality television show stars are perceived as vapid, ignorant and overly dramatic. If Fantz had chosen to refer to Coots as “National Geographic documentary star pastor” or even “National Geographic reality show pastor,” Coots would have maintained some of his presumed merits by merely being associated with National Geographic.

Fantz writes the introduction to her article in a sarcastic and accusatory tone. She begins with “A Kentucky pastor who starred in a reality show about snake-handling in church has died -- of a snakebite.”<sup>376</sup> Fantz’ opening statement comes off as sarcastic as if saying, “well, of course, he died by snakebite. What did he expect?” Fantz briefly explains that Coots refused medical treatment for the bite. She continues saying,

On "Snake Salvation," the ardent Pentecostal believer said that he believed that a passage in the Bible suggests poisonous snakebites will not harm believers as long as they are anointed by God. The practice is illegal in most states, but still goes on, primarily in the rural South.<sup>377</sup>

Fantz does not specify which passage of the Bible “suggests” those anointed will not be harmed by snake bites. The passage she is referring to but does not name is, of course, Mark 16:17-18. Serpent-handlers would not agree with her saying that the Bible “suggests” that those who are anointed will not be harmed. “Suggest” implies there is room for interpretation. To the serpent-handlers, there is no room for interpretation. Since the serpent-handlers adhere to a literal interpretation, they would argue Mark 16:17-18

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

*asserts* that believers will not be harmed while handling serpents under the power of the anointing. A fully literal reading of KJV Mark 16:17-18 leaves no room for questioning. Fantz does not explain what being anointed by God is or why it would protect someone leaving the subject of anointing a mystery.

Fantz says that the practice of serpent-handling is illegal but fails to detail the specifics of the law and provide examples of contemporary people being caught handling serpents illegally. She does say that Coots was given a year of probation for bringing venomous snakes into Tennessee and discusses the Tennessee law. Fantz also discusses Coots' arrest in 2008 for keeping 74 snakes in his home. Those two instances of illegally storing and transporting serpents are related but not the exact same infraction as the illegal handling of serpents she is referring to.

Fantz points out that the practice is primarily found in the rural southern United States. As discussed previously, while her statement is correct, it is a form of geographical othering. The serpent-handlers are rural as opposed to urban. The reader is assumed not to be located within the South. Furthermore, "the rural South" conjures images of quaint landscapes and ignorant, primitive, red-neck hillbillies. Even if Fantz was just stating a fact about where the practice, 'the South' elicits a specific image.

Unlike the previous articles I have discussed, Fantz draws attention to the clothing Coots and his son wear. She brings attention to Coots' goatee, hats and Y2K tee shirt. Why did Fantz comment on these aspects of Coots' appearance? Because they are out of the ordinary. Men in the modern, urban public sphere do not typically wear fedoras, cowboy hats or tee shirts emblazoned with millennialist theories (or at least they don't where I live). The fedora is an item that elicits two images, a vintage gentleman from a



by-gone era or an internet meme of a pseudo-gentleman. The cowboy hat is associated with the American South, more specifically, Texas. The cowboy hat conjures modern images of conservatism, patriotism, and capitalism. This hat is also reminiscent of the by-gone era of the wild-west. These hats are associated with the past or modern caricatures of someone distinct from the ‘average Joe.’

The tee shirt reading “The answer to Y2K – JESUS” explicitly denotes Coots’ religious affiliation while also referencing the millennialist theory that all computers would fail, resulting in the societal collapse on January 1, 2000. In the modern secular nation-state, explicit religiosity is expected to be relegated to the private sphere. Furthermore, the Y2K theory is a conspiracy theory which are fringe beliefs in and of themselves that the majority of people do not share.

The goatee is sometimes associated with malevolence or untrustworthiness in pop culture. For instance, the devil is often depicted as sporting this small, sometimes pointed beard. The image of evil is further exemplified if the character is bald, like Coots. Anton LaVey, American occultist and founder of the Church of Satan, is easily recognizable as “evil” with his bald head and goatee. LaVey was decidedly counter-culture, whose branch of Satanism subverted Christian normativity. Many villains who either undermine or impede ‘good’ and ‘right’ in popular culture wear goatees—for example, Jafar from Aladdin and Hans Gruber from Die Hard. As parodied in the television show “Community,” an evil twin can be distinguished by their goatee. The trope here is that men with goatees cannot be trusted and are antagonistic towards mainstream culture. Is Fantz’ highlighting of Coots’ beard meant to reference this television trope?

Coots' appearance marks him as outside of the modern normative aesthetic. If his clothing and facial hair were not remarkable in some way, Fantz would likely not have felt the need to call attention to them.

Fantz may not be aware, but Coots' appearance distinguishes himself from 'normative' serpent-handlers. Ethnographies report that serpent-handling men are clean-shaven and wear long-sleeve shirts.<sup>378</sup> A goatee and tee shirt sporting Y2K references do not fit within the strict moral codes to which followers of the Holiness adhere. In this sense, Coots' appearance puts him outside normative serpent-handling *and* normative secular culture. He is distinctly odd in the eyes of both the inside and outside cultures.

Fantz chose to end her article relating a scene from *Snake Salvation* where Coots, his son, Jamie Coots, and some church members went out to catch snakes. This article provides little contextualization of Coots', serpent-handlers and the laws related to serpent-handling. Rather than discussing Coots' death, Fantz was more interested in attracting attention by focusing on the oddity and illegality of the practice and the man. This article dehumanizes Coots and his death, reducing them both to an object of spectacle rather than a deceased human being.

A more 'humanizing' approach to Coots' death is taken by the *American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC News)*. *ABC News* is the news division of Walt Disney Television. The following is Gillian Mohny's article "'Snake Salvation' Pastor Dies From Snake Bite:"

Feb. 16, 2014— -- A Kentucky preacher famous for handling snakes during religious services, has died after being bitten by a poisonous snake at his church.

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<sup>378</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People": 257; Kane, "Ritual Possession," 295.

Jamie Coots was bitten at his church in Middlesboro, Ky., and died after Coots refused to go to the hospital for further treatment, according to police.

The Middlesboro Police said they believed Coots was 42 years old.

Coots was the star of National Geographic's "Snake Salvation" reality series, which followed the 42-year-old as he worked to preserve his way of religious way of life at his church, the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name.

Coots told ABC News during an earlier interview for "Nightline" that he and his followers believe that God calls upon them to handle venomous serpents and to drink other poisons. If bitten, Coots and his parishioners refuse medical treatment because they believe that their fate is in God's hands.

Police said they received a call about a snakebite injury around 8:30 from Coots' church. However, when emergency responders arrived at the scene, Coots had already driven home about one to two miles from his church.

Police and medical personal then went to his home and found that Coots had been bitten on his hand. For another 40 minutes medical personal stayed with Coots and tried to persuade him to go to the hospital for further medical attention.

Coots refused and eventually the emergency responders left. An hour after they left, another call was made from Coots' home to say that the pastor had died. Emergency personal and the coroner was dispatched to the scene. Currently the death is being treated as a non-criminal investigation.

Both Coots' father and grandfather handled snakes as Pentecostal preachers and Coots wanted to pass on the tradition to his son. Last year Coots showed ABC News his backyard snake shack. He had a permit that allowed him to legally keep the animals.

In 1995, one of Coots' parishioners suffered a fatal snake bite in 1995 after she refused anti-venom.

"If someone gets bit in my church and they're not immediate family. I will call 911 and have the paramedics come out and let them tell the paramedics they don't want medical treatment," Coots told ABC News during an interview for "Nightline" last year.

Coots told ABC News he had been bitten nine times and even lost his finger during a previous bite since he refused medical attention.<sup>379</sup>

The tone of the *ABC News* article is much more neutral than that of the *CNN* article.

Where *CNN* dehumanizes Coots, the neutral tone of *ABC News* humanizes him in

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<sup>379</sup> Gillian Mohney, "Snake Salvation' Pastor Dies From Snakebite," *ABC News*, February 16, 2014, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/snake-salvation-pastor-dies-snakebite/story?id=22542243>.

comparison. The title “‘Snake Salvation’ Pastor Dies from Snake Bite” is not sensationalist. Their article simply reports on the instance of his death and does not delve deeply into Coots’ celebrity or anti-serpent-handling legislation. The only reference to a law is that Coots had a permit that permitted him to keep the snakes on his property legally. In this article, *ABC News* does betray any judgement about the beliefs of the serpent-handlers; instead, they reference Coots’ earlier comments on his faith from a prior “Nightline” interview. This article informs the reader Coots did not make any presumptions about medical interventions for any congregation members outside of his family and required them to make important that decision for themselves.

“Reality show snake-handling preacher dies -- of snake bite,” and “ ‘Snake Salvation’ Pastor Dies from Snakebite” discuss the same incident, but represent the incident of Coots’ death differently. The former uses an objectifying approach that creates a spectacle of Coots, while the latter maintains the humanizing approach appropriate with marking someone’s death. To illustrate how the language used in the *CNN* article others Coots, compare the opening statement of “Reality show snake-handling preacher dies -- of snake bite” with the opening remarks of “‘Snake Salvation’ Pastor Dies from Snakebite.”

A Kentucky pastor who starred in a reality show about snake-handling in church has died -- of a snakebite.<sup>380</sup>

A Kentucky preacher famous for handling snakes during religious services, has died after being bitten by a poisonous snake at his church.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Fantz, “Reality show snake-handling.”

<sup>381</sup> Mohney, “‘Snake Salvation’ Pastor.”

The opening statement of “Reality show snake-handling preacher dies -- of snake bite” is much more accusatory and judgemental. In contrast, the opening statement in “ ‘Snake Salvation’ Pastor Dies From Snakebite” is neutral and straightforward. The opening statement of Fantz’ article is a hook, leaving readers to question what a ‘snake-handling church’ is, enticing further reading with a sensationalist tone. The opening of Mohney’s article provides a similar hook but manages to grab attention without sensationalism.

The language and tone usage of an article influence the readers’ perception of the topic discussed. A reader of the *CNN* article is much more likely to view Coots and the serpent-handling sects negatively compared to a reader of the *ABC News* article.

*Snake Salvation*’s Jamie Coots is a compassionate, charismatic pastor. *CNN*’s Jamie Coots is an idiot. *ABC News* merely states the facts about Coots’ death without presuming to know his character. Coots may have been a kind, compassionate man, an idiot or all of the above, but it is impossible to actually discern who the ‘real’ Jamie Coots was from these accounts. The Jamie Coots presented in these stories is whoever the creator decides him to be, a character sporting the name of a real man, an image of an outsider with bizarre, ignorant and antiquated beliefs.

The secular narrative and the mediatization process feed each other. The media reflects society’s lens, and society’s lens reflects what the media reports. When media calls the serpent-handlers ‘backwards’ and promotes them as primitive, mainstream secular culture adopts that perception. The serpent-handlers are backwards and primitive *because* they have been constructed as such by the secular narrative. ‘Tourist aesthetic’ media accepts and perpetuates the secular narrative. The process of creating serpent-handling as an internal other is circular. The secular narrative, as represented in the

media, is repeated and perpetuated until it becomes a ‘truth’ that is ingrained in our social imaginary.

### **My Life Inside**

*Snake Salvation* did not return after Jamie Coots’ memorial episode, but Little Cody did take up his father’s mantle, becoming the pastor for The Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name. A few years later, Barcroft TV picked up the Coots’ story and, in 2018, streamed their two-part documentary (complete with attention-grabbing capitalization of the title) *Snake-Handling Pastor Bitten By Deadly Rattlesnake | MY LIFE INSIDE: THE SNAKE CHURCH* on YouTube.

*My Life Inside* captured Pastor Cody Coots, the son of deceased Jamie Coots, getting bitten by a snake on the side of the head during a passionate sermon which sparked another, albeit smaller wave of mediatization. The Barcroft TV documentaries present a series of interviews with Cody Coots, the Coots family, believers, footage of catching snakes, the Coots’ snake room, serpent-handling services, Cody’s injury and interviews with medical personnel. Unlike *Snake Salvation*, which ‘humanized’ the serpent-handlers, Barcroft TV capitalizes on the fear of and stereotypes surrounding the serpent-handling sects. Cody Coots’ mother, Linda, emphasizes the normalcy of her family, which is juxtaposed with Cody’s wife, Brittany discussing her unsurmountable fear of the practice. Cody reiterates her concern saying, “the wife is super scared that I am going to get bit and killed. Every time I go to church, and I take a snake out of the box, she is like, “I am worried that you are going to get bit and killed.” And I just tell her when

it's my time to go; it's my time to go. I am still going to do it. It's not going to stop me.”<sup>382</sup> The first documentary ends soon after Cody received the bite, with him being helped out of the church building by two men.

The second installment of the documentary picks up where the first ends, continuing the dramatic, fearmongering atmosphere. In part two, the main focus is on the aftermath of Cody's bite and the unlikeliness of his recovery. The second part of the documentary is marketed with Cody Coats questioning his faith after being bitten. In an interview at his father's gravesite, Cody relates how before he became pastor, he wanted to leave the church. By the end of the documentary, however, it is clear the marketing of the post-bite questioning of faith was clickbait. Cody's experience did not deter his faith, and he says that he will give up neither snake-handling nor preaching. Cody's wife does not appear in the second part of the documentary, nor does the fear she expressed in part one. Instead, the documentary crew interviews a family nurse-practitioner who says that Cody “is lucky that he didn't bleed to death prior to arriving at the hospital.”<sup>383</sup> The documentary series does little to further knowledge about serpent-handling sects, and there is little contextualization of the sect or their belief regarding Mark 16:17-18. In an article published by *The Tennessean*, Ralph Hood criticizes Barcroft TV for poorly representing the serpent-handling tradition saying, “It's not really an effort to document

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<sup>382</sup> Barcroft TV, “Snake-Handling Pastor Bitten By Deadly Rattlesnake | MY LIFE INSIDE: THE SNAKE CHURCH,” directed by Ruaridh Connellan and Dan Howlett, August 16, 2018, documentary, 12:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OcoUyXiuU0>.

<sup>383</sup> Barcroft TV, “Pastor Fights For Life After Deadly Rattlesnake's Bite | MY LIFE INSIDE: THE SNAKE CHURCH,” directed by Ruaridh Connellan and Dan Howlett, August 23, 2018, documentary, 15:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ewdisyzk4k>.

the tradition, it's an effort to get a story out. It's almost like reality TV – that's fine, but it's not real.”<sup>384</sup>

Emma Perry, a digital correspondent in the United States for the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, claimed to have “exclusive access to a snake church in West Virginia, where Pastor Chris Wolford, who lost his brother and dad in similar rituals, refuses to give up.” Her exposé titled, “HISS-TERIA Inside notorious ‘serpent church’ where devotees die from grabbing rattlesnakes, drinking deadly poison and setting fire to skin to prove their faith” provides some insight into the serpent-handling sects but is still sensationalist.

In line with ethnographic reports, Perry’s article locates the serpent-handling sects in Appalachia, particularly Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. While she is not incorrect, Perry’s information is incomplete. She correctly reports that the practice stems from a literal interpretation of Mark 16:17-18, and that serpent-handlers catch and care for the serpents they use in their rituals. Readers leave having learned something about the serpent-handlers, but the new-found knowledge is not the primary takeaway.

Perry’s primary concern is depicting the serpent-handlers as a modern-day freak show. She plays up the “oddity” and “spectacle” of the serpent-handlers, evoking feelings of entertainment, curiosity, discomfort or bewilderment in her audience. Perry does not try to hide her judgement and perpetuates the ‘otherness’ of the serpent-handlers, as we can see by the title alone. Perry’s article is roughly 2000 words long and includes 34

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<sup>384</sup> Holly Meyer, “Documentary about ‘snake-handling’ Kentucky church fails to grasp tradition, expert says,” *Tennessean*, September 2, 2018, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/religion/2018/09/02/life-inside-documentary-snake-handling-church-cody-coots/1116357002/>.



pictures.<sup>385</sup> The article is full of colourful descriptions bordering on disturbing that sensationalize the serpent-handling church. For example, “THIS is the nail-biting moment a pastor drinks fatal poison while holding up a deadly rattlesnake with his bare hands - and miraculously survives,” and “Shockingly Pastor Chris Wolford was just 11 when he watched his dad haemorrhage to death from a snake bite during a service. Mack Ray Wolford died a slow and painful death as the snake’s poison coursed round his body stopping his blood from clotting, causing him to haemorrhage to death - taking his last breathe [sic] around nine hours later.”<sup>386</sup> Perry, like Barcroft TV, includes quotes from serpent-handlers’ families that emphasize their fear. Wolford’s wife is quoted, “Of course every Sunday I worry it might be the last time I see him. I worry about him getting bit. I’d rather he could worship God another way - without drinking that poison or holding those snakes. But it’s his choice, and there ain’t nothing I can do to change that.” These powerful voices from their loved ones are juxtaposed with the serpent-handlers' self-perception and normality, saying, “Outside of believing in the five signs of the Gospel I don't think we’re much different from any other church.”<sup>387</sup> The photos are large and depict shocking images of people holding snakes aloft, bringing flames very close to their skin, Cody Coot’s bloodstained shirt from *My Life Inside*, a bottle of strychnine poison, and children holding realistic toy snakes.<sup>388</sup> Perry includes photos of both living and dead

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<sup>385</sup> Emma Perry, “HISS-TERIA Inside notorious ‘serpent church’ where devotees die from grabbing rattlesnakes, drinking deadly poison and setting fire to their skin to prove their faith,” *The Sun*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7512634/inside-snake-church-kentucky/>.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

serpent-handlers.<sup>389</sup> One image is a close up of half a bottle of clear liquid with the words “DEADLY POISON” and a skull and crossbones.<sup>390</sup>

Not only are the words and imagery sensationalist, Perry participates in poverty tourism, highlighting the low socio-economic status of the rural West Virginian town this particular serpent-handling church calls home.<sup>391</sup> Both Pastor Wolford and parishioner James are both have a history of dependencies. Wolford founded his church after “God saved him” from his “addictions” to crystal meth, cocaine and “pain pills.”<sup>392</sup> Wolford People of low-socio-economic standing are already denigrated by the modern normative culture, which is then exacerbated with any instance of mental illness or drug dependencies. James joined Wolford’s congregation, to “escape from a lifetime of alcoholism.”<sup>393</sup> Perry focuses on the previous substance abuse problems of the pastor and members of his congregation, which removes them further from normative secular society. Those with drug dependencies and mental illnesses are commonly ignored and left to fall through the cracks in social support networks, which then feeds the cycle of poverty.

Barcroft TV’s *My Life Inside* and Perry’s article in *The Sun* draw attention to aspects of serpent-handling sects that deviate from secular normativity. For example, normative secular definitions of acceptable religion do not include risk of bodily harm, venomous serpents or externally manifested emotional displays.

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Poverty tourism or slum tourism refers to people typically of higher economic standing visiting impoverished areas to observe how people live in poverty. Critics of poverty tourism argue that the practice is classist, voyeuristic, and objectifying of those living in impoverished areas.

<sup>392</sup> Perry, “HISS-TERIA’.”

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

As we can see, representations of serpent-handling sects vary in tone. Some try to maintain a sympathetic approach while others exploit the bizarre. Even the more sympathetic pieces like *Snake Salvation* risk classifying the serpent-handling sects as “other” by romanticizing their faith and imposing primitive nostalgic ideals.

The media reifies normative boundaries of the consumer’s culture and identity through careful demarcation of the boundaries of what constitutes an implicit “us” and the “other.” Ronald Grimes described the tourist aesthetic as focusing on eye-catching phenomena, playing up the mystique of a group rather than increasing knowledge about a group.<sup>394</sup> The tourist aesthetic, whether intentionally or unintentionally, relegates the subject to the realm of the other. In the tourist aesthetic, the audience is removed, observing the subject as if they were a specimen in a fishbowl.

*Holy Ghost People* is a prime example of Grimes’ conception of an educational aesthetic. The camera movements are slow and steady, allowing the viewer to take in what is happening on screen. There are no distracting or manipulative camera shots, sounds, music or editing common to the tourist aesthetic. While there is focus on the “bizarre” behaviour, the producers frame it in a way that appropriately demonstrates the experiences of the serpent-handlers, showing the natural progression of the ritual and providing and contextualizing the priorly discussed experiences. There is ample depiction of both the mundane and the exciting aspects of the film. The film team took care to document the entirety of the ritual and did not disrupt its natural rhythm. The filmed service is not heavily edited, providing the viewer with a vision (as close as can be from

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<sup>394</sup> Grimes, *Rite out of Place*, 23.

behind a screen) of a true to form serpent-handling service and the members of these churches. When the serpent-handlers are interviewed, they provide detailed descriptions of their experiences with serpent-handling and how they came to the church. They focus on the positive such as their love of God or how God changed their life after prison. While we do not know what questions the film crew asked the serpent-handlers specifically, we get the impression that there was no agenda behind the line of questioning other than showing the emic experience. The thick depictions of serpent-handlers in *Holy Ghost People* enable us, the etic viewer, to become momentarily a part of their community. As the film closes, we may recognize aspects of ourselves in the serpent-handlers. We see that they are ordinary people with families, values and empathy for their fellows; they just happen to handle venomous snakes. Compared to the tourist aesthetic, which can destroy the meaning of the ritual, *Holy Ghost People* normalizes the serpent-handling ritual while humanizing the serpent-handlers.

If it is not clear just by watching the Barcroft documentary series or skimming through the images in *The Sun* article, the tourist aesthetic of such media is made abundantly clear when compared to works like *Holy Ghost People*. Where *Holy Ghost People* used minimal editing without flashy transitions to maintain the integrity of the service, *My Life Inside* heavily edited their video. *My Life Inside* only shows the eye-catching events, favouring dramatic transitions and heavy music that grabs the attention of the viewer and manipulates their reactions to what is happening on screen. The fade to black transitions and exciting instrumentals elicit a feeling of suspense and malaise that contribute to the mystique and exoticism of the serpent-handling sects. *My Life Inside* further emphasizes that the serpent-handlers are not like “us.” We are left questioning

how any reasonable person could participate in or endorse this dangerous ritual. “HISS-TERIA Inside notorious ‘serpent church’ where devotees die from grabbing rattlesnakes, drinking deadly poison and setting fire to skin to prove their faith” focuses on the eye-catching. Each photograph Perry chose to include in this article increases the distance between “us” and “them.”

*Snake Salvation, My Life Inside* and “HISS-TERIA,” “[do] little to push its [audience] beyond the stereotypes ingrained in white American culture.”<sup>395</sup> Exoticisation is inevitable when documenting ritual. As Grimes aptly points out, “media often validates rites. The presence of cameras announces, [‘]This is an important event.[’]”<sup>396</sup> We watch but are not part of the ritual; the film creates distance from the ritual participants. The images we watch on television are only part of the reality of the ritual.

Documentaries are “description-like,” providing non-fictional, educational or instructional representations of a topic. If a documentary is too suggestive or elliptical, it becomes an art film instead.<sup>397</sup> For example, *Holy Ghost People* provides a “description-like” portrayal of a typical serpent-handling service. There is no suggestion or agenda beyond furthering the audience’s knowledge of serpent-handling sects. In contrast, the episode “Deadly Legacy” of *Serpent Salvation*, follows a narrative. Initially, Cody is shown to be severe, irresponsible, and lacking in compassion for others. By the end of the episode, however, Cody is redeemed due to his new-found responsibility and compassion

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<sup>395</sup> Goldberg, “For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist.”

<sup>396</sup> Grimes, *Rite out of place*, 4.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

for his daughter. The narrative is far from “description-like” and is an entertaining art film rather than a documentary.

Documentary-makers rarely offer definitions of “ritual” in their films about rituals.<sup>398</sup> According to ritual studies scholar, Ronald Grimes, “Both ritual and the definition of ritual are understood to be acts of marking-off. For some boundary maintenance is a way of protecting a preserve; for others, it is a way of bridging, of making connections between cultural or cognitive domains.”<sup>399</sup> Ritual organizes, navigates and maintains boundaries. When “ritual” is defined explicitly in documentaries, the definitions promote ideas of primitivity, are often prejudicial or do little to further understanding.<sup>400</sup> Documentaries, while they *may* be interested in education, still need to sell a product, the documentary. In order to make their documentary profitable, ritual is commoditized and broken down into ritual objects/paraphernalia, performances and the idea of the particular “ritual.” As the marketing adage says, sex sells. Anything transgressive, taboo, mysterious or sexy is marketable and thus is profitable.

Documentaries cannot help but exoticize their subjects, but whether the creators choose to exploit this inherent othering or mitigate othering partially determines the aesthetic of the documentary. As Grimes says, “To warrant inclusion on the ritual tour, a certain size, scale or grandeur is essential. Rites that are domestic, local, or improvised are unworthy of sustained media attention.”<sup>401</sup> As I have discussed previously, Grimes

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid, 23.

posits that there are two types of documentaries, those with tourist aesthetics and those with contemplative aesthetics.

The tourist aesthetic capitalizes on the perceived strangeness of the ritual, gravitating towards eye-catching phenomena feeding the othering narrative. Documentary creators who utilize this aesthetic may enhance visual impact by editing colours and manipulating motion.<sup>402</sup> These enhancements are not used to educate but keep the viewer, who is assumed to have short attention spans, captivated and interested.<sup>403</sup> The camera angles mirror a tourist's gaze, "sometimes intrusive, sometimes distant. It seldom takes the time to dwell or participate, even momentarily."<sup>404</sup> The tourist aesthetic favours short, focused clips over long, wide angles. The camera shots are disjointed, focusing on intrigue rather than documenting the whole ritual. Grimes notes that

Rhythm is one of the most basic mechanisms of a rite. Rites do not merely use rhythms to convey messages; rhythms *are* messages. Rhythms are part of the content and effect of a rite. To overwhelm those rhythms is to engage in a counterritualizing act or, in some instances, even show a fundamental disrespect for them.<sup>405</sup>

The editing of the tourist aesthetic demolishes the meaning of the ritual, capitalizing on chaos while offering little explanation. The tourist aesthetic focuses on entertainment value rather than education and understanding. The tourist aesthetic sells the commoditized subject such as the serpent-handlers.

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

The contemplative aesthetic can easily be seen in the ethnographies that I cite. Modern ethnographic studies such as those conducted by Hood, Williamson, Kimbrough, Kane, and, to an extent, the film *Holy Ghost People* try to educate and demystify the perceived chaos of the serpent-handling ritual. Ethnographies do not consider the serpent-handling ritual in a vacuum. Each element of a ritual is documented to the best of the ethnographers' ability- from its preparation to its tear-down. They explore the historical, socio-cultural, and philosophical contexts in which serpent-handling occurs. Rather than isolating and focusing solely on the intrigue, nothing is too mundane or insignificant for ethnographers. While the tourist aesthetic assumes the viewers have short attention spans and need to be told what to find interesting, the contemplative aesthetic of these ethnographies assumes the viewers to be able to sustain long periods of focus. It does not presume to know what will capture the viewers' attention.

For example, Kane provides a thick narrative of a typical serpent-handling service.<sup>406</sup> Where *Barcroft* excites and misrepresents the serpent-handling ritual as being the crux of the service, Kane reports the serpent-handling ritual does not always happen.<sup>407</sup> The serpent-handling ritual is only one small aspect of a multi-hour service.<sup>408</sup> In the contemplative aesthetic, the serpent-handling ritual is one of many elements worth reporting.

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<sup>406</sup> Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 255-262.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.



Where *Barcroft TV* quickly explains that the serpent-handling ritual is justified in the book of Mark, Hood and Williamson provide theological justifications located in other passages like Acts 28:3-5 and Luke 10:19.<sup>409</sup>

The contemplative aesthetic used in ethnographies does not suggest that the researchers hold any sense of superiority over the serpent-handlers, judgements about the validity of the serpent-handlers' beliefs and, in many cases, the researchers discuss their ongoing friendships with the subjects of their studies.<sup>410</sup> The contemplative aesthetic provides a respectful and fair representation of the subjects, recognizing them as human beings rather than objects. The tourist aesthetic, however, does not require a respectful or honest representation of the subject. Regardless of the producers' original intentions, the contemplative aesthetic can quickly morph into the tourist aesthetic depending on the presenters' approach and narrative when presenting the subject.

### **Book: Salvation on Sand Mountain**

Before concluding remarks, we need to take a step back to the 1990s, and the publication of *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, a non-fiction book by Dennis Covington. The book, published in 1995, was a finalist for the National Book Award. Covington writes from a first-person perspective. Initially, Covington maintains a neutral, journalistic tone that becomes progressively emotional as the story progresses.

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<sup>409</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 77.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid*, xiii.

In 1991, the pastor Glenn Buford Summerfield attempted to murder his wife, Darlene, forcing her at gunpoint to put her arm into a box of rattlesnakes. Darlene was bitten twice and almost died. The judge sentences Summerfield to 99 years in prison for the attempted murder. Covington, a free-lance journalist for the *New York Times*, went to Scottsboro, Alabama, to cover the trial. Brother Carl invited Covington to a church service in Sand Mountain and eventually finds himself being an active participant in the serpent-handling church. Covington is drawn to the serpent-handlers and feels a kinship with them. Covington befriends and enthusiastically joins the serpent-handlers. He learns that some members of his family tree had handled serpents religiously. Throughout *Serpent Salvation*, Covington goes on a spiritual journey. Soon after joining them, Covington becomes disillusioned with the serpent-handlers after seeing their treatment of an ex-congregant. Covington challenges the sexist views at a wedding in what would be his first and only attempt at preaching. Punkin Brown and Jamie Coots quickly refute Covington's opinions. After the incident at the wedding, Covington leaves the church.

*Salvation on Sand Mountain* received significant praise and was a finalist for the National Book Award. In 2013, Michael Odom praised Covington for “[taking] great pains to present a fair and sympathetic perspective of the sake handlers and rural southern alike [sic].”<sup>411</sup>

While *Salvation on Sand Mountain* received accolades from the public and literary world, scholars of religion, scholars of the serpent-handling sects and the serpent-handling sect Covington befriended were less than impressed. Hood argues that

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<sup>411</sup> Michael Odom, “Dennis Covington’s “*Salvation on Sand Mountain*”: Descent and Vision in the Southern Memoir,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 46, no. 1 (2013): 97.

“*Salvation on Sand Mountain* is not about serpent handlers; not about salvation; not about redemption. It is about Dennis Covington. It is also about betrayal.”<sup>412</sup> According to one of Covington’s friends in the serpent-handling sect in Sand Mountain, “He betrayed our trust; he just wanted to tell a story.”<sup>413</sup> Initially, Brother Carl gives Covington permission to write the book since, as Carl understands it, if Covington writes the truth, he will be “edifying” the Gospel.<sup>414</sup> Covington himself wonders if Carl “knew about the inevitable treachery that stood between journalist and subject.”<sup>415</sup>

The perceived danger of handling venomous serpents attracts Covington, who admits, “I had always been drawn to danger. Alcohol, psychedelics, war.”<sup>416</sup> Soon after joining the sect, Covington discovers that his forefathers handled serpents religiously, which further piques his interest in the group. He brings his family to services and handles serpents himself. Covington “seeks his own roots in the religious heritage of Appalachia not so much to know and confront it, as to conquer and flee it. Serpents are his means not his end.”<sup>417</sup> *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is much more focused on Covington’s spiritual journey and self-discovery than the journalistic documentation of the serpent-handlers. *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is more a creative-writing autobiographical piece and does not accurately represent the serpent-handlers or religious practices of Appalachia.

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<sup>412</sup> Ralph W. Hood, “Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia,” *Appalachian Heritage* 23, no. 3 (1995): 54.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>414</sup> Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 20.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>417</sup> Hood, “Salvation on Sand Mountain,” 55.

In his review of the book, Ralph Hood says that “[Covington’s] story robbed those on Sand Mountain of the fair opportunity to have their own story told in any approximation to historical or descriptive adequacy.”<sup>418</sup> The representations of serpent-handlers and their beliefs in *Salvation on Sand Mountain* rely heavily on stereotypes. Hood points out that

We are reminded of supposedly outdated clothing, poverty, and the toothless. Covington’s imagination and writing skill transform even the most basic facts. The Porters’ pleasant brick home gets transformed into a bricked-over double-wide trailer. (It is not; [Hood has] been to this house).<sup>419</sup>

Covington’s representations of the serpent-handlers emphasize that the serpent-handlers do not conform to normative standards. Covington chooses to highlight the characteristics that suggest lower class, such as outdated clothing, missing teeth, being poor and categorizing their houses as “bricked-over double-wide trailers.” By focusing on and exaggerating these characteristics, Covington creates a barrier between the serpent-handlers and the book’s audience while also reifying Covington’s eventual argument that the serpent-handlers exist in opposition to modernity. At the end of his memoir, Covington informs the readers that he will no longer handle serpents, saying, “I refuse to be witness to suicide, particularly my own.”<sup>420</sup> Covington denounces the serpent-handlers and his heritage, saying, “Knowing where you are from is one thing, but it’s suicide to stay there.”<sup>421</sup> His comments cement the position of the serpent-handlers as being others.

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid, 364.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid, 263.

He is saying that serpent-handling is akin to self-destruction, which is not congruent with normative secular society.

Robert Orsi criticizes the popular book *Salvation on Sand Mountain* by reporter Dennis Covington for “taking a long detour to reestablish the prejudices against snake handlers many readers started out with, alongside whatever fascination drew them to the work as well.”<sup>422</sup> Covington spends most of his time humanizing members of the serpent-handling sects and exploring his interest in them before abruptly changing his tone. Covington solidifies the serpent-handlers as being incongruent with normative society.

Normativity is a set of culturally accepted values and ethics. Not only do “we” define ourselves in contrast to the others, but we also use them to maintain the status quo. In a society that values binaries such as ours, we define ourselves partly through those dissimilar from ourselves. We place our ideals on a pedestal, and the communities that do not share the same values become our scapegoats.

## Conclusion

Societal groups and collective identities are social constructs. Society defines itself through reference to beliefs, values and practices deemed non-normative. These norms are dynamic and subjective, continually being defined, interpreted, reinterpreted and redefined. Reiterating Sean McCloud, “Labeling [sic] the exotic is a crucial step in identifying its opposite, the domestic- that constituted as normal and everyday.”<sup>423</sup> Society, like its norms, continually defines and redefines itself in comparison with others.

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<sup>422</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 183.

<sup>423</sup> McCloud, *Making the American Fringe*, 36.

Othering creates hierarchal categories in order to underscore the privilege of the dominant group. The dominant societal group targets smaller groups based on race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, and religion. The “internal other” is a smaller group within the dominant culture, which is considered antithetical to the nations’ norms and values. The internal other is not fully “us” but is also not fully “them.” More often than not, othering relies on negative stereotypes of primitivity and backwards irrationality. In contrast to the other, “we,” the majority group are modern, rational and progressive. These narratives depict the marginalized group as needing to be reformed or rehabilitated to fit in with the dominant group. At the same time, the internal other become a scapegoat on which the negative traits of the majority culture are ascribed.

The internal other enables the majority culture to justify and maintain the status quo, holding securely onto our position of power. Not only does the majority culture define itself in relation to others, but the creation of an internal other also enables the majority culture to deflect the systemic societal faults onto a smaller “primitive” subset of the majority population.

The serpent-handling sects are easy targets for the internal othering process. They, like much of the American majority population, are white, English-speaking, heteronormative, patriarchal Christians. They are not immigrants, nor are they of different ethnicities, or different ability levels. Serpent-handlers are, however, are located within the Appalachian Mountain region, where 42% of the population lives in rural areas.<sup>424</sup> Comparatively, only 20% of the rest of the American population lives in rural areas.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> “The Appalachian Region,” Appalachian Regional Commission.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

Appalachia is known for its sprawling landscape and suffers under the sway of distinct cultural stereotypes involving poor, uneducated hillbillies. Their world-denying moral codes, religious convictions and “bizarre” rituals serve as exploitable boundaries between the serpent-handlers and the rest of normative secular American culture. The social imaginary of the serpent-handlers is a stereotype. Serpent-handlers are presumed irrational, backwards, primitive, rural and ignorant. The narratives about serpent-handling help the majority population establish its self-perception as being rational, modern, progressive, urban, and enlightened.

As we have seen, scholars, legislators and media networks perpetuate these stereotypes through incomplete, misinterpreted or misrepresented narratives that remove the individuality and context of the serpent-handlers. Etic bias is imposed onto the serpent-handlers, and emic voices are ignored or over-shadowed. Academia, legislation, and media helps categorize normativity.

The early academic interpretations of serpent-handling sects are laden with primitivism. Scholars pathologized the serpent-handling ritual, reducing it to a symptom of mental illness and maladaptation to the harsh Appalachian life. These approaches rely on negative stereotypes and place serpent-handlers outside of normative religious expression.

The American constitution promises freedom of religion, but the courts have ruled that it does not guarantee freedom of religious expression. The state has decided that protecting people from being maimed or killed during religious rituals overrides the right to religious liberty. In response to public outcry against injuries and deaths in serpent-handling sects, most Appalachian states made serpent-handling illegal. Other dangerous

behaviours that can also result in maiming or death, such as hang-gliding and parasailing, remain legal. Even in areas where serpent-handling is not explicitly prohibited, related laws such as keeping the peace may be used to limit the serpent-handling practice. In banning serpent-handling, legislators are defining acceptable religious practice. Anything deviating from this is outside of normative society. Media depictions of serpent-handling heavily influenced the laws prohibiting serpent-handling.

Language influences our perceptions and media representations of serpent-handling sects are often laden with sensationalist language. Early media depictions of serpent-handling sects such as newspapers and magazines reported heavily on the deaths and injuries caused by snakebites in the serpent-handling sects. Media depictions have gone largely unchanged. Modern media continue to sensationalize the serpent-handlers capitalizing on their perceived oddity, such as in *My Life Inside* or their primitivity such as *Snake Salvation*. Fair representations such as *Holy Ghost People* are rare. The sensationalist representations are reproduced and exaggerated until they become “truth.”

That reported truth becomes how the rest of society imagines the serpent-handlers. They are characterized in order to underscore secular conventions and culture. Serpent-handlers have become a scapegoat which we use to justify and define ourselves.

Societal narratives, including those around serpent-handling, shape our perceptions, culture and actions. Othering creates national unity at the expense of others. Society is deconstructed into essentialist rhetoric and this perpetuates marginalization.



## Appendix

Perry, Emma. "HISS-TERIA Inside notorious 'serpent church' where devotees die from grabbing rattlesnakes, drinking deadly poison and setting fire to their skin to prove their faith." *The Sun*, October 19, 2018.

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7512634/inside-snake-church-kentucky/>.

THIS is the nail-biting moment a pastor drinks fatal poison while holding up a deadly rattlesnake with his bare hands - and miraculously survives.

As the deadly strychnine, which can cause muscle spasms, convulsions and asphyxiation, begins to take hold, Pastor Chris Wolford has to sit down on the altar, struggling to breathe and sweating profusely.

Chris had mixed a white powder with water to make a clear liquid in the glass jar, before drinking from the supposed "poison".

But just minutes later the preacher is up on his feet dancing and praising God while swinging the - eerily motionless but still alive - snake through the air.

Shockingly Pastor Chris Wolford was just 11 when he watched his dad haemorrhage to death from a snake bite during a service.

His brother also died from the same dangerous practices - but he refuses to lose faith in God and the "Signs" religion.

The faith is practised in the Appalachian mountains of Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia and is based on a literal interpretation of a passage in the bible Mark 16:18 which says: "They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

Earlier this year dramatic footage emerged of Pastor Cody Coots, who was almost killed by a rattlesnake during a ritual at another church in Kentucky.

Many of the religion's churches - only a handful of which still remain open - are often closed to outsiders and cameras - particularly as snake handling is illegal in Virginia and Kentucky.

But Sun Online was granted exclusive access to one of Chris's church in Squire, West Virginia - which he says is "open to all".

Before the service, Chris paces up and down, cries and prays as he gets ready to lead his congregation.

Music is a huge part of the faith, and as the two guitarists and drummer start playing their mixture of blues and country music, Chris starts to preach.

His mother Vicie, 73, comes to the front and begins spinning round and round, eyes closed as her son praises Jesus.

Chris then lights a torch in a glass bottle and Vicie holds it next to her neck, without flinching and leaving no sign of any burn marks.

The pastor quickly takes the hissing rattlesnake out of its wooden box and begins swinging it in the air.

The service ends with singing and testimonies from individuals about how God has saved them, before everyone cheerfully gathers in the basement to share dinner - next to Chris's snake den.

Exhausted Chris sits down and tells me it can take him days to recover but nevertheless he'll be back the next week to do it all again.

### **'Saved' from drug addiction**

Set back off the main road just a few miles from the border of Virginia and West Virginia, the small wooden church looks similar to the dozens of others that dot the rural Bible Belt area.

The serpent-handling churches are believed to have originated as early as the 1800s - and are an offshoot of the Pentecostal faith.

In the past six years, there have been three recorded deaths in the US from snake bites during religious services.

Chris does not advertise that his church practices serpent handling on the outside – after receiving threats to burn down the building from rival Christian groups who believe the practice is against the word of God.

Chris, a recovered drug addict, set up the church after he said: “God saved him” from addictions to crystal meth, cocaine and pain pills - and his congregation has grown from just three to over 30 in just two years.

He decided to open his own church after the death of his brother Randy, who was also a pastor in the faith.

Many members of the congregation claim that they have been healed from other addictions such as alcoholism as well as illnesses such as lupus and heart conditions.

“I guess people, think that by taking up serpents that we're crazy. But the Bible says if I be a fool, I be a fool for Christ,” Chris said.

'No greater feeling'

"We've had people healed just in the past few months, even a little baby of about nine months old, who had a fever and couldn't stop vomiting.

"I've been healed twice. When I broke my ribs in a car wreck, I remember walking into church in so much pain and I could hardly breathe and somebody put their hands on my ribs and I walked out a different person.

“When I was on drugs I wasn't even living. All that dope, all that alcohol, all those parties and things that I would go and think ‘boy I'm having fun'.

“It wasn't even until God come into my life that I actually knew what it was like to live.

“Out of all the dope I've ever done I tell people there's no greater feeling than the power of God moving, on you and through you.

“When God moves on you to take up those serpents, words can’t describe that feeling. It ain't me. It's the power of God.”

### **Speaking in tongues**

Services at the House of the Lord Jesus are similar to those practiced by other Pentecostal faiths - except that followers here use snakes, fire and poison in their worship.

They are held every Sunday and can last between 45 minutes to four hours long depending on how many people feel “overcome with the spirit”, want to testify about their experiences or be healed.

The snakes are always brought to the service in their wooden boxes but aren't always brought out.

Chris had explained earlier how he wouldn't take out the snakes unless he felt the “holy spirit was with him” a sensation he says “is better felt than described”.

Throughout it all, the snake never bites anyone around it or attempts to, and almost looks lifeless, until Chris puts it down on the pulpit and it coils into a ball.

During the fascinating spectacle, the frenzied churchgoers clap, dance, scream and shout some even appear to speak in tongues.

### **Vomiting mid-service**

Afterwards Chris, who suffers from liver problems and is unable to work, is exhausted, sweating and breathless.

He tells me afterwards he had to rush to the bathroom to vomit mid-service: “Sometimes the spirit comes on so strong it makes you sick,” he says.

Three people come forward to be healed or to ask for prayers for loved ones. The congregations gathers around them and lay their hands on them.

“Outside of believing in the five signs of the Gospel I don't think we're much different from any other church.

“When God moves in that way we participate in taking up the serpents and whatever else he may ask it to be, fire, poison, pray for the sick, speak in tongues, cast out devils.

“We don't worship the snake, we worship the Lord Jesus Christ, but in the Bible Luke tells us that he gives us power to tread on the scorpions and serpents and nothing shall hurt us by no means.

### **Families finding Jesus through snakes**

James Bowman, 40, a mechanic from West Virginia, said he came to the church for the first time two months ago after seeing a video of a service online and believes “finding Jesus” has finally cured him from his lifelong alcoholism.

“It was the serpents that attracted me here,” he said.

“I was a full blown alcoholic but as soon as I saw him lift those snakes that was it for me and I haven't touched a drop of alcohol since and I don't plan to. I've got my life back.”

James now brings his wife Crystal, 41, to the church - along with their three grandchildren, Elaila, 8, Justin, 5, and Aubrey, 2, who sit in the front row mesmerised and unafraid during the snake-handling service.

### **'Worth dying for'**

Pastor Chris was just 11 years old when he saw his dad receive a fatal bite from a rattlesnake as he was preaching.

Mack Ray Wolford died a slow and painful death as the snake's poison coursed round his body stopping his blood from clotting, causing him to haemorrhage to death - taking his last breathe around nine hours later.

Almost 25 years later, Chris watched as his beloved brother Mack "Randy" Wolford die in the same way – bitten by a deadly rattlesnake while he was preaching during an outdoor service.

Chris tearfully recalls trying to give his brother - who he described as his "best friend" - CPR and how blood gushed out of his lungs with every compression.

"I hated to lose my dad. I loved my dad. And I loved my brother more than anything. He was my pastor, my brother, my best friend.

"I mean there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't call him or he didn't call me - we were very, very close. Not a day goes by I don't think about him but he found something that was worth dying for, something that he loved more than he loved his self.

"The day he got bit - and it was the same with my father - when we asked 'do you want to go to the hospital?' They could - we don't force nobody not to go. But they chose not to go. They were willing to give their lives for what they believe.

"I tell people this, if it ain't worth dying for, it ain't worth having and it ain't worth believing in.

"With my father and my brother, they kept the faith. They fought a good fight, they kept the faith, they finished the race, the course and they're at peace or with the Lord now.

"And I don't even think if they could come back, they'd want to come back. I believe that they're just happy where they are.

"The night he died - my brother - I remember sitting at his feet and I told him, I promised, that we'd see each other again, that it's not going to be the last time we saw each other and I'm going to do my best to keep that promise. So one day we can meet on the other side." And Chris, who has been bitten several times, the last time just two months ago, says that while he doesn't want to die from a serpent bite, he would be willing to die for his beliefs if he had to.

"It's not for us to question why these things happen - it's to believe," he said.

"I watched my father die that way, I watched my brother die that way and it's a hard way to die, but I hope if it's ever asked from me from the Lord, I'm willing to do it.

"I'd rather go that way than with a needle in my arm."

Chris's wife Judy comes in part-way through the service and stands at the back.

### **Each Sunday could be his last**

She also lost a family member - her brother - who got bitten while serpent handling and she is terrified of losing her husband the same way.

"Of course every Sunday I worry it might be the last time I see him. I worry about him getting bit.

“I’d rather he could worship God another way - without drinking that poison or holding those snakes.

“But it’s his choice and there ain’t nothing I can do to change that.”

Chris keeps around half a dozen fully grown snakes in the basement underneath his church - including venomous timber rattlesnakes and copperhead snakes.

He also has around four babies after he was given a pregnant snake.

Usually the snakes are caught from the surrounding countryside, and kept with heat lamps in glass cages and fed mice.

A picture of Jesus watches over the snake den.

Chris rejects any claims he mistreats the snakes - and has past inspections from local authorities.

“We take good care of these snakes. Some of them I reared since they were babies.

“If any of them refuse to eat we put them back out in the wild - some of them just won’t eat in captivity and we don’t want them to die so we turn them back out.”

Bizarrely Chris seems terrified of the snakes when he uses his snake hook to display them for the camera.

The jittery snakes rattle and hiss at every opportunity - the very opposite of how the rattlesnake in the service limply allowed itself to be swung around.

“You can see how scared I am of them when God is not with me,” he says.

“But when the Spirit is with you all fear just goes.

“Anything is possible with the Lord.”

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