To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by William Paul Williamson entitled "The Experience of Religious Serpent Handling: A Phenomenological Study." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Psychology.

Howard R. Pollio, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

THE EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS SERPENT HANDLING:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Dissertation Presented

for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

William Paul Williamson

December, 1999

Copyright © William Paul Williamson, 1999
All rights reserved

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory

of my mother, Ollie Dean Williamson, whose

encouragement I have felt throughout this project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In reflecting back over the process of an endeavor such as this, it becomes increasingly apparent that its completion would not have been possible without the cooperation, guidance, and support of several important persons. First of all, I would like to extend my thanks to the 17 participants of this study. Some of them had felt personally abused by previous investigations of their sacred practice and were at first reluctant to share their religious experiences until learning of my interest to describe them only from their point of view, something that seldom had been done by other researchers. Without their willingness to cooperate, in providing intimate details of their experiences, this study would not have been possible. I thank them for their participation as well as the churches and pastors with whom they worship for treating me so kindly and allowing me to be a part of their worship experience.

I wish to express grateful appreciation to two men, Dr. Howard R. Pollio and Dr. Ralph W. Hood, Jr., who have profoundly influenced my life in ways they may never fully understand, both as mentors and as personal friends. I am very thankful to Howard, who willingly took me under his wing--despite my unusual research interests--and taught me to pursue my investigations with passion and an appreciation for the meaning of personal experience. His insight, enthusiasm, and timely words of encouragement have provided me inspiration more than once throughout this endeavor. As well, he willingly gave me audience to express my ongoing struggles with religion, spirituality, and the greater meaning of life--issues, of course, not unrelated to the subject of this present investigation. Howard's influence on my life, both as a person and as a psychologist concerned with

human experience, is reflected throughout the following pages of this work.

I am greatly indebted to Ralph, without whose personal support and encouragement, extending over several years, this project would not have been. It was he who first sparked interest in my heart, as an undergraduate, to consider the investigation of religious experience from a psychological perspective. Throughout my academic career, he has taught me to think critically about religion and spirituality, and, at the same time, to hold in respect the legitimacy of their various traditions and experiences. In addition, his constant concerns for quality research in the psychology of religion have made an indelible impact upon my life as a researcher, for which I am indeed thankful. I am also appreciative of his personal friendship which has meant much to me over the years, especially at critical times of transition in my life that were often difficult for others to understand. As a mentor and a research colleague, Ralph's influence shows up throughout this study.

I would also like to thank the other men who served on my committee. Dr. Ronald E. Hopson has been a constant source of support during the course of this study, both as a friend who shares with me roots in a common religious heritage and as a psychologist of religion who has engaged me in challenging discussions on the present subject. I wish to thank Dr. Jack E. Reese whose support and willingness to contribute to this research extended even beyond his retirement from The University of Tennessee. Both these persons have touched my life and have influenced this present investigation in significant ways.

I cannot help but acknowledge the contribution of Howard Pollio's research group with whom I met on numerous Wednesday evenings throughout my graduate career at

Tennessee. It was because they were willing to take seriously an unusual religious practice that the present study progressed to its completion with the present findings. Their willingness to "bracket" initial presuppositions and contribute to the process of interpretation in this study will never be forgotten. I feel particularly grateful to Dr. Ronda Redman-Reitz whose kindred spirit and personal interest in this research have served as a source of personal inspiration.

Above all people, I wish to express gratitude to my wife, Gloria, and our two children, Misty and Andy, whose personal sacrifices and support have made this educational experience, and its culmination in the present study, possible. Over the past four years, no one has been more supportive and has believed in me more than Gloria; I borrowed often from her positive outlook and endless encouragement to renew my faith and confidence that I could reach the end of this endeavor. During this extended period, Misty has graduated from college and my son has himself become a college student, yet, despite their busy lives, they always expressed interest in my research and spoke of their pride in my efforts. The lives of my immediate family have contributed to this present study in immeasurable ways that cannot be fully described. I want all three of them to know that I love them very much.

ABSTRACT

An interesting practice among certain Holiness-Pentecostal sects of Appalachia is the religious taking up of venomous serpents in obedience to a perceived mandate of scripture--Mark 16:17-18. The purpose of the present study was to describe the first-person experience of this practice through use of a phenomenological method involving dialogic interviews and hermeneutic interpretation. In the course of this investigation, 17 participants, 5 of them women, were engaged in open-ended dialogue in which they described various personal experiences of handling poisonous serpents. From a hermeneutic analysis of the transcribed texts, a consistent pattern of four major themes emerged to characterize the awareness of meaning attached to the experience by all participants. These interdependent themes and subthemes are as follows:

I. "Wanting to Do" (the Word of God)

II. "Death"

III. Connection with God (on the basis of):

  A. "Faith"

  B. "Anointing" ("God Moving on Me")

IV. "Fear"/"Victory"

These findings were discussed with respect to the previous literature on religious serpent handling in terms of providing a more complete understanding of the practice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW	1
II.	THE HISTORY AND EMERGENCE OF THE SERPENT HANDLING TRADITION	10
	The Larger Pentecostal Context	11
	The Church of God Becomes Pentecostal	26
	Signs within a Pentecostal Church	36
	Serpent Handling Becomes a Pentecostal Sign	42
	Serpent Handling--A Church of God Practice	49
	The Dispersion of Serpent Handling	59
	On the Theology of Serpent Handling	67
III.	THE VENOMOUS REPTILE	74
	The Biology of Snakes	74
	Characteristics of Snakes	75
	Striking Tendencies	77
	The Severity of Snakebite	80
	Snake Venom	81
	Snakebite Immunity	83
	Snake Symbolism	84
	Human and Snake Interactions	90
	Herpetological Accounts	91
	Fear of Snakes	94
	The Care of Snakes	100
	Summary and Conclusions	103
IV.	CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL VIEWS OF THE RELIGIOUS SERPENT HANDLING TRADITION	106
	The Media and Popular Literature	106
	The Empirical Literature	115
	Psychodynamic Approaches	116
	Deprivation Approaches	122
	Psychophysiological Approaches	139
	Anointing among Serpent Handling Sects	140
	Anointing and Dissociative Trance States	143
	Descriptive Approaches	151
V.	THE METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES	161
	Philosophical Assumptions	161

CHAPTER PAGE

V. (Continued)
Phenomenology 163
Existentialism 167
Hermeneutics (and a word about Postmodernism) 173
An Integrated Perspective 177
The Methodological Procedure 177
The Initial Question 178
The Bracketing Interview 179
The Phenomenological Interview 180
Phenomenological Interpretation 184
Group Process 184
Hermeneutic Technique 186
A Word On Validity 187
Methodological Application to the Present Study 188
Bracketing Interview 188
Participants 189
Procedure 190
Analysis 191

VI. RESULTS 193
The Context of Experience 193
The Analysis 195
Theme I: "Wanting to Do" (the Word of God) 198
Theme II: "Death" 201
Themes in the Experience of Near-Death Bites 203
Theme III: Connection with God 208
Subtheme A: "Faith" 210
Subtheme B: "Anointing" ("God Moving on Me") 212
"Protection" 216
"Power to Do" 218
Theme IV: "Fear"/"Victory" 222

VII. THEY SHALL TAKE UP SERPENTS: A MORE COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING 229
Summary of Findings and A Global Description 229
Relevance of Findings for the History of the Pentecostal Experience 231
Relevance of Findings for the Contemporary Literature 236
The Media Perspective 236
The Psychodynamic Perspective 238
The Deprivation Perspective 241
The Psychophysiological and Trance-state Perspectives 242

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Serpent handling sects, primarily in Appalachia, remain fiercely independent congregations that take as literal practice what is perceived as mandates in Mark 16:17-18 (Hood, 1998; Hood & Williamson, 1998). This passage, which has become a foundational text, has been associated with many Pentecostals at least since the historic 1906 Azusa Street revival (Hollenweger, 1972; The Church of God, 1910). It reads as follows:

> 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, KJV)[1]

Interpreting these words of the resurrected Jesus as imperatives for true believers, adherents of these small groups view the practice of four of these signs as unconditional mandates and one--the drinking of deadly substances--as conditional because of the prefaced word if. Serpent handling sects who practice all five signs do so simply to be in obedience to what they believe to be the expressed command of Christ.

Serpent handling sects typically meet at least once weekly to worship God and experience manifestations of the Spirit. While gathering for service, members greet each other, and any visitors present, with warm handshakes and mutual exchanges of

---

1 There is scholarly debate as to whether the latter passage of Mark 16 (vv. 9-20) appears in the original manuscript, although serpent handling sects--and other fundamentalists--counter this claim with a proclamation that divine providence has resulted in the present canon of scriptures which may be faithfully trusted as the infallible Word of God (see Chapter II; Carden & Pelton, 1976)

conversation; in some churches, bodily embraces are reserved for the faithful and same-sexed. At the opening of worship, it is standard practice for the pastor or some other designated person to cordially welcome everyone and encourage all to obey God as He moves in the service. Reference is usually made to the presence of serpents and often to a container of a poisonous solution, although caution is urged for certainty of God's anointing before engaging in these activities. After an initial concert prayer, someone begins a song that is then followed by the strumming of guitars, beating of drums, clashing of cymbals, and shaking of tambourines, as others clap hands and join in with expressions of praise to God. With the onset of music, what seems at first to be a cacophonous exhibition soon gives rise to a synchrony of living worship in which believers move freely about and celebrate what is felt to be the presence of God.

Suddenly, and without announcement, someone moves toward one of the special wooden boxes, unlatches the lid, and calmly extracts a venomous serpent. As others gather around the activity, participation in worship increases with a more compelling sense of God's presence and direction, while other serpents are taken out and passed among the obedient. Amidst these manifestations, another believer passes by others, almost unnoticed, to take a container from the pulpit, remove its lid, and swallow a portion of its toxic contents. The jar is resecured and quietly returned to its place as the believer takes a moment to worship God in solitude and reverence. When the atmosphere of worship is sensed to have shifted, serpents are returned to their boxes at which time the sick, oppressed, and spiritually needy are offered ministry through prayer and the laying on of hands. At such times, the focus becomes helping others receive what they need from God

by personal surrender and obedience to the Spirit. These activities are then followed by special singing, personal testimonies of praise, and extemporaneous sermons that instruct the righteous, admonish the backslidden, and exhort the unbelieving. As the two-to-three hour service draws to a close, believers fellowship once more, then leave one by one until the next scheduled meeting. While the pattern may vary in order and duration, most services include these basic components that were common, except for serpents and poisonous solutions, to early Pentecostalism.

Pentecostalism itself came into its own from the Holiness movement around the turn of the twentieth century (Synan, 1997). Finding roots among the poor and disenfranchised, Holt (1940) has suggested that this brand of ecstatic religion achieved success in the first half of this century, particularly in the South, as a manifestation of "nature's power" to bring about healing to those who had experienced psychological isolation and insecurity from the process of urbanization. As the farm population migrated to urban areas for work, displacement from rural values, strict social controls, and a particular mode of former existence--coupled with low income and social discrimination by the more established urban population--often led to psychological tension, cultural shock, and maladjustment. The rise of Holiness and Pentecostal sects was said to be helpful in striking a psychological balance in confronting urban trends toward permissive social values combined with mainline religious tendencies toward liberalism, both of which conflicted with migrants' more conservative values. Hence these new sects became both a successful buffer for the estranged and a manifest protest against modernistic social and religious developments of the time (Synan, 1997).

During this period, the most successful of both Holiness and Pentecostal sects dominated the attention of social scientists as the need to explore their less organized factions went largely unnoticed (Holt, 1940). Such investigations, said Holt, might reveal how that religious experience among these groups serves to provide meaning and a sense of hope in their confrontation with hostile environments. Despite early notice of this bias, Cobb (1965), some 25 years later, and even Hood (1998), almost five decades later, have observed that the neglect of social scientists to study fringe groups, such as serpent handling sects, persists as the current norm thus leading to the notion of these groups in society as stereotypically strange and pathological--constructs also reinforced by the media and popular literature (Birckhead, 1993).

As mainstream Pentecostalism advanced toward the middle class stratum of society, however, the scrutiny of social science that first pathologized these denominations (Cutten, 1927; Laffal, 1965; Stagg, Hinson, & Oates, 1967) soon gave way to research that normalized and legitimated their religious worship and practices (Hine, 1969; Samarin, 1972c; Kildahl, 1972; Richardson, 1973; Coulson & Johnson, 1977; Spanos & Hewitt, 1979; Smith & Fleck, 1981; Malony & Lovekin, 1985). This transformation can be seen as stemming from two factors: first, the tendency of modern Pentecostal groups to distance themselves from intense emotional experiences found at odds with the larger society (Holt, 1940; Poloma, 1989; Hood, 1998); and, second, the willingness of social scientists to take the religious experiences of these groups as a legitimate focus of study (Malony & Lovekin, 1985). While it would not be expected that serpent handling sects will lessen their value on practices which are themselves a matter of great social tension--

that is, the handling of serpents and ingestion of poison--it does seem that a redirection of serious scientific inquiry into the meaning of such activities, as understood from within their context of experience, would provide a better understanding of these sects than is currently available to most social scientists and society at large. In agreement, Maguire (1981) has called for further research of serpent handling sects using descriptive type methodologies that move past the "unfair and sensationalized reports" (p. 179) of past investigations.

Having been reared within a mainstream Holiness-Pentecostal tradition myself, I was struck on my first visit to a serpent handling church by the familiarity of the worship service--that is, with the exception of using venomous serpents and strychnine. The lack of a scripted order for the service, the casual dress of congregants, and the free-style manner of participant worship all were reminiscent of my own experiences when growing up as a youth in my father's church. Such informalities, which I (surprisingly) found to be spiritually refreshing, were in marked contrast with much of what successful mainstream Pentecostalism has become today (Poloma, 1989). At the conclusion of the service, I was also surprised to find from interactions with believers that, despite the strangeness of serpent handlers conveyed by popular stereotypes, they were no different on a personal level from church people of my acquaintance in years gone by at a time when my own denomination was less concerned with "progress" and accommodating modernity. What began in January of 1995 as a curious inquiry into an anomalous version of my own religious heritage has continued into five years of extensive field research among serpent handling sects variously located in the states of Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky,

West Virginia, and North Carolina. To the present, this research has resulted in attendance at nine different churches, six of which were of the oneness doctrine.[2]

In the process of this research, a variety of events has been witnessed from the perspective of participant-observation, though I have never taken up serpents personally. At present, my observations consist of 89 worship services, including local meetings, revivals, and homecomings; 13 home visits; at least 9 instances of serpent bite in church; 17 formal interviews; a funeral wake service; 3 funerals, 2 of which were for a husband and wife who were each fatally bitten on different occasions while practicing the sign; a graveside serpent handling service; 2 snake hunting expeditions with a serpent handler, and a court custody case concerning the children of the deceased husband and wife. Entire worship services have been videotaped on 79 occasions, as well as 17 personal interviews, a funeral service, and 2 snake hunting expeditions. These materials are housed in the Hood-Williamson Research Archives for the Serpent Handling Holiness Sects, Lupton Library, the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. Afforded a personal history in Pentecostalism, I have investigated the phenomenon of serpent handling within its religious context and offer the findings of this study with regard to its meaning for those who practice it.

2

It seems that two versions of the godhead doctrine in Christianity, each with its own unique baptistic formula, have brought about significant division even among serpent handling sects--the doctrine of trinity versus that of oneness (or "oneless," as it is sometimes called). Those subscribing to the trinity doctrine believe the godhead is comprised of three distinct personalities in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, whereas those of the oneness persuasion hold that Jesus is in fact the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It is very uncommon for believers of these differing faiths to intermingle since each has bearing on the formula for Christian baptism--hence eternal salvation is at issue.

To consider the practices of serpent handling sects, a historical understanding is required of the religious tradition that contributes to contextualizing its meaning. Chapter II is concerned with the historical development of Holiness-Pentecostalism and the type of direct experience of God believed to be encountered by its adherents. It is from the mainstream development of the larger movement that those who adopted the more extreme Pentecostal sign of serpent handling were first marginalized and finally rejected. Forced to exist as independent congregations, their firm conviction of the practice as compliance to a literal reading of their sacred text left them to persist as autonomous groups even to the present time. The phenomenon of serpent handling is deeply rooted in the history of a religious tradition that emphasizes an emotional experience with God that transcends the immediate context of worship and bears influence in the everyday life of the believer. Part of coming to terms with what serpent handling means to practitioners dictates a taking into account the historical context that helped birth the experience and provide it meaning through an oral theology and language specific to the tradition.

Since the issues of fear and death are crucial in the serpent handling tradition, Chapter III is dedicated to literature on the various aspects of the venomous reptile itself, namely its biology and potential for harm, its various symbolic meanings cross-culturally, and in its interactions with human beings. Chapter IV is concerned with prior research literature that has focused on the religious serpent handling tradition, most of which has been responsible for constructing of our cultural understanding of the typical serpent handler as bizarre and pathological. This chapter begins with a review of media and popular literature, most of which have decontextualized the "sign" of serpent handling by

making it the center of attention, and sensationalizing it in such a manner as to attract prospective audiences. This is followed by a survey of various methodological approaches used by social sciences to study the tradition, along with findings that have been reported. As will be shown, such approaches are limited in their perspectives in at least one of three ways: (1) they tend selectively to seek out data that conform to their base theories while overlooking other information available from the perspective of serpent handlers themselves; (2) they tend to be reductive in explaining the practices of serpent handlers and, as such, render only a partial understanding of the phenomena; and/or (3) they fail to produce an encompassing description of the meaning of serpent handling by use of a rigorous method of analysis.

Given these limitations, it is the purpose of the present study to investigate the phenomenon of religious serpent handling with two specific goals in mind. First of all, in response to the first limitation, a phenomenological or dialogical interview will be used to collect data concerning the first-person experience of taking up serpents from the perspective of handlers themselves. Rather than seeking out "facts," it will take into account all information about serpent handling provided from non-directive interviews with participants who have had the experience. Secondly, a description of the meaning of taking up serpents will be rendered from a rigorous hermeneutic analysis of texts provided by participant interviews concerning such experiences. This interpretive aim addresses the second and third limitations of other studies in that: (1) it attempts to be non-reductive in its analysis while rendering a clear description of the phenomenon as experienced by participants; and (2) it seeks to arrive at a description of structured meaning by use of a

rigorous interpretive technique. While Chapter V focuses on the particulars of this methodology, and its use in the present study, Chapter VI will present the detailed results of this analysis including the themes that emerged as consistent across all interview texts.

These emergent themes, when taken together, will be shown, in Chapter VII, to formulate a global description of the meaning of taking up serpents for participants--a shared structure of meaning that is enlightening with regard to the experience. This final chapter also is concerned with the ways in which the present findings may inform other investigations of the serpent handling tradition--specifically, the general aspects of historical Pentecostal experience and the various perspectives of their practices provided from contemporary literature. Afforded a description of the personal meaning of this phenomenon, an effort is made to integrate the participant perspective with these objective views so as to develop a more complete picture of what religious serpent handling means within its own interpretative context. In addition, a concluding observation will present what seems to be the most compelling meaning of the practice from the perspective of participants.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY AND EMERGENCE OF THE SERPENT HANDLING TRADITION

In the religious world, it is of little debate that Pentecostalism has become a major movement within contemporary Protestant Christianity (Synan, 1997; Cox, 1995). In less than a century, its distinctive emergence from the Azusa Street revival of Los Angeles has encircled the globe with adherents that number to approximately one-half billion. Once thought attractive only to the poor, disenfranchised, and disconnected (Holt, 1940), the modern movement has expanded, appealing even to the upper middle class and highly educated of society (Cox, 1995). Moreover, while Catholicism and mainline Protestant denominations are reporting decreases in membership, attendance in Pentecostal churches has been on the rise largely due to those losses. That a movement, once marginalized by mainline denominations as aberrant and pathological (e.g., Cutten, 1927; Stagg, Hinson, & Oates, 1967), has now become a respectable vanguard for Christianity is interesting and deserving of attention in its own right (Cox, 1995). What is of even further interest, and of particular importance to the present study, is that religious sects who practice the handling of venomous serpents in their worship are descendants of the same movement, despite the minimization of such kinship by modern Pentecostal historians (Synan, 1997; Conn, 1996; Nichol, 1966).

The complexity of the serpent handling tradition, and its related phenomena, can be understood best by taking into account the historical and cultural backdrop from which

it emerged. The concern of this chapter is to focus on the process of this development, beginning with roots in the historical context of Holiness-Pentecostalism. It is from this larger movement that a certain Holiness church would come to be Pentecostal in character and known for a persuasive type of evangelism marked by "supernatural" signs--among the most convincing, the handling of venomous serpents. With denominational success, however, the sign of serpent handling became a marginal practice and eventually was left to those who would emerge and continue as independent sects through the influence of its alleged founder--George Went Hensley.

The Larger Holiness-Pentecostal Context

Despite the fact that some contemporary writers (Cox, 1995; MacRobert, 1988) place the origin of Pentecostalism at the renown 1906 Azusa Street revival, the roots of the movement extend further back into history (Creech, 1996; Synan, 1997). Synan (1997) has argued that Pentecostalism can be traced to the Wesleyan Holiness tradition that took root in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century and eventually spread throughout the American colonies from enthusiastic revival campaigns. The doctrine was conceived by John Wesley as a reaction against the exclusive doctrine of Calvinist predestination that dominated the period. Where Calvinism taught that only the elect could be saved, Methodism argued that eternal salvation was open to all who desired it; and while the Calvinist could not know of God's personal election for certain, the Methodist was persuaded of salvation because of a crisis conversion that was "heart-felt."

Fundamentally, Wesley's thesis taught there were two defining experiences for the Christian (Synan, 1997). The first was salvation, a crisis experience in which confession of

personal sin brought about forgiveness and justification before God. Though the person was justified, however, the sin nature was retained by the convert and continued to influence spiritual life--thus the need for a "second cure." In a second crisis experience, the person could be purged from this "Adamic" nature through sanctification and, thereby, become filled with perfect love toward God and others. For Wesley, this second blessing was not a deliverance from temptations and human failures, but an instant transformation of inner motives--a change in personal desire from that of pleasing the flesh to one of pleasing God. Once consecrated by this experience, self-examination and discipline would become the predominant avenues of life. Having implications for the psychology of experience, this new life-changing doctrine was effective in meeting the spiritual needs of the period and was successfully transplanted to America by the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

As revivals spread in America, the firm grasp of Calvinism eventually gave way to this fervent new kind of gospel, especially in areas where debauchery was reportedly rampant. In Brunswick County, Virginia, for example, Robert Williams led Methodist meetings that were punctuated by religious fervor and change. While pleading God's pardon for inbred sin, some "would be seized with a trembling, and in a few moments drop on the floor as if they were dead; while others were embracing each other with streaming eyes, and all were lost in wonder, love and praise" (Synan, 1997, p. 9). By 1776, half of all Americans in Virginia were Methodists--a region reportedly known at the time for its moral corruption and decay (Synan, 1997). From Virginia, these significant colonial revivals were to have a direct effect on others yet to come on the frontiers of Kentucky in

the nineteenth century.

Another important issue of this period was a concern of the early settlers in loosening the power of the Anglican Church on the colonies (Pitts, 1993). This "European" institution was perceived as one lacking in sufficient personal religious experience and moral conviction for the day--hence the depraved conditions. To bolster revival meetings, and dislodge the influence of the Anglican Church, Black slaves often were invited to revival campaigns and encouraged to take an active part. From the perspective of slaves, Pitts has suggested that two elements made participation especially appealing. First, the meetings condemned many activities of rich plantation owners as sinful and excessive; second, the high level of emotionality experienced in the worship was somewhat related to traditions deriving from their African homeland. Intrigued by such an opportunity, slaves became major participants in the emotionally charged revivals and gained some degree of acceptance, though only for short while, by the Whites involved. Joyner (1994) has cautioned, however, that they did not indiscriminately embrace the Christian God, or related beliefs, but simply "reinterpreted the elements of Christianity in terms of deep-rooted African religious concerns" (p. 37). Thus the first major conversion of African slaves to Christianity came on the tide of revivalism during the Great Awakening--a participation that was certain to have significant influence on the later emergence of Pentecostalism.

From a distance, Pitts (1993) saw revivalism of the mid-eighteenth century as important for three reasons. First, it provided Caucasians a religious outlet from economic frustration dealt them by wealthy plantation owners. Second, revivals of the period

somewhat bridged the gap between races: Whites who attended were employed as slave patrollers, yet they invited slaves under their overseership to meetings where all participated equally in worship. Third, this phenomenon was important since Blacks and Whites were converted together in a new type of Christianity that emphasized emotionality--one that involved being overwhelmed by the Spirit and one, it seems, that foreshadowed the Pentecostal experience to come. Not only did revivalism offer spirituality to its participants, said Pitts, it also was somewhat significant in lowering racial barriers at the time--a claim later made by Cox (1995) for Azusa Street Pentecostalism.

It has been observed that the emotional religious experience characterizing early Methodism was in great contrast to the mechanical and depersonalized experience found in institutional religion (Synan, 1997). This "heart religion" had strong attraction for the "poor and disinherited" (p. 10) of colonial and frontier America. As circuit riders of the late eighteenth century carried their message throughout the heartland, the passionate and volatile nature of backwood camp meetings appealed to the temperament of frontier life. The early pioneers had need of a rugged, emotional religion to suit them for coping with the challenges of a rugged, emotional life in the wilderness. The most famous Pentecostal-like revival occurred in 1801 at Cane Ridge, Bourbon County, Kentucky. Led initially by a group of Presbyterian ministers, who were later joined by Methodist clergy, the revival continued for over one year and was characterized by some of the most intense emotionality ever observed in American Protestantism. The interest and excitement of this event escalated to the level of a large-scale camp meeting in 1801, giving birth to what would become known in modern times as the American camp meeting revival.

Complimenting the vigorous disposition required for successful wilderness life, the religious fervor experienced by worshipers in these meetings was described as follows:

> Accustomed to "braining bears and battling Indians," they received their religion with great color and excitement. Their "godly hysteria" included such phenomena as falling, jerking, barking like dogs, falling into trances, the "holy laugh," and "such wild dances as David performed before the Ark of the Lord" ... After "praying through" some would crawl on all fours and bark like dogs, thus "treeing the devil." Others would fall into trances for hours ... In some services entire congregations would be seized by the "holy laugh," an ecstasy which could hardly be controlled. (Synan, 1997, p. 12)

The meeting climaxed in August of 1801 with crowds ranging from 10,000 to 25,000 in attendance. Because such religious experiences were found to have personal value for everyday life, the majority of all Christian Kentuckians were persuaded to this type of early Methodism by 1805. It was from eastern Kentucky that the Holiness tradition was to spread throughout the southeastern Appalachian regions of Tennessee, North and South Carolina, western Virginia, and Georgia. Everywhere revival emerged, the same kind of religious phenomena was said to have occurred--including that of speaking "in unknown tongues" in an 1801 meeting at the University of Georgia (Synan, 1997).

Many attending these camp meetings had by this time become the middle class, some owning slaves themselves (Pitts, 1993). Since American churches had been successful in escaping the throes of the Anglican Church, there was a deviation in these meetings from the revivalism of the past century. Though slaves were permitted to attend and participate in services, there were markedly less social cohesion in the events and more resistance directed toward their presence. Pitts has noted that, by the mid-1820s, the revival era ended, leaving a few slaves with opportunities to organize their own churches.

Because of slave rebellions like Vesey, Turner, and Prosser, however, these churches suffered blame and either were dissolved or intensely supervised by White congregations, thus forcing the oppressed groups to invisibility and secret meetings in "hush harbors" (Pitts, 1993, p. 50).

The Holiness movement continued to spread toward the middle of the century, although institutionalization and concerns over the doctrinal issue of sanctification had the effect of less "frenzied" worship experiences (Synan, 1997). As perfectionism became the dominant religious and social theme, revivals and their periodic "awakenings" became more cyclical in occurrence and less intense. The period also saw a proliferation in various periodicals given to the furtherance of Holiness teachings. In the 1860s, for example, the first paper dedicated only to the publication of Holiness doctrine, The Guide To Holiness, reached a circulation of some 30,000. As a Christian alternative to Emersonism, this "evangelical transcendentalism" (p. 30) and its emphasis on perfectionism continued to spread until the Civil War.

Although "sanctified" Christians thought slavery a blot on society, and greatly desired its end, this anti-slavery attitude was not shared by southern Methodists (Synan, 1997). In fact, this rent in the fabric of the church was destined to bring about its division, with the northern faction condemning slavery and the southern remnant supporting it. The great awakening revival of 1858 was influential only in the North whereas the South, striving to sustain the institution, failed to experience the movement altogether. From 1830 on, the quest for holiness was abandoned by Methodists in the South, resulting in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, all but removing Wesleyan holiness and perfectionism

from its literature and sermons by 1858. With the evils of slavery and war impinging, the era of the early Holiness movement in the U.S. came to a close.

After the Civil War, moral depression and "battlefield ethics" found their way into the affairs of government and business, thus an emphasis returned to Wesleyan principles and sanctification (Synan, 1997). In 1867, a modern Holiness crusade was begun in a Vineland, New Jersey, camp meeting in an attempt to unite and restore all Christians to holiness. This "National Camp Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness," which met with unqualified success, was an interdenominational call to all Christians initiated by Methodist ministers that would eventually be responsible for over 100 denominations emerging around world and have indirect impact upon bringing Pentecostalism to birth.

With the return of "fanaticisms," sinless perfection, "fire," and divine healing, however, came a rift within the Methodist church--the more traditional faction substituting the second definite work of sanctification for one more progressive and gradual (Synan, 1997). In 1894, the denouncement of the Holiness movement by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, sparked the formation of scores of new Holiness denominations composed of "come-outers" in protest against such issues as the doctrinal compromise on sanctification, escalating modernism in the church, and higher criticism of the Bible. Among the most successful churches of the Holiness Associations which organized were four particular denominations in the Southeast: the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, South Carolina (1895); the Pentecostal Holiness Church, North Carolina (1900); the Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee (1897); and what became later known as the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee (1896). These major denominations

were destined to play a significant role in the later spread of Pentecostalism in the South.

According to most accounts (Creech, 1996; Cox, 1995; MacRobert, 1988; Synan, 1997, 1988), the thread of Pentecostalism runs through Charles Parham, a White Holiness preacher of Topeka, Kansas, who was trained as a Methodist. Although glossolalia--speaking in tongues--had already been experienced in various Holiness sects, and even in other cultures (Malony & Lovekin, 1985), it had never been articulated as the exclusive doctrinal evidence of spirit baptism until Parham made the argument at his Bible school based on the biblical text of Acts 2:4 in December of 1900.[1] In an all-night service, Agnes N. Ozman, one of Parham's students, received the baptism of the Holy Ghost and spoke in tongues just after midnight, January 1, 1901, thus becoming the first person to receive such an experience according to this new theology. Other individuals present also received the experience and were said to have spoken in various foreign languages (Creech, 1996; Synan, 1997).

In 1901, Parham launched a series of revival meetings throughout the country, preaching the doctrine of spirit baptism by tongues (Creech, 1996; Synan, 1997), but later turned emphasis on faith-healing because of little recorded success (MacRobert, 1988). By 1905, he had relocated his headquarters to Houston, Texas, where he opened yet another training institution--the Bible Training School. It is at this point that William Joseph

---

1

The major biblical text from which the Pentecostal doctrine of tongues is derived states: "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). Other biblical texts also are used by Pentecostals to legitimate the doctrine (e.g., Isaiah 28:11; 33:19; Mark 16:17; Acts 2:11; 10:46; 19:6; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28; 14:5, 6, 18, 22, 39, etc.)

Seymour, the preacher-son of emancipated Louisiana slaves, crossed paths with Parham and became for himself a student of the new Pentecostal doctrine of tongues. Because of Parham's prejudice, however, the future Azusa Street Apostle was required to sit outside the classroom with the door ajar, a condition he evidently accepted without complaint. After short study, he ventured on, by way of invitation, to Los Angeles where he agreed to assume the pastorate of a new Holiness mission which had come into existence after its members were expelled from a Baptist church for their embracement of sanctification.

Armed with a new Pentecostal doctrine he had yet to experience for himself, Seymour encountered glaring opposition when preaching the subject to his new flock, and was literally locked out of the building by dissenting members after the very first service (Cox, 1995; MacRobert, 1988; Synan, 1997). The message was an affront to the fledgling group who had only recently sacrificed its former denominational ties for the acceptance of sanctification, a second blessing beyond conversion; now this neophyte pastor, upon arrival, was asserting there to be need for even a third blessing beyond the second--one of Holy Ghost baptism and speaking in tongues.

Refusing discouragement, however, Seymour conducted prayer meetings at the home where he stayed. At one such gathering in particular, on April 9, 1906, at least seven of the all Black participants fell to the floor in ecstasy and spoke in tongues--Seymour himself receiving the experience a few days later. As news traveled concerning the happenings of this event, curiosity seekers arrived at the house in increasing numbers, requiring Seymour eventually to preach from the front porch to congregants on the street. Locating an old, vacated Methodist church that had been converted first to a warehouse,

and then to a stable, Seymour and his followers moved into the crudely furnished structure at 312 Azusa Street.

Pentecostal revival services at Azusa Street were marked by highly emotional demonstrations of worship which in some ways were reminiscent of the Cane Ridge revival in Kentucky, nearly a century earlier. Synan (1997) stated that events at these services were indescribable.

> A visitor to Azusa Street during the three and a half years the revival continued would have met scenes that beggared description. Men and women would shout, weep, dance, fall into trances, speak and sing in tongues, and interpret their messages to English. In true Quaker fashion, anyone who felt "moved by the Spirit" would preach or sing. There was no robed choir, no hymnals, no order of services, but there was an abundance of religious enthusiasm. (p. 98)

Because of Los Angeles media coverage of the events, news of the phenomena was soon circulated over the entire American continent and Europe. Consequently, thousands converged upon the meager building to experience its lively worship three times a day, seven days a week, over the course of the next three years. Both Synan (1997) and Cox (1995) have observed that the revival was truly egalitarian in structure and interracial in its makeup, for worship involved spontaneous, interpersonal ministry among men, women, Blacks, Whites, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans--an interactive ministry that flowed indiscriminately from one to another. Religious leaders from all quadrants of the U.S. and various countries around the world traveled to the "New Jerusalem" to experience the Holy Ghost baptism with tongues. MacRobert (1988) stated that, within two years, over 50 nations around the world had been directly penetrated by the events of Azusa Street.

As events intensified, Parham was summoned to the revival by Seymour, who was

at a loss for direction in controlling the ecstatic demonstrations of worshipers. Upon arrival, the mentor was "shocked by the 'holy roller' aspects of the services and made efforts to correct the 'extremes and fanaticism' which he felt had gone 'beyond the bounds of common sense and reason'" (Synan, 1997, p. 102). He attempted to impose order on the meetings but was met with forceful opposition by key laypersons who asked him to leave--which he did with disgust, all the while denouncing the revival as a "prostitution" of spiritual power at the hands of "holy rollers" and spiritualists. The fervent revival continued in his absence without pause.

In reflection, the increasing interest in the revival coincided with various interrelated factors, two of which seem of particular concern and based on a fundamentalist logic of the text (see Kirkpatrick, Hood, & Hartz, 1991; Ammerman, 1991). As fundamentalists, the Holiness movement, which was instrumental to Azusa Street, held fastly to a premillennial doctrine that expected the literal return of Jesus, who was to rapture His church just prior to a tribulation period of God's judgment on the earth. After this period of wrath, it was believed that Jesus would return to earth with His church and set up a kingdom to rule in peace for one thousand years. Thus one concern of the religious in 1906 was the fact of a new century that had ushered in an expectancy for the imminent return of Jesus (Creech, 1996). With the perceived evils of modernism, Darwinism, and higher criticism directed toward the "inerrancy" of the Bible, believers became sensitive to the eschatological "signs" of the time and gave frequent warnings to the "lost" concerning the rapture and judgment of God to come.

Given this dynamic, perhaps one of the most fortuitous events serving to intensify

the Los Angeles revival was the factor of the great earthquake that shook San Francisco and the entire west coast, on April 19, 1906, less than two weeks after the meeting had begun (Synan, 1997). What was most compelling about this incident was that the Los Angeles Times had published on the previous day its first news release of the Azusa Street revival which included a description of the "frenzy and religious zeal" of participants, along with a prophecy given by a revival supporter based on a revelation received in church: "In his vision, he saw the people of Los Angeles 'flocking in a mighty stream to perdition.' He then prophesied 'awful destruction to this city unless its citizens are brought to a belief in the tenets of the new faith'" (Synan, 1997, p. 97). On the very next day, the Times intimated that the "awful destruction" had indeed come, through its descriptions of the earthquake's devastating impact upon San Francisco which were headlined with the caption: "Heart is Torn from Great City" (p. 98). Perceived as divine providence, the event made clear to the religious that occurrences at Azusa Street were a divine preparation for final things to come--a "last days" pouring out of spirit baptism that would effect world evangelism before the imminent return of Jesus.

A second factor affecting the magnitude of the revival was the influence of a similar type meeting in Wales that had begun in 1904 (Creech, 1996; Synan, 1997). News concerning the uncommon phenomena of the Welsh revival reached southern California where it inspired certain leaders, among them Frank Bartleman, to anticipate a modern replication of Holy Ghost visitation to an "American" Jerusalem as on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2)--this time, for the restoration of the New Testament church before the return of Jesus. Hence the British revival became an initial frame of reference that awoke

within key American figures a spiritual longing for a "second" Pentecost that would occur at Los Angeles.

Commenting on the events of Azusa Street, Hollenweger (1972) has raised a noteworthy point that eludes most Pentecostal historians and their critics, for reasons that are implicit by nature. He remarked:

> The 'Pentecostal experience of Los Angeles' was neither the leading astray of the Church by demons (as the German Evangelical movement claimed), nor the eschatological pouring out of the Holy Spirit (as the Pentecostal movement itself claims) but an outburst of enthusiastic religion of a kind well-known and frequent in the history of Negro churches in America which derived its specifically Pentecostal features from Parham's theory that speaking with tongues is a necessary concomitant of the baptism of the Spirit. (p. 23-24)

More important than the notion of Azusa Street as the "second" Pentecost is the recognition of its emotional, spiritual character as related to a particular people of the Southeast--slaves--and, I would venture, of Holiness Whites of the Appalachian region who at times had worshiped with them (Pitts, 1993). The "fixing" of glossolalia as the single evidence of spirit baptism at Los Angeles can be seen as a phenomenon that (1) articulated a cogent Pentecostal doctrine (Creech, 1996), and (2) delimited the range of emotionality expressed in the experience as a form of social control (Hood, 1998).

Creech (1996) noted that the eventual spread of Pentecostalism bifurcated into subcultures: one more conservative in the Mid- and Southwest, which distanced itself from Azusa Street; and the other in the Southeast, which acknowledged its ties to Los Angeles and various of its elements. The phenomenon of Azusa Street had been characterized by egalitarianism and ethical restoration; discriminations in regard to education, race, social status, and gender were engulfed in a worship context given to

spontaneity and ecstasy. According to Creech, the western, more conservative arm of the movement, led initially by Parham, was primarily concerned with forging the order of a new Pentecostal denomination that would eventually resurrect the pre-Azusa Street issues of education, race, and social status--all of which would seemingly lead to the loss of much of the spontaneity and ecstasy in worship. In fact, Poloma (1989) has recently documented the downward spiral of emotionality experienced among the Assemblies of God--a descendent of the Western movement--in relation to its concerns for institutional development. In the Southeastern segment, however, the Pentecostal doctrine spread to institutions that had predated the Azusa Street revival--most of which had already associated spontaneity and ecstasy in their worship with what was believed to be the direct experience of God, particularly in the Appalachian regions. For certain, most of these institutions already had issues regarding race and gender, yet the Pentecostal doctrine from the West more clearly defined their worship experiences and was easily embraced.

Among many important religious leaders attending Azusa Street was C. H. Mason, leader of the Black Church of God in Christ located in Tennessee (Cox, 1995; Synan, 1997). With his conversion to the doctrine of tongues, Mason's Memphis-based church eventually became the largest Black Pentecostal denomination in America (Synan, 1997, p. 70). C. B. Cashwell, associated with the Pentecostal Holiness Church of North Carolina, heard of the revival through news reports and traveled to Los Angeles where he himself received the Holy Ghost with tongues. Upon returning home, it was Cashwell who became instrumental in taking the tongues doctrine to the three remaining major Holiness denominations of the South: the Pentecostal Holiness Church of North Carolina; the Fire-

Baptized Holiness Church of South Carolina; and the Church of God which, by this time, had relocated to Cleveland, Tennessee. Through these four major denominations, the Pentecostal message with tongues was assured in the South and became synonymous with Holiness. Another critical figure was Baptist minister W. H. Durham of Chicago. It was he, after his Pentecostal conversion, who would become instrumental in formulating the "finished work" doctrine of salvation--a central tenet adopted by the Assemblies of God denomination when it organized in 1914.

It is from this point that Cox (1995) and others (Creech, 1996; MacRobert, 1988; Synan, 1997) center on the later expansion of the Pentecostal movement, its return to racial segregation, and its success in adapting to various worldwide cultures. As recipients of Holy Ghost baptism left Azusa Street, they carried in hand a doctrine of tongues as "biblical" evidence for their experience and spread it across America and the far corners of the earth.

An important psychological observation to note here is the use of a sacred text that modeled for participants at Azusa Street--and others since--a role concerning the reality and legitimacy of a religious experience, a perceived direct encounter with God through Holy Ghost baptism that was characterized by speaking in tongues (Holm, 1995; 1991). According to Sundén's role theory, religious experience, especially that encountered as supernatural, can be understood as taking the role of structured models provided by narratives of tradition found in sacred texts--in this case, the story of Pentecost in the Christian Bible. Such narratives contain two roles: that of a human party and that of God. In becoming familiar with the narrative, the person acquires the foundation from which

future spiritual experiences can emerge and a template that provides them with structure. At such times, motivation for seeking these events is thought triggered by a sudden lost feeling of security in an environment previously felt as safe. When this occurs, the person (unconsciously) takes over the role of the protagonist in the narrative as a performance, and also takes on the role of God in the sense that whatever happens in the context of experience can be perceived as being an act of God--a discernment of His immediate will. It is in this way that the person senses a "concrete" persuasion that God has been divinely responsible for the occurrences in the experience. In this mental shift, a "Thou" with a "purpose" has been encountered in pure relation through an experience that becomes all-encompassing--one that takes over complete control. Eventually, the person experiences a mental shifting from this religious context of encounter back to the secular realm of existence, altogether still feeling transformed by the experience. According to Holm (1995, 1991), the second chapter of Acts served as a narrative for Azusa Street participants who spoke in other tongues, as did the Apostles, and glorified God, as did the Apostles; and all of these events were experienced as under the direction of God.

The Church of God Becomes Pentecostal

The brief historical account of Pentecostalism is important in two ways: (1) it provides a foundation for Pentecostal experience; and (2) it provides a broader context for the emergence of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and its transition toward becoming a Pentecostal church--and one that, for a time, would come to practice the handling of venomous serpents as one of its convincing signs.

At the turn of the century, one of the major Holiness denominations, the Church of

God (Cleveland, Tennessee), was in process of birth (Synan, 1997). Charles Conn (1996), the denomination's historian, has pointed to 1886 as the church's origin. At that time, R. G. Spurling, Sr., a Baptist minister, became discontented with creedalism in his own denomination and organized, with seven others, the Christian Union Church in Monroe County, Tennessee. Willing to abandon denominational creeds, which were held to be unscriptural and divisive, this small group committed itself to the task of restoring pristine biblical Christianity and unity among all believers. Despite this worthy attempt at reformation--and the appointment of Spurling's younger son to leadership--the Christian Union dissolved shortly thereafter "for lack of interest" (Synan, 1997, p. 73) as charter members, including the elder Spurling, returned to their former churches. Inspired by his father and his own theology, however, Richard G. Spurling, Jr., continued his itinerant ministry in the mountains of Appalachia, establishing a few small "independent" congregations wherever he briefly settled--as has remained the typical practice of the region's Holiness preachers even to the present day (McCauley, 1995). Given that these small groups were "independent," it seems unlikely that most survived Spurling's departure. Without doubt, though, the major impetus for the Church of God came about through a significant Holiness revival that took place at Camp Creek, North Carolina, in 1896 (Synan, 1997).

As with frontier revivals of the early 1800s, the unique religion of this Appalachian region was, and has remained since, a blend spun together from various cultural traditions that adapted to the landscape, from a personal "awareness" of such traditions, and from the very nature of the mountainous terrain (McCauley, 1995). Mainly of Celtic, Scottish-

Irish, English, and German descent, settlers of the area came to depend upon a mysticism-oriented religion, rooted in heart-felt conversion, that equipped them for the emotional demands of challenging mountain life (Photiadis, 1978). The important perception of a direct encounter with God provided a powerful personal experience, giving religion both depth and rich meaning. For these individuals, God was experienced as a participant in the daily affairs of personal living, and it was such people who gathered at Shearer Schoolhouse, at Camp Creek, North Carolina, to experience a noted Holiness revival.

From the ministry of B. H. Irwin and his Fire-Baptized Holiness Association, revivals with Pentecostal-type activities had already spread to much of the Southeast by 1896 (Synan, 1997). Followers of the movement were accustomed to emotionally charged meetings in which participants would experience a third blessing beyond that of sanctification, often referred to as baptism with "fire." According to Irwin's theology, three separate experiences were available to seekers: (1) salvation that provided forgiveness of sins, (2) sanctification that eradicated the sin nature and made possible a holiness life, and (3) baptism with fire. Recipients of this third experience would reportedly "shout, scream, speak in other tongues, fall into trances, receive the holy dance and holy laugh, and even get the 'jerks'" (Synan, 1997, p. 52).

Having had contact with this movement, three evangelists--William Martin, a Methodist; Joe Tipton, a Baptist; and Milton McNabb, also a Baptist--began a series of meetings, in 1896, in the Shearer Schoolhouse at Camp Creek, which was to affect the community profoundly. Moved by enthusiastic, fire-baptized preaching, scores of converts were said to have fallen into the altars seeking for the experiences of sanctification and the

"fire," which, when encountered, were characterized by various ecstatic demonstrations, including that of tongues-speaking. The following description illustrates the kinds of experiences they encountered:

> The people earnestly sought God, and the interest increased until unexpectedly, like a cloud from a clear sky, the Holy Ghost began to fall on the honest, humble, sincere seekers after God. While the meetings were in progress, one after another fell under the power of God and soon quite a number were speaking in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance ... The power of healing was soon realized, and a number of miraculous cases of healings were wrought by the power of God. The people knew but little about the Bible, but they prayed, and shouted and exhorted until hundreds of hard sinners were converted. (Book of minutes, 1922, p. 11)

News of these of these events raised the interest of people in the region, prompting many to come and investigate the source of the spiritual fervor (Book of minutes, 1922). Reactions were mixed, however, with some being persuaded and others turning critical and hostile toward the group. After the revival closed, meetings were moved first to a log church, which antagonists soon dismantled and destroyed, and then to homes where unrelenting seekers continued to encounter these intense experiences (Davidson, 1973). As might be expected, rejection of this type of religious emotionality by the community, particularly established churches, was said to have become intense, even to the extent of home-burnings. However, the leadership of W. F. Bryant, a local Baptist lay minister, helped guide the group through these ensuing persecutions. Because they failed to organize as a church, however, the group lacked consistent government and teaching to safeguard both against persecution and sedition, and thus dwindled in number to no more than 20 by 1902 (Stone, 1977).

Through the influence of Irwin's movement, Richard G. Spurling, Jr., had also

come to embrace the Holiness doctrine of entire sanctification and holy living, and to reject the evils of society (Synan, 1997), even though he protested the "fanaticism" usually associated with such Holiness meetings (Conn, 1996). In frequent visits with Bryant's group, the itinerant preacher had encouraged his fellow believers to organize for the sake of surviving persecution and false doctrines; however, it was not until May 15, 1902, that the group finally organized as the Holiness Church at Camp Creek, with 20 charter members and Spurling as pastor (Book of minutes, 1922). Over the next year, the new Holiness sect, destined to become the Church of God, continued in its struggle to survive and exist according Spurling's concept of the New Testament church.

Drawn to the Holiness movement, A. J. Tomlinson, a Quaker-born salesman for the American Bible Society, often visited the home of W. F. Bryant on his treks through the Appalachian Mountains (Conn, 1996; Stone, 1977). It was there he grew in fellowship with the Holiness Church at Camp Creek, preached to its small membership, and encountered the teaching of Spurling concerning the restoration of the New Testament church. Invited to a Saturday Bible study of the group, he arrived at Bryant's home the previous evening (Evans, 1943). The next morning, he fellowshiped with the family at breakfast and then climbed to the top of nearby Burger Mountain where he spent critical time in prayer over whether to join the small congregation. Feeling resolved, he descended the mountain and was moved to join the church by covenant "with the understanding that it IS the Church of God [of the Bible]--not going to be, but IS the Church of God" (Evans, 1943, p. 12).

Because of his notable leadership abilities, Tomlinson was immediately selected as

pastor of the Holiness Church at Camp Creek the same day that he joined--June, 13, 1903 (Synan, 1997). Within two years of his leadership, the church expanded with three additional congregations located in Luskville and Union Grove, both in Tennessee, and in Jones, Georgia. Toward the end of 1904, however, Tomlinson transplanted the home base of the church from the heart of the mountainous Appalachian region to the nearby, small valley-town of Cleveland, Tennessee, where a central location and easy access to commerce would further its growth (Stone, 1977; McCauley, 1995). Descending the mountain with this Holiness church, however, came its mountain religious tradition that centered on a perceived direct experience with God, characterized by emotion, that found meaning in everyday life.

Through 1907, the small Holiness church had some notable growth, establishing a few congregations in the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia (Stone, 1977). By this time, all congregations of the group had met twice in two annual General Assemblies--both moderated by Tomlinson--to discuss and settle important points of doctrine and practice (General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914, 1992). In fact, it was in the 1907 General Assembly that the name Church of God was officially adopted to distinguish the group from scores of other independent Holiness congregations using variations of the same name. Since accurate records during this period were not well kept, it is impossible to measure precisely the extent of church growth, though there is speculation of some notable increase based upon General Assembly minutes. Because of concurrent events in Los Angeles, California, however, a new chapter of history would begin for the Church of God the following year.

Through various religious periodicals of the time, it is probable that Tomlinson received news of the much-publicized Azusa Street revival, which began in April of 1906, at sometime during that same year. In fact, he preached on the subject, "The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire," on Saturday night of the following General Assembly, January 23, 1907 (General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914, 1992). As Synan (1997) has observed, although some of its members had experienced glossolalia earlier, at the 1896 Shearer Schoolhouse revival, the church had yet to embrace the manifestation as the doctrinal sign of Holy Ghost baptism. That the Church of God did not link spirit baptism exclusively with tongues until after the 1906 Azusa Street revival is further suggested by evidence in its own historical documents--such as Tomlinson's personal diary (Journal of happenings), the General Assembly minutes, and early articles found in the church's official publication--which were written concurrently with the events they describe.

A careful reading of Tomlinson's personal journal will reveal that prior to June 14, 1907, he referred to the ministry of the "Holy Ghost" no less than eight times--two of which stated that "Some received [or got] the Holy Ghost" (Tomlinson, Journal of Happenings, August 4, 1904; August 17, 1904). However, no entry mentioned "speaking in tongues" with the experience until June 14, 1907, more than a year after the Azusa Street revival had begun. It is of further interest that, in the same month of that entry, Tomlinson had personal exposure for the first time to the Pentecostal doctrine of tongues in Birmingham, Alabama, through contact with M. M. Pinson--a Methodist minister who had experienced the phenomenon during a revival tour of C. B. Cashwell, who had himself just returned from Azusa Street with the Pentecostal experience (Synan, 1997). After the

June 14th entry, the phrase "speaking in tongues" began to occur quite frequently in Tomlinson's journal entries.

Tomlinson did not receive the Holy Ghost baptism with tongues for himself until January, 1908 (Tomlinson, Journal of happenings, January 13, 1908; Synan, 1997). At the invitation of Tomlinson, Cashwell came to the Cleveland church and preached on the Pentecostal doctrine. During the discourse, Tomlinson--seated behind Cashwell--slipped off his chair to the floor where, moments later, he experienced his own Holy Ghost baptism and spoke with tongues. After this life-changing encounter--given great detail in his diary (Tomlinson, Journal of happenings, January 13, 1908)--Holy Ghost baptism, uniquely evidenced by glossolalia, became widely preached in the Church of God. As a consequence, historical records reveal that significant revivals were conducted during the years following in which hundreds--and eventually thousands--were reported as converted, sanctified, filled with the Pentecostal blessing, and joined to the church (Stone, 1977; Tomlinson, Journal of happenings; General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914, 1992).

For example, Tomlinson began a Pentecostal tent revival in Chattanooga, later that same year, which continued for several weeks and ended with the establishment of a new church with 49 members. In writing at its conclusion, he stated:

> I preached last Sunday under the power of the Spirit to about 1000 people, and God wonderfully confirmed the word with signs following. Glory! What followed is almost indescribable. Shouts, speaking in tongues, a sister played organ controlled by the Spirit [sic]. I was enveloped in a kind of sheet of power and controlled, and they said my hair stood up on my head. Glory! It was wonderful. Since our meeting commenced there the first of May until the close last night there have been about seventy-five who received the baptism of the Holy Ghost and spoke in tongues, which is the Bible evidence ... I preached to about 5,000 people on a lake shore where we were baptizing. (Journal of happenings, 1908, August 4)

Not only did the addition of this Pentecostal doctrine, and its sign of tongue-speaking, inspire results in Chattanooga, it was significant in a revival begun one week later in Tomlinson's own town of Cleveland. According to his journal entries, thousands attended the ten-week event at which various demonstrations of the Holy Ghost were said to commonly occur--that is, "tongues ... manifestations and miracles ... visions ... [faintings] under the power ... blue vapor ... [a] streak of fire," etc. These Holy Ghost signs were convincing to such degree that scores of seekers reportedly "piled" into the altar most evenings--as many as 100 on one occasion--and received salvation, sanctification, and Holy Ghost baptism with tongues. The last night of the revival Tomlinson wrote:

> Closed out tonight after a 10 weeks successful battle [sic]. 105 profession and 163 received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. 78 baptized in water. 106 accessions to the Church. Quite a number healed. We had a glorious meeting tonight. About 75 in the altar. [sic] (Journal of happenings, 1908, October 14)

These types of meetings were not atypical for the Church of God in the years following Tomlinson's spirit baptism, but rather the norm--as evidenced in revival reports given in the Evangel, the denomination's official publication since 1910.[2] As the church became more Pentecostal in nature, both ministers and members saw themselves as sufficiently empowered to evangelize their communities and beyond with the gospel (Stone, 1977).

Although the "Holy Ghost" and "Holy Ghost baptisms" had been acknowledged in proceedings of the early General Assemblies--the first of which convened in 1906--it is of interest to note that the Church of God did not officially adopt the baptism "with tongues"

2

The original name of the publication, The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, was shortened to The Church of God Evangel after one year and is commonly referred to simply as the Evangel.

until the sixth Assembly, 1911 (General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914, 1992, pp. 87, 89). The church had first published the teaching only a few months earlier in an issue of the Evangel (The Church of God: Teaching, 1910), though it was not until the following Assembly that the doctrine was actually accepted in parcel with other Bible teachings referenced in the same article. Added to this, at least three other articles published in the Evangel that same year gave direct credit to the 1906 Los Angeles revival as the founthead of the recent Pentecostal movement (Tomlinson, 1910; Whidden, 1910; Pentecostal Testimony, 1910). Given these facts, and the accounts written in Tomlinson's personal journal, it seems likely that early self-understanding of the church was more one of Holiness than Pentecostal in terms of doctrine and practice--at least through 1907, the year preceding Tomlinson's baptism experience.

Though this observation mitigates the 1896 claim of the Church of God as being Pentecostal (Conn, 1996; Bowdle, 1999), it in no way serves to lessen the fact or prominence of Holy Ghost experiences and manifestations reported at the Shearer Schoolhouse revival. It simply attempts to place them into proper historical context by clarifying how they were understood by those who experienced them at that time, rather than glossing them as reinterpretations of those events decades later in retrospect of Azusa Street (Conn, 1996; Bowdle, 1999; Stone, 1977; Davidson, 1973; Book of Minutes, 1922). After Tomlinson's 1908 experience, however, the evidence is clear that the Church of God became more markedly Pentecostal in nature and, from that time, widely preached and defended the Pentecostal doctrine of Holy Ghost baptism marked solely by glossolalia. The importance of this observation is not trivial to the present study insofar as the Church

of God acceptance of the sign of spirit baptism--tongues-speaking--occurred just prior to that of yet another sign of Pentecostal empowerment--the taking up of venomous serpents. From records of its history, it appears that these two signs, along with others of Mark 16, became instrumental in the early success of the young church.

Signs within a Pentecostal Church

Once it became Pentecostal, the Church of God was afforded a religious context of experience from which certain manifestations of the Holy Ghost could emerge as persuasive signs for evangelism. As for the tongues-speaking experience, the sacred text also provided models for other roles involving possession by the spirit. As noted in the very first publication of its teachings (The Church of God, 1910), a text found popular among the Church of God included the words of Jesus, just prior to His ascension: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). After the promised arrival of the Holy Ghost, on the day of Pentecost, another prominent text for Pentecostals observed Peter giving the following explanation to the multitude who had gathered to investigate its curious manifestations:

> For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come: And it shall come to pass, that

> whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved ... Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. (Acts 2:15-21, 38-39)

A Pentecostal belief held early in the Church of God was that infusion by the Holy Ghost--evidenced by speaking in tongues--empowers the believer for effective witness of Jesus which may thus convince potential converts of need for salvation (He hath shed forth this, 1910). It is not necessarily the tongues themselves that convince unbelievers, although that may happen, but any demonstrations of the Spirit within the believer which may manifest at the will of God in various ways for convincing the unsaved. In Pentecostal theology, Spirit baptism also equips the believer for the exercise of a variety of supposed supernatural gifts which are designed to edify believers as well as to convince unbelievers (See Horton, 1934/1975).

This theology is based upon a literal interpretation of the text--a fundamentalist tendency--which, according to Hollenweger (1972), functions as a "ritual" for preserving a specific world view. In contrast with Cox's (1995) claim that Pentecostalism is not fundamentalist in nature, Hollenweger (1972) and Synan (1997) have both observed that American Pentecostalism emerged from roots in the late nineteenth century Holiness movement which rejected, as did other conservative Protestant groups, the rising tide of evolutionary theory and higher biblical criticism. According to Hollenweger (1972), the poetic beauty and elegance of the King James Version Bible is such that fundamentalists esteem it as perfect and beyond scholarly criticism--that is, it is perceived factually as the expressed word of God. For them, he said, the "ritual" of literal biblical interpretation

becomes a phenomenon, very sensitive to contextual cues, that harmonizes a poetic and aesthetic expression of the "Truth" with a perspective of the world which provides understanding and meaning--a process preselective according to context. It is through its faithful devotion, moreover, that this ritual guarantees salvation, protection, and order to its adherents. Higher criticism of the Bible, most especially that concerned with potential errancy of scripture, is not tolerated, else the ritual is challenged and leads to the collapse of the world view. Although rational arguments can be levied against the ritual of literal interpretation from outside, adamant resistance by fundamentalists to enter such debates sustains its practice, which in turn stabilizes their structured and contextualized view of the world. Hence, Pentecostals early in this century held to a literal understanding of scripture in which the Holy Ghost was felt to be directly experienced and necessary for empowerment in a spiritually discerned world.

This theology is clearly reflected in an Evangel article--presumably authored by Tomlinson, or at the very least endorsed by him--that stressed the need of Holy Ghost baptism with tongues (All need the Holy Ghost, 1910). Encouraging people to seek the Pentecostal blessing, he stated:

> Nothing can take the place of the Holy Ghost in the life of the believer. A man can be learned and eloquent and orthodox, as well, but he is as much in need of the Spirit as any one else. One may be able to draw good crowds and to entertain them with beautiful discourses, and even preach much truth, deep truth at that; but unless it is backed up by the power of the Holy Ghost, it will bear little fruit, and perhaps none to perfection ... Christ said, "Tarry till ye are endued with power from on high," but to-day [sic] men are saying, "Tarry till you graduate." After Pentecost, the Church was full of men who were full of the Holy Ghost and power, faith and wisdom, but their power was from God, and their faith was in God, and their wisdom was from God. There were men who were unlettered and ignorant, so far as worldly wisdom is concerned, but the wisest men among the

> Jews were unable to resist the wisdom with which they spoke ... The signs and wonders in great measure are following the preaching of the Word in many places ... The people are speaking in other tongues. The sick are being healed; and some are prophesying ... Some have come to our meetings, and have tarried till they were baptized in the Holy Ghost, and spoken in tongues, and gone forth to labor for the Lord. (All need the Holy Ghost, 1910, p. 2)

As direct experience of the Holy Ghost was for those of the Bible, the Church of God fully expected the same measure of empowerment for the modern believer based upon a literal understanding of scripture. Their primary dependence upon this Pentecostal theology for evangelization was in fact guided by an unrelenting faith that often rejected the contemporary "wisdom" of the larger religious world.

Indeed, Pentecostal doctrine and practice became a mobilizing force in the early success of the Church of God. The most reliable record for the earliest years, 1886-1904, reports church membership to have begun with 8 persons, in 1886; to have increased to 130 the same year as the 1886 Shearer Schoolhouse revival; to have declined to 20, by 1902; and to have increased again to 39 members, in 1904 (Conn, 1996, p. 580). No official membership reports exist, however, for the years 1905 through 1908. One possibility for this lapse, which seems probable, is that no procedure had as yet been developed by the church to report its membership until the General Assembly of January, 1909, when action was taken to make printed report forms available to the local churches (General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914, 1992).

Among verbal reports given in that 1909 Assembly--for the church work in 1908--M. S. Lemons reported a membership of 60 in Chattanooga and 75 Holy Ghost baptisms, while W. F. Bryant reported some 30 professions at Red Knobs. The only other minister at

this time to report specific numbers was Tomlinson, who stated that the Cleveland church had increased Sunday School enrollment from 60 to 230, experienced 300 professions, and witnessed 250 receive the Holy Ghost (pp. 57, 59). It should be carefully observed that, by comparison, Tomlinson's "fruitful" report to the General Assembly was in review of his first year of ministry after his Holy Ghost baptism with tongues.

Due to a new reporting system that by this time was in place, Tomlinson--now as General Moderator/Overseer of the overall church--was able to give a detailed report to the 1911 General Assembly which revealed the notable growth of the church achieved during the years of 1909 and 1910 (Minutes, 1911, p. 3). The number of churches reported to the 1910 Assembly, for the year of 1909, was 31. The number of new churches gained in 1910 was 27, which increased the total number of congregations to 58. The number of members reported at the 1910 Assembly, for the church work in 1909, was 1,005. Concerning membership gains in 1910, there were 310 new members added to the "old churches" whereas 540 new members were added through the establishment of new congregations. The net gain of 850 new members in 1910 almost equaled the entire membership reported for the previous year's work (1909) bringing the official membership to a grand total of 1,855. Thus the evangelistic efforts of the Church of God, for the work in 1910, resulted in numbers of churches and members that almost doubled those reported for 1909. This growth pattern was continually seen in membership reports during years that followed: 6,503 members, in 1915; 15,051 members, in 1920; 25,231 members, in 1925; 27,149 members, in 1930; 52,913 members, in 1935; and 83,552 members, in 1940 (Conn, 1996, p. 581).

It is not difficult to associate the Church of God's acceptance of Pentecostal doctrine with its notable growth which converged at about the same time. It seems clear that, during this period, a cornerstone teaching which became prominent in the church's theology, and vital at least in part to its early evangelistic success, was the Pentecostal notion that "supernatural signs" would accompany the true New Testament church in its mission. In fact, an article published in the August 15, 1910, issue of the Evangel begins: "The Church of God: Stands for the whole Bible rightly divided. The New Testament as the only rule for government and discipline. Below is given some of the teaching that is made prominent:" ("The Church of God," 1910, p. 3). Following this heading was a listing of 25 specific teachings with scriptural references--among them, number 12, which states: "Signs following believers: Mark 16:17-20, Rom. 15:18-19, Heb. 2:4" (p. 3).

The linkage of the signs with the church's Pentecostal theology and evangelistic mission can easily be seen from a vision the General Overseer experienced during his own Holy Ghost baptism. In an excerpt from the much longer descriptive account of the event, he stated:

> Also the 16th chapter of Mark came up [before him], these signs shall follow, dwelling on casting out devils, speaking in tongues and taking up serpents. I seemed to try to get to the healing of the sick, but could not quite get to that. Numbers of people came before me whom I could see coming. Among them were my wife and children. I seemed to see us all on a missionary journey. Glory to God! I must not fail to tell about the song I sang in unknown tongues. Oh, it was glorious!
>
> This was really the baptism of the Holy Ghost as they received Him on the day of Pentecost, for they all spake with tongues. With all I have written it is not yet told, but judging from the countries I visited [in this vision] I spoke in ten different languages. It seemed that the Spirit was showing me these countries with a view to taking me there. In each place I saw lots of people coming to the light and baptism. I could see multitudes coming to Jesus. I don't know if God wants

> me to go to these places or not, but I am willing to go as He leads. (January 13, 1908, Journal of happenings)

And go, Tomlinson did, inspired by a Pentecostal theology with signs that helped gain for the Church of God significant growth, including some of its earliest members outside the U.S. (Tomlinson, Journal of happenings, April 11, 1911).

Serpent Handling Becomes a Pentecostal Sign

Early revival reports and personal testimonials, published in the Evangel, almost always gave witness to manifestations of the Holy Ghost that were persuasive in Church of God meetings and personal life--particularly the Pentecostal sign of speaking in tongues. For example, T. L. McLain wrote of his 1908 conversion to Pentecostalism when unusual manifestations at Tomlinson's tent revival drew interest from reportedly thousands in Cleveland, Tennessee (McLain, 1910). Upon hearing of these demonstrations, he and some friends attended a service out of curiosity to see for themselves the ecstatic type of worship taking place. Though apprehensive at first, and somewhat embarrassed for his presence at such a meeting, this visitor soon experienced "conviction" in his heart when witnessing a female participant manifest the sign of tongue-speaking in a song. "The moment she began singing [in tongues] the power of God struck me in both hands, and ran to my elbows. I was convinced of it being the word of God" (McLain, 1910, p. 5). So convincing was this sign, said McLain, that he returned for service the following Sunday and fell into the altar with others to seek this Pentecostal experience, after which time he grew to prominence as an important figure in the expanding church (see Conn, 1996; Davidson, 1973).

Still others were drawn to the Church of God because the signs of divine healing for sickness and the casting out of devils were compelling. As one of many examples, such was the case reported in a 1910 Church of God revival at Coalburg, Alabama, in which:

> The Holy Ghost had full control through the entire meeting, and the Lord was present in mighty power, and confirmed the Word with signs following ... Large crowds attended the meeting, and the people knew very little about salvation, but conviction prevailed among them, and numbers were at the altar seeking the Lord. Those who at first stood back and mocked were struck with conviction as the Holy Ghost manifested His mighty power and presence ... Devils were cast out and the sick were healed by the power of God. A child which was possessed with an unclean spirit from its birth, and would roll its head from side to side continually and throw its hands and arms, and be in a continual move, until its mother could scarcely hold it in her lap, was delivered. The mighty power of God fell, the devil was rebuked and the child looked at us and smiled and went to sleep ... We closed the meeting with about twenty-five professions ... A number were sanctified and some baptized with the Holy Ghost. (Cotton, 1910, p. 7)

Such reported manifestations of the Holy Ghost as these--speaking in tongues, healing the sick, casting out of devils--were significant to much of the success enjoyed by the Church of God throughout the early twentieth century (Crews, 1990).

It was amidst such a climate of Pentecostal signs that George Went Hensley, the man most credited with the origin of serpent handling, first made his appearance among the Church of God whose growth was spreading from Bradley County to neighboring regions in Tennessee. There is no clear agreement among scholars (Burton, 1993; Kimbrough, 1995; Kane, 1979; Vance, 1975; La Barre, 1962/1992) as to the precise date the practice began, or if Hensley was indeed the first to initiate it, though all admit he was at least indirectly responsible for the spread of the movement in the South--that is, with the exception of Vance (1975), who has argued that serpent handling sprang up as an independent movement in various regions unrelated to Hensley. For example, Vance

stated that the tradition began in Alabama, and later in Georgia, through Jim Miller, who is said to have begun serpent handling in northern Dekalb County, Alabama, as early as 1912, without previous knowledge either of the practice or of Hensley. Miller's contact with Church of God minister J. B. Ellis in those early years, however, casts doubt on the certainty of this argument. Ellis, who had received the Holy Ghost baptism in 1910, was well aware of serpent handling in the Church of God, as indicated in an Evangel article (Ellis, 1914), and was likely to have at least mentioned the newly emerged Pentecostal sign to Miller on some earlier occasion.

Vance (1975) has argued that, by 1934, one Albert Teester of Sylva, North Carolina, also began handling serpents as an independent phenomenon without any prior knowledge of the practice or of Hensley. Again, his thesis is called into doubt by the fact that, by 1930, there had been already 11 reports of serpent handling published in the Evangel from at least nine different locations in North Carolina, ranging from Hayesville, in the western part of the state, to Washington, in the eastern part. Serpents had been handled in Hayesville, 50 miles west of Sylva, as early as 1917 (Martin, 1917), while the practice had taken place at Leicester, 50 miles east of Teester's home, by at least 1919 (Hopkins, 1919). Although Vance's theory is possible, it seems unlikely given the wide circulation of the practice in North Carolina before 1930. It may be true that neither Miller nor Teester had ever heard of Hensley, but news of the practice with which he is credited was certainly available to both of them. Thus it seems possible that Hensley may indeed be linked with the spread of religious serpent handling in the South--at least indirectly.

Various scholars (Burton, 1993; Kimbrough, 1995; Kane, 1979) have

reconstructed the personal history of Hensley and situated his first known contact with the Church of God at Owl Hollow, just outside of Cleveland, Tennessee. It should be noted, however, that these sources rely heavily upon an account rendered by Homer A. Tomlinson (1968), A. J. Tomlinson's eldest son, whose accuracy in reporting various historical events, both religious and secular, has met with well-deserved criticism (Burton, 1993; Hunter, 1988b). Nevertheless, Burton (1993) has carefully analyzed and related various other sources which also suggest that details rendered by Tomlinson (1968) of Hensley's emergence may generally be accepted as true. Kimbrough (1995) and Kane (1979) also reached similar conclusions based upon personal interviews with family members of Hensley.

In 1908, the community of Owl Hollow had readily accepted the Holiness-Pentecostal revival begun by the Church of God and had constructed a small church for its worship (Tomlinson, 1968). For its dedication, the group had invited A. J. Tomlinson to be keynote speaker; however, the minister's busy travel schedule precluded his appearance which resulted in the sending of Homer, his 16 year old son, in his stead. Having preached only one other sermon in his life, the youth struggled through his discourse in the morning service and was later horrified to discover he was expected to speak yet again in the afternoon service following a fellowship dinner. While standing in the pulpit in the afternoon, he found himself reading the story of Nicodemus in John 3 and--feeling encouraged--decided to extend an invitation for those desiring to be saved, sanctified, or baptized with the Holy Ghost to come forward. To his amazement, five young men responded, knelt in the altar, and "prayed through." One of those five was George Went

Hensley.

The predominant practice within Appalachian communities of transmitting history through oral tradition accounts for various discrepancies that emerge in articulating certain of their past events (McCauley, 1995); the version embraced depends largely upon which of the particular primary sources are consulted. This is no less true for Hensley's role in introducing the Pentecostal sign of serpent handling into the Church of God and the precise time at which it actually occurred. From what is known, however, Hensley's experience at Owl Hollow was such that he willingly forsook tobacco, moonshining, and "worldly" friendships for full embracement of the Holiness-Pentecostal doctrine and the zealous way of godly life it stressed (Kane, 1979; Kimbrough, 1995; Burton, 1993). A man of devout and sincere faith, it was sometime during this period that he became deeply concerned about the biblical passage of Mark 16:17-18 which was commonly preached among Holiness-Pentecostals as a textual justification for their unique worship practices as well as for evidence that they were believers and practitioners of the whole Bible. The preaching of these Pentecostal signs troubled him greatly, especially given the fact that only three of the signs were being manifested by believers. The speaking of tongues was widely practiced in the Pentecostal meetings he attended, as were the casting out of devils and the healing of the sick, but what of the taking up of serpents? It was reported that this discrimination among the signs caused him much spiritual unrest (Collins, 1947).

Being deeply pressed in spirit, Hensley was said to have climbed atop nearby White Oak Mountain to seek God in prayer and ultimately decide this spiritual struggle

(Collins, 1947).[3] Resolving that manifestations of the signs in Mark were in fact commands for believers to obey, he felt his eternal security rested upon obedience to these mandates--and specifically, at the present moment for him, the taking up of serpents. Collins (1947) reported:

> His decision was to risk his life in order to have rest from his spiritual burden. Thus it was that he set out on probably the first religious snake hunt in modern civilized history.
>
> In a great rocky gap in the mountainside he found what he sought, a large rattlesnake. He approached the reptile, and, disreguarding [sic] its buzzing, blood-chilling warning, knelt a few feet away from it and prayed loudly into the sky for God to remove his fear and to anoint him with "the power". Then suddenly with a shout he leaped forward and grasped the reptile and held it in trembling hands. (pp. 1-2)

It was from this life-changing experience that an inspired Hensley descended the mountain, with rattlesnake in hand, and launched only a few days later his first evangelistic effort in his own community of Grasshopper Valley, with a challenge that believers should practice all that Jesus had commanded--including that of taking up serpents (Collins, 1947).

As noted earlier, the precise time of this event is difficult to ascertain. In his classic work on serpent handling, La Barre (1962/1992) placed this event in 1909, probably relying on Collins (1947). Kane (1979) initially situated the happening around two years after Hensley's 1908 salvation experience at Owl Hollow, approximately 1910, the same year that Kimbrough (1995) regards as more confident. It should be noted, however, that Kane (1984, 1987, 1989) has since stated Hensley began the practice around 1913, though

---

3 Based on a phone interview I had with J. B. Collins, October 22, 1999, the information he published, regarding Hensley's conversion to serpent handling, came directly from personal interviews he conducted with Hensley himself.

no justifications were given for this date. Rather than pinpointing a specific time, Burton (1993) presented several possibilities, ranging from 1908 (H. A. Tomlinson's claim) to 1914 (the first documented reports of serpent handling in the Evangel and local newspapers). In summary, Burton (1993) said: "As rewarding as it would be to know exactly where and when George Hensley first took up a serpent--or whether in fact he initiated the practice--the solution to the mystery remains elusive" (p. 39). In the final analysis, the fact of the exact date is indeed secondary to the more important issue of the emergence of serpent handling itself as a legitimate Pentecostal sign and its effect upon evangelism. Drawing from role theory, Hood and Kimbrough (1995) have observed that the critical issue is the appearance of a charismatic figure who acts out a role for others based on the narrative of a sacred text.

From the psychological perspective of Sundén's role theory (Holm, 1995), Hensley's serpent handling experience can be seen as the result of being troubled by believers practicing only selected signs among those explicitly stated in a scriptural text already embraced by his religious tradition. When atop White Oak Mountain, and confronted with a rattlesnake in the context of prayerful meditation, he took on the role of a true believer constructed from the text, and also the role of God which led to his feeling of being divinely directed in the activity. In the mental shifting toward this religious experience, God was felt to be directly encountered as a present divine reality who sanctioned the obedience of Hensley as a true believer in the performance of His expressed command. Never to be the same again, Hensley descended the mountain to launch by example a religious practice that would hold tremendous meaning for those who would

fully believe and obey.

Serpent Handling--A Church of God Practice

If Hensley's serpent handling did begin in 1909 (Collins, 1947), or even 1910 (Kimbrough, 1995), evidence seems to indicate it to have produced only marginal results in Grasshopper Valley for the first few years (Collins, 1947). He continued to preach in community churches, brush arbors, and homes, expounding on the third of the Pentecostal signs of Mark 16 (Kimbrough, 1995; Kane, 1979). At such meetings scoffers, and those hoping to make a public spectacle, brought venomous serpent to Hensley and his followers, challenging them to fulfill their claims as obedient believers of the scripture--at which time they did with absolute impunity and often with persuasive results. At one such occasion, Homer Tomlinson (1968) claims a result of "this amazing miracle [was that] a revival broke out that brought thousands from everywhere, walking, and by every means of transportation" (pp. 41-42). Kane (1979) quotes Tomlinson and relies upon his account to conclude Hensley's meetings as "noteworthy events" (p. 36), although the local newspaper in Cleveland neglected mention of any serpent handling activities at all until 1914 (Snakes in demand, 1914, September 17; Religion and snakes, 1914, October 1). Nevertheless, Hensley continued his ministry with Pentecostal signs and joined the Church of God membership in 1912 (Conn, 1996).

It was sometime in the period between 1912 to 1914 that Hensley's ministry of serpent handling gained the attention of leaders in the Church of God. As noted earlier, the church itself was growing notably in membership at this time--137 churches and 4,339 members by November, 1914 (General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914, 1992, p. 313)--

through evangelistic efforts characterized mostly by the Pentecostal signs of tongues-speaking, divine healing, and exorcism. It was in September of 1914 that Hensley and Bishop M. S. Haynes were conducting a revival meeting in the South Cleveland Church of God tabernacle with results that drew wide attention from the religiously interested, as well as from the local newspaper, the Cleveland Herald (Tomlinson, 1914b; Snakes in demand, 1914, September 17).

Upon returning to Cleveland from ministerial travels, General Overseer A. J. Tomlinson (1914b) learned of the events and wrote of the revival in the next issue of the Evangel. He had recently received a letter from an unnamed "uninformed personality" who had charged that Church of God people were lagging far behind other Pentecostal groups in regard to manifestations of God and evangelism. Responding to this allegation in the article, he suggested that--aside from reports in which "multitudes" were being healed, the "dead" were being raised, and fire was being handled--readers should consider additional evidence from the most recent revival at South Cleveland. Hensley and Haynes had brought no snakes to the meeting, though Hensley had preached on the third sign and prophesied that one would be brought to revival by someone at some point.

> On Friday night it was there. Some body [sic] had brought in a fierce "Rattlesnake Pilot." None of the saints had made any plans or said what they would do about the matter and even went to the meeting with little or no expectation of such a thing. The power of God was demonstrated successfully, however, and several handled it and no one was injured by it. Some were bitten, but with no damage to them.
>
> The sensation was so great that outsiders got enthused and wanted to test the matter further. So on Sunday night Sept. [sic] sixth they took in a "Copperhead." This was handled with as much success as the first, and many were made believers on account of the demonstration of God's power. The meeting went on after that with seekers in the altar and good results until Thursday night

Sept. [sic] 10th. (Tomlinson, 1914b, pp. 2-3)

On the following Sunday night, a rattlesnake and an adder were brought to the revival by scoffers. Through the demonstration of "successful handling," unbelievers were said to have come forward with tears of conviction, seeking salvation. Noting that unbelievers had been converted to the faith through this sign, Tomlinson closed the article with reference to Mark 16 and claimed that "All these signs are being demonstrated by those who are members of the Church of God" (p. 3). He warned, however, that believers should carefully discern the proper anointing for the sign and the appropriate context for its manifestation, lest extremism should bring reproach upon "the worthy cause we love so well" (p. 3). In one sense, it seems the General Overseer was careful here to observe this sign as a supernatural manifestation of God operating in a convincing way among the Church of God. Yet in another, it appears he expressed concerned over an issue of control regarding an emotional religious experience that, if exercised through error or misperception of God, could result in at least two possibilities: (1) it might stigmatize the church as a group of "snake handlers;" and/or (2) it could lead to serious injury or even death of its participants.

In view of the response to signs demonstrated at South Cleveland, it seems the Church of God and its leadership became increasingly persuaded that the literal taking up of venomous serpents in Mark 16 was as legitimate a Pentecostal sign as speaking in tongues, casting out devils, and healing the sick. If three of the signs--tongues, exorcism, and healing--were understood as literal practices for Church of God believers, it would appear as good theology to equally justify other signs for practice outlined in the same text

(Hood, 1998; for a discussion on construction of local theologies see Schreiter, 1985). In addition to serpent handling, there is evidence that even the fourth sign of Mark 16--drinking poison--was practiced in the Church of God, although it was probably rare (Brouayer, 1921). That this theology was considered as sound is suggested in its use by Tomlinson as support for another theological argument--that the revelation of biblical doctrine should be unequivocally received by the faithful.

> "My doctrine shall drop as the rain," His doctrine is good doctrine. (Prov. 4:2)
>
> "For I give you good doctrine." "Nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine." (1 Tim. 4:6)
>
> The word "shall" in this lesson is the same as the "shall" of Mark 16:17, 18.
>
> "They SHALL speak with new tongues; they SHALL take up serpents; they SHALL lay hands on the sick, and they SHALL recover." There's no use talking against it the doctrine just has to drop down [sic], and if we do not get it, it is because we are in the house of some selfish opinion. This is the time when the doctrine has to fall. (Tomlinson, 1914e, p. 2)

The manner in which Tomlinson used the Mark 16 reference strongly suggests its theological acceptance in the Church of God as a literal imperative for the signs mentioned--including serpent handling. It is of further interest to note that Tomlinson gave support to the third sign in two other articles of the Evangel before the end of 1914, which endorsed the practice and claimed it as a unique Church of God manifestation (Tomlinson, 1914c, 1914d).

Further evidence that the church embraced the sign of serpent handling is supported by four additional observations. First, in the November General Assembly of the same year, Tomlinson mentioned the practice of serpent handling in his much regarded annual address:

> The souls that have been saved and the backsliders reclaimed would probably number up into the thousands, judging from the many reports that have come in from every direction. Churches have multiplied, and the dear old doctrine, heralded by the faithful messengers as they ran to and froe, is becoming sweeter and more glorious. Under the illumination of God's love and mighty power many signs and wonders have been wrought in the name of the Holy child Jesus. Many miraculous cases of healing have been witnessed. Wild poison serpents [emphasis mine] have been taken up and handled and fondled over almost like babies with no harm to the saints. In several instances fire has been handled with bare hands without being burned. Glory to our God! Have seen no reports of anybody outside the Church of God performing this miracles [sic]. We are beginning to surpass all others in miraculous signs and wonders. The magicians of Egypt could do some things like Moses and Aaron, but there came a time when Moses and Aaron far surpassed them. God is preparing us for the "greater things." We are on the run. Let us continue to humble ourselves and increase our speed until God's church will shine out with so much more brilliancy than anything else in the world that all men will, like Jannes and Jambres, acknowledge it is the "Finger of God." (Tomlinson, 1914a, p. 15)

It seems clear that Tomlinson regarded serpent handling as one of several "miraculous signs and wonders" of the church's Pentecostal theology and, by endorsing it in his annual address, gave license to its acceptance and practice in Church of God evangelistic endeavors.

Secondly, Hensley, along with Tennessee State Overseer G. T. Brouayer, conducted services at the 1915 General Assembly in a revival tent outside the main auditorium while another evangelistic service was held inside the building by H. B. Simmons and J. A. Davis (Minutes, 1915, p. 13). Given the large attendance at the Assembly, simultaneous services were conducted at different locations to accommodate the evening crowds. By the time of this event, there had already appeared at least 20 articles about the practice of serpent handling in the Evangel. Among 18 of these publications--five of which specifically named Hensley--the occurrence of the phenomenon

was regarded positively as a Pentecostal sign with significant advantages for Church of God evangelism (Williamson, 1995). The fact that Hensley, a known serpent handling preacher, was given placement on the General Assembly program, the church's most important annual meeting, seems to further suggest that serpent handling was coming into view as a legitimate Church of God practice.

A third observation that lends support to this view concerns the endorsement and licensure of Hensley--then 37 years of age--as a Church of God minister on December 25, 1915 (Index to the roster of ministers, n.d.). This event was 18 months after the South Cleveland revival by which time the evangelist and his practice of serpent handling must have become increasingly known within the church through both the Evangel and his appearance on program at the General Assembly. It is of interest to note that the credentials were issued on Christmas Day and signed by A. J. Tomlinson, General Overseer of the Church of God, and F. J. Lee, pastor of the larger Cleveland congregation.

Finally, there appears to be compelling evidence in the Evangel itself which suggests that this manifestation was adopted theologically by a significant base among its membership. From earlier observations (Williamson, 1995), a closer analysis finds some interesting facts that support this view. First there is a notable frequency of articles that reported serpent handling accounts among the Church God--89 which were published over a 21-year period, from 1914 to 1935. Second these reports were from at least 14 different states. Third, as many as 105 different persons were identified by name who were related to church/revival services in which serpents had been handled. It should noted,

however, that scores of others were mentioned who attended the activities but were unnamed. Fourth, among the 105 persons identified, official church records (Index to roster of ministers, n.d.; Conn, 1977) reveal that at least 23 were ordained bishops, 22 of whom were either Church of God state overseers at the time or would become such leaders in the future. A fifth observation is the degree to which serpent handling may have contributed to the success of Church of God evangelism and growth as a Pentecostal sign.

For example, some young scoffers had heard the pastor of a local church in Odum, Georgia, preach on the signs of Mark 16 (Roberson, 1935). Eager to harass the minister and create a public spectacle, they brought a large rattlesnake, contained in a wooden box, to the later service which was filled to overflowing with both members and skeptics. As one of the young men boldly entered the sanctuary and placed the screen-covered box on the altar ...

> ... God took charge of the rest of the service. The power fell, and personally speaking, I have been in services almost regularly for the past nine years, but I've never felt such great power. It seemed that angels were in and around the altar ... Brother Sanders pulled the screen back. The snake was still standing on his rattles, and as he walked back and to with His [sic] Bible in his right hand and prayed, the boy who brought the snake went to him and told him not to put his hand in that box, as the snake's fangs had not been removed. Brother Sanders prayed on. As he came back by the snake, he had ceased his rattling. He put his left hand in, took him out, stood on the altar and rubbed him like a little kitten, placed him about his neck, held him for a few minutes, placed him back in the box and felt no harm. Sinners screamed, cried and stood on benches. Hard-hearted men who had fought holiness for years said, "I'll never doubt it any more." (Roberson, 1935, p. 15)

The effect of such manifestations as this were not uncommon in Evangel reports of early Church of God meetings and were associated with at least some significant growth--especially in the late teens and early 1920s. In fact, the church periodical related

manifestations of serpent handling to the organization of at least 12 new congregations with a combined membership of 287 new members whereas 231 new converts were added to membership rosters of congregations already in existence. To claim these increases were directly attributed to the practice of serpent handling would be an overstatement, for several factors often contributed to the success of revival meetings: the perceived presence of God, the interest of participants; the quality of preaching, singing, and prayer; the manifestation of spiritual gifts; and the practice of other signs of Mark 16. On the other hand, to minimize the place of taking up serpents among the Pentecostal signs, as manifested in the early Church of God, and to marginalize its significance at that time is to ignore evidence that suggests the contrary.

Despite the present Church of God claim that serpent handling was marginal among its ranks, and practiced only by a few who were misguided, fanatical, and extreme (Conn, 1955, 1977, 1996), it seems evident--if we consider only articles from the Evangel--that such was simply not the case. Born in the heart of Appalachia, and transplanted to the valley-town of Cleveland, Tennessee, the Church of God's inherent predisposition to heartfelt religious experience soon discovered meaningful roles of redefinition through a Pentecostal theology based on models in the scripture texts of Acts 2 and Mark 16. The church's readiness for accepting the practice of serpent handling predated Hensley in its embracement of what was perceived as various directly-experienced manifestations of God--namely tongues, healing, exorcism, and demonstrative worship. The Church of God welcomed the serpent handling of Hensley into its evangelistic arsenal and persisted in its practice several years after his departure in 1922. Hensley was simply a fortuitous

instrument, appearing at a critical time in history, who took on the role of a model in a biblical text already held as central to the theology of this emerging Pentecostal church. Once noted in the text, and seen from the modeling of Hensley himself, a significant number of the Church of God and its leadership indeed followed Hensley's example, holding firmly, for a time, to the practice of serpent handling as a legitimate Pentecostal sign. Such adherence was felt to provide a direct encounter with God that had great significance for the participant--in terms of experiencing the Holy Ghost--as well as to provide convincing evidence of God's power.

Gradually, from the late 1920s onward, the Church of God moved toward rejecting serpent handling in its services, forcing those who continued the practice to the periphery of its fellowship, and eventually to outside existence as independent sects (Hood, 1998). There is no clear evidence that other major Pentecostal denominations ever practiced the "sign"--in fact, the Pentecostal Holiness Church and the Assemblies of God rejected it from the beginning (Kane, 1979; Crews, 1990)--hence, as the Church of God joined ranks with mainstream Pentecostals, it discouraged manifestations of the sign. As I have documented elsewhere (Williamson, 1995), the church never did officially repudiate the practice in its 1928 General Assembly, despite early claims of Conn (1977) and Crews (1990), although Evangel articles criticizing the sign did appear with increased frequency and virulence--the first of which was penned by S. J. Heath in 1928. In his diatribe, he stated:

> There is not very much stress upon casting out devils, speaking in tongues, and laying hands on the sick for their recovery. But many have gone into rank fanaticism, and false teaching, bringing reproach on the Church, and disgust to

> intelligent people over the handling of serpents ... I believe every gift, and every sign is in the body and God can use men that will properly submit to Him, and will do it, but when it comes to using the Church of God as a medium to advertise snake shows it is absurd and ridiculous. I have seen a few of these displays undertaken in the spirit of boasting men, and when bitten by the poisonous reptiles, severe sickness and sometimes death has resulted. And again it has caused much suffering to the victims, and many times has taken much prayer to save life, then we are made a laughing stock to the world and a reproach for the cause. (Heath, 1928, p. 3)

From a social-psychological perspective, it seems likely that serpent bite issues of "severe sickness," "death," and "reproach" were factors incongruent with a sect seeking denominational status with appeal to middle class prospects. This beginning negative criticism of serpent handling had been unleashed and opened wider the door for other reviews (Clark, 1934, 1942; Simmons, 1939, 1940; Harris, 1949) to follow which were yet more critical.

It was during this period that the Church of God began growing by even greater margins in membership and gaining in social acceptance (Williamson, 1995; Conn, 1996; Bowdle, 1999). Between 1927 and 1936 alone, it more than doubled it membership from 25,340 to 57,417, as greater emphasis was placed on more mainstream social values such as education, affluence, upscale church facilities, and ecumenical concerns. As consequence to this shift in focus, the values which were once held sacred by the church--that is, the taking up of venomous serpents, the casting out of devils, the more ecstatic forms of worship, etc.--were now found unappealing. Consequently, such values were gradually targeted, marginalized, and finally rejected by the church in its process of transition from sect to denominational status--the typical sociological pattern of development observed among religious groups (Hood, Spilka, Hunsburger, & Gorsuch,

1996). Hence, serpent handling, a once significant part of its Pentecostal theology, was eliminated from Church of God practice as early as the mid 1940s and then denied its role in history by the sect that would be a church (see Conn, 1955; 1977; 1996).

The Dispersion of Serpent Handling

There is specific mention of Hensley and his ministry at least nine times in the Evangel during his association with the Church of God, though other sources (Collins, 1947; Kane, 1979; Burton, 1993; Kimbrough, 1995) have suggested his ministry was much more active during this period. The first mention of his name was by his wife, Manda (1914), who wrote of her own personal healing and of Hensley's successes in revivals at Evansville and Dayton, Tennessee, which reported the combined results of 10 saved, eight sanctified, four baptized with the Holy Ghost, and several healings. In 1914, he was named in three articles, two of which were accounts of the same South Cleveland revival that seems to have launched serpent handling in the Church of God (Bro. George Hensley is conducting a revival, 1914; Tomlinson, 1914b); the third article of that year reported of revival work with M. S. Haynes at Ooltewah, Tennessee, where rattlesnakes were taken up and fire was handled (We had the pleasure, 1914).

In August of 1915, he and Pastor N. P. Mulkey (1915) had conducted a successful revival at an unspecified location "out on the mountain"--most likely near Chattanooga--where a rattlesnake was handled, 15 were converted, several received the Holy Ghost, 16 were baptized in water, and 12 became members of the church. The article went on to state that both ministers were presently conducting a revival at Soddy, Tennessee, with converts being saved and receiving the Holy Ghost.

In the following month of September, Hensley and Mulkey were again in revival at the Church of God at Dividing Ridge, Tennessee, where "in one of the services every sign was seen following but one [the drinking poison, most likely]" (Miller, 1915, p. 4); four had received the Holy Ghost during the meeting at this 83-member church. Tomlinson (1916) later wrote that "thirty or more" had received the Holy Ghost through Hensley's ministry at Harrison, Tennessee. An article expressing thanks for his preaching of Holiness doctrine and the Church of God message was penned from Birchwood, Tennessee (Headrick, 1918).

The last article found Hensley, in late 1921, in Fostoria, Ohio, where he conducted a revival with his sister, Bertha Weaver, of Walbridge, Ohio, who was herself a licensed Church of God minister (Burkhart, 1922; Minutes, 1920). Although no serpents were said to have been handled, a vision of fire was described as seen flickering against the church walls, along with other various Holy Ghost manifestations. Results of the meeting were reported as six conversions, eight sanctifications, seven Holy Ghost baptisms, and eight new church members. Hensley, who was then of East Chattanooga, and his sister were highly recommended by Burkhart to Evangel readers for revival services.

There seems to be little doubt, as evidenced from Evangel articles, that Hensley's serpent handling practice influenced and inspired unknown numbers in the Church of God to follow his lead, as well as others of independent groups. For instance, Collins (1947) documents the activity of a serpent handling sect in Grasshopper, Tennessee, which appears to have been unrelated to the Church of God. It may well have been a group of Hensley's association prior to his joining the Church of God in 1912. This sect, which met

in brush arbors and homes, gained recognition as the foremost group which practiced serpent handling on a consistent basis. When one of its key members, Garland Defriese, received a near fatal snakebite in 1919, however, the sect dissolved, marking the end of the practice as a customary observance by any known Tennessee congregation for several years to follow. It should be noted, however, that serpents were in fact handled at Church of God revivals in Tennessee after that date on at least two occasions (Dalley, 1921; Beard, 1924).

In 1922, Hensley resigned his ministry in the Church of God because of unstated family problems and relapsed into a former lifestyle that predated his serpent handling days (Conn, 1996; Burton, 1993). He became increasingly estranged from his wife Amanda (also known as Manda) and seven children and, by the end of March, 1923, was arrested on charges of moonshining which resulted in a sentence to a county workhouse near Chattanooga (Burton, 1993). While sent on a errand as a trustee, he fled and escaped custody, eventually arriving at his sister's residence in Ohio. Shortly thereafter, he reclaimed salvation and resumed his "preaching, holding revivals, and faith healing" (Burton, 1993, p. 44). Divorced from Amanda by late 1926, he took a second wife, Irene Klunzinger, only a few months later and spent the next several years in various cities of northeastern Ohio. Never being consistent at work, Hensley failed to provide sufficiently for his new wife and the two children who were born, yet preached all the while wherever possible.

By 1932, Hensley moved his family back to the Appalachian region, this time to Pineville, in eastern Kentucky, where he began the East Pineville Church of God and

served as pastor (Kane, 1979). It was from this vantage point that he made evangelistic tours over eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, and other states of the Appalachian region as far south as Florida, introducing serpent handling and "proselytizing" converts to the practice from among miners and farmers--most with Holiness-Pentecostal backgrounds--with significant success. For example, on one occasion in Norton, Virginia, over 500 "followers" were reported to have been present, many of whom participated with Hensley in the taking up of serpents (Burton, 1993). While preaching, in 1936, from a tent in Bartow, Florida, he drew a crowd of over 700, not only from among the religiously interested, but also from various press and camera media who were intrigued by his practice of serpent handling (Kane, 1979).

Burton (1993) stated that, in preaching of the Mark 16 sign to prospects, Hensley would assert it to be a modern form of God's deliverance, similar to that which was promised to the obedient in the Bible. Hensley ...

> implied that the reason for handling serpents is that it is a modern manifestation of Old Testament deliverance by the Lord, such as Daniel from the lion's den, the three Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, and Jonah from the belly of the whale: "But you don't know that," he said. "That was before your time. I'll show you something in your time. I'll show you how to handle a rattlesnake, and you all know the result of rattlesnakes." (Burton, 1993, pp. 45-46)

For people whose lives were daily challenged by the hardness of mountainous living, such preaching with live demonstration was certainly convincing to many--especially when combined with the fact of Hensley's small frame, quiet disposition, and personal friendliness with the crowds.

In the midst of such enthusiasm, there were always some present who would join

with Hensley in the handling, and inevitably, some were bitten--and even died. Such was the case of 27 year-old Alfred Weaver, who attended the Bartow, Florida, meeting.

> When the power fell ... Weaver ... reached into one of the two snake boxes and came out with a rattler hanging from his hand, its fangs deeply embedded in his flesh. He flung it to the ground and again attempted to pick it up. The snake struck him on the wrist. In a few moments, Weaver lost consciousness and fell into the arms of two men behind him. Devotees carried the stricken man out of the tent. Revived by the night air, Weaver started to walk about and shout praises of the Lord, saying God would not let him die. (Kane, 1979, p. 62)

Taking him to a fellow-worshiper's home, Hensley, along with other believers, prayed for the young man's healing. Explaining that handlers bitten far worse had recovered, Hensley assured the concerned that Weaver, who had refused medical aid, would live. Despite this encouragement, and the victim's professed faith, the young convert died the following day. Hensley later gave testimony before a coroner's jury, which deliberated only minutes before declaring Weaver's death a result of his "personal carelessness." This event, however, touched off concern in Bartow and resulted in the adoption of a city ordinance that prohibited in the future such demonstrations of religious faith. As a result, Hensley closed the meeting and left town. This local action in Florida was a foreboding of legal problems for serpent handlers yet to come (see Kane, 1979; Kimbrough, 1995).

After the move to Kentucky in the early 1930s, two other children were born into the Hensley family, a complication which further increased difficulties for a man who had not faired so well in domestic responsibilities (Burton, 1993). As in his previous marriage, such tendencies were also a point of contention with his second wife and were fueled by his absence while on frequent evangelistic excursions throughout the Southeast. After briefly relocating first to Duff, Tennessee, in late 1941, and then to Evansville, Indiana, he

and Irene separated but reconciled a short time later and returned to Pineville, Kentucky, in 1942. After only a year, however, the family disintegrated, resulting in Hensley's return to Birchwood, Tennessee, near Grasshopper, and the family's move to Chattanooga. It was here, in 1944, that Irene died, leaving the children dispersed, ironically, among family members of Hensley's first marriage--a situation that seems to have fared surprisingly well. While she was laying in state, Hensley visited to pay his final respects but then returned to evangelism, having no further contact with his family.

The practice of serpent handling in the Grasshopper area had abated with Defriese's near-fatal experience in 1919 (Collins, 1947). Several attempts to revive it had been initiated through the years, though none were successful for any sustained period, most likely because of rejection by the community and the more mainstream Pentecostal churches of the area (Burton, 1993). Hensley, now blemished by a suspicious family history, attempted with little success to revive the work. In late spring of 1943, however, Raymond Hayes, a staunch convert of Hensley's from Kentucky, arrived in Grasshopper--Bible and serpents in hand--with the same kind of fervor that had kindled Hensley himself some 34 years earlier (Collins, 1947). Preaching the sign as a requirement for heaven, he and Hensley saw backsliders of yesteryears repent and new converts enlist to reestablish the practice in the community under the name "The Dolly Pond Church of God With Signs Following." Weekend services in the roughly constructed building were filled to capacity with the faithful, the gainsayers, and the religiously curious--all eager to witness demonstrations of the third sign of Mark 16.

After rebirth of the sect in Grasshopper, leadership responsibilities were given over

to young Tom Hardin, whose father had been among the first area converts of Hensley decades earlier (Collins, 1947). For the next two years, the group generated notable interest from outside the community through Lewis F. Ford, a young truck driver who through his public witness was indirectly responsible for drawing media attention to activities at Dolly Pond. In short order, photographs and reports of serpent handling were published over the wires of the Associated Press, giving the small community outside of Chattanooga national visibility. In the fall of 1945, however, local opposition to the sect emerged with Ford's own death by snakebite when attending a brush arbor service in Daisy, Tennessee, and then escalated further with the snakebite death of Clint Jackson near Daisy, only a few months later--the consequences of which factored into legal action by the state against serpent handling. Despite the law, the faithful continued unflaggedly in the practice of their religious beliefs.

Hensley continued his evangelistic work in the Tennessee region, often having skirmishes with the law over his religious practices (Burton, 1993). By 1946, he had a third marriage with a widowed Inez Riggs Hutcheson, a union that lasted only six months because--according to her son--"George was not the kind of person Inez thought he was ..." (Burton, 1993, p. 55). Nevertheless, generally known as a "good, gentle, [and] sincere man" (p.58), he enthusiastically continued his preaching and serpent handling in an itinerant fashion, traveling from place to place. By 1951, he had married a fourth and final time to Sally Moore Norman in Chattanooga, who joined him on his evangelistic campaigns throughout the Southeast.

Moving to Albany, Georgia, Hensley held meetings on both sides of the

Georgia/Florida state line (Burton, 1993). It was at such a gathering in Altha, Florida, however, that he would meet his death. For three weeks, no serpents had been handled until a large five-foot rattlesnake was brought in on Sunday afternoon. After handling the serpent for several minutes, Hensley was struck on the wrist with a bite that proved to be fatal after several hours of intense agony. At the end of suffering, he was reported to have said, "The snake would not have struck--if fear had not come over someone here" (Burton, 1993, p.57). With that, the man who possibly had more influence on the serpent handling tradition than any other single individual let out his last breath at age 75--the date, July 24, 1955. In his lifetime, he claimed to have been bitten as many as 446 times; his death, brought about by this last bite, was ruled a suicide by the Calhoun County sheriff (Burton, 1993, p. 57).

According to his grandson, the last 25 years of Hensley's life was predominantly home-based in eastern Kentucky, though he traveled constantly over several other states of the Appalachian region--Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida (Burton, 1993). He remained transient, preaching the doctrine of serpent handling and inspiring followers most everywhere he went. It is likely that most contemporary sects can be traced either directly or indirectly to the ministry of this itinerant if studied closely. As noted earlier, even those movements studied by Vance (1975) in Alabama and Georgia may be indirectly linked to the activities of Hensley though early contact with J. B. Ellis of the Church of God. Seeds sown by Hensley have cyclically flourished, waxed, and waned according to times and seasons, always in relation to the number of persons seeking a meaningful expression of spirituality as related to the

signs of Mark 16, particularly the one that Hensley practiced so passionately.

I have purposely included reference to Hensley's domestic difficulties in this historical review of what has been described as his "checkered career" (Conn, 1996, p. 168). A faith tradition that persists by pointing to its legitimacy in a sacred text, however, cannot be simply dismissed as defective on the basis of exceptions taken to its founder. If this were indeed the case, a closer look at some key figures in the rise of Pentecostalism itself would cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the larger movement, e.g., B. H. Irwin, Charles F. Parham, Agnes N. Ozman, C. B. Cashwell, Aimee Semple McPherson (see Synan, 1997; MacRobert, 1988). In fact, most members of contemporary serpent handling sects I have interviewed possess no personal knowledge of Hensley or his role in the history of the tradition. More to the point, though, it is sufficient to note that despite social rejection and dismal forecasts by early researchers (La Barre, 1962/92; Nichol, 1966), serpent handling sects have indeed survived and may continue to do so as long as a people take up as literal the reading of a text that models for them an experience of God which gives purpose and meaning to life.

On the Theology of Serpent Handling

A significant justification for the theology of practicing signs lies in the literal interpretation of a text long familiar to Pentecostals--Mark 16:17-18 (Hollenweger, 1972). Referring specifically to this passage, Jackson (1936) admitted, "Surely there is not a verse in the Bible that we Church of God folks quote more than this one. We like to tell them that if these signs don't follow them they are not altogether on the Bible plan" (p. 3).

From an interpretative stance, perhaps the most resounding case for handling

serpents made from this text was by General Overseer A. J. Tomlinson in a new publication of the Church of God, The Faithful Standard. In it he wrote:

> And you say that the disciples did not handle serpents? You cannot read of it anywhere in the Bible? I wonder what kind of a reader you are! Doesn't the Book say that these signs shall follow them that believe, and isn't taking up serpents one of these signs? Were the disciples believers, or were they a set of unbelievers like a good many in these days? ... Jesus plainly said, They shall take up serpents. Who? Believers. Who? Disciples, because they were wholehearted believers, and no one dare deny it. Then they took up serpents, did they not?
>
> "And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed." Who went forth? The disciples. Who preached? The disciples. Who did the Lord work with? The disciples. In what way was the Word confirmed? By the Signs that followed. What signs? Those mentioned above, of course. Who took up serpents? The disciples. And who dares to wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16) and offer a denial? In the face of this plain analogy I would certainly hate to be in the shoes of some who are so bitter against taking up serpents. (Tomlinson, 1922, p. 12)

Clearly a literal interpretation of the text itself was taken into account and thought sufficient for justification of the practice. From his treatment of the passage, four observations of the theological argument seem readily apparent: (1) it is based entirely upon the Bible as written; (2) it makes a claim for literal compliance with the mandate by the disciples; (3) it recognizes the sign as being a visible confirmation of God's word brought about by obedient, "wholehearted" believers; and (4) it expresses grave concern for anyone so bold as to distort the "plain" understanding of the sign as revealed in the text--an odious ploy thought deserving of God's judgement.

Similar feelings regarding this last observation were shared by F. J. Lee (1925), Tomlinson's successor as General Overseer. In addressing the third sign as literally understood from the text, he argued: "I didn't put this in the Bible and I am sure I am not

going to take it away for I know what the curse is to those who take from or add to" (p. 2). Even as leader of the Church of God, his statement seemed to indicate that taking up serpents was justified from a literal interpretation of the text. Perhaps the theological argument for the sign can be no more persuasively stated than as by pastor Liston Pack: "Regardless of how people read it, the Bible is still the Bible, and we should leave it just like Jesus left it. I believe the Bible says what it means and means what it says" (Pelton & Carden, 1974, p. 21).

In denouncing practice of the sign, Pentecostal historians (Synan, 1997; Conn, 1996; Nichol, 1966) have commonly asserted serpent handling to be a "proof" or "test" of personal faith in God. In fact, Conn (1996) has judged the "morbid spectacle" (p. 170) to be an act of "tempting" God that, he suggests, warrants condemnation by Jesus (Luke 4:9-12). This view, however, ignores the fact that modern day sects practice serpent handling only as a response to the perceived command of Jesus--as a simple act of obedience (Hood, 1998). Based upon personal interviews with serpent handlers, Pelton and Carden (1974) have noted that the practice "is not proof of their godliness. Its one and only purpose is 'to confirm the Word'" (p. 15, emphasis theirs). Hence obedience--not proof of faith--is the central tenet in the theology of serpent handling.

In a more recent Evangel article, Church of God evangelist G. B. Horton (1989) rejected serpent handling on the basis of an exegesis of Mark 16:18. Calling attention to the fact that "they shall take up" is translated from the Greek word "airo," he noted its use 102 times in the New Testament, as well as its various translations: "take up, remove, take away, destroy, put away, do away with, kill" (Horton, 1989, p. 20). Based on this

observation, he concluded, "There is no command in the passage that the full-gospel believer must take up serpents or drink poisons. It does not state that the believer is to purposely take hold of snakes to show that he is a believer" (p. 20).

However, a careful look at other scriptures in which "airo" is translated reveals that it can in fact be taken as a command (Strong, n.d.). For instance, Jesus spoke an imperative to a paralyzed man, "Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house" (Matthew 9:6). To the weary, Jesus instructed, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:29). To his followers, Jesus made clear that discipleship was a condition of purposive action: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Furthermore, Bullinger (1975) gives reference to the fact that the rendering of "airo" in Mark 16:18 is affected by the reading of the entire clause, i.e., its structure actually requires insertion of the phrase "also, in their hands" between "take up" and "serpents." Hence, a more accurate and explicit translation of the clause might be: "They shall take up also, in their hands, serpents." Even from an exegetical analysis of the text, there seems room for serpent handlers to stake out a theological claim in Mark 16 for practice of the third sign.

If an appeal is made to higher criticisms of the Bible, there seem to be additional difficulties for those would outright dismiss the theology of serpent handling as not legitimate (Hood & Williamson, 1998). Should the latter portion of Mark 16 be considered as only an addition to the original manuscript--as suggested by some biblical scholars (Wuest, 1973; Bruce, 1979)--still the question can be posed as to why a passage

that included a reference to taking up serpents was incorporated into the text (Hood & Williamson, 1998). Despite the notions of some (Hunter, 1988a; Daugherty, 1976), serpent handling sects are not naive of this criticism but sincerely believe that whatever is presently contained in the King James Bible is due to divine providence and must be accepted entirely on those terms as the expressed word of God (Carden & Pelton, 1976). Even if the debated text is excluded, however, Burton (1993) has listed various other biblical passages that serpent handling sects use to support their theology: Exo. 4:3-4; Job 26:13; Eccles. 10:8; Luke 10:19; John 20:30-31; Acts 2:43, 5:12, 28:3-5; and 1 Cor. 10:9.

Concerning another criticism--that signs were for only the apostolic era--serpent handler Richard Williams made an observation with which most of his fellow-believers would agree:

> Jesus told the apostles, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." All He did there was tell them to preach. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Believeth what? Believeth the Gospel those boys preached! "These signs shall follow ..." Who, the apostles? It didn't say that. "... [It said] them that believe." Believe what? Believe the Gospel! The five signs were made for everyone who believes the Gospel. (Carden & Pelton, 1976, p. 161)

What is key in this response is the notion of its rationale, based on an understanding of a sacred text that stems from a fairly complex and consistent local theology (Hood, 1998; see also Schreiter, 1985). It is one that has emerged from a certain religious tradition through struggle of its adherents in process of making sense of their spiritual experiences, and one that has been passed on orally to others through history with modifications that reflect nuances of personal experience that have emerged to demand theological explanation--for example, the theology of the just suffering a serpent bite, or dying from a

serpent bite.

What is of far greater consequence for Pentecostals in general--and others who might follow their lead--is that those who would make use of extra-textual factors to refute certain signs of Mark 16 must do so from outside their own tradition (Hood & Williamson, 1998). By taking such a stance, however, they themselves become vulnerable to the same types of criticisms in regard to doctrines they too hold sacred--for example, the Virgin birth, resurrection of Jesus, miracles, etc. (see Sheehan, 1986; Grant, 1977). On the other hand, should the disputed text of Mark be allowed to stand within a tradition, the question of selectivity among the signs again becomes an issue and the matter of a local theology (Schreiter, 1985)--and in the case of serpent handlers, one that demands "a fair hearing" (Hood, 1998, p. 81).

In summary, this chapter has addressed the history and development of Holiness-Pentecostalism which have important implications for understanding the experience of religious serpent handling among contemporary sects. The history of the tradition is rooted in a Wesleyan crisis conversion that was "heart-felt" and followed by an ecstatic experience of God through sanctification which brought about a pursuit for holy living. As this perceived, direct encounter with God developed over time, it emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as baptism with the Holy Ghost. This experience was believed to empower the recipient at certain times with supernatural gifts and abilities helpful in ministry and evangelism. Since God was felt as directly encountered, one particular ability experienced by the obedient believer was that of taking up venomous serpents in such a way as to convince others of the power of God. This particular nuance of the tradition is

one credited largely to George Went Hensley, who was struck by a model for serpent handling found in a prominent Pentecostal scripture which he took on for himself as a role through obedience. What is critically important from a historical perspective is that this personal experience of God emerges from a complex religious tradition whose boundaries are defined by a specific understanding of sacred text and one that, when experienced, is so profoundly meaningful that it resists all opposition to deter it, be it from friends, family, the mother church, or from legal sanctions by mainstream society.

It should be noted, however, that such historical opposition and persecution have also served a positive function among serpent handling sects. From a sociological perspective, it seems probable that these marginalizing dynamics have circumscribed boundaries of group identity, promoted membership cohesion, and even have cultivated a sense of chosenness by God (see Williamson & Pollio, 1999)--all of which have added to the historical context of the tradition and have served to affect religious experience at some level. All aspects of cultural history when taken together contribute to a certain "throwness" (Heidegger, 1927/1962) into the world of existence. What has been provided here is a presentation of the various aspects of the tradition's historical development in order to illuminate the context from which its practices emerge--particularly that of religious serpent handling.

CHAPTER III

THE VENOMOUS REPTILE

Though a vast literature exists on venomous snakes, the purpose here is simply to provide a general foundation of knowledge concerning their role in religious serpent handling. The selected literature is presented in the following three sections: (1) the biology of snakes, (2) snake symbolism, and (3) snake and human interactions. These areas of information will be connected, and an attempt will be made to show the relevance of venomous snakes to the serpent handling tradition.

The Biology of Snakes

Based on personal field research and interviews with serpent handlers, the most common types of venomous snakes used in serpent handling are pit vipers of the southeastern region of the United States--primarily rattlesnakes, copperheads, and occasionally cottonmouths. Although some snakes are purchased from animal dealers, most are supplied by serpent handlers from snake hunting expeditions, or by friends of the sects who occasion upon them near their homes or on highways.

Among the most commonly handled species of rattlesnakes are subspecies of the timber rattler (Crotalus horridus horridus) and the canebrake (Crotalus horridus atricaudatus). Species of the eastern diamondback (Crotalus adamanteus) and the western diamondback (Crotalus atrox) are less often handled, since they are from outside the region; they are especially valued among serpent handlers, however, for their more aggressive behaviors and are used in worship if available. The cottonmouth (Agkistrodon

piscivorus) is thought by serpent handlers to be somewhat more aggressive than the related copperhead (Agkistrodon contortrix) but is handled far less frequently, largely because two subspecies of the copperhead--the northern (Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen) and the southern (Agkistrodon contortrix contortrix)--are more readily obtained within the region. I have been informed by participants that other non-regional venomous snakes have been handled on rare occasions--such as coral snakes, cobras, puff adders, and bamboo vipers--although I have not personally observed the handling of these.

Characteristics of Snakes

Ernest (1992) has carefully documented the characteristics of each of the species and subspecies of the live-bearing pit vipers mentioned above. The copperheads (Agkistrodon contortrix) are the most docile of those commonly handled and may reach a maximum length of 135 cm. The amount of venom usually stored by this reptile averages from 40 to 70 mg--25 to 75% of which would be expected to discharge in a single bite. All measurements of venom reported here are in dried form. It should also be noted that all venom yields reported by Ernest (1992) are similar to those given by Pinney (1981), except where indicated. Since the lethal dosage for an adult human is estimated to be at least 100 mg, it is of little surprise that only one death has been recorded due to a copperhead bite--that of a 14-year old male (Ernest, 1992, p. 61).

The temperament of the cottonmouth (Agkistrodon piscivorus) varies according to the individual snake (Ernest, 1992). If unable to escape from a captor or predator, it usually coils and strikes repeatedly. This reptile may eventually reach a length of 189 cm, depending on the subspecies. An average yield of venom for the cottonmouth ranges from

100 to 150 mg--the same amount estimated to be the lethal dose for an adult human. According to Allen and Swindell (1948), at least 50% of bites delivered by cottonmouths result in maimed appendages.

The closely related subspecies of timber (Crotalus horridus horridus) and canebrake rattlesnakes (Crotalus horridus atricaudatus) retreat from danger if possible but will strike if provoked (Ernest, 1992). A timber rattlesnake has been documented to reach the length of 189.2 cm, though three year-old adults may grow as long as 80 to 90 cm. A typical Crotalus horridus stores from 100 to 200 mg of venom while the estimated lethal dosage for a human adult is from 75 to 100 mg. Ernest has acknowledged there to be at least one known case in which human death resulted from a wound inflicted by the decapitated head of a canebrake rattlesnake (Ernest, 1992, p. 116).

Although most eastern diamondback rattlesnakes (Crotalus adamanteus) range from 100 to 150 cm in length, fully mature adults have been known to measure as long as 244 cm (Ernest, 1992). Its behavior, when discovered in the wild, is typically to first lie still but to coil and strike when provoked. The venom content of an average adult eastern diamondback has been found to range from 492 to 666 mg, based on different studies--Pinney (1981) has estimated it to range from 370 to 720 mg. It has been speculated that the lethal dose for humans is about 100 mg (Ernest, 1992). Even in escaping death, victims of snakebite from this reptile often suffer partial crippling of limbs and appendages.

The species of the western diamondback rattlesnake (Crotalus atrox) is perhaps the most aggressive of rattlers that serpent handlers include in their practice. Ernest (1992) has noted that, once provoked, this snake will coil, raising its head to a striking position as

high as 50 cm, and often advance toward its captor or predator--presumably for the purpose of improving its striking range. Its length has been known to reach over 210 cm. While the storage of venom for a typical adult may average from 200 to 300 mg, one snake, measuring 165.5 cm in length, was found to contain 1,145 mg of venom--underscoring the fact that the volume of venom increases with size of the reptile. It was estimated that the delivery of 100 mg would be necessary to cause death in an adult human. According to Ernest, The complex chemistry of the western diamondback's venom renders it more dangerous than most other rattlers, making it more likely responsible for the majority of human deaths by snakebite in the U.S.

Striking Tendencies

In his study of rattlesnakes, Rubio (1998) has observed two striking maneuvers: one for prey, and another for defense. When attacking prey, the strike is downward with a twisting motion that deeply embeds the fangs, whereas the defense maneuver is typically initiated toward an upward direction--resulting in the shallow penetration of fangs. During a strike, the snake controls through a contraction the amount of venom injected through each fang according to size of prey. It is of interest that no single bite depletes the entire venom reserve, while even less venom is usually injected in bites for defense. This may account for the number of "dry" bites received by humans, said Rubio, as well as the improper position of the jaw and fangs in an upwardly-angled strike for defense. It should be noted, however, that, as practitioners handle serpents, the reptiles are often in a position to strike in a downward fashion, as if it were at prey.

An infrequency of snakebite among serpent handling sects has been reported by

researchers (Scwharz, 1960; Tripp, 1975; Kane, 1979; Minton & Minton, 1980; Rubio, 1998)--which seems surprising, given the frequency of handling itself. The actual base rate of snakebite per handlings is unknown, as serpent handling sects produce the only data of this nature themselves. As we shall see in a later chapter, serpent handlers have offered explanations from their tradition as to why snakebites are infrequent, though, from a purely secular perspective, there are two interesting experimental studies related to the subject.

Concerned with gaining insight into mechanisms of certain psychiatric syndromes, Svorad (1957) studied the effects of motion on various animals while measuring EEG responses (only for one of the groups). In his study he included samples of cats, rats, rabbits, roosters, and lizards (Lacertaviridis), and rotated, in a special apparatus, each subject about its vertebral axis from the zero position of Magnus to 180 degrees. Only the lizards, roosters, and rabbits exhibited a sudden "paroxysmal inhibition" (p. 536) characterized by an observed loss of posture, and a hypnotic state equated to sleep (as interpreted by rabbit EEGs), for significant periods of times--an average of over 18 minutes for the reptiles. Only the roosters were more susceptible to this phenomenon than reptiles. It might be tempting to relate the agitated treatment of the reptile lizard, along with its immobilizing effects, to the sometimes vigorous handling of serpent handlers who seldom suffer bites. Before such generalizing is done, however, it should be noted that, though practitioners handle their reptiles sometimes in an excited manner, no observations have been made from my field experience in which believers rotated them in such a fashion as described in this experiment. It has been only on extremely rare occasions--three or four

times at most--that I have observed serpents held in other than an upright position, and then only for brief moments of time.

On the other hand, findings from at least one other experiment suggest that snakes that are handled might be more prone to bite. Herzog (1990) studied three groups of juvenile eastern garter snakes (Thamnophis sirtalis) to determine how they might react defensively to differential treatment effects of handling. The treatments were as follows: one group was picked up and briefly shaken by a model predator (harassed group); a second group was taken up and gently handled by the experimenter (handled group); and a third group served as a control, receiving no treatment in handling at all. After three weeks of treatment, a defense test which measured the striking tendencies of the snakes found that the harassed group struck significantly more often than did the control group whereas the handled group was found at midpoint of the range established by the other two groups. A second part of the study, which reversed treatment conditions for the harassed and the control groups, found the following effects after three additional weeks: (1) the newly harassed control group significantly increased its striking tendencies; (2) the unmolested harassed group continued its high frequency of strikes; and (3) the handled group, which was continued in the same treatment as received earlier, even increased its moderate striking tendencies. While various species of snakes clearly differ in behaviors and temperaments, such findings do offer interesting considerations in addressing the low frequency of snakebites among serpent handling sects. Despite suggestions that frequent handling of serpents has taming or calming effects (see discussion in Kane, 1979), Herzog (1990) has shown that, under controlled experimental conditions, aggressive and even

mild handling in fact increase the tendency of snakes to strike over time. It is most interesting to note that aggressively treated snakes, after the three additional weeks of no treatment at all, continued to strike more frequently--an observation suggesting that all snakes kept by serpent handlers, even those only handled periodically, pose an increased risk for snakebite.

From a purely secular perspective, then, the findings of Herzog (1990) would seemingly indicate that the frequent handling of venomous serpents by believers would increase their striking tendencies, not reduce them. Added to this is the fact that those, specializing in the study of venomous reptiles (Minton & Minton, 1980; Rubio, 1998), have visited serpent handling sects to witness their practices and found no satisfactory explanations as to why handlers are not bitten more often. Such observations, about snake striking tendencies among these religious sects, are both perplexing and intriguing, and add to the study of serpent handling.

The Severity of Snakebite

Kane (1979) has noted that three variables determine the seriousness of a snakebite. First of all, it is relative to the age, size, sex, and health of the victim as well as individual allergic reactions and susceptibility to protein poisoning. The emotional state of the person and even the layers of clothing worn at the time of the bite are of importance. Secondly, the snake itself is a factor in terms of its species-type, size, and excitement when inflicting the bite. The condition of its venom sacs and their volume are important, including the recency of feeding. The severity of the bite is affected by the condition of the snake's fangs and the level of microorganisms present in its mouth. The bite itself is a third

variable that influences the nature of the wound. The location of a bite is important--a bite on the face, for example, would be far more serious than one delivered to the hand. Whether both fangs were imbedded, the depth of penetration, and the volume of venom injected are important determinants in the severity of a bite as well as in the length of time a snake holds on by its jaws to the area of attack. To these observations, Rubio (1998) added the age and health of the snake, the climate, the time of day, and the season of the year. All of these observations factor into an equation determining the severity of a snakebite.

Snake Venom

The chemistry of snake venom is of two types: (1) hemotoxic, which prevents blood clotting and destroys blood vessels; and (2) neurotoxic, which acts on the nervous system, paralyzing muscles involved in the cardiovascular and respiratory work of the body (Rubio, 1998). Rather than thinking of hemotoxin and neurotoxin as distinct types of venom, however, they are best understood as two basic properties found in all snake venoms, in varying degrees, according to species and subspecies. Environmental factors, as well as preferred types of prey, play a significant role in the chemistry of venom. The toxin is composed of complex proteins, enzymes, and polypeptides--all of which contribute to the process of breaking down body tissue in the prey. More specifically, Pinney (1981) has described the common components of venom:

> Among the components found in most or all venoms are: hyaluronidase, which destroys the matrix of connective tissues; ribonuclease, which destroys RNA, the cell's protein-making genetic material; deoxyribonuclease, which destroys DNA, the genetic material of all animal cells; phosphodiesterase, which breaks the molecular bonds of many important cell components; and ATPase, which destroys

the cell's major energy-carrying molecule, ATP. (Pinney, 1981, pp. 141-143) Since the snake can only swallow its prey, this biological alteration by venom, and its subsequent dissolution of tissue, seems to aid in the digestion of food kills, while leaving permanent deformities and atrophied limbs with those who survive.

At the site of the wound, swelling and intense pain are due to the breakdown of cell membranes and the flooding of histamines and bradykinin (polypeptide hormones that dilate blood vessels of injured tissue) which are produced by the victim's immune system (Rubio, 1998). The disintegration of lymphatic vessels and these cellular membranes results in the collection of fluids at the site of the wound, along with blood and plasma that are released by dissolved capillaries--all of which lead to swelling of enormous size and excruciating pain. Acute necrosis may develop in the surrounding tissue and eventually require surgical removal. Uncommonly, pulmonary complications may spread to vital organs, including the lungs, kidneys, and alimentary tract, at which sites hemorrhaging occurs. Depending on the degree of envenomation, an immediate drop in blood pressure may result, adding further difficulties.

Venoms with higher levels of hemotoxin produce symptoms of severe headache, nausea, and abdominal cramping--which are precursors of cardiac and circulatory failure--whereas venoms more concentrated with neurotoxin tend to manifest impaired locomotion, visual and auditory perception, and gastrointestinal functions. Symptoms, in this latter case, also reflect abnormalities in cognition, speech, and body sensations as well as severe headaches.

Although thousands of snakebites are experienced yearly, Rubio (1998) estimated

that only a dozen on average prove to be fatal in the U.S., an approximation similar to that given by Ernest (1992). In one study (Parrish, 1980), deaths caused by venomous animals in the United States were found due to the following: 40% by insects; 33% by snakes; and 18% by spiders and scorpions. In this particular year, 1959, 14 persons of 6,680, who were treated for snakebite, died--a statistic which predicts that one in 10 million Americans will die of snakebite each year. The lapse of time between the bite itself and treatment is crucial; survival rate is 99% for those receiving antivenin within two hours of the inflicted bite (Rubio, 1998). On the other hand, those bites proving to be fatal usually claim their victims between 6 and 48 hours after envenomation.

Snakebite Immunity

Minton and Minton (1980) have looked at issues of immunity in regard to snakebites. In one study, a total of 14 interviews were conducted with snake handlers, herpetologists, biologists, and animal dealers who had been individually bitten from two to 12 times by venomous snakes--mostly by North American pit vipers. As a result of the bites, individuals experienced various symptoms ranging from mild to near-fatal. From the interviews, it was found that many participants experienced more severe symptoms from the same species of snakes in later bites--hence no evidence for the development of immunity was found from repeated bites. Two explanations are given for this finding: first, time intervals between bites were too variable for the systematic development of immunity; second, the amount of venom injected with each bite was unknown.

There is other evidence, however, that immunity from snakebite does develop, but only with respect to a specific venom which is injected systematically over time (Minton &

Minton, 1980). If periodic injections are discontinued, the level of antitoxin in the blood diminishes, once again leaving the person increasingly vulnerable to the venom. On the basis of the above study, and the low frequency of natural bites, it seems unlikely that the vast majority of serpent handlers--if any at all--would develop significant immunity to snakebite. The facts of maimed appendages and atrophied limbs tend to support this hypothesis--not to mention the fact of death itself. For example, one 34 year-old serpent handler, who had agreed to participate in this present study, died within minutes of a serpent bite only five days before the scheduled interview; it was reported that he had been bitten on at least 23 other occasions prior the fatal bite.

Snake Symbolism

Aside from justifications given in a sacred text, the fact that certain religious sects use the serpent in their worship inherently raises an important issue as to its symbolic meaning. As noted by Mundkur (1983), the snake has symbolic signification in almost every culture of the world. Though an indepth survey of such meanings is beyond the scope of this present study, a brief review of the most related work is offered here, including that given directly to religious serpent handling.

Since psychoanalytic theory has been used as a basis on which to study serpent handlers (La Barre, 1962/1992; Kane, 1979; Hood & Kimbrough, 1995), it seems helpful to consider the idea of symbolism from a psychanalytic perspective. In a chapter dedicated solely to this topic, Jones (1961) viewed the symbol as an indirect substitute for a primitive idea that had been repressed from conscious awareness by affective inhibition. Symbols are distinguished from metaphors and other poetic figures in that their meanings

are invariably unconscious and have failed, insofar as their symbols are concerned, to be sublimated into modifications found more acceptable in society. According to Jones, universal cultural symbols number less than 100, the vast majority of these concerning the phallus, with the serpent its most constant symbol (Freud, 1938a).

Characterized as phallus worship, certain religions--such as Western Christianity--are thought unconsciously to center upon: (1) a cultural over-emphasis on the primordial function of sexuality, and (2) hostility toward the primordial father who had denied sexual privileges to his sons, an act for which he was eventually killed (Freud, 1938b). The conscious aspect of such religions, however, is thought to be a reaction formation of this repressed hostility which manifests itself in an adoration for the projected divine father. All of this, said Jones (1961), is rooted in an unconscious concern for a real phallus. With the repression of such affective tendencies, the resulting intrapsychical conflict shifts toward the fusing together of related unconscious and conscious elements into a compromise-formation which eventually comes to stand as a symbol for the primitive notions--a sufficient substitute infused with unconscious meaning. Hence the serpent as a persistent cultural symbol is an unwitting equal to the phallus. All other meanings of sexuality related to the serpent are derived primarily from this fundamental concept. That this association gained wide acceptance in psychoanalytic theory may be demonstrated by various studies (e.g., Hassall 1919; Reed, 1922; Fortune, 1924).

Perhaps the most detailed account of snake symbolism related to religious serpent handling was given by La Barre (1962/1992). Tracing the origin of snake cults to Egypt, the common role of snakes was observed to emerge within diverse cultural mythologies

that generally centered on themes of creation, death, and immortality--a blended motif undeniably linked with sexuality. For example, dual phallic functions were ascribed to snakes in their mythological roles as "water-gods" who produce rain and hence life upon the earth--a phenomenon paralleled even in the rod of Moses that produced water from a rock and sustained the Hebrews in the wilderness. Other phallic qualities, variously abstracted from myths, included the snake's hairiness (particularly in American myths), its tumescent and detumescent capabilities, and its relationships to ancestry, husbandry, and masculinity. For La Barre, the ubiquity of these cross-cultural observations was so convincing as to ask: "Where is the snake not a phallic symbol?" (La Barre, 1962/1992, p. 74).

In the Bible, La Barre (1962/1992) pointed to various associations of the serpent with life and death which ranged over time from the symbolism of a high god to that of an archdemon. Beginning at the Garden of Eden, the serpent was viewed as the procreator, the teacher, and the punisher, as well as the incarnate of immortality, the phallus, and evil. On the one hand, it was seen as the giver of earthly life and even eternal life and, on the other hand, as God's instrument of destruction and death. Despite this plethora of related meanings, claimed La Barre, the real serpent is none of these but rather a symbol of the psychological source from which they all flow--the human father, and yet more specifically the father's phallus. For La Barre, then, the serpent was unequivocally equal to the phallus, as held in classic psychoanalytic theory.

From another psychoanalytic perspective, Eigen (1981) rejected a strict interpretation of the serpent as a phallic symbol for one that is relative to a given context.

The structural limitations of the serpent as phallus were viewed as apparent in that, for example, the penis cannot curl as a snake, and neither is a serpent fully extended except when dead and held up by the tail. According to Eigen, the symbolic meanings of the serpent, both conscious and unconscious, are based upon the specific field of perception in which it occurs and the particular serpentine qualities most featured.

Relying largely on Freudian theory, Rousselle (1984) compared the serpent handling of Hellenistic Greece with that practiced in contemporary America among serpent handling sects. A brief survey of early Greek literature found links between the snake and the phallus, as well as heroes who had gained semi-divine status after death. At least two Greek cults, those of Sabazius and Dionysus, were observed to have practiced ecstatic serpent handling. While activities of the first cult are obscure, handling rites of the second are more well-known and center around women who danced ecstatically while in trance states for days with large nonvenomous serpents in hand--an act interpreted as female hostility aimed at castrating male dominance, which met with limited success. Shifting focus to modern times, parallels were drawn with certain religious sects of the American South who were said to take up serpents unwittingly as an ecstatic expression of repressed sexuality. In this context, female aggression observed among the Greeks was thought to be manifested once again in the patriarchal South as women handled serpents until they were "limp as a necktie" (p. 483), another Freudian phallic symbol, whereas the injection of venom through snakebite, and its aura of death, were equated to coitus and the depletion of life-force. Though the serpent was also afforded symbolism of the Christian devil, immortality, and wisdom, such associations were eclipsed by its

predominant link with sexuality.

Other investigations not given to psychoanalytic theory have attempted to describe the symbolic meaning of the serpent. Tracing the origins of snake worship, Howey (1926) suggested the most predominant symbolism of the serpent was that of deity as portrayed in Egyptian hierographs of the "Encircled Serpent." When representing the cosmos in such depictions, the Egyptians would ...

> [D]elineate a serpent bespeckled with variegated scales, devouring its own tail, the scales intimating the stars in the Universe. The animal is extremely heavy, as is the earth, and extremely slippery, like the water, moreover, it every year puts off its old age with its skin, as in the Universe the annual period effects a corresponding change and becomes renovated, and the making use of its own body for food implies that all things whatever, which are generated by Divine providence in the world, undergo a corruption into them again. (Howey, 1926, p. 17)

Variations of this theme, said Howey, evolved over time with the dispersion and diversification of cultures, though all, including that of the phallus, are rooted in the symbol's foundational meaning of life--particularly everlasting life. Hence any phallic connotation cannot be taken as an end in itself but only as a certain marker within a greater context of meaning that points toward the essence of life and its regeneration.

In a critique of poetry from the Romantic period, Pedrini and Pedrini (1966) focused especially on the literary imagery and symbolism of the serpent as used by certain authors. Emerging from the restraints of the 18th century, the most noted idealist poets employed the serpent to represent a wide range of concerns best understood, according to the authors, by five categories of symbols that related to: (1) idealism, (2) the Fall of Man, (3) materialism, (4) man against man (tyranny and injustice), and (5) institutions against man. Sexuality as a category was neglected in this analysis in efforts to highlight the range

of other possibilities the serpent lends to symbolic intuition. Although reference was made to both conscious and unconscious meanings as related to the serpent, Pedrini and Pedrini (1966) dealt largely with those given to consciousness.

Taking careful account of the serpent cross-culturally, Mundkur (1983) observed a wide variety of symbolic meanings, other than sexual, that are expressed through cultural myths and artifacts, including deity, evil, protection, ancestry, and prosperity. At the same time he noted various animals, other than the serpent, which take on sexual significance as a cultural symbol--for example, the hippopotamus of Egypt, the fish of Spain, and the mating dragons of China. In some cultures--the Mayan, for example--no evidence was found for sexual symbolism of any kind. Hence Mundkur found the classic psychoanalytic view of serpent symbolism far too restrictive.

On the basis of this review, the serpent, exclusively interpreted as a phallus, does not seem well-grounded. As shown earlier, not all psychoanalytic studies of the serpentine symbol have suggested such an equation. Even Pruyser (1963), in review of La Barre's (1962/1992) work, went so far as to say it might symbolize "Christ," as well as immortality and the "Devil." Hood and Kimbrough (1995) have suggested the serpent to represent death and life among serpent handling sects whereas Eigen (1981) saw its meaning as defined by contextual factors, a view well supported by Mundkur (1983). In other studies, Howey (1926) saw little cultural evidence for strict phallic symbolism in the serpent, and Pedrini and Pedrini (1966) chose to emphasize other symbolic meanings of the serpent existing in literature.

Mundkur (1983), in his conclusion, outright rejected psychoanalytic theory as a

viable method for the study of cultural serpent veneration, for three primary reasons. First, despite universal claims rooted in biology, psychoanalysis is not based on a replicable scientific method but only on unverifiable "insights" into the pliable human mind. Secondly, psychoanalytic interpretations cannot rightly be generalized and found universally valid in all cultures, as evidenced in Mundkur's own study, though they may be useful and enlightening in specific contexts. Finally, the methodological use of the theory varies from one scientist to another and therefore requires each researcher to responsibly mark out reasonable limits of its application in individual cases--something, said Mundkur, that La Barre (1962/1992) failed to do.

I would add to these observations that the definition of what constitutes a symbol seems also at issue. For those given to classic psychoanalytic theory (Hassall, 1919; Reed, 1922; Fortune, 1924; La Barre, 1962/1992; Rousselle, 1984), a true symbol is distinct from a metaphor in that its meaning is repressed in the unconscious--it is in fact a substitute for the original meaning (Jones, 1961)--whereas all other ideas of symbolism, such as metaphor (Mundkur, 1983), depend largely upon meanings furnished by the conscious mind in varying degrees. The range of symbolic meanings the serpent has, therefore, is restricted by the theoretical assumptions one is willing to make and by the degree of trust vested in the self-understanding a culture has in regard to its practices.

Human and Snake Interactions

Since the present study involves the relationship between serpent handlers and the serpents themselves, it seems fitting to take brief note of literature given to human and snake interactions. The possibility has even been suggested that snakes may respond

differentially to those with whom they experience frequent contact (Bowers & Burghardt, 1992). The following review includes accounts of serpent handling written by those who have studied snakes, the element of human fear in relation to snakes, the issue of snakebite, and the care of snakes given by serpent handling sects.

Herpetological Accounts

It is of particular interest to note that at least five researchers wrote of religious serpent handlers in their studies of snakes, three of whom actually attended worship services for the purpose of observing their practices. In reporting on various species of reptiles inhabiting Big Black Mountain of Harlan County, Kentucky, Barbour (1950) made brief reference to serpent handling sects when describing the rattlesnake populations. From information provided by a native source, he told of a local pastor who chanted "magic words" just before capturing a four foot rattler in the wild.

Klauber (1956) included a brief section on serpent handling sects in his extensive work on rattlesnakes. Concluding their practice a "test of faith," he noted that fear among serpent handlers persisted until they entered a "hypnotic" state during worship at which time they found enablement to handle serpents. He further observed that the snakes had not been physically altered in any way to inhibit biting and were not restrained in any manner by skillful techniques of handling. After noting the legal action taken against this practice of the sects, the author gave accounts of bites and deaths from at least five different states, as well as of a court case involving the insurance claim of a serpent bite victim. It is unclear that Klauber ever attended the services he described, although it seems unlikely given the sources he cited.

In their book on venomous reptiles, Minton and Minton (1980) committed a chapter based on a single visit to a Tennessee church for the purpose of observing serpent handling firsthand. In this chapter, they offered a brief history of the oral tradition and then described their own observations at the service they attended. Of the eight men and three women who handled serpents, it was thought that most did so from an self-induced state described as "hysteria bordering on temporary psychosis" (Minton & Minton, 1980, p. 205). The authors noted the various types and conditions of snakes used--some of which were lethargic and apparently dehydrated--and found no evidence that they had been altered to inhibit potential injury to the handlers. Children in attendance were also observed to be in no danger, as they were not allowed to be in close proximity of the snakes. In concluding remarks, discussion was given to the frequencies of bites and deaths that occurred within the larger serpent handling tradition. According to Minton and Minton (1980), the taking up of venomous serpents is a "grim test of Christian faith" (p. 199) for followers of the tradition.

Rubio (1998), in his study of rattlesnakes, also included a chapter on religious serpent handling based on his attendance at a service in Georgia. After a brief introduction given to ancient serpent veneration, and the history of contemporary serpent handling, a typical service was described, followed by an evaluation of serpent handling itself. The author observed that serpents were not altered and distinguished the particular species of rattlesnakes commonly used in the practice. Attention was given to the reported frequency of snakebites and death among serpent handlers, as well as to the fact that children are not allowed to take up serpents among contemporary sects. In explaining the tendency of

snakes not to strike, various hypotheses were offered--that is, catatonic defense mechanisms triggered by rough handling (see Svorad, 1957), tendencies to become easily disoriented from being passed among handlers, soothing effects derived from passing through warm hands (see Kane, 1979)--though it was clearly stated that all such explanations were not supported by unequivocal evidence. Finally reasons were considered for the survival rate among the seriously bitten who do not seek medical attention, most notably a possible endocrine-immune response in the body, related to the intensely emotional state of worship. It is likely because of Rubio's (1998) scant field research among serpent handling sects that he, like Minton and Minton (1980), concluded that religious serpent handling to be a test of faith for members of the tradition.

It is significant to point out here that the latter three researchers (Minton & Minton, 1980; Rubio, 1998) made three critical observations among many during their field visits. First, despite traditional claims made about the tampering of snakes by handlers to reduce potential injury, no evidence was found to support this view. Secondly, no mention was made of serious abuse to the snakes. Minton and Minton (1980) noted that the reptiles they observed were lethargic--one even appeared to be dehydrated--however, the time of their visit was in winter, and then it was to a rural church that was not likely to have been well-heated. Lastly, it was found that children were at very low risk of endangerment. It was factually stated that children were not allowed to participate in serpent handling (Rubio, 1998) and even consciously kept by adults from the proximity in which handling took place (Minton & Minton, 1980). These observations are consistent with my own in field research, documented over the past five years, as well as with those

made by others (Kane, 1979; Hood, 1998).

Fear of Snakes

Given the use of venomous serpents in their practice, the experience of fear is an intense emotion with which serpent handling sects contend (Hood, 1998; Williamson & Pollio, 1999), yet the affect of fear in reaction to these reptiles is one of universal human response that has been generalized even to non-venomous snakes (Mundkur, 1983).

Based on cross-cultural studies, Mundkur (1983) has maintained that the reaction of fear to the serpent is rooted in a sensitivity to its form and sinuous movement--a genetic adaptation in the human psyche which manifests in particular social behaviors and religious beliefs whenever the serpent is involved. Denying the possibility of an unconscious to non-human primates, he acknowledged that they, like humans, also display a fear of snakes. Based on this observation, he argued against any universal theory of an unconscious for explaining snake veneration and symbolism, and suggested in its place an evolutionary hypothesis to account for the fear of snakes common to all cultures. Emotion is said to be a physiological state of arousal stimulated by a cognitive framework and intensified by the release of epinephrine in the bloodstream. Cultural myths--including those related to animals such as snakes--contribute to such mental frameworks thus impacting related emotions which may range on a continuum from clinical ophidiophobia to fascination and awe. That which facilitates this process is thought to be a complex visuo-motor affect mechanism cued to features which come into the field of perception--that is, in the case of the serpent, its limbless shape and sinuous locomotion. Other characteristics of the serpent's mystique that contribute to the cultural cognitive framework are its occasional

abnormalities (two heads or tails on a single body), the ability of its body to continue movement after severance from the head, and a generalized potential for danger.

According to Mundkur's (1983) theory, veneration of the serpent resulted from the migration of pre-civilized humans who eventually developed agricultural skills to survive. The advancement of horticulture necessitated the clearing of land which brought about the flooding of altered landscapes by rain and the subsequent invasion of snakes seeking higher altitudes and dryer habitations--often in human dwellings. Eventually the simultaneous appearance of snakes and certain climatological conditions became linked which then led to the introduction of these reptiles into religious rites devised to influence the sun and rain for agricultural purposes. With an increase of grains came an increase of a rodent population, which in turn multiplied the presence of snakes, along with enhanced notice of their unique qualities leading to their veneration by humans--that is, their shape, sinuous movement, and potential danger, all of which persisted in the evolution of cultures that later emerged. Even to the present day, "the serpent's power to fascinate certain primates is dependent on the reaction of the latter's autonomic nervous system to the mere sight of reptilian sinuous movement--a type of response that may have been reinforced by memories of venomous attacks during anthropogenesis and differentiation of human societies" (Mundkur, 1983, p. 6). For Mundkur, modern recognition of such serpentine attributes continues to stimulate cultural responses that are rooted in a common primordial fear of snakes.

Laboratory studies also have focused on the possibility of a genetic predisposition for the fear of snakes in primates. Joslin, Fletcher, and Emlen (1964), for example,

compared the fear reactions of rhesus monkeys reared in a laboratory with others reared in the wild when confronted with a bullsnake and a range of snake-like objects: snake models, ropes, and tubes. As expected, wild monkeys took significantly more time than laboratory animals in reaching for food when presented with a live snake and snake-like stimuli, and demonstrated significantly more emotional disturbance. The experimenters suggested three possible explanations for these differences: (1) an aberration of an innate response in lab monkeys due to impoverished environmental conditions, (2) a tendency in lab monkeys to habituate to originally aversive stimuli such as snakes and snake-like objects, and (3) a lack of learning experience among lab monkeys that would otherwise teach avoidance responses to live snakes and generalize to other similar stimuli. Because of the design of the experiment, however, it was not possible for Joslin et al. (1964) to make final judgements concerning these possibilities.

Building on these themes, Mineka, Davidson, Cook, and Keir (1984) conducted two experiments focused on primate fear of snakes, the first of which was a near-replication of the Joslin et al. (1964) study, but using wild-reared Rhesus monkeys and their lab-reared offspring as subjects. The same type of apparatus as used in the earlier study--the Wisconsin General Test Apparatus (WGTA)--was employed here to present each monkey with a live snake, various snake-like stimuli, and neutral objects in random order. As in the earlier study, Mineka et al. (1984) found the wild-reared monkeys took significantly longer than their lab-reared offspring in reaching for food when presented with the snake and snake-like stimuli, and displayed more behavioral disturbances related to this fear. Another testing apparatus, the Sackett Self-Selection Circus, independently

confirmed the findings. The Sackett Self-Selection Circus was a specially designed apparatus composed of a common center cage of hexagonal shape with an entrance into other cages extending from each of its six walls. Hence there were six cages extending from the center cage, five of which were used in the experiment. One of these annexed cages was used as an entrance chamber for monkeys to access the common center cage. The other four annexed cages were used as stimuli chambers in which access was gained upon entrance for viewing one of the following stimuli: a real snake, a model snake, a toy snake, or a neutral unpainted wood object. Monkeys were free to enter and leave chambers according to their own will. Time spent in each chamber was recorded and used for comparisons.

To test observational learning theory--that monkeys learn to fear snakes by observing such fear exhibited by other monkeys--a subset of monkeys from the first experiment paired lab-reared offspring as observers with their wild-reared parents as models in a second experiment (Mineka et al., 1984). Procedures of the first experiment were repeated in the second for the parents, but this time with their offspring in close proximity to observe their fear reactions during the presentation of each stimulus. After a designated number of trials, the lab-reared offspring were then tested by the procedure and found to exhibit the same types of avoidance and disturbance behaviors as their wild-reared parents. These findings were also confirmed by testing with the Sackett Self-Selection Circus. After a three month period, follow-up testing by both apparatuses found that the fear of snakes learned by lab-raised monkeys from observations of their wild-raised parents had indeed been retained, thus clearly supporting the theory of

observational conditioning in regard to fear of snakes for primates.

In regard to these findings, several observations of the experimenters (Mineka et al., 1984) are worth noting. First, the fact that the learning of fear was acquired so rapidly is striking since direct contact with snakes for the offspring was rare; even their wild-reared parents, who demonstrated high levels of disturbance, had not had contact with snakes for the last 12 years of captivity. Hence such rapid acquisition of fear is congruent with an "adaptive/evolutionary" perspective which predicts that, although direct contact with such a predator by a monkey would not be a common phenomenon in the wild, mistakes in fast learning could prove fatal. This dynamic might also account for the widespread fear of snakes in humans, who have little contact with snakes yet acquire a strong fear easily from little exposure and experience. On the basis of this study, it was suggested that various phobias in both primates and humans are the consequence of "prepared" observational conditioning, which seems to be a biological predisposition that can be initialized by observing reactions of high-level disturbance in others (see Mundkur, 1983).

These observations might also be related to the serpent handling context. Although "successful" handling is much more common in worship services, my field research has found there is virtually no long-time believer who has not witnessed a serpent bite, along with its sometimes damaging consequences. In fact, almost all experienced serpent handlers of my acquaintance bear the physical markings of long-time obedience to the practice of their faith, whether by scars, gnarled or missing appendages, or atrophied limbs. Furthermore, virtually all have either witnessed or known of an acquaintance (or

relative) whose death was related to a serpent bite sustained while practicing the faith. Just as non-human primates, who are easily conditioned through observation to fear snakes, it seems likely that serpent handling believers have also been conditioned to fear and know of the dangers related to handling serpents. As one participant in this study aptly stated, "I'm scared to death of them" (P6).

Fear and/or awe appear to be universal human reactions to serpents. In his extensive work, Mundkur (1983) has marked out these relations in almost all cultures which gave way to cults that venerate the serpent. Howey (1926), in his study of cultural snake mythologies, suggested that the "encircled serpent" predominantly signified perfection and deity, and committed a chapter to anecdotes that illustrate the power of fascination and awe it commands from both humans and other animals alike. It is of particular interest here to note that such qualities as these are ascribed to God by Otto (1923) in his well-known work, The Idea of the Holy.

According to Otto (1923), God is a non-rational supra-reality--non-rational in the sense that God transcends all comprehension by rational thought or human logic--who exists above all religious concepts which, based on previous experience, are meant to understand and relate to Him. At best, any "idea" of this "numen" is awakened in "creature feelings" that are realized in two extraordinary sensations captured in the expression "mysterium tremendum." While experience of the numen involves an ineffable "mysterious" quality, it also provides a sense of awe, overwhelming power, and an urgent energy, all of which contribute to an aura of "tremor" that enticingly draws and, at the same time, fearfully repels. These dual qualities, which are both daunting and fascinating,

are thought to unite as a "strange harmony of contrasts" in the experience of the numen:

> The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it somehow his own. The "mystery" is for him not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication; it is the Dionysiac-element in the numen. (Otto, 1923, p. 31)

This is indeed an intriguing passage, significant with meanings for the present study. Without pressing the issue at this point, it is sufficient to point out that the fear and awe of God's presence are both merged together in a very tangible way in the worship context of serpent handling sects. From my field research, I have found that serpent handlers often mention the issue of fear as related to the serpent and that, when serpents are handled, all attention by others nearby is drawn to the serpent being held, as if compelled by what Otto would describe as awe. For serpent handlers, this combination of universal fear and awe takes on special significance and meaning in their worship.

The Care of Snakes

Serpents handled in the early history of Holiness-Pentecostals were initially brought to meetings by scoffers and skeptics who challenged believers to make good their claim on the biblical text that signs should follow them. In such a context, believers willingly obeyed the scriptural mandate and took up serpents which, at times, were so convincing a sign of God's power that even those contriving the events were sometimes converted. At that time in history, snakes were readily available to both skeptics and believers alike, since most of the population was rural and the prevalence of agricultural

labor brought people into frequent contact with the reptiles. With the spread of industrialization and urbanization, however, these populations no longer had easy access to venomous snakes thus requiring believers to supply their own serpents if the scriptural text was to be obeyed. So persuasive a sign was serpent handling that it demanded believers not only to seek out snakes but sometimes to maintain them for extended periods in order that the word of God be fulfilled with regularity in their services--hence the institutionalizing of the tradition. In fact, my research among contemporary serpent handling sects has found that most all serpents are supplied for worship either by believers or friends of the sects.

When attending the Pine Mountain Church of God in 1938, Kerman (1942) noted that serpents were captured for the congregation by "unbelievers" but then maintained by the believers often for as long as a month, during which time a "wooden box" containing them might be rotated from church to church. By the 1940s, however, Collins (1947) observed that believers themselves took some degree of responsibility for supplying their own serpents. Collins indicated that serpents were as a prized possession of the handlers, and understandably so, since without them it would be quite impossible to fulfill their role as true believers of the Bible. In caring for their valued serpents, it was found that believers fed them rodents and small chickens, and warmed them by the fire during the chill of winter months. It is also significant that Collins (1947) gave what seems to be the first-known early account of a "special-built box" used by sect members for the transport of their serpents to and from services--an observation suggesting the beginnings of an institutionalized practice.

In his study of serpent handling sects, Kane (1974a) found that his informants cared for their serpents in much the same way as described above. In addition to furnishing an appropriate diet and water, believers who maintained serpents were found to bathe them weekly and provide opportunities for regular exercise by releasing them on the ground for brief periods of time. Rowe (1982) observed the same procedures for the care of serpents in his study. Despite giving such deliberate care, both Kane (1974a) and Rowe (1982) found that serpents kept by their informants lived an average of eight months in captivity. Kerman (1942) found from his investigation that members of the Church of God of Pine Mountain practiced the release of their serpents after only a month of captivity, since longer periods reportedly resulted in their death. According to Collins (1947), even serpents, known to have bitten handlers, were well-treated; in fact, said Collins, no serpent handler had ever been known to kill a reptile intentionally.[1] Overall, it seems that the care and well-being of their serpents has been a traditional concern among religious serpent handling sects.

From my own research, I have found that those who maintain serpents invest considerable amounts of money and time in the care of their reptiles. One of my research participants, P15,[2] for example, keeps his serpents under lock and key in a building

---

1

I have found one exception to this general statement that was reported by Birckhead (1976) in which an assistant pastor deliberately--with great reluctance--killed a western diamondback rattler for the safety of neophyte handler who had expressed a desire to handle it. The minister knowingly put his own reputation at risk for the over-riding concern of his brother, and did so on the basis of a foreboding dream that personal harm was imminent.

2

Codes have been assigned to my research participants to ensure their anonymity.

especially dedicated to their maintenance, completely furnished with a largely-constructed pit and various glass aquariums appropriately sized for their needs. He gives them live rodents purchased locally on a regular feeding schedule, bathes them regularly, provides routine sanitation of all cages, and maintains the temperature in the upper 70s during the cold Kentucky winters. I have accompanied this handler on two different serpent hunts, one of which involved releasing two timber rattlesnakes and five copperheads into the mountains.

Another serpent handler (BT) informed me that he breeds venomous snakes and then releases their offspring into the mountains. Although he has been sought out by at least one exotic animal vendor as a supplier of these reptiles, he has categorically refused to participant in any such business enterprises because of personal convictions. According to him, this is one of his ways of giving back to God and ensuring that there will always be sufficient numbers of serpents in the area for fulfilling the biblical mandate. This does not mean, however, that all handlers are as knowledgeable of serpents or as adept at their maintenance as these two individuals, although all such persons of my acquaintance have demonstrated concern for the welfare of their serpents. Given this general disposition among serpent handling sects, it is not surprising that neither Minton and Minton (1980) nor Rubio (1998) found apparent evidence of abuse when observing practice of serpent handling. As a final observation, I have noted from field research that caring for serpents is virtually a male activity; females were not found to be involved.

Summary and Conclusions

Serpent handling sects use only venomous snakes in their worship--primarily

rattlesnakes, copperheads, and, to a lesser degree, cottonmouths. From a scientific perspective, the most dangerous of species handled are the eastern and, particularly, the western diamondback rattlers, both of which have been known to claim the lives of their handlers. Although it is unlikely that a snake will inject the total volume of its venom in a single defensive bite, the combination of several other variables, including both the snake and the victim, are factors determining the severity of a snakebite. Based on the literature, the complex chemistry of snake venom is such that all the above snakes have been known to mete out permanent damage to limbs and appendages, and occasionally to deliver lethal doses of venom under a certain combination of variables--even the copperhead in one reported instance. Further, there is reason to suspect that repeated handling of a specific snake may increase rather than decrease the likelihood of a strike. Given these observations, it seems that the possibility for a handler experiencing a snakebite is ultimately unpredictable, as is the potential for maiming and even death.

The symbolic meaning of the serpent has been shown to vary according to theory and cultural locale. Those of a strict psychoanalytic orientation tend to see it as a phallic symbol with hidden meaning whereas those less strongly commitment to a classic version of the theory allow for other interpretations, such as death and life, which seem to offer more promise in understanding serpent handling sects. Other perspectives, which also seem relevant, depict the serpent as a symbol of deity and spirituality. Given the range of literature concerning the symbolic meaning of serpents, there seems to be no justified reason to hold the serpent exclusively as a phallic symbol. To do so would require commitment to a unique version of a single theory that fails to allow for the construction

of meaning as given by the discourse of a specific context and tradition.

Finally, it is important to draw from the literature on human and snake interactions the quintessential factor of fear. In addition, serpent handling sects commonly manifest humane concern for the serpent both as a living being and as an element important in their worship practices. Though many handlers have acquired a significant knowledge of snakes through continuing interactions, they continue to confess a respect for the reptiles and fear the possibility of snakebite. This manifest fear and the symbolized meaning of the serpent itself are intricately bound together in the practice of religious serpent handling. Of primary importance is the fact that fear and awe are universal reactions to the serpent--a dual quality in the reptile that both draws and repels at the same time and underlies what theologian Rudolf Otto has termed the "idea of the holy."

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL VIEWS OF THE RELIGIOUS SERPENT HANDLING TRADITION

As a religious group holding to an anomalous practice, serpent handling sects have for several decades received attention from various investigators. Unfortunately, much of this attention has resulted in their being characterized as "bizarre," "ignorant," and "pathological"--all of which are descriptive labels that feed into the social construction of an "Appalachian otherness" that more mainstream society tends to contrast with itself. The burden of this pejorative cultural stereotype has been due largely to the media, popular literature, and some of prior social science research, though some more contemporary sources have attempted to present the tradition from a less biased perspective (Birckhead, 1993).

This present chapter is committed to surveying investigations of serpent handling sects in the following two sections. The first is concerned with media and popular literature which have kept the practice of serpent handling in the public eye whereas the second is centered on various approaches taken by social scientists and others who have made the practice and its tradition a serious focus of study. With regard to empirical studies, a review of their findings will be followed by a rationale for the approach to be taken in this present investigation.

The Media and Popular Literature

Media coverage of religious serpent handling sects first began with newspaper

accounts that gave selective attention to legal conflicts and infrequent deaths resulting from their practices, both elements of which helped to produce a public image of serpent handlers as bizarre and pathological (Birckhead, 1993, 1997; Tripp, 1975). Following such attention came wide interest from curiosity seekers who attended serpent handling meetings and wrote of their experiences. Attention also came from magazine publishers who, in hopes of boosting circulation numbers, sent writers to get "the" story about this "bizarre" group. Even social scientists were drawn to research this anomalous phenomenon, although some, more often than not, applied a type of arm-chair analysis that always was within closer reach than field experience. As television became a staple of American life, documentaries about these mountain people who do "strange" things occasionally appeared on broadcasts, which tended to decontextualize and sensationalize the practice of serpent handling as though it were the only feature of their worship. Not all that has been circulated by the media and popular writers has been as damaging to the public image of religious serpent handling sects, though much of it has. For example, the survey below offers the scope of what the media and popular literature have presented about the religious tradition.

Although serpent handling was significant early in this century, and was occasionally mentioned by local newspapers, it was not until 1938, when legal action was taken against it, that the practice gained national attention (Kerman, 1942; Minton & Minton, 1980). Kerman (1942), as a newspaper reporter, was among the first to bring serpent handling into the arena of public scrutiny. The event which served as a catalyst in bringing this about involved a farmer, named John Day, whose wife had converted to the

serpent handling tradition in Harlan County, Kentucky. In efforts to dissuade her, he reportedly had three leaders of the congregation arrested for breach of the peace. Although the charged were acquitted at trial, this event, covered by the Associated Press, sparked wide public attention to the novel practices of the group, which was then followed by news reporters and other media. As one of the first reporters, Kerman attended services and wrote descriptively of his first-hand experience of seeing serpent and fire handling, and even of an interview conducted with George Hensley. Although stating his reservation to judge the things he saw, he began his descriptions with what seems to be a discriminating view from the very start.

> I stepped into the Pine Mountain Church of God, and it was like passing abruptly from a comfortable fireside doze into delirium. Within those four rough walls there was a scene which to me had the strange, unreal--and disturbing--quality of a fevered dream. (Kerman, 1942, p. 97)

It was this "disturbing" reality which seemed to provide a context for his further descriptions, and one that helped sketch out the social construct of who serpent handlers were and how they were to be understood--as bizarre and different from ourselves.

After the 1938 national debut of serpent handlers, an article was published in a science periodical (Cult snakes, 1940) which proposed that copperheads were more favored among the sects because they were less aggressive and least likely to cause death. Such an assumption, based on no cited field research, seemed to suggest serpent handlers to be manipulative and deceptive in their religious practices. Time magazine (National affairs, 1947) reported on a meeting conducted by serpent handling preacher Gordon Miller at which the "salvation cocktail" (a strychnine solution) was brought out amidst the

"moaning and singing and shouting," (p. 25) and drank by a 34 year-old Ernest Davis. The young farmer died five days later at which time his young widow was said to have commented (in a decontextualized quote): "Ernest just had too much faith" (National affairs, 1947, p. 25).

From a somewhat contrasting perspective, Chattanooga reporter J. B. Collins (1947) produced a pictorial and descriptive account of happenings related to the Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following congregation. In this 36-page document, he attempted to provide an unbiased history, a basis for beliefs, a description of worship services, an account of serpent bite deaths, and a chronology of the group's current skirmishes with the law--all of which were offered without explicit comment for the reader's own evaluation and judgement. The author's efforts were based on two years of observation and are overall valuable, yet included in the introduction were statements describing the congregation as a "cult" and its practices as "strange."

Concerned mainly with Reverend Bill Parsons, and his Shrine of Divine Healing church of Stone Creek, Virginia, Womeldorf (1947) presented his view of sects who take up venomous serpents. In a characterization of believers, he generalized them as a "people of mingled blood and culture, the descendants of Scottish-Irish and criminal immigrants" (p. 1517) who had little regard for the law. Their primitive form of worship was thought reminiscent of "the voodoos of the jungle" and included "an orgy of emotional manifestations" (p. 1517). According to the author, the "strange doctrines" of the sects had "stirred up trouble" in numerous states and demonstrated the same type of curious appeal as circus and carnival sideshows. Noting that exercise of the "perverted doctrine"

had led to infrequent deaths, it was hypothesized that snakebite victims were able to build up immunity to venom through repeated bites or to counteract envenomation through use of "corn liquor." Given the danger of such practices, it was thought that civil authorities had been "very patient" with such groups who participated in them, though various states had already taken legal action serpent handling. Responding to Parsons' claim that his church handled more and larger serpents than any other, Womeldorf (1947) concluded, "There he stated a fact. Snake handlers have not much competition. Most churches have something better to offer" (p. 1518).

Robertson (1950) included a chapter in his book about Holiness-Pentecostal traditions and told his experience of attending five nights of tent revival meetings in Chattanooga that were sponsored by the Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following. In this account, he described dissensions over doctrine that arose in service, concerns of handlers that others view them as ignorant and poor, and the presence and apprehensions of Blacks in services. With use of his writing skill, Robertson (1950) quoted serpent handlers in a style that liberally expressed a restricted and inferior dialect--which seemed to emphasize their lack of education. After the strychnine deaths of two members, Mink (1973) focused on the persistency of a serpent handling sect in its "divine derring-do"(p. 45), despite subsequent persecution from the local law. In discussing the "dangers" of a literal interpretation of the Bible, Watts (1973) made reference to the faith of serpent handlers as a classic example of the "mindless belief" and "furious zeal" typical of the ignorant who require some system of authority to provide them security and peace of mind. As a corollary to the Playboy article (Watts, 1973), Hustler also published a piece

by Fortunato (1980) on religious serpent handling.

As one of the more positive treatments of the tradition, a complete issue was dedicated to serpent handling sects by Foxfire (1973) in which descriptions from interviews of believers and justifications for their religious practices were presented with an array of supporting photographs. Artist Shelby Lee Adams (1993), in his pictorial offering of the Appalachian heritage, included portraits of serpent and fire handling when presenting its religion. Campbell (1974) visited a serpent handling congregation and concluded that its practice, while at odds with mainstream Christianity, was more in keeping with genuine spirituality than what had become of the sect's institutionalized counterparts. After attending a serpent handling meeting in east Tennessee, Alther (1976) conducted an interview with the pastor and two other members in which information was given about the experience of anointing, the meaning of serpent bites, the misconception that serpent handling is "tempting" God, and the illegal implications of the practice. The interviews were published without commentary.

After showing a documentary on serpent handling, Dunlap (1975,1993), an expert in film analysis, wrote of his later experience when debating with associates about the legitimacy of the practice; his was a mixed view that tended toward viewing the practice in compensatory terms--as "a deluded escape, for which they are willing to risk their lives" (1993, p. 199). Esler (1983) visited the church of a noted serpent handling preacher who, at the time, handled serpents only a half dozen times a year, yet focus was given to the practice as "one of the most bizarre Christian ceremonies imaginable" (p. 2). As a free-lance writer, Watterlond (1983) drew from various scientific researchers to study and

address the "deadly practices" of a people he thought unquestionably from "another plane"--an existence found "wholly in the thin, almost dimensionless region of 'hard doctrine'" (p. 50). Fee (1989) wrote of his experience in attending a serpent handling service as a 14 year-old, when he witnessed a man suffer a fatal rattlesnake bite; he depicted the members as being misguided by faith-healing in attempting to resolve the crisis and unsympathetic with the victim. In writing about American revivalism, journalist Patsy Simms (1996) included a chapter on religious serpent handlers, based on a homecoming at an east Tennessee church. Though helpful biographical information was included about central figures, her descriptions of persons keyed on their Appalachian "otherness" and their quotes were rendered in a dialect that appeared exaggerated and condescending.

What began as a journalistic investigation was transformed into a supposed spiritual journey for Dennis Covington (1995), as he joined with serpent handlers in the taking up venomous serpents himself. Though he seemed more concerned with himself than the handlers, the descriptions given to fellow-worshipers appear as primitive and patronizing, and hence give only a skewed representation of serpent handlers to readers. For example, they were generally described at Glenn Summerford's trial as "hard, angular women and men with slicked-back hair and unfortunate teeth" (p. 27). This repetitive type of eccentric characterization, the legitimacy of his spiritual quest, and other critical observations have also been noted by others (Birckhead, 1996; Hood, 1996).

Two other publications should be mentioned that seem more balanced in their presentations. Lee Smith (1995) skillfully penned a novel about a serpent handling family

whose father was an itinerant preacher. Amidst events common to the tradition, the plot of the story emerges around one of the daughters who grows up struggling with her spiritual heritage--one from which she can never ultimately escape. Committed to a non-judgmental stance, Schwartz (1999) presented a factually-based pictorial digest that portrays the serpent handling tradition as a community of believers--composed of handlers and non-handlers--whose interconnected families find profound spiritual meaning in a variety of worship practices, not just serpent handling. Of the some 88 black and white photographs in the book, 38 capture non-serpent handling activities; 31 include various scenes with children; 13 are images of serpent handling, and 4 of fire handling; and 2 pictures are of scenery, one of which is the outside of a church building. Schwartz's work seems significant in that it helps mitigate the overemphasis given by the media to serpent handling among the sects, especially since it occupies only a minor role in their worship.

As noted by Birckhead (1993), various film media have focused on religious serpent handing in recent years--the vast majority presenting the "sign" in a sensationalized way. Even the most sensitive of efforts, however, seem to have fallen short of portraying the practice in an adequate manner. In his review of three of the more positive films--Holy Ghost People (Boyd & Adair, 1968), They Shall Take Up Serpents (Siegler, 1973), and The Jolo Serpent Handlers (Kramer, 1977)--Clements (1977, 1979) found that all contained errors and inconsistencies in their representations of the worship practices. Since Siegler (1973) and Kramer (1977) presented serpent handling in isolated segments, Clements (1977, 1979) concluded that Boyd and Adair (1968) were more effective since the practice was shown by them as only a minor activity in the context of an

entire service--and hence more true to life. Two other films that approach serpent handling sects from a more contextualized perspective are productions by Burton and Headley (1983, 1986). A more complete catalog of video and audio media, concerned with serpent handling sects, is given by Burton (1993).

In summary, the media have played a prominent role in how our society views and understands serpent handling sects. Although some have appeared to be more sensitive in their recent presentations, most by far have focused on serpent handling as a novel event that, when stripped from its larger context of meaning, appears as strange and bizarre. In addition, attention has been given to this worship practice mostly whenever severe snakebites, related deaths, or legal conflicts have occurred--events which simply reinforce the pejorative social stereotype that already exists.

In the early reporting of bites and deaths, public concern was raised for the welfare of children, a concern which resulted in the passage of legal sanctions against serpent handling in many southern states during the 1940s (Kane, 1979; Rowe, 1982; Burton, 1993). The persistency of believers in the sincere practice of their faith, despite such legal oppression, further stigmatized their social image with each reported incident. They were perceived as ignorant, misguided, and dangerous, having little regard for their own safety or the welfare of others--even their own children. In two states, Georgia and Alabama, infractions of the original laws involved felonies, which were later reduced to misdemeanors and finally deleted altogether from the codes in the 1970s. The practice of their religious faith by believers continues to be in violation of state codes in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina as misdemeanors, though rigorous enforcement

of these statutes has abated in recent years, most likely because early prosecutions--some of which led to acquittals--brought understanding to the context of serpent handling as a legitimate religious belief when examined more closely, as in courtrooms. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the legal ramifications were largely a product of the attention given by media to serpent handling only in reference to infrequent serpent bites and death (See Hood, Morris, & Williamson [1999] for an experimental study addressing social prejudice directed toward serpent handling sects).

Though some media have recently attempted to place serpent handling within a broader context of religious meaning, errors and inconsistencies still persist in these efforts, seeming to have little impact on the stigmatized social image of the sects who practice it. Hence the practice remains "strange" and "bizarre" to mainstream society, while believers who embrace it are marginalized by society as "other." Such a state of affairs is owed in part to the focus media presentations have given to the phenomenon of religious serpent handling--as a practice that is deviant and life-threatening to its practitioners.

The Empirical Literature

Social science research dedicated to religious serpent handling has involved different disciplines, sometimes even within a single investigation. Generally speaking, however, anthropologists have made these sects a subject of cultural concern with interest in understanding their tradition, practices, and beliefs. Historians have researched the origins of the tradition and attempted to offer contextualized perspectives on its rise and development over time. More concerned with the personal perspective, psychologists (and

psychiatrists) have taken interest in observing the behaviors and activities of sect members, seeking to understand them and to provide explanations often in terms of proposed functional relationships. Sociologists, on the other hand, have studied these sects in terms of group dynamics with particular concern for understanding how they function and persist as a subculture within the larger social context. Most of the empirical research on religious serpent handling involves an overlapping of these disciplines and often follows more than one theoretical approach, making them sometimes difficult to classify. For purposes of this review, however, studies have been organized into four general categories: (1) psychodynamic, (2) deprivation, (3) psychophysiological, and (4) descriptive. It should be noted that some studies are guided by more than one approach. Nevertheless, a brief review of these approaches and what seems to be their most-related studies are presented below.

Psychodynamic Approaches

All psychodynamic theories have their origin in a psychoanalytic view of human development and behavior (Wulff, 1991). Shafranske (1995) has suggested that Freud's critique of religion rests on three basic postulates: (1) the assumption that psychoanalytic interpretation is uniquely useful in gaining access to the unconscious, (2) the significance of "analogy" in ritual behaviors which links conscious symbols with unconscious desire, and (3) the presumption of wish-fulfillment as a basic component of mental life that manifests itself in action and language, both of which are vested with deeper intrapsychic meanings. Though much too complex for simple explanation, this framework is sufficient to provide a scheme for understanding the studies that follow.

The classic psychoanalytic study on serpent handling was conducted by anthropologist Weston La Barre (1962/1992), whose work on this tradition has been widely cited in almost all scholarly research that followed. His work approached the investigation in three parts: (1) the historical development and spread of the practice; (2) an anthropological Old World view of snake symbolism, taking into account the biblical practice of contemporary sects; and (3) the psychoanalysis of a serpent-handling minister La Barre named Beauregard Barefoot.

Concerned with the historical emergence of the tradition (which he termed "cult"), La Barre traced its origin to George W. Hensley, based largely on Collin's (1947) work with a Tennessee serpent handling sect. Using this source, combined with newspaper articles, an attempt was made to reconstruct the dispersion of the tradition as well as its conflicts with legal authorities. Although the effort contains some inaccurate details--for example, a misconception of Church of God history (pp. 31, 32, 184)--a significant contribution is the documentation of several serpent bite fatalities based on newspaper reports. In his section on snake symbolism, La Barre situated the origin of snake cults in Egypt, and suggested that they spread from there throughout Africa, the Middle East, Asia Minor, and into India. Through Semitic influence, they were thought extended into Western Europe and, later, into modern America. Although various cultural meanings of the serpent were observed, it was ultimately concluded, in all cases, as a representation of the phallus. (See Chapter III for a further discussion of La Barre's contribution to serpent symbolism)

Concerning his case study, La Barre pieced together from a single biographical

interview the psychology of a man who was unseated as the firstborn male at age two, held to strict moral accountability by a religious mother, and given certain liberties by a more lax father. From these family dynamics, Reverend Barefoot was characterized as an emotionally-starved and compulsive individual who sought pleasure, often at the expense of others. Adding this to certain sexual difficulties, related to his marriage, he was thought to be neurotic and perfectly suited as a minister among serpent handling sects. In worship service, he was observed to touch female members, under the guise of prayer, when placing hands on them "inappropriately." Furthermore, he was believed to handle serpents in place of opportunities lost as a child, when the pleasurable touching of his genitals was strictly forbidden by his mother. For La Barre, the compulsive repetition of this "ritual" illustrated a "return of the repressed"--the reappearance of an unconscious forbidden desire seeking fulfillment.

From this single case, La Barre concluded all members of serpent handling sects to be victims of similar fates and social conflict, "poor white trash," who find a temporary psychological respite in an "unfortunate" religious rite. He argued, however, this practice to be a pseudo-therapy that must be abandoned for a "return" to the origins of conflict if they were to be properly resolved. He was also pessimistic about the future of serpent handling sects and predicted their fall to urbanization and modernism.

Much could be said of La Barre's (1962/1992) work, although only two points are to be mentioned here. First, the observations upon which his conclusions rest were drawn primarily from the field research notes of others (Tripp, 1975)--which raises the issue of adequate preparation on the part of the author himself. A second concern involves La

Barre's generalizing of a single analysis to include everyone who follows the serpent handling tradition. Such generalization, based upon a single case, seems unwarranted and methodologically inappropriate. Nevertheless, La Barre's study has contributed significantly to the scientific and cultural stereotype of those who practice religious serpent handling--which is embodied even in the pseudonym "Barefoot" given to his participant.

Another anthropologist whose work has been widely cited is Stephen M. Kane, who did in fact spend considerable time in field research. His initial contribution was a master's thesis (Kane, 1973), in which he presented a brief sketch of the tradition and raised interesting research problems regarding its history, the anointing, and its practices of poison ingestion, and serpent and fire handling. One edited version of this thesis was focused primarily on the practice of serpent handling (Kane, 1974a) whereas another, with slight extension, served to address the relationship of fire handling to the anointing--the latter concluded to be a trance state that made such handling possible (Kane, 1974b, 1978, 1982). This initial research (Kane, 1973) then provided the groundwork for a doctoral dissertation, Kane's (1979) major contribution to the literature, which considered the historical development of the sects, including their legal difficulties. What is perhaps most significant in this work is Kane's (1979) psychoanalysis of a serpent handler he named Lonnie Barnett.

From an indepth interview, Kane (1979) found that Barnett had a difficult childhood in poverty with an abusive, alcoholic father who often beat his submissive wife and children for no reason at all. When hardly a teen, Barnett fled the difficult situation,

taking with him an indifferent attitude toward life which often led to problematic behaviors and skirmishes with the law. After several difficult years, including a stint in the service beginning at age 15, he encountered a spiritual transformation at a serpent handling church and soon become a fearless serpent handler who accumulated scores of bites over the years that followed. When bitten, he admitted a strong need to immediately resume serpent handling and stated a desire eventually to die by serpent bite in the practice of his faith.

As La Barre (1962/1992) had done earlier for Barefoot, Kane (1979) concluded that participation in the "ritual" for Barnett also was a "return of the repressed" (Kane, 1979, p. 269). From this analysis, it was determined that he unconsciously longed for passive, sexual contact with his father and, at the same time, desired punishment for the violation of this cultural taboo by way of serpent bite. Thus Barnett's religious activity with venomous serpents was characterized as a neurotic ritual rooted in an unconscious sexual desire and a related death wish. Very brief analyses of three other handlers were also included in the study (Kane, 1979): one was described as a victim of gender identity disorder; the second was described as a homosexual; the third individual was determined to have no pathology. In all cases except the last, the serpent was equated symbolically with the phallus. In discussing the significance of his study, Kane (1979) argued that the performance of these practices was shown to have both conscious and unconscious meanings for practitioners. In addition to this analysis, Kane has also contributed other informational articles on religious serpent handling in encyclopedias (1984, 1989), as well as a more substantial book chapter (1987) that appropriately positions the practice within

its relevant historical and sociological contexts of meaning.

Hood and Kimbrough (1995), relying on attribution, role, and psychoanalytic theories, presented an integrated psychological framework through which the five signs of Mark 16 may be understood--particularly that of serpent handling. From an attributional perspective, they pointed out that the sacred text, which is of fundamental and psychological importance to serpent handling sects, provides the dispositional basis for a literal theology that supports the practice. More relevant here, however, psychodynamic theory, and its elaborate theory of symbols, was found to offer insight into the sacramental status of this practice among believers. While the serpent has been shown by some studies to symbolize the phallus, it also may be viewed as a cultural symbol of death that, for serpent handling sects, is incorporated into a religious practice giving rise to a perennial return of the repressed--the fear of death. According to these authors, "What has been repressed is in the broadest sense the body and its early domination by the pleasure principle" (p. 316)--hence the profound emotionality that accompanies serpent handling. It is because of such psychodynamic tendencies that Hensley can be understood in taking notice of the prescribed model for handling serpents outlined in Mark 16. Succinctly put, from the proposed theory, what had been repressed by others was acted out by Hensley in a practice that found both a justification and a template in sacred text.

In sum, there was no subtlety in the classic use of psychodynamic theory by La Barre (1962/1992) and Kane (1979). The practice of serpent handling was viewed as a compulsive return of repressed sexual conflicts that were reenacted unconsciously on a level that ultimately was thought inadequate. From biographies of their subjects, these

researchers made use of psychoanalytic interpretation to link ritualized religious practice with an unconscious effort to resolve repressed sexual conflicts and/or desires. Clearly, for both researchers, the symbolic use of the serpent as a phallus allowed for an unconscious sexual meaning of a "ritual" that was otherwise afforded religious meaning based on a sacred text.

Without doubt, such uses (by La Barre [1962/1992] and Kane [1979]) of the psychodynamic approach remove an important religious practice from its context of sacred meaning and attribute importance to unconscious motives on behalf of its participants. It assumes that practitioners do not know what they are doing, despite their justifiable claims that, on the basis of a sacred text, they do indeed know. Even if this theory were considered viable for studying the serpent handling tradition, there is no universal need for the serpent to symbolize a phallus (see Mundkur, 1983; Eigen, 1981). As Hood and Kimbrough (1995) have shown, psychodynamic theory, and its emphasis on symbols, also has room for other unconscious meanings regarding the serpent, such as death and resurrection. Unfortunate for Kane (1979) this very possibility, held open by him in the brief analysis of his final participant, was ultimately overshadowed by an emphasis on the serpent as a symbolic phallus. To provide a more complete understanding, the context of phenomena must always be taken into serious account when making psychological inquiries (Gergen, 1992; Kvale, 1992)--a practice that can be done, even with certain uses of psychodynamic theory (Hood & Kimbrough, 1995).

Deprivation Approaches

In 1964, sociologist Charles Glock proposed a general theory of deprivation that

focused on the ways in which religion may be thought to alleviate deficiencies in various areas of life. He operationalized the meaning of deprivation as "any and all of the ways that an individual or group may be, or feel, disadvantaged in comparison either to other individuals or groups or to an internalized set of standards" (Glock, 1964, p. 27). Extending this concept, he specified five ways in which deprivation may be experienced. First, there is economic deprivation in which resources are insufficient to provide material necessities, wants, and satisfactions of life; hence religion may displace such concerns by emphasizing money as less important than issues of morality and spirituality. Secondly, social deprivation relates to individual differences based upon social rewards of power, status, and prestige; in this case, religious groups place everyone on equal footing, especially in view of God, who is most important. As a third type, organismic deprivation concerns deficiencies in physical and mental health; in this domain, individuals find resolution to their despair and consolation from their suffering in God, often becoming new "instruments" for His ministry. The final two deprivations, noted by Glock, deal with ethical and psychic concerns. Since the world is lacking in proper values, the morally concerned discover in religion a systematic reserve of values delineating right and wrong. Those in search of self-esteem, identity, and a sense of belonging also find resolution to their psychological (psychic) needs within a religious framework.

Notable distinctions among these types of deprivations also exist that have bearing on the role religion is thought to play (Glock, 1964). With economic, social, and organismic deprivation, differences are observed between the person and external standards of society, whether the individual is conscious or unconscious of the evaluation

process, or of its results. As religion is embraced, compensation for these deficiencies is experienced through a transformed view of society in which the person feels no longer deprived, although circumstances themselves do not actually change. Particular to economic, and sometimes to social, deprivation, the latent resentment for disparity is thought transformed by religion into a "symbolic" revolution in which society becomes devalued and is ultimately rejected. In this case, feelings of socioeconomic deprivation are compensated by the status of "religious privilege."

On the other hand, ethical and psychic deprivation result when the individual observes deficiencies between the self and an internal set of standards, most notably of a moral or a psychological nature. In each of these cases, there may be no lack of economic means or of social power, yet the enjoyment of social rewards that accompany such resources has not been experienced. Hence religion is sought out as a resolution and serves to ameliorate these types of deprivation. According to Glock, religion is thought to serve as a resource that either compensates or resolves observed needs experienced by humanity.

It seems that the majority of research on religious serpent handling falls somewhere within the scope of a deprivation theory of this type, whether the approach is explicitly or implicitly followed. The following review is not meant to distinguish between which types of deprivation have been observed by investigators but to present findings and conclusions based on their guided concerns--most of which can be linked with little effort to some sort of deprivation.

One of the earliest studies of this genre was conducted by Sargant (1949), a British

psychiatrist, who visited a serpent handling church in the Southeast and collected photographs and sound recordings of its ecstatic worship. He was mainly concerned with the successful treatment of clinical depression, anxiety, and hysteria in his practice, and compared his own prior research with observations made during these services. At these gatherings he noted a psychological process, precipitated by participation in worship, which began with subdued music and then escalated in excitement to such extent that venomous serpents were finally passed among participants. Sargant related the psychological states of such activities to a process ordered by dissociation, excitement, collapse, and increased suggestibility--a mental restructuring that provided the person a new view of the world. He felt that similar processes were at work in the successful treatment of psychiatric patients through use of abreactive methods. Although he admitted that the religious practices he observed often were judged as irrational, he considered them to be no more so than certain techniques used in modern psychiatry at the time--for example, electroconvulsive and insulin shock therapies. Hence, by virtue of their therapeutic and functional value, these religious practices were thought to be deserving of further serious investigation.

Also with medical interest, Schwarz (1960) attended four serpent handling services over the period of a year. On these trips, he collected both quantitative and qualitative data concerning three specific issues: (1) how participants handled venomous snakes successfully, (2) how they exposed body parts to open flames and live coals with no tissue damage, and (3) how they ingested strychnine mixtures without apparent harm. From his observations of serpent handling, Schwarz documented 200 such instances with no

occurrence of bites, a phenomenon he could not explain with satisfaction. Upon examination of believers after handling fire, he concluded that their impunity to "coal oil" flames, as well as to acetylene flames (from a miner's headlamp), was likely related to what appeared to be trance states experienced by those who encountered the anointing--or "exalted states." After observing two persons ingest clinically tested strychnine mixtures, Schwarz was led to believe that their apparent immunity was related to concomitant physiological reactions experienced with the "exalted" worship. In addition, he conducted psychiatric examinations among sect members but found no demonstration of significant pathology. Despite these observations and findings, Schwarz (1960) thought that practices of these sect members served them as "miracles" that gave proof of "rewards in Heaven for the suffering and sacrifices on earth" (p. 406).

Folklorist Ellen Stekert (1963) conducted field research at a serpent handling church in eastern Kentucky to learn how that specific tradition affected participants' worldview. Enumerating the former activities and pleasures forsaken by converts, she determined that new attitudes adopted toward such exercises were context-related and not necessarily attached to the activities themselves. For example, dancing that was once enjoyed in a secular environment was thought sinful after conversion, yet the enjoyment of dancing in the context of sacred worship was quite acceptable. Hence it was argued that converts simply rejected the "situations" rather than the "materials" of such activities. This new worldview, however, restructured from the religion, was argued by Stekert to be a primary rationale for these "backwards" Appalachians in resisting urbanization and modernity--hence Holiness equates with and justifies backwardness, i.e., strict dress codes,

shunning of doctors, avoidance of theaters, etc. In conclusion, the author speculated that serpent handling sects might in time follow other religious movements who have become institutionalized and more adaptive to change.

Concerned with the local influence of Holiness attitudes, Cobb (1965) described a fictitious Appalachian community, Mutton Valley, and its reaction to social change over a 30 year period. According to Cobb, the most influential local religious group--a Holiness serpent handling sect--arose in the 1930s from a "pre-sect state" in the community which already reflected a religious attitude stemming from vestiges of religious traditions brought by early settlers to the isolated mountainous regions. Concurrent with the intrusion of social change and liberal ideas, the Holiness sect fortuitously emerged from indigenous revivals as a manifest protest, giving definition to this preexistent community attitude on the basis of a recalcitrant Holiness theology. Although many community members did not attend this church, the sect did exemplify local sentiments and was adept at marshaling the prevailing attitude in defiance of such change and outside influences. Despite the sect's reputation for strife and sedition in the community, Cobb suggested its survival over the years was related to four factors: (1) it preached a rigid theology founded more on belief than actual practice; (2) it promised a heavenly reward in place of the abiding misery of present poverty conditions; (3) it had experienced only one leader in its founder who was slightly open to some change, such as the acceptance of electricity; and (4) the community at large had already acquired an internalized "religious attitude" that was only reinforced by the practices of the serpent handling sect--hence the Holiness ethos of religious and social conservatism of the community.

Tellegen, Gerrard, Gerrard, and Butcher (1969) were successful in administering the MMPI to members of a serpent handling church in West Virginia, as well as to a comparison group, matched as closely as possible for age and socioeconomic factors, from a more traditional church of the same region. The numbers in the groups completing the instrument were 46 and 90, respectively. The analyses of the data were conducted in four parts: first, a method of analysis was implemented that would detect the presence of any bias by clinicians towards religious serpent handlers; second, a descriptive analysis of the actual data generated by the MMPI was presented; third, the descriptive data were interpreted blindly by clinicians; and fourth, a quantitative analysis of those interpretations from part three was performed to test their validity. In this brief review, only findings of parts one and three of the analyses are addressed.

Initially, four clinicians were presented with a total of 96 anonymous profiles obtained from the churches and given general information about the two congregations, including the fact that one practiced serpent handling. Given this background information, the clinicians were asked first to study the profiles and then to sort them into which of the two church groups they thought they belonged--either the conventional church or the serpent handling church. The clinicians were next asked to judge these profiles according to the following four categories: normal, neurotic, behavior disorder, and psychotic. There was statistical agreement among three of the four judges on 58 profiles with respect to both classifications--assigned church membership and diagnostic impression. The results found a tendency among the clinicians to assign those profiles judged to be members in the conventional church as "normal" while assigning those judged to be members in the

serpent handling church as "abnormal" (neurotic, behavior disorder, psychotic). When actual church membership was considered, however, the data found there to be "a somewhat larger percentage of abnormal profiles, particularly 'neurotic' ones, in the conventional church" (Tellegen, et al., 1969, p. 229), thus revealing a biased predisposition among clinicians to link psychopathology with serpent handling.

In part three of the study (Tellegen, et al., 1969), another group of three clinicians, uninformed of the prior aspects of the investigation, was given the mean t-scores of profiles from the two "anonymous" churches (labeled A and B) with regard to the subgroups of age and sex. Statistical differences on subscales between the church groups were also supplied, along with background information concerning the geographical, socioeconomical, and cultural factors of the two churches, although specific religious practices were undisclosed. Overall, interpretations developed on the basis of these blind analyses found three major distinctions between congregations. First, older members of the serpent handling church were less depressed than those of the conventional church. Second, both old and young of the serpent handling congregation were more impulsive and spontaneous than their counterparts. Finally, psychological compatibility between the young and old of the serpent handling church was greater strength than for individuals in the conventional church. In reviewing these findings, these investigators rejected La Barre's (1962/1992) notion of neuroticism for the participation of members in the sect and suggested instead a marked predisposition for extroversion that was interpreted from the profiles. Though the study did not find significant pathology among serpent handlers, one of the primary investigators (Gerrard, 1968) had reported the results earlier and suggested

that the religious tradition provided for participants a compensatory function: "Religious serpent handling, then--and all other emotionalism of the Holiness churches that goes with it--serves a definite function ... [as] ... a safety valve for many of the frustrations of life in present day Appalachia" (Gerrard, 1968, p. 28).

Gerrard (1971, 1978) also contributed a chapter that contrasted the socioeconomic lifestyles of the "stationary poor"--among them serpent handlers--with "upwardly mobile poor" of the same region. The first group accepts, for themselves and their children, the current situation of poverty as permanent whereas the second group aspires to break free of the current condition especially for the sake of their children. The critical distinction between the stationary poor who are religious--"religious fatalists"--and those who are upwardly mobile is a failure by the first group to practice "anticipatory socialization" in raising their children--a failure that is replaced with concern for the pursuit of holiness and living out the perceived will of God. Possessing neither resources nor hope for the immediate future, these "fatalists" are said to trust their present concerns to God who is experienced in an emotional religion characterized by fundamentalism, other worldliness, and perfectionism--all of which provide social and psychological balance to the believer. Despite its compensatory function, however, Gerrard saw the religion of the stationary poor as "archaic" and limiting.

Sociologist K. P. Ambrose (1970) wrote a master's thesis on serpent handling sects designed to evaluate differences among themselves and others based on their beliefs and religious worldview. Based on field research over a two and one-half year period, a comparison was made between rural and urban serpent handlers from West Virginia and

North Carolina as well as between a combined group of the serpent handlers and a more religiously diverse group taken from a previous study in Appalachia. Among five serpent handling congregations studied, more rural congregations were found to have longer services, more handling of serpents, and less structured worship than their more urban sister churches. In addition, some overall variations existed between the youth and adult segments of these churches with the youth earning higher incomes, marrying later, having fewer children, and participating in the "signs" with less frequency. Finally distinctions were found between serpent handlers as a composite group and the general religious sample regarding various attitudes and beliefs measured on a secular/sacred scale--with serpent handlers scoring more consistently toward the sacred pole than their counterparts. Another consistent observation was that of more agreement on scale items between the youth and adults of the serpent handling sample than for their counterparts in the general religious sample. It was suggested that further research be concerned with how the religious attitudes of youth might be affected by migration to other communities.

Later, in a doctoral dissertation, Ambrose (1978) was concerned with commitment as demonstrated by members of a Midwestern serpent handling church whose members were migrants from southern West Virginia. Relying on Kanter's theory, the commitment of members to their local church and religious tradition was observed in terms of instrumental commitment (sacrifice/investment), affective commitment (renunciation/communion), and moral commitment (mortification/transcendence). Instrumental commitment involved the concerns of sacrifice (e.g., modern dress, worldly activities, personal safety in sect practices) and of investment (e.g., personal time,

participation in worship, finance). In affective commitment, the important aspects of renunciation (i.e., renouncing worldly relationships and activities that disrupt group cohesion) and communion (i.e., promoting group cohesion through interpersonal contact, worship, and participation in unique practices) were considered. Finally, moral commitment was assessed by observing mortification (e.g., personal conformity to group norms socialized through public confessions of sins, mutual criticisms, and prescribed sanctions) and transcendence (i.e., the experience of awe through water baptism and fire and serpent handling) among church members. Based on this theory, the author structured questions for interviews with 39 members of the congregation and found evidence for high levels of commitment to the church group and its practices. In conclusion, the findings were considered a confirmation of the theory, although, in another sense, they reveal how it is that members commit to the sect for needs of esteem, identity, and belongingness.

The focus of a master's thesis by Tripp (1975) concerned the "deviancy" of serpent handling sects as a subculture of American society. Over a 15 month period, she and Kirk Elifson, her thesis advisor, conducted field research with a serpent handling congregation in northwest Georgia that included personal interviews with 40 individuals, most of whom were members of the church. From an interactionist perspective, Tripp attempted to explain how use of the social label of deviancy affected the group when used by two sources: (1) by the larger society in marginalizing serpent handling sects, and (2) by the serpent handling sect itself in controlling sect members. In the first case, serpent handlers are labeled as deviant by mainstream society through use of negative sanctions perceived by the sect as persecution. Such sanctions are related to sect practices of a strict

Holiness lifestyle and dress, faith-healing, and of course the handling of venomous serpents. Depending upon whether the perceived persecution was from impersonal or personal sources, the individual member will either remain active within the sect or defect. Persecution from law enforcement or media, for example, is of an impersonal nature and tends to reinforce participation whereas persecution from family and/or acquaintances is of personal concern and thought more likely to deter the believer from the tradition. Though impersonal persecution marginalizes serpent handling sects as deviant from the larger society, such oppression was seen to strengthen group cohesion and significance.

At the same time, Tripp (1975) observed that serpent handling sects also make use of labeling deviant behavior within the group as a means of control and boundary maintenance. To pull marginal members toward the established norm of group behavior, negative sanctions are given formally through sermons and informally through ostracism. The deviant members of the sect who tend toward the values of the larger society (underconformity) are warned publicly of the sins of worldliness whereas those deviating toward extremism (overconformity) are ridiculed and excluded from fellowship by members of the sect. In each case, marginal members are labeled as deviant by negative sanctions in efforts to strengthen the social boundaries of the tradition and to maintain its unique distinction. As implicitly shown by this study, the label of religious deviancy serves believers as a means of personal identity and admits them to membership in a cohesive group that affords a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Having been raised in the Holiness traditions of Southern Appalachia, Daugherty (1976, 1978; 1999) attended serpent handling sects of West Virginia as a researcher for a

period over six years. From her studies she observed various worship activities and concluded the practice of serpent handling to be a sacrament for believers that equaled Communion practiced by Catholics--a distinct "way of celebrating life, death, and resurrection" (Daugherty, 1976, p. 234). Noting the harsh and uncontrollable elements of Appalachian life--poverty, untreated illness, unemployment, death in the mines, etc.--the confrontation with the serpent, she thought, depicted once more the struggle with life and the oppressive forces that have characterized the region for generations. "[I]n the name of Jesus," the power of the serpent and death is overcome, giving assurance of life in an otherwise hostile environment. Hence the sacrament of serpent handling was thought to offer a spiritual reality to all who participated through obedience and, as such, to resolve for believers various types of needs.

In completing a master's degree in anthropology, Miller (1977) attended various serpent handling churches over the course of a year to study their practices and beliefs. His primary concern was to understand the emergence of the tradition (which he described as a "cult") in terms of a "religious revitalization" in reaction to social stress experienced within the dominant culture--that is, in response to prevalent economic, moral, and religious values. In support of his thesis, chapters included descriptions of services, a brief history of the tradition, an application of Wallace's revitalization theory, maintenance of the belief system (in reconciling serpent bites and harm), and legal conflicts. In conclusion, Miller saw the beliefs and practices of the serpent handling tradition as serving an existential purpose for believers in an otherwise meaningless world.

Van Hoorebeke (1980), concerned with communication dynamics, attended to the

rhetorical situation that emerges within serpent handling services, her purpose being to describe this situation and to identify the components that facilitate its process. Because field experience amounted to less than a month, the author relied heavily on descriptions provided by the works of Pelton and Carden (1974; Carden & Pelton, 1976) in her analysis. The worship service itself was thought to be a rhetorical act, centered on both verbal and non-verbal communication, that is set within the bounds of a physical context in which the psychological expectations and needs of participants are met. Accordingly, communication is channeled through various components of the service--such as singing, praying, preaching, and practice of the signs--which allow a type of feedback that continually modifies needs and expectations. This rhetorical situation is thought to provide for the psychological needs of participants that are unmet in other avenues of daily living because of non-access to social and economic resources. Based on this analysis, Van Hoorebeke concluded that serpent handling Holiness sects engaged such rhetorical acts to ameliorate needs which resulted from new social change and economic disadvantage. On the other hand, it was predicted that participation in these emotional religious activities would decline and dissipate as social and economic improvements were obtained by members.

Rowe (1982, 1986) studied the relationship between the beliefs of serpent handling sects and their geographical locations in southern Appalachia as subcultures, focusing primarily on a congregation in West Virginia as a single case study. He concluded from an analysis of demographic data and interviews that, though sect members were fairly representative of the region's socio-cultural milieu, a relationship existed between their

religious practices and their lower socioeconomic status. Rejecting deprivation as an explanation for their practices, however, he offered instead a cognitive model whereby values of the tradition were adopted by members because of congruence with personal ones for interpreting the world--which also might be viewed itself as an ethical type of deprivation.

Moore (1986) investigated the role of music among serpent handling sects. Noting the importance of music to almost all aspects of the service, he collected songs commonly sung, analyzed them for content of meaning, and found four basic types, all of which were thought to protest the social order: (1) songs that condemn the established order, (2) songs that suggest escape from the world and evil, (3) songs that speak of hardship and suffering as a price for heavenly rewards, and (4) individual songs that each contain all three previous themes. Based on the assumption that music induces dissociative states, the author suggested that serpent handlers, as socially and economically deprived people, achieve a sense of well being and high self-esteem from trance states derived from constant repetition of message-laden songs. Accordingly serpent handling sects overcome their socioeconomic disadvantages, said Moore, through a powerful spirituality keyed to music in their worship experience.

An historian, Kimbrough (1995) studied the emergence of serpent handling in eastern Kentucky among Trinitarians. As a participant observer--in the fullest sense--he attended various serpent handling sects and conducted extensive research centered largely around the Saylor family who embraced serpent handling early in the twentieth century. Based on their history, it was suggested that their participation in the tradition was in

reaction to the harsh invasion of mining and timber industries that pillaged their farmland and resources; in short, the religious practice served to compensate for their loss of power, status, and prestige. In tracing the roots of the tradition, Kimbrough saw its origin in George Hensley, whose personal history he reconstructed and associated with the spread of serpent handling in eastern Kentucky and other areas of the Southeast. A strength of Kimbrough's account is its teasing out of historical events based on detailed information provided by informants and relevant documentation from that period.

In reflection, deprivation theory has provided a backdrop not only for much of research directed toward religious serpent handling but also for a significant portion given to religion in general. In fact, Dittes (1971) has suggested that "Among modern social scientists, one would be hard pressed to find any major theorist who did not formulate his understanding of religion as a compensation for deprivation" (p. 394). Thus it seems that a major challenge in the use of this theory is for researchers to tease out precisely the meanings that observed deprivation and its relations hold for those who are said to experience it--something that appears to have been seldom done in this type of research (Hood, 1983). The most common approach relies upon the assumption that religious activities increase with the decrease of various resources, whether they be economic, social, organismic, ethical, or psychic (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985). Most of the studies noted here have made either explicit or implicit arguments, based on this theory, that the practices of serpent handling sects function to compensate or ameliorate either social or psychological deficiencies. If this is true, then the theory would also seem to predict, along with La Barre (1962/1992), the demise of the sects with urbanization and

modernism. But is this the case?

It is clear that many serpent handling sects are no longer isolated from the rest of society. Kane (1974) located sects in as many as twelve different states where families migrated for better jobs, taking their religious beliefs with them. Tripp (1975) noted that one of the more successful sects is situated only an hour's drive from Atlanta--hardly a remote area--and that its members hold occupations in all sectors of society. The congregations that Carter (1987) and Ambrose (1978) studied were composed of families who had successfully migrated to urban environments for employment. The argument for pervasive illiteracy among those who handle serpents is also challenged. Daugherty (1976) noted that one communicant had two years of college and that most young people among her informants had either graduated from high school or were presently enrolled. From my own research, I have become acquainted with two medical nurses among serpent handling sects (one of whom participated in the present study) and learned from attendance at a recent homecoming that at least seven families now regularly correspond among themselves via the Internet--four of them with me.

Many of sect members are no longer confronted with financial crisis. As early as the middle 1970s, Daugherty (1976) noted among participants in her study the possessions of new homes, appliances, and automobiles. Over 26% of the participants in Carter's (1987) study had annual incomes above $22,000, while the majority were said to maintain a comfortable lifestyle and own homes. My own field research has found much of the same. A church parking lot will contain a wide distribution of vehicles, ranging from the newest and most expensive pickup trucks to the oldest and least dependable cars. One of

the serpent handling churches I have visited most often in north Georgia has a stone and brick exterior, full carpeting, padded pews, central heat and air, and multi-fixtured restrooms for both men and women. Just outside a college town in eastern Kentucky is a sect whose large facility is situated in a strictly middle class residential neighborhood. On a recent visit, I noted that its modernly-decorated sanctuary, complete with a balcony, can easily accommodate up to 500 worshipers on padded pews that sit beneath a high cathedral-like ceiling accented by stained wooden beams and tongue-and-groove decking.

There is no intention here to give the impression that all serpent handling sects fair this well--indeed many do not--but the reality of severe socioeconomic deficiencies, once thought mitigated by the practice of religious faith, does not seem to apply in most circumstances. If deprivation theory holds true, then the practices of serpent handling sects should have abated with the attainment of needed resources; if their expression of faith were but a function of need, there would be fewer of these sects in modern society, if any at all. It may be possible that socioeconomic deprivation could have given rise to serpent handling sects; however, their modern survival and persistence would seem to go beyond the predictions of this theory.

Psychophysiological Approaches

In general terms, a psychophysiological theory assumes a linkage between neural and psychological processes (Lundin, 1991). It is primarily concerned with identifying the biological correlates of psychological experiences and with offering mechanistic explanations for them. A number of investigations, guided by such interests, are presented in two parts. The first section reviews studies that were concerned with the anointing

among serpent handling sects whereas the second examines literature linking the anointing with trance states, particularly in the Pentecostal experience of glossolalia.

Anointing Among Serpent Handling Sects - Kane's (1974b, 1978, 1982) field research among serpent handling sects addressed the nature of "the anointing" that was reported by believers to make possible the successful practice of handling fire. He described the concept of anointing as essentially "the belief that the Holy Ghost 'moves' upon the believer and takes possession of his faculties, imparting to him supernatural gifts, which qualify him for service to the Lord" (Kane, 1974b, p. 296). Based on his observations, he further suggested that practitioners, who believe themselves possessed by the Holy Ghost, experience an altered state of consciousness, or trace state, which was defined as "a complete or partial dissociation, characterized by (apparent) loss of voluntary control over motor functions, body-image changes, perceptual distortions, diminution of inhibitions, sudden and unexpected outbursts of emotion, and impairment of reality testing to various degrees" (Kane, 1974b, p. 296). With this theory, Kane then related various aspects of sect behavior--emotional fervor, intensity of experience, invincibility to fire, rhythmic response to music--with possession trance and suggested that such an experience among believers was a complex phenomenon woven together of various biochemical factors, psychological variables, and contextual cues. He concluded, however, that those who experience the anointing cannot be viewed as psychopathological but rather as participants in an institution whose socially sanctioned beliefs, rituals, and symbols contribute to the effective social and cultural functioning of its members in the larger community.

It is noteworthy that Kane (1978, 1982) attempted to relate anointed states of religious fire handlers to hypnotic states of subjects in controlled experimental studies. On the basis of hypnotic suggestion, subjects were observed to experience no tissue damage from noxious stimuli and yet to develop tissue damage in the absence of such materials. Based on these findings, Kane suggested that the success of "entranced" fire handlers was due to the activation of protective neurological mechanisms that were mobilized by belief to produce immunity to the flames of their torches.

Burton (1993) was successful in obtaining EEG readings from serpent handling preacher Liston Pack who experienced the anointing in a laboratory setting. After being properly connected to electrodes, the subject meditated with eyes closed until the anointing came, at which time he made various physical gestures that were reported as appropriate to the event. The technician who performed the study drew four conclusions based upon the EEG recording: (1) there was no evidence of abnormality in the frequency patterns that might indicate seizure activity; (2) preparation for the anointing involved an EEG state similar to that of mediation; (3) with report of the anointing came a sudden conversion from alpha to beta frequencies--an aroused state within normal parameters; and (4) the patterns of frequencies recorded during the session were similar to what might be expected from individuals who are good candidates for hypnosis--that is, persons who reflect in their EEG patterns whatever state is suggested. Given this interpretation, the technician hypothesized that a key to understanding the physiological and neurological functioning of those who experience the anointing may lie within the literature on hypnosis rather than on meditation, although such a proposition was thought in no way to devalue

the religious experience of the anointing.

Schwartz (1999) reported a study in which blood samples were drawn from an anointed serpent and fire handler, and analyzed for adrenaline, beta-endorphin, and cortisol levels. When believers experienced the anointing, Schwartz had hypothesized that the euphoria and altered perceptions of stressful stimuli were due to increases in these neurological chemicals produced by the body. The investigators drew three blood samples, of 10 mls each, from a volunteer handler: (1) approximately two hours before serpent and fire handling experiences, (2) moments after both practices had been completed (the participant continued to speak in tongues as blood was being drawn), and (3) two hours after the events had taken place. Analyses of the blood samples obtained during the handling indicated that the participant experienced a 61% increase in adrenaline, a 28% increase in beta-endorphins, and a 525% increase in cortisol; two hours later there remained only a slight elevation in beta-endorphins when compared to the pre-anointed stage. Schwartz concluded that the handler's energetic and distracted behavior during the anointing was suggestive of an adrenaline "high," while his fearlessness could be understood in terms of an elevated beta-endorphin level. The lack of pain experienced in the fire handling was attributed to the endorphin-related euphoria combined with a psychological expectation for success in the practice--a suspected combination that both lowered anxiety and inhibited pain perception. In conclusion, Schwartz suggested that the endorphin-related euphoria and the adrenaline high experienced in the anointing may be linked to a "psychic reward system" that reinforces an addiction to such a religious experience.

With regard to investigations reviewed thus far, it should be noted that even if controlled studies could be replicated among serpent handling sects, their findings, though interesting, would be of somewhat limited value in understanding the phenomenon of the anointing and its related practices. For example, the same EEG patterns recorded from a believer during the anointing might be similar to those obtained from a focused student in the context of a library; and, similarly, the blood chemical levels of an anointed serpent handler might correspond to those of an athlete at certain moments of excitement in a championship game. Although the neurological processes may share similarities, the meanings to these contextualized events would differ greatly. A psychophysiological mechanism may describe biological correlates in successful serpent or fire handling; what it does not describe are the meanings that the experience holds for the person undergoing it. For that to occur, another type methodology is required.

Anointing and Dissociative Trance States - In studies reviewed above, success in manifesting the various signs among serpent handling sects was attributed to the anointing, a phenomenon described by practitioners as a direct experience of feeling God, and observed by researchers as a type of trance or dissociative state (Sargant, 1949; Schwarz, 1960; Kane, 1973; 1974b; 1978; 1982; Moore, 1986; Burton, 1993; Hood et al., 1996). In describing such states, for example, Schwarz (1960) observed that:

> the members appear as if they were intoxicated, and their facies [sic] are very similar to those seen with reactions induced by mescaline and LSD 25. They describe the depersonalization phenomena as: "I feel high in the spirits" ... "happiness in the bones" ... "a shield has come down over me" ... "I've got conviction" ... "I lose sight of the whole world" ... "I can't tell if my head and face are all together" and "I can't stand under the power of God." (pp. 408-409)

At the climax of this ecstatic experience, Schwarz further noted that members would engage the "ordeals" without apparent harm. These observations, described by believers as God moving on them, were hypothesized to be trance states with neurological and physiological implications that were viewed by Schwarz as the only possible explanations for success in the practices--particularly those involving fire handling and poison ingestion.

Although studies specifically focusing on trance states among serpent handling sects have been limited, an abundance of research exists on Pentecostal groups linking trance with tongues-speaking (Malony & Lovekin, 1985). The two terms most often used by investigators to describe mental states thought related to glossolalia are "trance" and "possession." Though various definitions have been offered for each of the phenomena (see Swanson [1978] for an interesting theory), a basic distinction involves perspective: "Trance is the phenomenon observed from the outside, whereas possession is the experience reported from the inside" (Malony & Lovekin, 1985, p. 98). Trance is inferred by the researcher, based on observation and measurement, whereas possession is judged by the individual undergoing the experience and by the tradition according to cultural expectations. Among those who speak in tongues, the culture of Pentecostal theology and experience claims that Jesus continues his presence on earth through the agency of the Holy Ghost, who is received as an indwelling presence and believed at times to possess the individual for the purpose of fulfilling the will of God. Hence possession by the Holy Ghost may not always involve trance, or loss of self-awareness. Since the once-suspected link of pathology with glossolalia now seems no longer an issue (Alland, 1962; Wood, 1965; Gerlach & Hine, 1968; Hine, 1969; Kildahl, 1972; Richardson, 1973; Coulson &

Johnson, 1977; Lovekin & Malony, 1977; Spanos & Hewitt, 1979), the major focus of research has shifted to the debate of whether glossolalia requires a trance, or altered state, for its practice.

Though several investigators (Cutten, 1927; Sargant, 1949; Lapsley & Simpson, 1964) have linked glossolalia with dissociation, perhaps the most ardent proponent of this theory is Goodman (1969, 1972a; 1972b, 1988) who has concluded that speaking in tongues is an "artifact" of trance states. On the basis of cross-cultural research, she has argued for a genetic predisposition in which the practice of a religious ritual induces an alternate state of consciousness. For her, this religious trance ...

> is the vehicle that does not just transfer the participants to another plane of emotion, but rather propels them to an altogether different aspect of reality, or, as others see it, to an alternate one. A careful look at rituals reveals that without exception [emphasis mine] they contain a signal to the participants indicating that this is the point where they should make the switch to this different mode of perception. (Goodman, 1988, p. 34)

Pointing to the widespread frequency of religious trance--experienced by some 92 percent of small societies in one survey--Goodman suggested it to be a normal and often an unconscious event in Western cultures, especially when institutionalized as a "ritualized action," conditioned and controlled by ritual cues. Despite their frequent occurrence, Western religions have been much less aware of trance within their rituals than Eastern religions, largely because of the West's cultural notion that such states are psychologically deviant and pathological. In contrast, Eastern traditions have very much valued such states of consciousness and easily recognize their manifestations.

According to Goodman (1988, 1972b), religious trance occurs as the person

removes him/herself from the ordinary perception of reality, an event marked by various stages. If examined within a religious context, "the start" is induced by participation in an established ritual that may include singing of songs, clapping of hands, reciting of prayers, moving of the body, etc. These specific aspects of the ritual do not themselves produce the trance but rather are thought to stimulate a necessary expectation required for the phenomenon to occur--hence the wide range of trance stimuli across cultures and contexts. Within this ritual of activity, concentration is continually focused and eventually leads to a notable shift in perception--an experience often described as "getting past a barrier."

In this second stage, called "sojourn," the body continues to move rapidly and manifests a range of observable phenomena: "The observer notes pallor to perspiration, trembling, twitching, extremely rapid motion, sometimes even what looks like a swoon, a catatonia-like rigidity. The latter is actually the sign of tremendous excitation, so intense that movement is no longer possible" (Goodman, 1988, p. 38). According to Goodman, these manifestations of ecstatic experience are common across cultures but context-dependent for interpretation and nuanced for meaning by the specific tradition in which they occur. Hence the common process of religious trance admits various cultures to different realities. Although most participants return to an ordinary state of consciousness at this point, others may experience a mystical encounter.

The third phase of religious trance is noted as "dissolution," an awakening to ordinary consciousness, which may be signaled by a ritual cue or by the ending of the ritual itself. Goodman (1988) has observed that, while in religious trance, novices tend to

be less responsive to such cues than experienced participants but soon, with practice, also become conditioned to the appropriate time for ending the experience. At the conclusion of religious trance, the final stage, known as "aftereffects," is marked by an overwhelming sense of joy and intense euphoria. These qualities are experienced for longer durations among neophytes than experienced participants since they become less pronounced over time. Whether the content of ecstasy in religious trance is later recalled depends upon the expectations of the religious community; any amnesia regarding the event, said Goodman, is related to suggestibility by the tradition during trance.

Goodman's theory is said to be based on cross-cultural studies of Pentecostal groups (Goodman, 1969, 1972b) and controlled laboratory experiments (cited in Goodman, 1988). In these latter studies, religious trance was induced among participants at the same time as physiological measures were obtained. Trance states were found to involve an increased heart rate (with a concomitant drop in blood pressure), lowered levels of adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, and higher levels of beta endorphins that persisted even after the trance experience ended. EEG patterns revealed trance to involve electrical brain activity in the theta range whereas direct current measurements found negative charges of 1,000 to 2,000 microvolts in some participants, the values of which are sizeable in comparison with the usual 250 microvolts that accompany the experience of learning. The paradox of slow theta waves (6-7 cps) combined with the significant magnitude of negative electrical charges, said Goodman, is a puzzling aspect in the experience of trance and deserving of further laboratory study. The wider EEG patterns obtained by Goodman (1988) resembled those measured by Persinger (1984) in another

glossolalic study but differed from beta patterns recorded from a serpent handling preacher during an experience of the anointing (Burton, 1993)--an inferred trance state.

The variability found in EEG studies of meditation has been noted by Hood et al. (1996) and Wulff (1990). While Zen masters tend to manifest synchronized patterns in the theta and delta range, expert Yogis produce dysynchronized beta patterns in deep meditative states. It can be inferred from Wulff's (1990) observations that this distinction may be due in part to differences between the two systems of thought: Zen focuses on awareness of the world whereas Yoga concentrates on withdrawal from the world. In terms of EEG protocols, it is curious that the anointing encountered by one experienced serpent handler (Burton, 1993) correlated more with meditative states of expert Yogis than with Zen masters, the latter of whom have meditative states that resembled those of entranced glossolalics (Goodman, 1988; Persinger, 1984). At another level, however, these confounding results only demonstrate the complexities of determining the meaning of altered states assessed by physiological measures.

The difference between the findings of Goodman (1988) and Burton (1993) may be understood at two levels. First, in a technical sense, Goodman (1988) used a standard trance induction technique to achieve the experience of glossolalia among her participants whereas Burton's (1993) serpent handler improvised from his own tradition a method for experiencing the anointing in the laboratory. Second, these studies involved Pentecostal participants who were from differing subcultures of the religious tradition, and hence from nuanced realities of religious experience. The variable findings indicate that, while physiological measurements and laboratory procedures reveal some degree of insight into

Pentecostal anointing and/or trance states, they are insufficient in themselves to yield the depth of understanding required from a religious point of view. It is indeed the variability of the experience itself that merits focus and description.

In earlier research, Goodman (1972b) made claims that trance states were necessary for glossolalia. Although observed stages of trance may become less pronounced over time, she argued for their presence on the basis of data deriving from seven different cultures and four different languages which, when analyzed and compared, produced a consistent configuration of linguistic patterns from glossolalic utterances. On this basis, Goodman (1972b) concluded that "Such agreement of patterns despite linguistic and cultural differences, to my mind, can be explained only if we assume that glossolalia is not simply uttered while in dissociation but is an artifact of the mental state, or rather of its neurophysiological processes" (pp. 123-124).

In a review of Goodman's (1969, 1972b) research, Samarin (1972a, 1974) took a strong opposing stance. From his perspective, glossolalia mostly occurred independent of trance states, though it could also be manifest at such times (Samarin, 1972b). Samarin (1972a) criticized Goodman's (1969) "artifact" hypothesis based upon three observations. First, he argued that glossolalia is a sociolinguistic phenomenon developed within a religious tradition that exerts social influence. In fact, said Samarin (1973), it is a learned behavior that emerges from a context that (1) requires it for community membership, (2) sanctions--through frequency of practice--certain features of utterance over others, and (3) demonstrates the borrowing of glossolalic syllables and sequences among speakers. A second criticism charged that Goodman's (1969) samples were not cross-cultural but

simply subcultures of a larger Pentecostal tradition that already shared a common glossolalic tradition (Samarin, 1972a). In his view, they were not truly independent cultures, hence no universal claim could be made as legitimate. A third exception to Goodman's (1969) thesis was the analysis of common intonational features in glossolalia spoken among samples which were mistaken for what is more correctly understood as a "style of discourse"--a phenomenon commonly found within any particular religious subculture. Among Pentecostals, for example, the same pattern of intonational emphasis found in glossolalia is consistent with that observed in the group's prayers and sermons. Hence Samarin (1972a, 1973) concluded that glossolalia is not the result of a universal trance state but rather is of a learned behavior extremely sensitive to contextual cues.

Responding to these criticisms, Goodman (1972a) argued that her technique of analysis was indeed justifiable from a methodological perspective and that her subsequent observations warranted a causal explanation, one she believed to be rooted in an altered state of consciousness. In defense of her cross-cultural claims, attention was called to the fact that one group's history had no connection whatever with American Pentecostalism and that an additional culture was later studied and found to support her position. Since variations exist even among specific languages of a particular language family, Goodman argued that the mythical "style of discourse" loses value in accounting for cross-cultural similarities in glossolalia which, she said, can only be explained on the basis of an altered mental state.

Malony and Lovekin (1985) have discussed various controlled experimental studies designed to test the validity of Goodman's (1969, 1972b, 1988) thesis of trance

state glossolalia, although none have been convincing in finding support. In fact, there were no differences found between glossolalic and non-glossolalic conditions in the assessment of heart rate, breathing, and brain wave patterns (Pavelsky, Hart, & Malony, 1975); photographed energy fields of participants (Strom & Malony, 1979); or memory recall of words and matching tasks (Spanos & Hewitt, 1979). Despite these findings, Malony and Lovekin (1985) agreed more with Goodman than with Samarin for two reasons: (1) the self-report of glossolalics that they are under the control of God is itself an indication of some degree of change in consciousness, and (2) consciousness might be more appropriately thought of as a continuum rather than a juxtaposition of states in which so-called altered ones are simply contrasted with others considered to be more "normal." Nevertheless, the debate surrounding trance and glossolalia is still largely open--depending primarily upon how both trance and glossolalia are operationally defined in empirical research. Although trance states have not been directly linked to the anointing in such research, Hood et al. (1996) have suggested they more closely parallel the experience of handling serpents by "the anointing" than handling them by "faith."

Descriptive Approaches

In an effort to better understand the serpent handling tradition, Holliday (1966), a newspaper publisher and state legislator, conducted interviews with serpent handlers posing to them various questions about their beliefs and practices. Among the chapters most relevant to this present study were those given to "Holy Ghost" possession and "Snake Handling," both of which were composed entirely of transcribed interviews with believers. The strength of Holliday's work lies in its gathering of first-person descriptive

material concerning various issues: experiences of Holy Ghost "trance," personal conversion narratives, the meaning of the serpent, maintenance of serpents, and experiences of serpent bite. This collection of information was presented directly from quotes of believers with no additional commentary or analysis.

Although freelance writers, Pelton and Carden (1974; Carden & Pelton, 1976) provided many valuable insights into the psychology and sociology of religious serpent handling. In two books, the authors attempted to offer answers to various questions about the tradition and personal descriptions of experiences as given by participants themselves; in addition, they provided a generous supply of photographs. The first publication (Pelton & Carden, 1974) was organized around such issues as the biblical basis for the tradition, the anointing, serpent bites, spirit baptism, healing, exorcism, and the drinking of poison. These and other similar issues were again discussed in a second publication (Carden & Pelton, 1976), although organized, this time, around the question of constitutionality regarding the laws prohibiting serpent handling. Although both works are enlightening, they are limited since they involved no systematic analysis of the data nor any interpretation of the phenomena observed. Instead, they "simply present the truth and the facts regarding the Holiness serpent handlers of the Southeast" (Carden & Pelton, 1976, p. 21).

For his dissertation, Birckhead (1976) produced an ethnographic study on a religious serpent handling community, based primarily on a particular east Tennessee congregation he attended for the cumulative period of a year. As a guarded participant observer, he took careful note of its oral tradition, beliefs, and rituals, and attempted to

describe them in relation to their function within the community, and in regard to the greater religious community and society at large. From personal observations and interviews, he found that an oral serpent handling tradition laid claim to the days of the apostles and provided the contemporary sect with a deeply rooted sense of spiritual significance and continuity. Other elements noted by Birckhead were the variability of socioeconomic factors among members, the religious and social boundaries maintained between the sect and others of society, and the defining infrastructure and activities of the tradition. He also investigated the phenomenon of "supernatural power" that members believed they acquired--primarily through the anointing--and its ongoing negotiation of meaning in terms of success and failure in everyday life. In regard to this process, a core of premises was described and offered as the basis for a decision-making model whereby the negotiated meaning of problematic failures--that is, serpent bite and subsequent death--ultimately leads to a reconfirmation of the community and its faith in the sacred text. A most notable feature of the study, however, is its emphasis on how meaning is derived from reconciling such failures with the experience of supernatural power.

Birckhead has authored at least two other publications (1993, 1997) on serpent handling, besides reviews (1994, 1996) of other works on the subject. In the first piece, Birckhead (1993) drew from his own research experience to expose the role of media in constructing and perpetuating the pejorative stereotype of religious serpent handlers. Stripped of religious meaning, the decontextualized offerings of television productions and printed media were characterized as seeking to compete for an entertainment-oriented audience by presenting sensationalized accounts that stigmatize practitioners as "bizarre"

and as strange representatives of an Appalachian "otherness." Such casting of the tradition, and those who are part of it, said Birckhead, made it a social spectacle and an unfortunate icon of Appalachian religion altogether.

In a more recent book chapter, Birckhead (1997) offered critical reflections on the various ways in which the serpent handling tradition has been interpreted. In this analysis, he surveyed popular media and found the tradition was usually characterized as "strange" and "bizarre." In addition, he found that the scholarly literature emphasized certain of its elements as evidence for psychopathology, compensation for social deprivation, psychophysiological responses, and so on. Finally, an extended account of his own research experiences among serpent handlers was given to present a different perspective: Birckhead understood serpent handling as part of a meaningful tradition deriving from a specific cultural context. In respect to this latter view--given the bulk of the chapter--Birckhead reflected extensively upon his own personal biographical issues which led to this choice of research interest and to the effect that living among "his people" had on him as a researcher.

For a master's thesis in history, Vance (1975) traced the roots of the serpent handling tradition to the Wesleyan Holiness movement that later gave rise to Pentecostalism at the turn of the twentieth century, yet his most interesting contribution is the teasing out of serpent handling movements that later emerged in the Southeast which were argued to be independent of George Hensley. Optimistic about the survival of sects, he described its members as holding to a certain worldview of a nurturing God who protects them from the personal attacks of a scheming Devil--an overarching schema that

interprets the world and personal existence as an ongoing battle between forces of Good and Evil in which believers themselves become the coveted prize.

In her study of serpent handling sects, Maguire (1981) attempted to describe them from a general perspective based upon information drawn from previous research. She began by contextualizing the emergence of the tradition within the interrelated historical movements of Holiness, Pentecostalism, and Fundamentalism, and their sociological functions. This was followed by a brief history of the serpent handling movement, the theology of its practices, and various sociological, psychological, and physiological interpretations offered by contemporary social scientists. Observing that such interpretations typically neglected the socio-historical and theological issues of these groups, she concluded that further investigation of serpent handling sects was needful through use of descriptive methods that take such factors into account.

Concerned with the migration of serpent handling sects to urban locations, Carter (1987) studied a single congregation in Ohio for a period of seven months as a participant-observer. From a collection of demographics and personal interviews, an effort was made to provide a descriptive/interpretive analysis of the group's unique religious practices in an urban context. This analysis provided: (1) an interpretation of the specific symbolic language that gives meaning within the group, (2) a description of a typical worship service and how manifested signs are facilitated, and (3) a linking of the tradition with certain socio-demographic variables. Of particular interest is the degree of justification given the tradition by Carter based upon its positive influence in the lives of believers.

In a book dedicated to the history of serpent handling, Burton (1993) was

concerned with "presenting a descriptive, analytical, partly oral-historical insight into the belief and the believers of taking up serpents as an act of Christian obedience" (p. 4). After a brief introduction, and insights into the practices given by key serpent handling believers, Burton presented a detailed history of the tradition organized around the figure of George W. Hensley who was said to have propelled it forward by early association with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). After Hensley's break with the denomination, Burton traced his personal life, and the wide path taken, in spreading the doctrine of serpent handling throughout the Southeast. A detailed account of anti-serpent handling legislation in Tennessee was included, as were brief biographies of two renown serpent handlers. A major strength of Burton's work is the variety of perspectives offered concerning the history and practices of the serpent handling tradition, including self-descriptions rendered by believers themselves.

From participant observation research, Hood (1998) studied serpent handling sects with an interest in describing their existence as a marginal group in relation both to the more mainstream Pentecostal tradition and to society at large. It was noted that their tendency to remain independent and resistant to modernity centered about the practice of serpent handling and the related issue of death. According to Hood, the unpredictability of serpent bite in the practice itself resists both institutionalization and social constraints on affect, the latter of which are required by denominations who successfully accommodate to their host culture. Refusal to abdicate this "sign" has brought about the marginalization of serpent handling sects by a successful Pentecostal movement that progressively moves toward middle class values and toward a repression of fear of death. Though dismissed by

others as "bizarre," Hood felt that their practices are legitimated by narratives and an oral theology that, when heard, is convincing in its own right. For this reason, he concluded that the demise of serpent handling sects, as forecasted by others, is an obituary too soon written.

Williamson and Pollio (1999) also were concerned with religious serpent handling, but from the perspective of believers themselves. From various visits to serpent handling services in the southeastern United States, they collected a series of 18 extemporaneous sermons on the practice which were given by handlers either while the practice was in progress or immediately afterward. The sermons were transcribed and analyzed using hermeneutic procedures for deriving themes relating to the experience of serpent handling. This analysis found that a pattern of five major themes described the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the serpent handlers. As an embodied event, the taking up of serpents within the context of sacred worship involved an awareness of: (1) Being Moved, the Feeling of God; (2) Life/Death, the Feeling of Vitality; (3) "Us"/"Them," the Feeling of Specialness; (4) The Power of True Knowing; and (5) "Joy Unspeakable." Since the context of sermon delivery did not lend itself to further detailed descriptions in some cases, e.g., the meaning of joy unspeakable, it was suggested that further research be done using phenomenological interviews.

In sum, descriptive methods seem to hold a good deal of promise in studying certain types of religious phenomena, a sentiment first raised by James (1902/1982) nearly a century ago. This conclusion also seems to hold true for investigations regarding the phenomenon of religious serpent handling. Some studies reviewed above also employed

other methodologies in their investigation, although their efforts to describe the tradition required a certain sensitivity to the context that would have otherwise been lacking. Of all the descriptive studies reviewed, the technique used by Williamson and Pollio (1999) seemed to involve the most systematic approach to analysis; however, the method of data collection was found to have certain limitations--specifically, the lack of opportunity to query participants for further detailed descriptions. In this regard, it seems that further research of this tradition, particularly with this type of descriptive method and other types of data, is warranted.

In conclusion, the present chapter has focused mainly on the literature concerned with the tradition of religious serpent handling sects. From reviewing the present status of research, it seems most studies have only allowed for only a limited scope of inquiry that led to a partial understanding of the religious tradition and, in particular, its practice of serpent handling. The limitations of prior approaches can be summarized in terms of three observations. First of all, they tend selectively to seek out data that conform to their base theories and tend to gloss over other information available from the perspective of serpent handlers themselves. As a second issue, most tend to be reductive in explaining serpent handling phenomena and, as such, render only a partial understanding of these events in terms of unconscious dynamics, amelioration of deprived needs, or correlates to biochemical activities. Thirdly, they fail to produce an encompassing description of the meaning of serpent handling by use of a rigorous method of analysis. Although some studies have been descriptive in their orientation, they did not engage a systematic method of analysis in order to arrive at their descriptions but offered insight based only on limited

field observations or on raw interview data that sometimes lacked in consistency.

Given these limitations, it is the purpose of this present study to investigate the phenomenon of religious serpent handling with two specific goals in mind. First of all, in view of the first limitation noted, a methodological technique, often called a phenomenological or dialogical interview, will be used to collect data from serpent handlers themselves. As a non-structured encounter, it is concerned with the first-person experience of taking up serpents from the perspective of an individual who has practiced the "sign." Rather than seeking out "objective" facts, the present investigation will take into account all information about serpent handling provided in such non-directive interviews.

Secondly, a description of the meaning of taking up serpents will be developed on the basis of a rigorous hermeneutic analysis of texts provided from participant interviews concerning such experiences. This procedure is designed to address the second and third limitations of other studies mentioned above since: (1) it attempts to be non-reductive in its analysis while rendering a clear description of the phenomenon as present to participants; and (2) it seeks to arrive at such a description of structured meaning by use of a rigorous interpretive technique. As noted, whereas some studies did approach their investigations on the basis of a descriptive method, none, except for Williamson and Pollio (1999), made use of a rigorous method of analysis in producing their descriptions.

In his presidential address to APA Division 36, Psychology of Religion, Wulff (1998) suggested the great need for qualitative research in the empirical study of religion, which he thought might prove more fruitful than quantitative methods traditionally

preferred. Hood (1998), in a descriptive study of serpent handling sects, found that further investigation was needed of their practices using methods more of a phenomenolocial nature--a suggestion I have also made elsewhere (Williamson, 1998). In a recent study, Williamson and Pollio (1999) investigated the meaning of serpent handling based on a rigorous method of interpreting extemporaneous sermons given by preachers of these sects on this subject. Though the findings were plausible and enlightening, it was suggested that additional study was needed using the phenomenological interview as a technique for collecting data--a method affording participants opportunity to clarify their experiences before a final description is offered by the investigator.

Hence the purpose of the present study is to discover the meaning of religious serpent handling as described by handlers themselves. Using a type of methodology that takes into account the context of experience, an effort will be made, insofar as possible, to provide a first-person description that captures the personal meaning of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. By using such an approach, it is hoped that the resulting conclusion will be enlightening to previous research concerning the practice and useful in developing a more complete picture of what it means to take up serpents.

CHAPTER V

THE METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Given the present concern for obtaining a first-person description of religious serpent handling, a methodology that takes into account the perspective of practitioners themselves was selected for use in this study. Whereas previous methodological approaches were concerned with evaluating a particular theoretical stance in their investigations of this practice, the present method is designed to describe, with as few presuppositions as possible, the personal meanings attached by participants to their religious experience of taking up venomous serpents. The focus of this chapter, then, is threefold: (1) to examine briefly the philosophical assumptions guiding the use of phenomenological methods, (2) to outline its procedural aspects, and (3) to describe its application in the present study.

Philosophical Assumptions

The methodology used in this study derives from earlier research procedures developed at Duquesne University in the 1970s and 1980s (Giorgi, Fischer, & von Eckartsberg, 1971; Giorgi, Fischer, & Murray, 1975; Giorgi, Knowles, & Smith, 1979; Giorgi, Barton, & Maes, 1983). In general, these procedures involve collecting descriptions of experiences from participants and then analyzing the resulting texts (Giorgi, 1970, 1971). In his review of phenomenological methods, Polkinghorne (1989) noted at least three commonalities among those committed to developing a first-person description of some significant phenomenon. In the first stage, all methods require a

division of transcribed text into units that express the meanings of the event for participants. Once identified, a second stage is concerned with transforming such units into descriptive statements about the experience. A third stage then attempts to provide a general description in terms of a series of themes that expresses the meaning of the experience for the participants. In contrast to the stance taken by Giorgi (1975), who insists upon a transformation of meaning units into psychological terminology, Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) have suggested that the final meaning units retain, as far as possible, the participants' own words. This concern is seen to represent an effort to remain faithful to the experience as specifically rendered by participants.

The present methodology, as well as most other procedures concerned with describing the meaningful structures of first-person experience, derives from three interrelated philosophical traditions: phenomenology, existentialism, and hermeneutics. From phenomenology, it assumes a profound interest in describing everyday human experience with as few theoretical presuppositions as possible (James, 1902/1982, 1983; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1994). From existentialism, it derives an appreciation for the significant situations of contemporary human life and the personal meanings they afford each person (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980; Heidegger, 1927/1962; May 1950/1977; 1983; Sartre, 1957, 1943/1956). From hermeneutics, it manifests a concern for language and narrative as well as an appreciation for the difficulties involved in interpreting the structure of meanings embedded in first-person descriptions (Gadamer, 1976; Bleicher, 1980/1990; Kvale, 1996). Taken in combination, these philosophical considerations suggest that any attempt to capture the first-person meaning of significant human phenomena must involve

procedures that interfere as little as possible with their ordinary mode of description. Paraphrasing Heidegger (1927/1962), the method chosen must allow the phenomenon to show itself in its own light and in its own language.

Phenomenology

Perhaps the two philosophers most important to the phenomenological concerns of the present methodology are William James (1983, 1902/1982) and Merleau-Ponty (1962/1994). The phenomenology of William James (1983) rests upon the view that the world exists as a factual reality whose objects are experienced by the person through successive states of consciousness--a psychology that holds as irreducible facts: the knowing mind and the object known. From his description of mental states, James allows for a phenomenology of personal experience in which the objective world appears to each individual in a variety of unique ways. In addition to consciousness being a personal entity, it is said to be ever-changing: hence, events experienced at different times of even the same object in the world are no more precisely the same than are two wave-crests which arrive at different times at the same point of space in the sea.

According to this view, successive states of consciousness are never the same as those they have followed, but are always in a flux, and flowing as a "stream" that moves about from place to place, attending to various objects in the world. Characteristic of this stream is the subjective awareness of its rate of change, described by James (1983) as "substantive parts" (restful places given to the contemplation of an object) and "transitive parts" (places of fight given to the relations between objects of contemplation). Furthermore, in sensing objects, or parts of a single object, consciousness finds of interest

one particular aspect among the others to become the momentary focus of attention while pushing all other aspects to the "fringe" of awareness--a phenomenon of choice, says James, based on personal interest in the aesthetics or practicality of the situation. Indeed this selectivity has tendency to choose certain objects and to diminish or ignore others altogether in constituting the personal world of experience. It is in this way that what is real for the person is that which has been attended to--that which has been selected based on personal interest. In reflecting on his description of consciousness, and its personal attendance to the world, James concluded that

> the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention ... The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere matter to the thought of all of us indifferently. We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world we feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. (James, 1983, p. 277)

Based on the concept of this personal interest in the objective world, James' phenomenology extends a cogent philosophical perspective that takes into account the influence of culture and tradition on personal experience by way of a "shared" interest in particular aspects of phenomena that appear within the local context of meaning--and this

while "rejecting certain portions of the given stuff." For example, in happening upon a snake in the wild, a Christian of the Methodist faith might sense the reptile to be a dangerous animal, one to be avoided at all costs, whereas a Christian of the serpent handling faith might experience it as a useful creature provided by God for the confirmation of a scriptural mandate. Still an environmentalist, in such an encounter, might experience the animal as an important ecological factor in the maintenance of the environment. In each case, the person has attended to aspects of the same being that are of particular interest to his or her own culture while, at the same time, dismissing other aspects that are of little or no concern. When investigating a particular experience, James' perspective supports a concern for locating a commonality of themes in a collection of personal descriptions of a phenomenon and for capturing, at the same time, the nuances of individual experience that emerge in such reports.

Regarding investigations into the world of personal experience, it is important to note that James (1983) observed particular limitations implicit to the most acceptable psychological methods contemporary with his time--introspection, experimentation, and comparison. Though space does not allow for discussion of these procedural problems, it is sufficient to observe, among the most serious, the perennial problem of language in studying the richness of subjective experience. In addition, there is the problematic "fallacy" of the psychologist in imposing upon the mental state under investigation his or her own perspective as to what that state is actually like for the person experiencing it. In his Briefer Course, James (1961) concluded that psychology--considered by him a natural (biological) science--should be more properly viewed as "the hope of a science" (p. 335),

one which he thought had been most productive at descriptive levels of investigation. Given this attitude, it is no surprise that description was chosen as the method of inquiry in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902/1982). In this classic work, subjective experiences within various religious contexts were given significance based on rich descriptions rendered by persons who encountered them. For James, the phenomenology of personal experience was concerned with investigating the infinite variety of ways in which the world can appear to states of consciousness, a concern that could best be served by use of descriptive methods.

Drawing upon Husserl, Merleau-Ponty (1962/1994) articulated a type of phenomenology that posits as key an intentional relationship between person and world. Merleau-Ponty begins with a concern for the "facticity" of personal experience, which he feels must precede any reflection on that experience. Through careful descriptions of immediate experience, unencumbered by assumptions of causality or psychological reductionism, the task of phenomenology is to describe the everyday world of human life. From a phenomenological point of view, the person is not viewed as an outcome or product of causal forces in the world but, rather, as an individual who, on the basis of his or her direct and reflected experience, adopts and/or constructs a particular world view--a "tradition" that provides a foundation for his or her being-in-the-world. From this perspective, the world affords a setting from which events emerge in unreflected experience. Since such experiences weave together to become the world of everyday existence, it is the business of phenomenology to undercut abstractions and focus, instead, on descriptive accounts of events as present to consciousness--in Husserlian terms, to a

concern with "the things themselves."

Since phenomenal experience is composed of layered relationships between person and world, it is only by attempting a conscious suspension of such engagement that an awareness of any particular phenomenon is possible--a process Husserl described as phenomenological reduction. It is only by reflective disengagement that the "intentional threads" linking a person to world are sufficiently relaxed to reveal the everyday world of human experience as "strange and paradoxical," that is, as replete with multiple possibilities (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1994). Since total disengagement is never possible, a complete suspension of the so-called natural attitude (i.e., a belief in the independent existence of what is experienced) cannot be achieved. Its abeyance, or bracketing, however, is central to attaining perspectival views of the world and the varieties of phenomenological experience.

In contrast to a transcendental state of knowing, Merleau-Ponty (1962/1994) defines the phenomenological world as a collective crossroads ("a network of meanings," as he puts it) where various experiences in and of the world mesh together and synchronize with those of others to constitute a more general world of meaning. Far from being complete, however, the world so attained is as an unfinished product ever yet to be fashioned and molded by present and future experiences. In regard to the present method, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty thus affords both a foundation and a descriptive means for investigating lived human experience.

Existentialism

Existentialism provides for the present methodology a distinct perspective for

understanding how engagement of person with world is experienced and understood. Concerned with the human struggle for meaning, the philosophy of existentialism arose largely in response to a major shift in the worldview during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that was particularly influenced by the rise of modern science (Guignon & Pereboom, 1995). Previous to this time, Greek philosophy had proposed a natural order for the cosmos in which humanity was determined a functional role of meaning in relation to the gods or forms. In Medieval Europe, meaning and purpose for human existence was to be found in the master plan of God as the divine creator. With the advent of natural science, however, such systems of meaningfulness were set aside for the purpose of observing the world "objectively," as a reality whose material objects were viewed within the "value-free" context of causal relations so noted by natural science. From such a perspective, human beings came to be viewed either as other objects or as animals of the world, devoid of significance and meaning, with no ultimate plan for existence.

It was against this predominance in Western thought that particular thinkers came to protest what Max Weber later described as the "disenchantment of the world" along with its subsequent lost meaning for human existence. Among the first of these was Kierkegaard (1941a, 1941c) who took issue with Hegel's popular concept of an absolute truth as existing beyond the person. Within Hegelian philosophy, individuals are separated from being through reflection and are only able to transcend the breach between their givenness and self-conscious strivings through mediation of rational thought. This process involves a dialectic tension between that which is immediately sensed and that which is held as objective truth--a contradiction that eventually synthesizes its way toward a reality

embraced as rational and Absolute. In contrast to this approach, Kierkegaard saw the dialectic between opposites as within the context of linking the temporal with the eternal, a task that requires perennial "leaps of faith" toward committing one's life into the hands of God (1941b). Such an endeavor involves relational truth that comes by faith--as opposed to objective truth that come by rational process--which fuses together the temporal and eternal in a reality that provides an overarching structure and purpose for existing and participating in the world. As noted by May (1983), Kierkegaard's theistic perspective serves to ameliorate existential anxiety arising from the subject/object cleavage of earlier rational thought, while restoring a psychological wholeness to personal existence.

Despite Kierkegaard's protest, psychological compartmentalization continued in the Western analysis of being well into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (May, 1983). One consequence of this approach was that the individual became increasingly separated from meaningful engagement in art, labor, relationships, and religious practice. In the early decades of this period, it was his utter skepticism that led Nietzsche (1974) to proclaim the death of God and to renounce any universal system of values that might serve as a reality for appearances in the natural world. Accordingly, the sickness of society was thought due to a passive stance taken in the present world for the sake of hope in a better one yet to come. With interest vested only in the future, a psychological separateness was believed to escalate between the person and the world, leading to pervasive repression, spiritual decadence, isolation, and meaningless living. Allowing for no teleological narrative to guide personal development, Nietzsche called for

individuals to actualize their own creative potential at the given moment by embracing whatever life brings in a self-affirming stance--an action he called the "will to power, which is precisely the will of life." With personal exercise of such power, Nietzsche (1974) thought a unity and style of character would be obtained wherein both strengths and weaknesses are integrated into an "artistic plan" that brings about self-satisfaction and meaningful existence.

Both Heidegger and Sartre also have contributed to the existentialist perspective. A student of Husserl, Heidegger (1927/1962) was concerned with the recovery of meaning in everyday life that had been lost in the stance of objective reality as adopted by natural science. According to his view, such a theoretical perspective was not privileged to "the" truth about reality, yet its dominant grasp on society cultivated a certain distortion and "forgetfulness" with regard to a fundamental understanding of everyday experience in the world--a world that is "out there" and contextualized with significant meaning for each person. Like James, self and world, for Heidegger, were not two independent modes of being, as proposed by the objectivity of science, but rather a unified phenomenon that comes together in a single entity called "Dasein" (translated as "being there") or being-in-the-world. Given personal agency in the world, each individual was thought responsible for taking a stand in life and--having grasped such responsibility--becoming "authentic" and concerned with engaging the world in a meaningful way. For Heidegger, the descriptive aim of phenomenology should be directed toward uncovering the "hidden ground and meaning" of what shows up for the person in the world--clearly an existential concern.

Sartre (1957) reasoned that, with the announcement of God's death, the notion that essence precedes existence was unwarranted. With no predetermined role of divine origin, each person was thought encumbered with responsibility for choosing projects that provide self-definition and meaning in life--hence the phrase: "existence precedes essence." In this regard, one is enabled as a conscious being to transcend being-in-itself--the "facticity" or present givenness of personal existence--by first questioning and then choosing projects of personal concern to take up as meaningful tasks in living out life--an active stance on existence known as being-for-itself (Sartre, 1943/1956). Since the question of being is always at stake for the individual, the facticity of existence is never fixed but remains open to various projects for the choosing which, in the process of accomplishment, afford personal meaning to life. Since no universal truth exists to offer a platform from which to inquire, and because life is always in the making, concern for understanding human existence must begin with the person's own concrete sense of self and the world which, according to Sartre (1957), is best served by phenomenological description.

Influenced by the philosophies of phenomenology and existentialism, Pollio and his colleagues (1997; Pollio, 1982, 1990) have suggested that human beings create or derive personal meaning only by participating in a life-world contextualized by the existential grounds of body, time, others, and world. Taken in combination, these contexts circumscribe and support the personal life-world, and that which becomes meaningful in any given experience emerges as figural in relationship to these grounds, either singly or in combination. When an experience occupies immediate consciousness, these grounds do

not disappear but recede to the periphery--the Jamesian fringe--and continue to provide support and definition for what is figural at the moment. Since consciousness is both focused and ever-changing, what is central to awareness at one moment is always both ephemeral and contextualized by issues relating to body, time, others, and world.

For example, a student in a typical classroom setting can demonstrate, in a variety of ways, which aspects of that particular world are experienced as meaningful. The student may be profoundly intrigued by the professor or the lecture; and though she may be somewhat aware other grounds (her body, the surrounding environmental world, time of day, other people in the setting), there is something in the professor or the lecture which is experienced as more meaningful at the present moment. Suppose during the next moment she feels a pain in her foot. The experience of pain has just become figural to her, whereas all remaining, non-body grounds shift to the margins of her experience. Suppose, now, that her pain is temporary and she next comes to look at a painting over to her right on the classroom wall. Meaningful contemplation of this object emerges from the world and pushes to the edge of consciousness the grounds of others, body, and time. Finally, let us imagine the professor, the lecture, the pain, and painting no longer have any personal interest and yield to a sudden awareness of time. When the professor was found interesting, time was marginally experienced as ongoing; now, however, it has become focal and is experienced as dragging on in a now-meaningless classroom. Although quite ordinary, this example describes human experience as a flowing and changeable figure-ground event--a gestalt contextualized by the meanings of body, time, others, and world.

Hermeneutics (and a word about Postmodernism)

Key access to meaningful experience is often, although not exclusively, gained through the specific language used to articulate it--an observation clearly supported by hermeneutic and postmodern thought. Since universal theories underlying mainstream methodologies may be viewed as perspectival notions of truth (Kuhn, 1996), hermeneutic philosophy has emphasized the importance of cultural context wherever language and social discourse construct a taken-for-granted reality (Gadamer, 1976; Gergen, 1992). From the perspectives of both hermeneutics and postmodernism, interest over the discovery of an objective universal truth is displaced by a concern for contextualized truth which emerges from discourse in the form of narratives, conversation, and cultural tradition. Linked to pragmatic human activities within a culture, language constructs, rather than mirrors, reality and thus provides a legitimate source for rigorous investigation into meanings of those activities found persistent (Kvale, 1992, 1996).

In his discussion of qualitative interviews, Kvale (1996) observed that language constructs knowledge even in those encounters and described five postmodern aspects related to the dialogic process. First of all, knowledge is embedded in conversation, and it is through such discourse that meanings of lived experiences are negotiated and understood. A second feature of language-based knowledge concerns the specific symbolic form known as a narrative. With postmodern skepticism toward universalities, attention must be given to working out "truth" locally in small narrative units that, when harmonized with collective stories, articulate and sustain the overall values held within a specific cultural context. Since language serves to construct reality, and each language

produces a unique view of the world, it follows as a third point that language does not reflect some objective reality but serves as a shared structure of knowledge learned and articulated by members of some community. A fourth aspect of postmodern thought is that knowledge is context specific and cannot, without careful means, be translated from one context to another--even from oral to transcribed forms. Finally knowledge produced from interviews is interrelational, the result of a dialogic encounter between persons focused on a specific theme. Understanding from this encounter is derived neither from within the person nor from the external world, but emerges within interdependent engagements connecting them. Postmodern philosophy emphasizes a moral consideration of truth defined in terms of social context, leading to social discourse as a central arena of investigation. What is articulated as personal experience within a specific context deserves critical notice and cannot be dismissed simply as a deviation from the measurement of some objective truth. From a hermeneutic (and postmodern) perspective, language is both adequate and essential to understanding the meaning of lived experience as it is manifested and sustained in and through human activity.

This view of the relationship between language and world is rooted in early nineteenth century hermeneutics which was largely defined as a philosophy concerned with "the interpretation of meaning" (Bleicher, 1980/1990, p. 1). The term, hermeneutics, derives from Greek mythology where Hermes was commissioned by the gods to present their messages to humanity. In fulfilling this mission, Hermes was obliged both to relate their words verbatim and to supply an interpretation that rendered them clear and meaningful to recipients. As Bleicher notes, hermeneutics viewed its task as involving two

concerns: (1) deriving the precise meaning of a word, phrase, or text; and (2) locating implicit directives expressed on the basis of metaphor and other symbolic forms. Because of its focus on language and its implications for human understanding, hermeneutics has become a philosophy of interpretation as well as a method for use by social science (Bleicher, 1980/1990; Pollio et al., 1997; Kvale, 1996; Gadamer, 1976; Gergen, 1992; Van Manen, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Valle et al., 1989).

Concerned particularly with interview texts, Kvale (1996) characterized hermeneutic philosophy as the commitment to an interpretive search of a text for meaning that contributes not only to co-understanding and possible consent but also to an overarching historical dialogue with humanity that is itself continually enriched by the process. In addition, Kvale summarized Radnitzky's (1970) approach to interpreting texts in terms of the following seven "canons" of hermeneutics.

1. The Hermeneutic Circle. Interpretation begins with a vague understanding of the whole of a text that provides specific intuitions for interpreting its parts. As individual parts are considered, their meanings, in turn, influence interpretation of the whole which, in like manner, contributes further understanding to its parts. As this process of going back and forth continues, the meaning of a text is progressively clarified.

2. "Good Gestalt". Since going back and forth from the whole of a text to its parts can never be exhaustively completed, the process is discontinued when a sensible meaning is discovered and its parts are seen to reflect a patterned unity free of internal contradiction. The hermeneutic circle is thus concluded when a good Gestalt of meaning

emerges from the text.

3. Testing. Throughout the interpretive process, the meaning discovered in different parts is compared to the interpreter's evolving sense of the text's more "global meaning." Testing ceases when both parts and the complete text form a meaningful unity.

4. Autonomy of the Text. In hermeneutics, the text alone is the authority for what is to be said about the person's lived experience. As individual themes are interpreted, the text becomes a reference point for their location and clarification. Independent of psychological theories and personal biographies, statements are considered as sufficient expressions of the life-experience they disclose, and their autonomous interpretation in terms of the total text is of primary concern.

5. Knowledge of the Theme. For proper interpretation, some degree of preexistent knowledge of an unfolding theme is necessary for detecting subtle changes in meaning that emerge within various contexts.

6. Presupposition. It is understood that no one comes to the interpretive process without prejudices: that is, without a personal tradition. As in phenomenological research, the key is to make personal biases explicit and then attempt to keep them at the forefront of awareness throughout the interpretive process. Presuppositions--what Gadamer calls prejudice--can never be overcome, nor should we expect them to be, since interpretation is always a historically contextualized process.

7. Creativity--Verstehen. Comprehension of the text comes about through a process of understanding. For each interpretation, there exists a better understanding, a certain creative aspect that extends itself beyond that which is immediately given to an

enriched illumination of the whole--a meaning that is continually refined with each process of interpretation.

An Integrated Perspective

Extending from the bases of the above philosophies, Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) have proposed a research methodology concerned with investigating the meaning of personal experience from a first-person perspective. Given phenomenological and existential concerns, it can be concluded that "human experience is ... not a static thing; rather, it is more accurately described as a sensibly changing perspectival relatedness to conditions, possibilities, and constraints of the world" (Pollio, et al., 1997, pp. 28-29). It is from this observation that human experience can be viewed as intensely personal, always changing, and usually unclear to the individual, even when given to self-reflection. For that reason, it seems sensible that an individual reflecting upon an experience can be helped by a second respectful person, an investigator, whose own experience is not at issue. It is from their common concern, and willingness to explore, that meaningful dialogue can emerge and lead, as we shall see, toward a better understanding about the specific experience at hand. Based on hermeneutic interpretation of such encounters, the resulting first-person perspective affords psychological insight into the meaning of personal events that can complement the more predominant third-person approach taken in psychology--the outcome being a more complete understanding of a particular phenomenon.

The Methodological Procedure

Every research project begins with a problem concerning a particular phenomenon of interest. Once determined, an appropriate method must be selected or developed to

investigate the phenomenon in question. Within a phenomenological tradition, no particular method is binding; rather, there is freedom for phenomenon and method to select one another in ways that best capture the world of human experience (Pollio et al., 1997). The word "method," in fact, derives from the Greek word "methodos" which is composed of the individual morphemes "hodos," meaning a path or way, and "meta," meaning across or beyond. Thus the word "method" connotes a path across or beyond. In the context of phenomenology, the use of any method always involves a choice thought to provide best access to the phenomenon of concern. As noted by both Kvale (1996) and Gergen (1992), narratives often are useful in gaining first-person descriptions of lived experiences, and Pollio et al. (1997) have suggested the appropriateness of an open dialogic encounter in which the participant is helped by the interviewer to construct a descriptive narrative of the particular phenomenon at hand. To understand the nature of phenomenological interviewing, and its subsequent phenomenological interpretation, it is necessary to present a concise overview of its procedures. Generally speaking, such procedures involve the researcher with four major steps: (1) determining the initial question, (2) participating in a bracketing interview, (3) engaging in phenomenological interviews with selected participants, and (4) interpreting the resulting interview texts.

The Initial Question

Once dialogue is chosen as the method for collecting descriptions in a particular study, the first concern involves an attempt to formulate an appropriate opening question for the interview. Since the specific question chosen will direct the ensuing conversation, it is important to make sure that it is sufficiently open to allow for multiple ways of taking it

up in the interview. Van Manen (1990) has suggested that the process of coming to terms with this question begins with wondering "what something is really like" (p. 42) and evolves to a point where "we live this question ... we 'become' this question" (p. 43). It is indeed only from such a vital sense of the question that the researcher is sufficiently prepared to pursue a specific phenomenon.

In coming to their question, it is a common practice for researchers to bring proposed opening questions to a phenomenology research group where they are assisted by others in clarifying their research interest and helped in structuring the specific interview question to be used. Because "why-questions" have been found to lead the participant away from the phenomenon toward an explanation of its origins or mode of operation, phenomenological interviewing is based on the use of "what-questions"--that is, with a concern for what the experience was like for the participant (Pollio et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 1989). In the case of the phenomenon of fear, for example, one possible question might be: "Can you tell me about a specific time that was fearful for you?" Responses to such a question might focus upon describing a significant personal event in which fear was experienced in a meaningful way. The opening question, phrased in terms of a specific episode, not only begins the interview but also serves as a constant point of reference in talking about the phenomenon of interest.

The Bracketing Interview

Phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have all noted that the so-called "natural attitude" must be relinquished in order to consider the perspectival ways a phenomenon is experienced. To clear the ground of preconceived

notions as to what a phenomenon may mean, an initial bracketing interview is conducted in which the interview question is posed to the researcher (Pollio et al., 1997; Williamson, & Pollio, 1999). The descriptions of experiences rendered in this interview are then transcribed and presented to a phenomenology research group for interpretation. The actual process of interpretation will be later addressed; the immediate issue of importance here concerns the specific meanings the researcher brings to the phenomenon of study. An examination of this awareness is critical since it is designed to make possible a coming "to the things themselves." Although it is impossible to bracket one's presumptions entirely, what is possible is to keep them in the forefront of awareness so as to enable the researcher to be mindful of his or her presuppositions when conducting interviews with participants.

The Phenomenological Interview

Once the initial question has been formulated, and related preconceptions acknowledged, the researcher moves toward a selection of participants for interview (Pollio et al., 1997). It is from such dialogic encounters that first-person descriptions of a phenomenon will be obtained and interpreted in coming to some description of the meaning of the experience in question. In a phenomenological study, there are relatively few restrictions on the selection of participants. Since the goal of investigating lived experience is not generalizability but interpretive clarity, random samples are not a consideration (Polkinghorne, 1989). Two criteria for selecting participants are: (1) they must have experienced the phenomenon under investigation, and (2) they must be able to provide an articulate description of the experience. Aside from these requirements, the

number of participants chosen is determined by the richness of descriptions obtained during the interviews (Pollio et al., 1997). Interviews continue until the process ceases to render further variation of the phenomenon--typically from 10 to 15 interviews, although no specific restrictions apply. Concerning the issue of variation, the procedure of focusing on a specific phenomenon in a variety of personal interviews (contexts) is thought comparable to Husserl's more personal technique of imaginative variation in which the phenomenologist him/herself imagines and reflects on the event in a variety of contexts.

There are certain dynamics of a phenomenologically motivated interview that also seem noteworthy (Pollio et al., 1997). Once an initial question is posed, the interview is unstructured, open-ended and largely directed by the participant. In this way, a certain freedom is granted the participant to locate frames of reference both for the researcher and for him or herself. It also provides an opportunity for the participant to discover such important issues as the attitude of the researcher toward the person and the phenomenon, both of which might affect the encounter. It must be remembered that the encounter is also an experience, and one that respects the participant's privileged perspective. Because of the conversational quality of the interview, "leading questions" that can distract from the emergence of descriptive data are unnecessary and avoided; dialogue is encouraged to flow freely along, weaving together details of experience without interruptions from an agenda to be covered. Questions that emerge within the flow--say for purposes of clarity and/or proper understanding--connect the researcher and the participant, and serve to promote the quality of the descriptions produced. Once obtained, such descriptions supply a rich data source for interpreting the meaning of the phenomenon under study.

Keen (1975) has acknowledged three criticisms levied by traditional psychologists against verbal reports of the type deriving from phenomenological interviews. First of all, such reports are thought to be replete with subjective biases and therefore offer little contribution to psychology as a science. What this criticism seems to miss is that obtaining a wide variety of personal experiences surrounding a particular phenomenon is precisely the goal of phenomenology. The traditional methodological concern over subjective bias is rooted in the positivistic assumption of an objective truth beyond the context of dialogic encounter (Gergen, 1992; Kvale, 1992). Since knowledge emerges from social discourse, any description emerging from a dialogic encounter is considered the experience of the participant and serves to present the concrete phenomenon at hand (Pollio et al., 1997).

A second objection centers on concerns for unconscious processes: because much behavior is thought to be rooted in the unconscious, participants are thought unable to render accurate reports of their engagements and activities (Keen, 1975). Without taking any final stance on the role of unconscious factors in human discourse, the phenomenological view is specifically interested in how a phenomenon is present to experience, and the interview process is concerned precisely with obtaining descriptions detailing the "what" of an experience rather than its "why" (Pollio, et al., 1997). Thus, what is described of an experience reveals what is currently meaningful about that experience to the participant.

A third criticism of interview methods is that participants are assumed to disclose largely what they think researchers want to hear (Keen, 1975). Within the context of a traditional psychological experiment, it is thought that the "subject" is keenly aware of

being under scrutiny--and this may well be the case. Within the context of a phenomenological interview, however, the nature of the relationship is such that the "subject" becomes a "participant," or even a "co-researcher" (Pollio et al., 1997). In this role, it is the participant, and not the interviewer, who directs the interview and assumes the position of knowledgeable authority in terms of the experience. Because of a sensitivity to issues relating to the (admittedly incomplete) process of bracketing, the researcher is encouraged to take a non-judgmental stance toward the participant and simply attempt to clarify descriptions of the experience rendered. In this way, problems regarding the demand properties of verbal reports are minimized by the nature of phenomenological inquiry as well as by the context within which the research dialogue takes place.

Another traditional concern involves the trustworthiness of data obtained from phenomenological interviews (Pollio et al., 1997). If personal experience is at least to some degree socially constructed, the matter of intercontextual coherence across various contexts of a particular experience is at issue, even among different conversations with the same participant. However, it is assumed that the same phenomenon will bear some resemblance in different contexts since day to day change in the personal field of experience is organized against the more stable backdrop of personal surroundings and culture (Berger & Luckman, 1966)--hence the expectation is for an experience to be supplied with reasonably consistent and coherent meanings. Further the reconstruction of memory in present consciousness involves a temporal fusing together of one's past knowledge of an experience with the present, one which integrates the newly-constructed

understanding into the context of personal history. Although the present meaning is nuanced, it is not radically transformed by the process (Gadamer, 1960/1975; James, 1983).

Phenomenological Interpretation

Once an interview has been completed, it is transcribed verbatim into textual form (a protocol) and presented to members of an interpretive group where it is read aloud and analyzed for meaning. At this stage, two important issues concerning phenomenological interpretation need to be addressed: the dynamics of group process, involving members of the interpretive group; and the use of hermeneutic technique as a rigorous methodological procedure.

Group Process. The phenomenology research group at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has met weekly for the past 15 years and is attended by graduate students and professors representing various disciplines at the institution. All participants have a shared interested in dialogical research and contribute to the process of interpretation in five important ways (Williamson & Pollio, 1999).

1. Bracketing. In addition to the initial bracketing interview, concern with presuppositions about the phenomenon is essential throughout the entire research process, most especially during its interpretive phases. As each text is read aloud, group members are available as accountability partners to point out reactions to the unfolding text that seem to derive from personal bias and not from the text. In this way, preconceived theories and presumptions are noted, and taken into account, so as to allow the meaning of the phenomenon as presented in the text to emerge.

2. Expanded Possibilities. Since the group consists of 8 to 14 members, it affords multiple perspectives on the possible meanings of the text. In addition, the range of collective knowledge often includes experiences with cultural contexts similar to those described and contributes significantly to the interpretation of a particular text. For example, if a description contains references to the Jewish culture, a member of the group with knowledge of that tradition is helpful in clarifying statements that frame the experience within that context.

3. Accountability. The presence of others also brings to the process an accountability for any interpretation offered. Since the text is considered autonomous, and sufficient to the experience, various proposed meanings are responded to by asking the persons posing them: "Where do you find that in the text?" Group members also attempt to assure internal consistency of interpreted themes across passages, a safeguard against meanings that appear disjointed and out of context in regard to the complete text.

4. Shared Responsibility. The sheer magnitude of a project can appear overwhelming to a single researcher, and the responsibility for interpreting texts on one's own can be a daunting task. In bringing texts to an interpretive group, such responsibility is distributed among members and does much to relieve personal doubts surrounding possible meanings arrived at by singular effort.

5. Group Unanimity. Before any interpretation is accepted, it must meet the approval of all group members. It is always possible that dissenting opinions or reservations reveal some glimpse of the participant's experience yet unclear to the group. As group dialogue continues, such differences are freely considered and discussed until a

common understanding of the protocol is reached.

Within an interpretive group of this type, written texts take on a life-like quality as each passage is read aloud by members designated to read specific parts. At appropriate breaks in the reading, members react to what has been read and interact with each other to negotiate proposed meanings. This process of group interpretation contributes significantly to a clear description of the personal experience presented in the protocol.

Hermeneutic Technique. An essential tool of textual interpretation involves an ongoing attempt to relate parts of the text to its overall meaning--the so-called hermeneutic circle (Williamson & Pollio, 1999; Kvale, 1996). As an interpretation for a single passage or remark is proposed, reflections on meanings derived from earlier passages are considered simultaneously for consistency of understanding. The analysis of any text invariably involves a circular pattern of determining the meaning of a part that affects the meaning of the whole which, in turn, bears upon the meaning of the individual part. This process of going back and forth strengthens internal consistency and the interdependency of emerging themes as they lead toward an overall meaning for the text.

The use of hermeneutic interpretation extends beyond an idiographic description for a single participant to other protocols describing the same phenomenon so as to produce a "global meaning" (Thompson et al., 1989) or a "nomothetic thematic description" (Pollio et al., 1997). At this level, the process includes interpreting the meaning of each text in the context of all others; such extension is not for purposes of generalization but to improve the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon as described in different contexts. In considering all protocols, a particular pattern of themes

tends to emerge and constitute the meaning of the phenomenon as experienced. Valle, King, and Halling (1989) have compared such a consistency of themes across contexts to a melody of music transposed to different keys: Although the piece can be played in a variety of keys, the melody is immediately recognized by the familiar sound of its note structure regardless of key. This does not mean, however, that interpretation of an experience has been exhausted or closed in any way by the structure of nomothetic meaning described, since the meaning of a phenomenon is always open to reinterpretation as unique variations emerge from specific participants and contexts of experience.

A Word On Validity

It is of constant concern to psychology that a study render "valid" results. In agreement with Giorgi (1975), Pollio et al. (1997) have argued that validity for research of this type depends primarily on the degree to which a reader may take up the findings of a study and see what the researcher saw from his or her investigation. The issue is further extended to include a consideration of the particular evidence in the text used to support the specific interpretation offered and the quality of understanding attained. The point of agreement between researcher and reader is not absolutely essential, although the quality of textual evidence presented for the interpretation is imperative.

This concern for quality of the evidence presented treats validity as a judicial-like process (Pollio et al., 1997). The validity of phenomenological interpretation does not rest upon a direct correspondence to some reality experienced by the participant. Instead, it is determined by the degree of evidence brought forward by the analysis and by whether the thematic structure discovered illuminates the experiential world described by participants.

Such evidence can be determined both methodologically and experientially. From a methodological perspective, appropriateness and rigor are weighed against the claims of understanding provided by the investigation. The experiential factor of validity is determined by whether the structure offers insight into the phenomenon--a condition best understood as plausibility and illumination. If the reader is able to understand relationships between the interpretation and evidence, an interpretation may be considered plausible. Illumination may be experienced when the structure of meaning presents the phenomenon in a new light such that the reader comes away with a new and/or enlightened perspective. If a structure is both plausible and illuminating, it has a resonating quality within the reader that brings about a different view of the experience. Given these considerations, it is possible to judge a phenomenological investigation as "valid" if its method is appropriate and rigorous, and if its interpretation is plausible and illuminating. It should be noted that similar criteria for validity have been offered by Kvale (1996).

Methodological Application to the Present Study

Given the primary concern for understanding the first-person experience of religious serpent handling, the methodological procedure outlined above was applied to the present study as described below.

Bracketing Interview

In preparation for my role in the present set of interviews, I participated in a bracketing interview designed to highlight my own presuppositions regarding serpent handling sects and the activities in which they participate. The initial question to which I responded was: "Can you think of a time you have seen someone take up serpents and

describe what that experience was like for you in as much detail as possible?" The audiotaped interview was transcribed verbatim and submitted to an interpretative group for analysis. The results of this procedure were invaluable in helping me, as the interviewer, maintain an open mind to the phenomenon as it was described in later interviews by research participants.

Participants

From acquaintances over the past 5 years of field research, 24 persons who had handled serpents were asked for personal interviews concerning their experiences of serpent handling. After hearing an explanation as to the nature and purpose of this study, 7 of this number declined on the bases of personal religious convictions and/or concerns related to previous scientific research and media coverage that had focused on their religion.

The 17 persons who consented to be interviewed were active religious serpent handlers from 5 different congregations in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Among these participants, 8 were known as preachers and 5 of the group were female--a number that nears the sex ratio found among those who practice serpent handling in the congregations I have attended. The youngest participant was 24 years of age; the oldest was 66 years. Concerning their vocations: 5 were sales/service industry employees (merchandising, repair, maintenance, transportation), 4 were self-employed (construction, pest control, miscellaneous); 3 were homemakers; 3 were physically disabled; 1 was a medical nurse; and 1 was retired. Three of the participants also stated they worked as pastors/overseers of congregations but gave no indication they were

compensated for their responsibilities; 1 self-employed male indicated he had completed vocational school in preparation for his business career; 1 of the homemakers volunteered her status as a part-time college student when asked about her vocation; and the nurse stated she had completed 5 years of higher education in vocational schools and college. Their experience within the serpent handling tradition ranged from 3 to 38 years. At conversion, 10 participants had immediate/extended family members who either were presently active in the serpent handling faith, or had been at one time; since conversion, 5 of the remaining 7 had such family relations connected with the tradition. One participant professed a commitment to the doctrine of trinity.

Procedure

Individual interviews were scheduled at the convenience of participants and conducted at locations they suggested. Just prior to the interview, each participant was asked to read and sign the Information and Consent Form (see Appendix A) which described the purpose, method, and issues of confidentiality related to the study; a copy of the document was given to each participant for his or her own personal file. Before the phenomenological interview began, a few basic questions were asked of all participants with regard to age, vocation, the number of years involved with serpent handling, and whether family members were believers in the tradition.

The initial question used to begin each interview was as follows: "Can you think of a time that you have taken up a serpent and tell me about that in as much detail as you possibly can?" For approximately one and one-half hours, dialogue followed this question within the guidelines as described above. As participants offered various details of their

serpent handling experiences, care was given to ask for complete descriptions with regard to personal meanings, especially whenever details given were ambiguous or couched in the terminology of the tradition. Concern was also given to helping participants articulate descriptions rather than explanations of their experiences.

It is worthy to note that when giving detailed descriptions of the anointing, 5 of the participants reexperienced the phenomenon at that very time--as evidenced by verbal confessions, closed eyes, tears, facial expressions, and body gestures--to such degree that a few moments were required before the interviews could resume. At the conclusion of all interviews, each participant expressed a satisfaction that his or her descriptions of serpent handling experiences were as complete as possible. In addition to the standard audiotaping that had been approved for this research project, all 17 interviews were videotaped by an independent party with the consent of participants and later donated for archival purposes at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Analysis

From audiotapes of interviews, a verbatim protocol was transcribed for each participant (see Appendices B and C); 5 of these protocols were interpreted indepth in the context of the phenomenology research group at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Using hermeneutic techniques described above, significant meaning units were identified in each protocol, carefully analyzed, and then formulated into meaning statements. The remaining 12 protocols were interpreted by myself using the same method of analysis and the work done by the interpretive group as a point of reference. After the initial analysis of all 17 protocols, meaning statements were organized into subthemes and then integrated

into major themes that described the structure of meaning for participants in the experience of handling serpents which, when taken together, provided a global description of the meaning of this experience.

This thematic analysis was next presented to members of the research group for consideration in terms of the joint criteria of plausibility and illumination that were previously described. Within this context, findings are considered plausible if understanding rendered by the interpretation is well supported by evidence in the text; they are considered illuminating if they present the reader with an enlightened understanding of the phenomenon as lived/described by the participants. Meeting both conditions implies that an interested reader will be able to read the results of the study, see connections between the interpretation and the text, and come away from the reading with a changed view of the phenomenon as described by the investigation. After careful consideration, and minor adjustments, consensus was given by the interpretive group to the findings of the present analysis.

A further procedure used in regard to the present findings was implemented by asking three persons who had handled serpents to review the results of the analysis and to provide feedback. Two of the reviewers were a male and female who had both participated in the interviews; the third was a male who had previously refused an interview on the basis of past experience with media attention. After careful consideration, all three reviewers were satisfied that the description of meaning provided by the present analysis resonated with what they had experienced themselves when handling serpents. The following chapter is committed to the details of that analysis.

CHAPTER VI

RESULTS

As described in Chapter V, phenomenological interpretation was used to analyze the transcribed interview texts of 17 religious serpent handlers in this present study. From this analysis, it was found that participants described 105 specific encounters with serpent handling--almost all involving personal experiences of taking up serpents themselves. On rare occasion, a participant described an experience of seeing another believer handle a serpent. Of these 105 different events, 78 were experienced in worship that occurred within a church service context, 22 were experienced in worship outside the church service context but in the presence of others (i.e., after the close of a service at church, at the place of employment, in the woods, on the roadside, or in homes), and 5 were experienced in private worship without others in attendance (i.e., at home or in the woods). The method of analysis was concerned with describing the structure of meaning of these experiences for participants as they took up serpents in these various contexts.

The Context of Experience

Most typically, the taking up of "poisonous" serpents was experienced within the context of Pentecostal-type services at which believers, and often unbelievers, were gathered for the worship of God. The phenomenon of serpent handling most often occurred as congregants would (in their words) "get in" the worship of the service and participate fully in a focused manner. One participant gave a generalized description of such a meeting that eventually leads to manifestations of the sign:

> It's like the whole service changes. The whole environment changes. Everybody seems to want to get in when the Lord begins to move. The service may be a little tight. People have not got their minds together, but when the Lord begins to move a little bit, then everybody gets their minds together. Everybody'll get their minds together, then you can begin to get in. You feel things kind of loosen up ... [E]verybody begins to get in a little bit. Stand up, raise their hands, praising the Lord. When everybody does their part in a church service, then it's obviously going to get easier. It's like you take one person, maybe pulling a rope, pulling a heavy object. It's extremely hard, but when you get two or three or four or five or eight or ten more, then obviously, it's going to get a little easier. So when everybody tries to press in, then it gets easier for you to press in ... [T]here's times I've had to press in myself and try to get the Lord to move. The Bible said in Psalms, David said to praise Him on the stringed instruments and high sounding cymbals. Praise Him in a dance. Sometimes you just got to praise the Lord a little bit before the Lord will really begin to move ... You just feel it. (P16)

As noted above, and in descriptions contained in various other protocols, the experience of "getting in" a worship service involves wilful participatory singing, hand-clapping, dancing, praying, and shouting--all of which are typical expressions of traditional Pentecostal-type worship that focus congregants on God (Synan, 1997). Worship services that resulted in serpent handling were described by some participants as including personal effort to remain focused on God. For example:

> Seemed like the service--I really began to get in. I mean I really began to get my mind on God. I thought about, you go out to service, and you can get your mind on God, [or] you can let your mind scatter. It's easy for you to get your mind off of God. You've got to have your mind fully on God, and if you don't keep it that way, you begin to look around at this one--maybe somebody sitting around here, somebody across the church house. Or you may get your mind on something back at home--get your mind completely off of God. But I'm talking about getting your mind completely <u>on</u> God and letting Him just take your mind and began to teach you and tell you, "P15, Now's the time for you to carry out my signs." (P15)

Although serpent handling occurred in situations other than in services at church, all such events were understood and described by participants from the context of their larger Pentecostal tradition of worship that emphasizes a direct encounter with God--whether

experienced inside or outside a regular church service. These encounters involved either a more common experience feeling God in the body or a less frequent sense of knowing His presence through faith.

The Analysis

From an interpretive analysis of the protocols, it was found that the phenomenon of serpent handling emerges primarily as a sacred, embodied event from the larger ground of Pentecostal-type worship. The meaning of this experience can be understood and represented as a Gestalt-type pattern involving four interrelated themes: (1) Wanting to Do, (2) Death, (3) Connection with God, and (4) Fear/Victory. As suggested by Figure 1 (p. 196), meaning in the experience of serpent handling emerges as a pattern of themes related to experiences of the body which, in turn, serves to ground them in corporeal existence by providing a context within which they are understood. Within the sacred context of worship, an awareness of one's own body was described as a major context in taking up serpents, although other contexts, such as others, world, and time, were also noted to lesser degrees.

The experience begins with participants feeling a desire of wanting to do the sign; most often this involves an awareness of the need for obeying the Word of God. While sensing this desire, participants are keenly aware of the potential for death through the presence of the serpent. Through a focus on God, however, they experience a connection with God, described as faith or/and the anointing, and thus are enabled to confront death through the taking up of the "deadly" serpent. If harmed by the serpent, or if the connection with God ceases, an experience of fear returns; if unharmed while handling

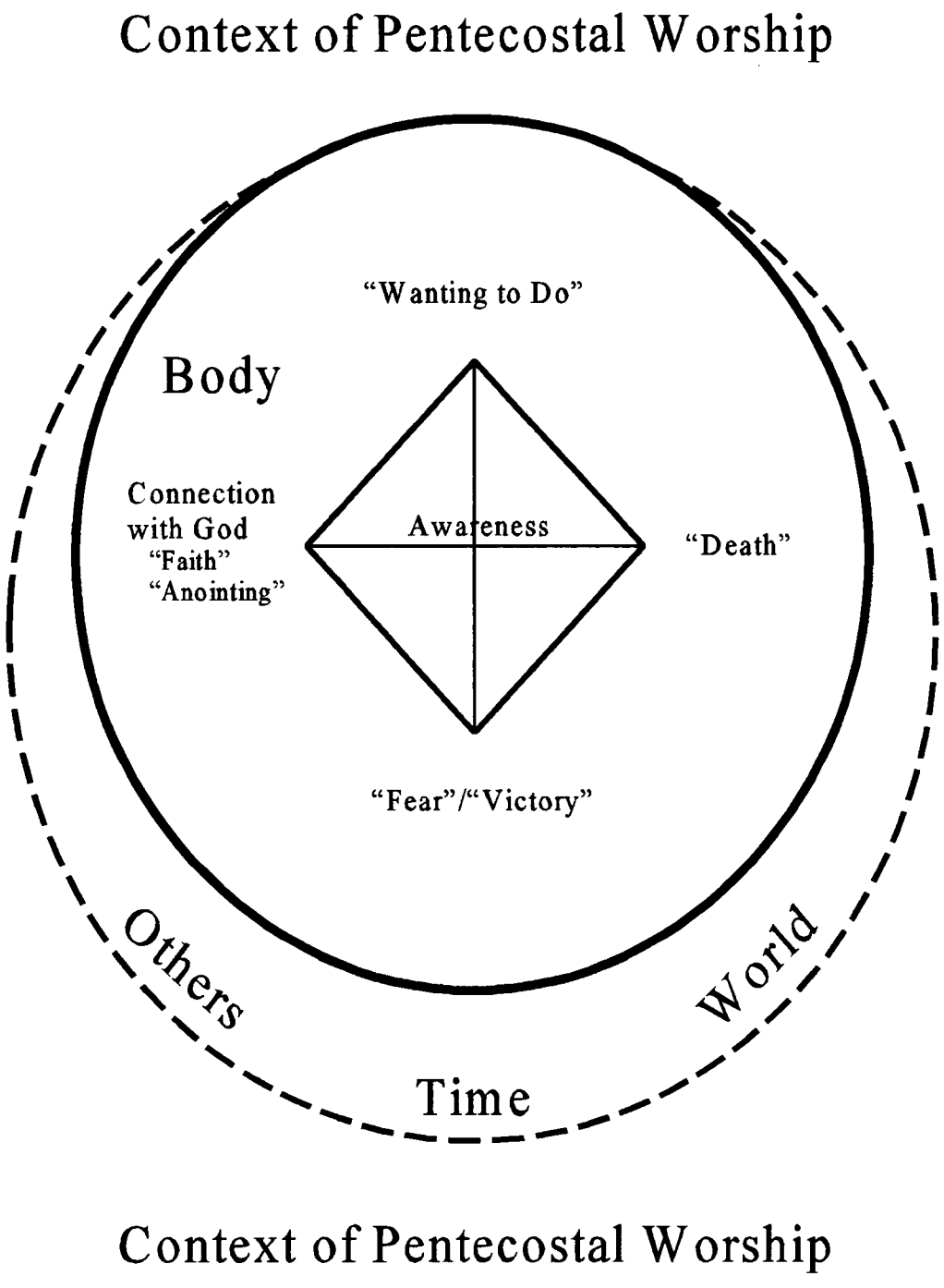


Figure 1. The Thematic Structure of Meaning in the Religious Experience of Handling Serpents.

the serpent--which does not necessarily mean without receiving a bite--participants reported intense feelings described as victory. Although idiographic differences exist within this structure of meaning, its thematic pattern emerged consistently across all 17 protocols in which experiences of serpent handling were described.

In terms of other existential contexts that come into awareness (see Figure 1), God is experienced through connection as "the Other," although other people enter into awareness in different ways, e.g., through the taking and handing over of serpents, the laying on of hands, the observance of fellow handlers, etc. Death is also experienced as "an Other" in the form of a fearful enemy who threatens one's life and must be overcome. As serpent handling takes place, the context of world comes into awareness in varying degrees--from a full consciousness of worship music and other environmental surroundings to a diminished awareness of anything but God. Except when harmed, Time is transcended in the handling of serpents, especially when victory is experienced.

Each of these themes is felt in the participant's body, not thought and represented, and the experience is direct and unreflected. As suggested by the connecting lines used in Figure 1, relationships among and between the themes are fluid within the experience of serpent handling. None of the themes are independent and none are uniquely bounded. As one theme comes to the forefront of awareness, all others shift momentarily to the periphery of consciousness where they merge with, and provide support for, the theme presently in focus. This continues in the experience until the flow of consciousness brings another of the themes into primary awareness, pushing all others to the periphery where they, in turn, interplay with, and support for, the focal theme presently attended.

Interdependent as such, all four themes are simultaneously present and co-constitute for participants the general meaning of the experience of serpent handling. Each of these major themes and subthemes of the experience is outlined below, with brief excerpts from various protocols to illustrate the specific ways in which participants described them.

Theme I: "Wanting to Do" (the Word of God)

In telling of their serpent handling experiences, all participants described feeling a "desire" or a "need" to take up serpents. With the exception of two young female participants, whose families were active in the tradition long before their times of conversion, all participants specifically described an awareness of wanting to obey the Word of God in relation to their handling--desiring "to be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only" (P12). All 17 participants, however, expressed a basic desire of wanting to practice the sign used such descriptive words/phrases as: "want[ed] to [do]" (P1, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17), "I wanted more" (P8), "desire[d] [to do]" (P3, P6, P15, P16), "I need to be doing" (P6), "just started gnawing at me inside" (P2), "I had every intention of doing it" (P4), and "like to [do]" (P5, P6). (Numbers in parentheses indicate specific participants)

Among the seven participants who had no family relations initially involved in the serpent handling tradition, it was common that they had heard from others about the practice and had read of it in the Bible, at which time they described experiencing a desire to respond to the mandate as obedient believers. For example, one young preacher told of his conversion to the practice:

I remember reading the signs, one night--the actual scripture, Mark 16:18. I

> remember reading that one night. And I remember it was like all through my sleep that night. I was quoting that scripture: "They shall take up serpents. They shall take up serpents. And if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not harm them." And when I woke up that morning, I was quoting that scripture. It was just like all through my sleep, the whole night, that scripture was there. And then, it wasn't long ... I had a madeup mind that I was going to do that. So I did ... I went to the man that I knew had been there--down to [a local serpent handling church]--and I asked him if he'd go with me that night, and he said, "Yeah, We'll go." And I had--on the way down there--I had every intention of doing it. (P4)

At one level, it seems difficult to distinguish between the handler's immediate awareness of obeying the scripture when practicing serpent handling and his/her (cultural) disposition for being, at all times, an obedient believer who practices the sign. Despite this ambiguity, when asked to describe their experiences, all participants disclosed a conscious desire for obeying the scriptural command. Whether given as a justification for their handling or as a present aspect of awareness in their experience of handling, it remains as part of their experience as described and serves to provide meaning for the event.

When asked what was meant by stating that he "had to" take up serpents, one participant said:

> You have to believe it. It's in the Bible. If you believe it like you ought to, you will go where it's being done. You'll desire to go and see it being done. And if you go to that place, at some point God's going to move on you to do it. You may do it. You may not. If you don't, that's just between you and God is all I know. But I believe at some point, I believe God will move on you to do it, and I believe at some point, if you really believe it, and you're going and seeing it done, and you go to a church where it's being done all time, at some time, you're going to desire to do it. (P16)

Another participant described how the biblical mandate not only inspired within him a desire to handle but also how it came up inside him and took over, giving him faith and courage to handle the serpent.

> I had a good feeling, but I had a little fear. But I said, "It's in the Bible. It's in the scriptures" ... I knew it was right. And I wanted to do it ... As you move into this and begin to deal with it, when the scriptures began to move out to you, and you begin to read it, and it begins to come in to you ... them Words will just come up in you ... [I]t just takes me over. I mean it's just a wonderful feeling. He said it's bread come down from heaven. You know, we can eat of it. When that's coming up to me, I'm eating. I'm eating of the Word. I'm drinking His blood, and believing every Word He said. (P1)

Reflecting on their first times of taking up serpents, other participants briefly described similar experiences:

> [A] man had found it [the serpent] inside the plant where I was working, and I remembered the scripture--the Word of God--coming to me then, and the Lord speaking to me and said, "Don't you believe my Word?" And I reached down and picked it up and carried it and put it outside. (P4)

> And I said, "Lord, you told me I shall, and that shall means shore enough." And I said, "I'm just a baby in this," and I said, "I'm just gonna take you at your Word." So the next thing I knew I went up there and I had a serpent in my hand. (P8)

In the context of a worship experience, the taking up of a serpent involves an awareness of "wanting" to handle serpents, primarily as an obedient response to the expressed command in the Bible. In the words of one participant:

> It's what the Bible said. You shall take up serpents if you believe. They say it's proving your faith ... No, I'm not proving my faith. I'm proving to God I'm doing what God wanted me to. (P12)

From an interpretive analysis of the protocols, it seems difficult, if not impossible, for participants to separate "believing" from "doing." These two terms appear to them as one and the same--believing is doing. As Bible believers, they experience a desire to obey the last command of Jesus before His departure from earth. During this practice, they are presently aware of wanting to do what Bible believers "ought" to do--that is, "take up serpents."

Theme II: "Death"

Within the serpent handling context, an awareness of "Death" is always present; such awareness was described by all 17 participants. All of these persons, with a single exception (P2), had attended church with acquaintances who had died in the past from serpent bite when practicing the sign. Nine participants (P3, P5, P6, P7, P9, P11, P12, P15, P17) voluntarily mentioned these persons in their interviews--3 (P7, P12, P17) of whom were family members--whereas 8 participants (P3, P5, P6, P7, P9, P11, P12, P15) described their presence at services in which these individuals received fatal bites. Three participants (P5, P9, P12), in fact, had handled the same serpent that delivered the lethal bite, with one of them (P12) describing his experience of handling the same serpent after the death of its victim, his own sister. Another participant (P11) described the service in which he had provided the serpent that fatally bit Charley Hall, a renown serpent handling minister of yesteryears, and told of his difficult feelings both during and after the incident. One participant (P15) described his experience of taking up serpents at the graveside of a close friend who had died of a serpent bite--an event that took place just two days prior to his interview. From descriptions of their experiences with serpent handling, it was evident that participants were keenly aware of death as a constant presence.

> I mean, it's like you take up death in your arms and just hold it there and not worry about it. (P1)

> I just went right on over and took it from him ... It just happened all of a sudden like that. He moved that way cause He knows I'm scared to death of them. (P6)

> He got bit by an Eastern Diamondback in church, and he stayed here at my house until about one or two o'clock in the morning. His wife kept calling and talking to him, and she finally talked him in to going to Chattanooga to the hospital, so we

> carried him up there, and he died about 7 o'clock the next morning. (P7)
>
> I had danger in my hand--had death in my hand. (P8)
>
> That serpent that bit me was given to me, and we took it home ... It scared me. It really, really scared me. We were all praying one night. We had the snake box ... and they opened the box up, and took that serpent out ... Scared me to death. I could see it biting everybody in the house. It really frightened me. (P9)
>
> [Her first experience of handling serpents] was at a service in Johnny Holbrook's--the man that was serpent bit and died--it was at his church. (P13)
>
> Like I said the other night, when you take those things out, you've got your life laying there in your hands. I mean, when you're looking at that thing, you're looking at your life because it can bite you, and if God don't intervene, you're gone. I mean it can take you out, and it don't take a day or two, it can take you out the very minute it bites you. (14)
>
> Anytime you handle one, it could bite you, and it might could be your last bite. (P16)
>
> It's instant death ... You better make sure that you're not hypocriting--that you're living a good clean life--because when you take up that serpent, you stand a chance of being bitten and dying. (P17)

As indicated by these excerpts, the element of deadly serpents at church and personal knowledge of their capabilities loom large among participants. Their awareness of potential harm and death is present each time the serpent box is opened--whether the person participates as a practitioner of the faith or as a concerned observer.

Of the 17 participants, 12 (P1, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16) had experienced serpent bites when obeying the scriptural mandate and provided descriptions of such events--three (P4, P11, P12) of which were described as near-death situations. Among these encounters, that of P4 was the most detailed account and afforded the most insight, perhaps because of his youthful age of 24 years and the relative

recency of his conversion to the tradition (see Appendix C). As a newly converted preacher, only two and one-half years into the faith, P4 was conducting a tent revival on the rural property of a fellow-believer. After having already handed a copperhead, he felt moved to take up a canebrake rattlesnake, while preaching, which struck his wrist, injecting sufficient venom to produce immediate physiological reactions. Without his consent, the property owner eventually summoned emergency medical help who responded and transported the victim to the nearby hospital. Despite surgical and antivenin intervention, his vital organs began failing, providing a dismal prognosis. P4 did slowly recover, however, and eventually returned to the practice of serpent handling a few months later.

Themes in the Experience of Near-Death Bites - A brief analysis of P4's description of near-death experience indicated that a structure of four general themes emerged into his awareness and provided meaning for this event. This structure was also characteristic of those experiences described more briefly by P11 and P12. As clearly evidenced by their descriptions, the context from which these themes emerged was death. For example:

> My reactions was ... I knowed that there was one of two things ... I was going to live or die, and that was it ... I was going to live--spend some time here on earth--or I was fixing to meet eternity. (P4)
>
> [I]t was sort of like ... facing death is ... it's a big step. (P11)
>
> I just [felt]--spiritually, "Well this could be the end of it." It was a possibility. (P12)

From the context of death, the first theme that came into awareness was: "It 'Hit'

Me." Bites that result in serious injury are distinct from others because they are experienced as being more aggressively delivered by the serpent--as illustrated by the following:

> He just struck and hit me right there in the wrist ... I mean he just latched on. He didn't just hit like a lot do and pull back. He just stuck there ... [I]t felt like a baseball had popped me on the wrist. I knew I was bit. (P4)

> When it first hit me, it bit right to the bone on my knuckle. From the time I got my hand out of the box and got the lid closed and stood up and started talking to the Lord, that was already solid black around my knuckle ... [I]t's hard to remember right after you get hit that hard. (P11)

> [I]t just reached over and hit me ... They heard it all the way in the back of the church. It was just like a fist hit me. It hit me that hard. (P12)

Among participants who spoke of being bitten, in this study, those receiving less serious bites consistently used the word "bit" to describe the action of the serpent--for example, "It bit me"--which is in contrast with those above using "hit" in describing more serious bites. In near-fatal bites, participants experienced the delivery of their bites as immediately distinct from other less severe ones. The very nature of these bites was sensed as being different: As P4 stated, "I knew I was bit."

A second theme was a physical awareness of "Agony." In recalling these events, all three participants described experiencing the reaction of their bodies to the venom--two of them in graphic detail. Within minutes, the victims experienced intense suffering, which collectively included dizziness, blurred vision, vomiting, respiratory difficulty, temporary loss of consciousness, and--in the case of P12--the loss of sight for an entire day. None of the participants described the duration of their suffering, although P4 told me in a conversation prior to his interview that he remained in the hospital for nine days--several

of which were spent in intensive care. In the case of P12, a week was required before he was able to function reasonably well. P11 did not indicate how long his experience of suffering was endured.

After receiving bites, these participants described an awareness of "Fear/Victory," a modulating theme, based on immediate perception, in which the presence of one in the experience is felt to give way to the presence of the other. Hence in the absence of victory, fear is experienced; in the absence of fear, feelings related to victory are experienced. With sense of the bite as being distinct from others (as more severe), and the experience of his body reactions to the venom, P4 described an immediate sense of fear. P11 tended toward fear, but P12 described an immediate awareness of victory.

> When it first happened, I have to admit there was a little bit of sudden fear hit me--which is not good. It's not a good thing ... I was a little fearful and unbelieving and that's not good when you're serpent bit. But then I began to try to overcome that, and I began to rejoice, you know, I began to run around a little bit. I was in the front of the tent, and I began to run around a little bit--try to praise God ... [T]his venom began to hit me quick. Within five minutes, I was down. (P4)

> [T]he fear came after I went back out to my house. I was laying there, and it was sort of like ... facing death is ... it's a big step. (P11)

> I just [felt]--spiritually, "Well this could be the end of it." It was a possibility. It was just a good feeling, too. I was just as happy that way as I was any other way. (P12)

As P4 experienced fear, he described an attempt to "overcome" it with victory through worship of God but with no apparent success at that time. From his description, fear (in relation to death) became the major focus of his awareness rather than victory. As a youth, his immediate focus was attending to existential concerns in the temporal world--that is, "I was going to live or die"--rather than in the eternal (spiritual) world--the latter

focus, involving feelings of victory in its transcendence of physical death. Whereas P4 experienced fear, 66 year-old P12 experienced victory. Concerning any sense of fear, P12 remarked:

> I got rid of all of that. I just don't listen. It just almost seems like instant coffee ... Well it would be that fast. I just got rid of unbelief or doubt or I wouldn't handle them no more--something like that. Fear ... I don't have no fear of handling them if one's bit me or anybody else. In fact, I enjoy it, cause he got the victory one time, and I'm going to get mine the next time ... if it's God's will. Any time one bites you, you've got to have victory over it. (P12)

Some months later, P4 eventually gained victory over the fear enough to take up serpents again, as did P11.

When seriously bitten, the fourth theme that emerged into awareness was "Reflection." Given the face of death, all three participants described the sobering experience of reflecting on their lives--whether it was for seeking how to come to terms with an unknown eternity and its awesome God, or for searching out personal wrongs that needed mending before meeting God, or for reasons that might have led to the infliction of the bite.

> So when you're looking at and facing eternity, it's kind of scary cause you're fixing to have to face the Man, God Almighty, that created the whole world, the stars, the universe--all the things that the scientists are trying to understand. That's the scary part. It's not leaving this life, cause this life--What is <u>this</u> life? This is a good life, but what is this life compared to the life to come? It's nothing. (P4)

> I began to talk to the Lord. I said, "Lord, is there anything I need to do, maybe like just ask you, if I've ever done anything to you, to forgive me." You'll just start back-tracking to see if you owe anybody anything or you need to fix anything. I felt like everything was clear ... "Lord, whatever you want to do. It's up to you." (P11)

> I figured I might have lost some faith or something, but anyhow, I know I lacked to have died ... I knew that it was in God's hands ... Everything's in God's hands

> anyway, as far as I'm concerned ... [W]hatever He does about it--well, like serpent bites, or anything--it's in God's hands ... If we die, we're the Lord's. If we live, we're the Lord's. And you don't worry about what's the Lord's. The Lord takes care of everything. (P12)

Based on the above descriptions, Reflection seems to have led to resolution of all concerns for life in the present world. It is at this point that fear, in relation to death, was no longer felt as a threat to existence. The focus of attention transcended the temporal world, in which the threat of death was experienced as fear, to the eternal world, in which time and death had no part. Hence, Reflection merges with another theme that comes to the center of awareness--even as fear gives way to victory.

This analysis of near-death experiences, resulting from serpent bite, helps to illuminate and situate the major theme of "Death" in the experience of taking up serpents. As is typical with participants of this study, the majority of serpent handling believers in the tradition have experienced the pain of a serpent bite and can therefore relate to those among them who have experienced serious harm, and even death. When telling of his experience with near-death, P11 described the effect that any practitioner's death, including his own, has on those who take up serpents:

> [S]omebody can get bit in West Virginia and die, and it will nearly stop serpent handling down here for a month or so with the congregation, cause if a brother gets bit--don't matter if it's 500 miles from here--it puts a fear on them cause it's part of the body of Christ that's got hurt. (P11)

In addition, four participants described dreams in which they, themselves, or others were bitten by serpents. One who had never experienced a bite remarked:

> Sometimes, it's like when I lay down and go to sleep, I have dreams of people getting snake bit, or if I'm in a service with somebody when they get snake bit, that puts a fear upon me--not only me, but other people that's around me. (P8)

Hence death is a major concern as believers go to the box or accept serpents from one another.

Theme III: Connection with God

In their descriptions, all participants spoke of being Connected with God and of discerning His "voice" in directive ways--a spiritual connection through which they experienced an enablement to take up serpents. On such an occasion, one participant described feeling a specific bodily reaction when experiencing God giving him clear directions in the handling of a serpent:

> When those chill bumps come up, I know that God is there. I know that the spirit is there. And you feel it. You just feel, and you just have to do what it wants you to do. And I had to go in the box and get that serpent out and handle it ... He'll tell me which one to take out. He'll tell me what to do when I take them up, and He lets me know when it's time to put them up ... It's just something that just sits right down on you. Have you ever just all at once wanted to go somewhere and you knew that--you just got up and started getting ready to go? Well that's the way the spirit does you. All at once you just know. (P14)

Other participants described similar experiences involving a connection with God in which He was both felt and heard:

> I felt the protecting spirit of the Lord there with me. And then when it left, I then put the serpent back up. It was as if to say, "That's enough now. I've let you do it." (P3)

> ... when you feel that come down--"He's [the serpent's] not going to hurt you. Now you can do my will." It'll all work out. Demons will be casted out, and serpents will be handled. (P5)

> I felt the spirit of God move on me to do it, and ... I don't believe I would have got bit if I would have obeyed the Lord and did what He told me to do when He told to put that serpent up. (P10)

> If you feel that the Lord has took you over, then He's going to lead you--if you'll let Him lead you--cause you can hear the leading of the spirit. You can hear the

voice of God. (P11)

On the other hand, experiencing a connection with God and receiving instructions does not always involve specific emotional reactions. Participants also described experiences of serpent handling in which such communication was experienced in the absence of feelings:

> And God says, "You can go up there and take that serpent out and there won't be no harm to you." Whether I feel anything, I'll hold on to that faith, and I'll come up here because God spoke to me, and I can do those things. (P11)

When the issue was raised, participants were asked to describe what it was like to hear the voice of God. One individual expressed:

> It's kind of hard to explain ... He'll talk to you all the time, and unless you're listening, you won't know it ... You can't hear Him with your ears. You've got to hear Him with your heart. You'll hear Him from within you, talking to you, and He'll verbally talk to you just like I'm talking to you. He'll tell you, and you'll know because you'll have that feeling of love. (P9)

Immediately after receiving a serpent bite, another participant described hearing the voice of God in a similar manner--but this time to comfort his subsequent fear:

> It's just like my conscience spoke to me, "You're alright." It sounded like my voice. It was like God was speaking, but it was using my voice. (P1)

In describing her experience of hearing God, one female participant took exception to being labeled by unbelievers as "crazy" and to being accused of hearing "audible voices" on such occasions. When God speaks to her, "It's almost like you're thinking ... an intuition ... a gut feeling ... you just know" (P17). However communication with God is variously experienced among participants, it involves a certain connection with God such that they feel enabled to take up poisonous serpents and to do His will. Further analysis of

the protocols indicated that the theme of "Connection with God" is characterized by two subthemes, "Faith" and "Anointing," either of which enables the handling of serpents.

Subtheme A: "Faith" - All 17 participants included in their descriptions a distinct reference to handling serpents by "Faith," although two, P2 (a male) and P6 (a female), had never actually done so. One of these two (P2), however, did describe his experiences of ingesting strychnine, the fourth sign of Mark 16, by faith; this description did not differ in structure from those rendered by other participants who had handled serpents by faith. When asked what it was like to take up serpents by faith, participants gave strikingly similar descriptions, all marked by a present awareness of simply believing God for the ability to carry out the sign at the moment of the event. The basis for this faith was generally described as a personal belief that the perceived imperative of Mark 16 ("shall take up serpents") may also be understood as an enablement ("can take up serpents")--that is, an ability to "handle them at anytime just because it's what the Word said" (P16). When asked to say more about this type of handling, one young preacher described an experience that occurred at his home.

> Handling it by faith, with God speaking to you ... I've talked to the Lord, and the Lord tell me I could. I've asked the Lord, I said, "Lord, Can I take that up?" You know, "I'd sure like to take that up. Can I take that serpent up?" And the Lord's told me, said, "Yeah, I'll let you take it up" ... So I went ahead, and I did it. To me, the Word of God says it. The Word of God didn't say, "I'll let you take them up [only] on the anointing," or "I'll let you drink the deadly thing on the anointing" ... I believe that you can take them up on faith without the anointing being there all the time. (P4)

Another participant described a unique way in which faith works within him when taking up serpents by such means.

> Now by the faith, they can be handled--if you've got the faith ... The way I do it ... I get a picture in my mind--and I'm talking to the Lord all at the same time--of the cross, and it's sticking out of the ground, and I'm looking at the base of it. And as I start up, I see the blood on it, and by the time I see the blood running down it--I never get to His feet--I reach out and let that blood run right on my hands--and you're talking to the Lord--and when you see that blood on your hands, reach right down and pick him [the serpent] up and let him crawl in that blood, and he'll never bite you. But if you get your mind off that blood and look over at where they're snapping cameras at you standing there, he'll see you, and he'll bite, and kill you. As long as you've got that blood, and you don't see nothing else but that blood, he won't touch you. Now that's the way I've done it ... The faith is you. The faith is: "God, I know you'll let me do it. You said it. I believe it. I'm willing to do it. If I live or die, I'm going to do it." (P5)

As may be seen from these excerpts, and from other protocols as well, handling serpents by faith is based on a present belief, or knowing, that it can be done--that God has given "permission" to do the sign through a specific awareness of connections with Him. This type of enablement involved no feeling of God upon the body but was a more cognitive type of response to the scriptural mandate--perceived as the "permissive will of God" (P12). The descriptions of participants regarding the emotional aspects of this experience are well represented by P15's pointed remark: "On faith, I don't feel nothing." In contrast with P5 (quoted above), some participants described the possibility of experiencing a serpent bite, and even of potential harm, when handling by faith but that, in such cases, the same faith that afforded the handling would also be sufficient in sustaining the person if he/she did not waver in belief. When telling their experiences of handling by faith, some participants described various degrees of fear experienced during the practice--for examples: "a little fear" (P1), "still had fear" (P3), "feel fear" (P5), "a little leery" (P13), "quite a bit nervous" (P4), "had fear" (P7), and even "no fear" (P15). Other participants did not mention fear when handling by faith.

Subtheme B: "Anointing" ("God Moving on Me") - Although serpents may be handled by faith alone, all participants stated a preference for taking up serpents on the basis of what was described as the "Anointing." In the words of one participant:

> I don't guess there's really no [particular] time to do it, if you're doing it by faith. You just do it. I really believe anybody should wait on the Spirit of God to do it. (P10)

This "waiting" was mentioned by all participants in their descriptions of serpent handling and was always used with reference to anticipating a "moving" of God on/in the person--an embodied connection with God experienced as the anointing which reportedly gave handlers a remarkable ability to take up serpents, as well as to carry out other signs.

When asked to describe their experiences of the anointing, it is of interest to note that, at such moments during interviews, 6 of the 17 participants indicated they were reexperiencing the anointing, as evidenced by their self-reports, observed physical gestures, and noted affect. In each of these cases, a few moments were required to pass before the interview could resume. One participant recalled his most memorable experience of anointing during a visit to a local revival. Concerning this event, he rendered one of the most complete and illuminating descriptions of the anointing found among the protocols. Because of its richness, a version of this account is presented below, though in very condensed form.

> I was handling the serpent, and God began to move on me ... It was something that you could raise your hands, like this right here, and you could begin to feel that come from another world--just like you was touching heaven ... the pearly gates ... I just feel it begin to move upon me right now ... [participant begins to cry] ... It felt just like rain ... [I]t would start like maybe just at the top of my head. It's just like you would be standing in just a small drizzle of rain, and it would just sprinkle ... The more I'd reach my hands, the more I'd feel ... I began to just look up and

> let God take my mind, blocked everything out from all around me, and said, "God, Here I am. Just whatever you want me to do ... ever how you want to move on me, here I am" ... [He] takes your mind, just like He's talking to you. You just quit [talking to Him], and it's like He keeps on ... It's just like you're standing out in a small drizzle of rain ... I can feel it just a little bit, and before you know it, I'm soaked and wet. I'm just covered with the spirit of God--the anointing of God ... The power of God began to move upon me, and I thought that there was no harm ... [I]f I just held on to that serpent ... I believe the power of God would have killed it ... [A] fellow was sitting in front of me ... [who] never cared a lot for me ... God began to wipe my mind and never let enter what that man thought about me--or what nobody thought about me ... It's something you just can't explain ... You begin to try to tell somebody just how good how it feels, and you just can't tell them. (P15)

The experience of the anointing is a complex phenomenon and deserving of an indepth thematic analysis; such an endeavor, however, is beyond the scope of the present study. An awareness of basic meanings, however, did emerge as a template from the above description and was found in all protocols concerned with this experience. As described by P15, the anointing involves four basic aspects, all of which are directly felt in the body: (1) God moving on him, (2) a diminished awareness of surroundings, (3) indescribable good feelings, and (4) a compelling sense of empowerment when handling the serpent.

Based on his description, the anointing was felt by P15 as "God began to move on me"--an experience also reported by all other participants in this study. This "moving" was described as a body sensation that felt like rain, first on his head and then over his entire body. Other participants variously described this body sensation as a warmness, numbness, tingling, goosebumps, chills, and chillbumps (P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P13, P14, P15, P17), or as electricity, energy, juice, excitement, a stirring, fire, and pressure (P1, P4, P6, P8, P11, P12, P15, P16). Some participants described physiological responses involving increased heart rate, sweating, a quickening, a shaking, trembling, dancing, weakness,

walking, running, and crying (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15). The experience of being moved on also was described by P15 as being taken over or controlled by God for some divine purpose--the controlled object, in this case, being his mind. All other participants gave similar descriptions of feeling taken over when the anointing comes. For example, one participant remarked, "It's like something takes over the carnal mind" (P4). Still another spoke of losing control of his body to God as a "puppet ... [with] ... God pulling all the strings" (P16). One participant always experienced the anointing moving on him to take up serpents through losing control of his feet:

> And then I said, "Lord, I don't know where these feet are going, but they look like they're going to go up there." That's when I just let them go. The Lord was pulling me and urging me ... If my feet don't move, I don't go ... I've got to know it's God. (P2)

With arrival of the anointing, participants felt it as a moving of God upon them, marked by particular body sensations and some sense of lost control.

P15's description indicated that the anointing also related to "another world"--one that involved a blocking out of surroundings to some degree. Concerning the immediate context, all participants described their awareness of being present in varying degrees. Asked if she was aware of surroundings when describing an experience of anointed handling, one participant remarked:

> Yes you are, but you're not focused on it. It's just kind of on your peripheral vision. (P17)

When describing his experience, P16 expressed a similar awareness to the context: "You see everything and you know what's going on." On the other hand, P3 described her experience as involving a "darkness" one encounters such as when "fainting." Another

participant reported a similar experience in which she could discern none of her immediate surroundings:

> I couldn't hear the music. It was just like I was in another world. I didn't hear the music playing. I didn't know who was around me. It seemed like I was there all by myself handling it. (P13)

Others described being present to the immediate context in various degrees within this range when experiencing the anointing.

In terms of emotion, P15 described his experience as one involving a "good" feeling--a feeling that could not be adequately communicated to others. These "indescribable" feelings also were expressed by all participants in their descriptions of the anointing. For several participants, the feelings were experienced as a "high" that far surpassed any comparison with alcohol or drugs. For example:

> I can't describe what it feels like ... I don't care if you've been high on liquor, or cocaine, or marijuana, or whatever high you've been on, you can multiply that by 10,000 times 10,000, and you still wouldn't be able to come up with what this feels like. I mean that is just how great it is. (P10)

"Joy" was the most common word used to describe the experience of good feelings and often was used in conjunction with other words to emphasize its effect and significance, e.g., "a burst of joy," "joy bubbling up," "great joy," and "joy unspeakable." Expressing this joy another way, one participant remarked:

> I've felt the presence at times when I could do nothing but just laugh--just laughter. Nobody said nothing. I was just under the control of laughter. (P2)

As participants encountered the anointing, they also reported feelings of "peace"--the kind of peace that makes one aware of "no cares," "comfort," "satisfaction," and "calm." In describing her experience of anointed handling, one participant said:

> [A]t that time, it was just like I was covered. It was like a fan on me here just a blowing, and there wasn't nothing in here but peace ... No worry. There wasn't nothing on my mind but just feeling the Lord. (P8)

Good feelings that accompanied the anointing also were commonly described as "love"--"perfect love," as P9 put it. For him, as well as for others, the experience of such love involved an awareness of feeling unconditionally loved by God and a sense of reflecting that love to others nearby (as noted in P15's description above). Given the ineffable quality of the feelings reported, the descriptions offered--in terms of a high, joy, peace, and love--are considered only as approximations of a very moving experience that transcends adequate description. Nevertheless, they are so "wonderful" that, as in the words of P11, "[I]t's something that makes you want to come back Wednesday night ... Friday night ... [and] Sunday night ..." to experience over and over again.

The most compelling feature of the anointing, and the most important one for the present context, is the sense of empowerment that accompanies the experience; this experience was described by P15 as "the power of God." Feeling "soaked and wet" with the anointing, he experienced empowerment to such an extent that he felt: (1) protection--"no harm"--from the serpent, and (2) power to carry out the will of God--to handle the serpent--in an uncontested way. Connected with God through the anointing, participants described an enablement to take up serpents that was characterized by experiences of "Protection" and "Power to Do."

<u>"Protection"</u> - Given the presence of poisonous serpents, the theme of "Death" is in the awareness of all who assemble for worship and, as such, produces fear in those who would handle them. As the anointing is experienced, however, all participants reported a

sense of "Protection" (P3, P5, P9, P12) or "insurance" (P15) that lessened or removed altogether any fear related to the serpent. The anointing provides the person with a feeling of being "covered" (P3, P4, P8, P16), "safe" (P5, P6, P17), "alright" (P1, P7, P14, P16), or insulated by a "hedge" (P2, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12) or a "shield" (P12, P15) from the explicit danger of the serpent; it was also described as being taken care of by the protective "hand" (P5, P9, P13) of God. Since the participant is completely "covered" by the anointing, the sense of fear is eliminated thereby allowing for the perceived will of God to be done. In describing their experiences of anointing when handling serpents, participants indicated their loss of fear and feeling of protection in the following excerpts:

> Well you just get to the point ... like that you're not there. It's just something taking over in you to do that, and when He gets on you, then you're ready. When the Spirit of the Lord gets on you, it's a wonderful feeling. It's joy. I mean, it's like you take up death in your arms and just hold it there and not worry about it ... There's no fear there when God takes over. (P1)

> [I]t's like a warmth that comes over you, and it's like you feel in your heart it's alright to take up the serpent. And when you reach out there to take the serpent, you know what's going on ... yet the Lord's in full control ... His presence may not be very strong upon you, but yet you can feel His presence--that He's protecting you. And then it's like you can feel it--as quick as it came--you can feel it start to leave. And that's when you know to put the serpent back up cause you don't want to get within yourself cause that will get you hurt. (P3)

> There's no danger, cause you're safe--actually feel the hands of God reach down and touch you. My Lord! You can very easily walk into the fiery furnace, like the Hebrew children done it. (P5)

> We were at church one night, and they had a big box of copperheads up behind the pulpit, and the Lord was moving. I had two of them in my hands, and two of the brothers kept taking the serpent out and piling them in my hands. And I had about 22 copperheads in my arms. There were whole heads going everywhere and ... I didn't have any fear whatsoever of getting bit, nothing hurting me. It was just a calm feeling ... I wasn't worried about anything at that point. [P9]

> At that point, I had no fear, no fear whatsoever ... When you accept that anointing, all fear goes. You have no fear because you're right there in the palm of God's hand and you're going to be okay. (P17)

Some participants agreed from personal experience that feeling the anointing was no guarantee against being bitten while handling serpents, although if bitten, when anointed, there would be no harmful consequences--no ill effects.

> [T]he spirit of God moved on me out there, and I honestly didn't care whether I got bit or not. I mean, it didn't matter to me ... I've never been bit and hurt when I was anointed by God to take up a serpent. I don't believe He's that kind of God. I've been bit and hurt, but not when I was anointed to take up serpents. (P7)

Hence the felt protection, while anointed, allays the fear of death and harm among participants, enabling them to obey God and take up serpents.

"Power to Do" - In addition to feeling protected from harm, participants also experienced through the anointing an enablement of "Power to Do" the will of God. Participants reported that, when handling serpents through the anointing, it was the power of God working through them that gave success. For example, when asked how she felt about knowing she had handled a deadly serpent with impunity, the participant quickly replied, "I didn't do it. The Lord did it" (P17). The following excerpt contains a description of one participant's first experience of handling a serpent.

> They had serpents out everywhere, but I was in the spirit. I didn't realize they had took out the serpents, and I just kind of froze in my tracks, in a sense, and I was just amazed--actually. I could just see the power of God moving. I was just amazed at these serpents being bound by the power of God, you know. And the next thing I knew, my feet was kind of headed right on up to the people. I said, "Lord, I don't know where these feet are going, but it looks like it's going up there to those serpents." I said, "I'm trusting you in all this." And so I went right amongst the people and took the serpent out of one the brother's hand, and I looked at that serpent--it was a big rattlesnake--it was a very large rattlesnake--and I just said, "I bind you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." And that serpent just

> straightened out just as straight as a rod, and I handed him back, and I came back to my seat, and I said, "What did I just do?" I really didn't have that much control over it because the Holy Ghost, the spirit of the Lord, just came upon me to show me that I could, and He took over my vessel because I've always tried to be a willing vessel. If the spirit's moving, I try to follow. (P2)

As described, the participant's awareness was, first, of God's power moving through other believers to manifest the sign and, then, of God's power moving on him to handle a serpent. He perceived that his ability to come forward, to handle the serpent, and to "bind" it from harm came from an enablement of power through the anointing--that is, through a manifestation of God working in him, as a yielded "vessel," to fulfill His immediate purpose.

Other participants described their experiences of successful handling in similar but nuanced ways.

> In the Bible, the Lord tells us we have power over the devil. When you take up a serpent, it gives you a feeling and lets you know the Lord did give me the Holy Ghost. I do have power over the devil. But you have to make sure it's God before you do it. (P6)

> [W]hether I reach and get it from you or I get it from the box, I've got the same anointing ... [Y]ou might want to call it "taking a risk," but you're not taking a risk when you've got the power of God on you. You're in warfare with the devil, and you're depending on God to be there when you take them up and being there through the whole thing. (P12)

> Then when He began to move upon me with his anointing power from heaven ... It's hard to explain. There's no way to explain what it feels like when I say He anointed my soul and let me carry out the signs. (P15)

Participants described an awareness of their ability to handle serpents successfully through the power of God working in and through them. For some, like P6, the experience of anointing not only provided a feeling of sufficient power for practicing the sign, it also

provided an overall sense of feeling powerful--an empowerment that also annihilates fear and makes one feel invincible to harm.

In their connection with God, some participants described their experiences of faith and anointing as though they were aspects of a single continuum. In a portion of his interview, for example, a well-experienced participant was asked what it was like to experience faith at the moment of faith-handling:

> P12: Well, it's just a feeling you've got. You're coming in with the feeling. You get a feeling--like you're obeying the feeling. And which I think that the anointing is the spirit of God. So I feel like I'm obeying God--doing what God wants me to do.
>
> Interviewer: When you're obeying God, is that the faith part or the anointing part?
>
> P12: It's both. See without faith, it's impossible to please God, and the anointing is just the spirit of God moving within the faith. In other words, it's a generating power.
>
> Interviewer: A generating power.
>
> P12: A generating power. Like a generating power cause God is really moving and getting bigger all the time, seems like. Of course, He's the same God all time. But it just seems like when it starts, it starts off light and easy, and then it gets like bigger and bigger, but it's no heavy pain or nothing like that. It's just a heavy feeling.

For this participant, his experience of connection with God is such that it begins primarily with faith--a basic belief in God's Word combined with a desire to obey it--which is then gradually increased in magnitude through a generating quality of the anointing. It seems important to note that, in earlier descriptions of the anointing, this participant was aware of no fear at all when fulling anointed to handle serpents and claimed to have never experienced a single bite under such an extreme condition. For him, this type of experience

was described as a "comfortable feeling" that starts in his abdomen and rises to his arms and hands, and finally to his head: "When it gets up to here [his head], I feel fine now. There's nothing going to happen" (P12). On the other hand, he also reported that all 125 of his bites occurred when handling within a range of experiences, from handling only by faith up to handling when partially anointed--as when felt only "in my arms and hands" (P12). When bitten on such occasions, he described sometimes feeling a hesitancy or need to:

> wait on God a little more ... To me--now other people may feel differently--I feel like I want to slow down. Maybe I'm getting a little ahead of God ... I'm doing things out of the will of God--when God's not really there, not your protector, right then. And you're going mostly by faith--in serpent handling--and you get ahead of God. (P12)

For this participant, connection with God begins first with a faith experience--a felt desire to obey God's Word--and some hesitancy concerning the lack of protection. With the onset of anointing, however, the sense of protection is felt to increase continually until full anointing is sensed in the body, at which time full protection is felt from all harm. According to P12, his failure to wait for the completion of this dynamic, between that of faith and anointing, sometimes has resulted in serpent bites and harm.

At least nine other participants described a similar relationship between faith, the anointing, and feeling protected when handling serpents. For example:

> It starts with faith. You've got to have faith to do anything ... Then the Spirit begins to move ... You've got to move from faith. See that's how we start, by faith ... Fear will move away when that anointing comes down. Like when I start in myself, there might be a little fear there, but if you wait till God <u>really</u> moves, then there's no fear. You don't fear death. (P1)

> There's been times I took them up on faith. He let me know, "It's alright." And

> I've took them up on faith and not feeling nothing, and then that anointing would begin to come by ... At any given time, I'm just waiting on the Lord to begin to anoint my soul, and when He begins to anointing my soul then you just don't care what the serpent does. You just get to a point that you'll let them crawl, let do what they want to do. (P15)

Hence participants described feeling an enablement to handle serpents when connected with God through faith or anointing, or in some relationship involving the two, although protection from fear of harm or death was most often experienced during encounters of the anointing. At such times, according to one participant, "It'll all work out. Demons will be casted out, and serpents will be handled" (P5).

Theme IV: "Fear"/"Victory"

The major theme of "Fear/Victory" has already been described briefly in the preceding analysis of near-death serpent bite contexts, yet the present concern is to show that it is also experienced by participants across all contexts of serpent handling. Based on participant descriptions, the experience of fear may be described as inverse to the experience of victory. For example, where fear is experienced as predominant, there is little or no sense of victory; with the experience of "complete" or "good" victory, fear is not sensed at all. The theme of "Fear/Victory" merges with that of "Connection with God," which has implications for the experience of the present theme.

Among all who assemble for worship, the presence of poisonous serpents is an abiding reminder of death whereas their role in the "sign" itself makes them a threat to physical harm for any who take them up. In their descriptions, the presence of fear was commonly experienced by all participants at some point when handling serpents. In experiencing a connection with God (particularly on the basis of the anointing), feelings of

fear are "overcome," leading to the "successful" handling of the serpent without harm and the concomitant experience most often described as victory.

> I was handling it, and I was testifying, and its head was laying in my hand. Had good victory ... [Can you tell me what victory is?] ... It's feeling that anointing and knowing everything's alright. (P16)

> [T]he Lord moved on me, and I had a courage ... It was like a boldness of a lion. I mean it was like a courage of a lion ... I come up over the rail that night, and ... went in on that Western [Diamondback rattlesnake], and I got him out ... So that's one of the greatest experiences, probably, that I've ever felt in serpent-handling--is knowing that there's something that is so ... so mean, but the Lord gives you victory over it--that you're able to handle it without getting bit. (P4)

> I just had that feeling again. You know, you can feel the Holy Ghost move, and like ... it's excitement ... and I just felt like He wanted me to do it. He was showing me I could have the victory over the devil ... Well, after I gave it back to GS, I just went to the place where I was standing and just thanking God that, again, He let me do something like that and took care of me while I was doing it, not letting me get hurt, and just blessing me so. (P6)

> I was talking to the Lord: "Thank you, Lord, for giving me the victory." He was giving me victory over those copperheads. I mean, there were legions of devils right there in my arms, and the Lord was giving me victory and the power over them ... When the Lord moves and you have a serpent, it's just like a baby. It's just like a dishrag. It can't do nothing. When God's got control of it, it's helpless. (P9)

Concerning her first experience of taking up serpents, one participant gave a lengthy, detailed description in which she experienced the anointing so strongly that awareness was lost of her surroundings and even of the serpent she held. In reflecting on her experience, she described it as:

> an awesome experience. I mean God had full control, and I guess, you know, He knew I was so scared of the serpent--the snake--and He knew I was scared to reach there and take him up and hold him and everything, and that He just--the first time, He just had to--I call it--wipe me out, so I wasn't aware of what I was doing, [in order] to be able to experience His love and His feeling ... I really don't know how to explain it ... It was like I entered into a darkness ... [W]hen I realized what was going on, and I was coming out of this darkness, I was happy. I was

shouting. I was praising the Lord cause he gave me the victory over this. (P3)

For all participants, the word "Victory" helps to capture various feelings that were described as being similar to those of a victor who has conquered a formidable adversary--in the case of participants, the foiling of the devil and his malevolent forces. Such a feeling of victory was described as different from the feeling of "Power to Do," which is experienced with the "Anointing." Whereas "Power to Do" stems from feeling sufficiently equipped for spiritual battle with the adversary, "Victory" is a feeling of celebration over the battle having been won--sometimes, even experienced in advance of the confrontation with the serpent. When asked to describe further the feeling of victory, various participants said:

> I was happy ... I was praising the Lord that He let me experience this feeling because to myself, I had accomplished something for Him, to be able to do one of His signs ... The more that you can accomplish for Him and do for Him, it just feels like your spirit's uplifted ... It's a joyful experience. (P3)

> It's good. It's like that you've been satisfying to the Lord--that you've done something of His approval, because He's watching out for you ... But just to take something so aggressive, the Lord will stop the mouth of something so aggressive--something so mean. It's a good feeling. It's like that you're at a satisfactory point for the Lord ... It's like a goal accomplished. (P4)

> Victory is having power over anything--coming out on top. That's the way it is. See, if you win a war--the victory of the war--you've got the victory ... It's victory I feel like I've got over serpents when I handle them and don't get bit. I feel like "I've got victory over that devil" ... I feel good when I'm handling them. (P12)

> Whew! It felt good. I could have went through the top of the church ... When you get the victory over that serpent, throw him back in that box ... God overtook him. (P14)

It is important to note that participants sometimes received serpent bites, when anointed and feeling the victory, but with no physical consequences at all. In such cases, the bite

was experienced as "a sign from God ... It proved to other people how real God is" (P15). In this way, it is felt that unbelievers, expecting to see unfortunate consequences of a serpent bite, were shown instead that God is among the believers--an experience of victory indeed.

In the event of serpent bite and subsequent harm, participants reported a variety of meanings in coming to terms with such experiences. Harm sustained from a bite was described as: a sign to prove the danger of the serpents to unbelievers and skeptics (P1, P8, P9, P15, P16, P17); chastisement for disobedience (P2, P3, P8, P10, P16), pride (P11), carelessness (P3), misinterpretation of the anointing (P6, P8, P10, P11, P12), or unspecified sin (P5, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P16); suffering on behalf of another (P4, P11); a personal lesson in the virtue of suffering (P12, P14); as the will of God (P5, P6, P12, P13); and for unknown reasons (P4, P7, P10, P11, P16). Regardless of the meaning experienced with the bite, effort was made to overcome the subsequent feelings of fear with victory--as did P4, though in vain, when experiencing his near-fatal bite.

One participant (P3) spoke of witnessing a bite received by a fellow-believer and described her own reaction to the event as being "scared ... cause I know what they [serpents] can do." Along with other believers who were present, she "got to praying for him, and the Lord moved in it" to such extent that victory was finally obtained for the victim over the bite. When asked what "getting the victory" was like in that context? She remarked:

> It feels good that the Lord has moved on something that you're asking him for--that he has healed someone that's sick, if you've been praying for someone that had been sick and going through a lot of torment ... [I]t puts another step on the

> devil, you know, to get victory over him. It brings him down just a little bit more every time we can pray through to God and God hears us. It just pushes him out that door a little bit more. (P3)

When asked to describe the experience of feeling troubled for the victim, and then helping him pray through to victory, she said:

> It's a painful experience in your heart. You're hurt cause you know, when that happens, it can lead to death, okay? It hurts you, like you've already lost a loved one. It hurts cause you know what can happen, and you just start praying with everything you've got, "Lord, hear me, you know, hear this prayer. See the need that we need right now." And then when it finally overcomes that one--the Lord moves upon it--and you start feeling good within your heart again, you know the Lord's moved on it and took care of it ... It's just joy ... Victory and joy ... Victory. (P3)

With the infliction of serpent bite came a fear for the victim, as though "you've already lost a loved one." Although feeling the presence of death, the participant experienced fear as vanishing when God was felt to move (anointing) and bring feelings of joy--victory. Asked if the physical appearance of the bite changed after the experience of victory, she said:

> It looks the same. You just know the Lord's gonna take care of it ... It don't matter if it's swelled humongous or if it don't swell at all. If you know without a shadow of a doubt the Lord's moved in it and you stand upon that, and that faith, and believe in that. It's gonna be alright. (P3)

After the experience of victory, the victim reportedly suffered no pain from the bite, although he did experience some swelling of tissue. The occasion of the bite and the victory achieved were experienced by believers as a sign to onlooking unbelievers for the purpose of confirming the viability of the serpents--observed in the swelling of tissue--and of God's power to heal--so noted by the testimony of no pain. In the context of even a harmful serpent bite, subsequent feelings of fear can be overcome by experiences of

victory.

On the other hand, the feeling of victory, obtained after the event of a harmful bite, can be lost again by refocusing on the severity of the injury with doubt--hence, the return of fear. For example, after receiving a serious bite, and returning home with symptoms, P7 was visited by a believer who laid hands on him and prayed for his recovery. As she was praying:

> I came up off the couch just like I had never been snake bit, or nothing like that. And I sat around there for about, I guess, probably three hours and wasn't feeling the effects of it at all. I mean, it was over with ... and some of them kept sitting around talking about what it (the bite) was supposed to do, how it was supposed to affect you, how it was suppose to do this, and how it was supposed to do that, and I got to listening to them, and I just thought, "How bad am I bit?" And I looked down, and when I looked at my finger, it was like I got bit all over again. It set in to burning again, and I never did get victory over it again. (P7)

For P7, and others like him, the experience of victory obtained when bitten can be ephemeral unless "you stand upon ... that faith, and believe ..." (P3).

As described, "successful" handling can be experienced through victory in any of three situations: (1) the serpent does not bite; (2) it bites but without harm; or (3) it bites with harmful consequences. The critical factor for this is in which way the theme of "Fear/Victory" is experienced. Drawing collectively from his experiences of serpent handling, one participant described the meaning of victory for him:

> If you get bit and it don't hurt you, you've got that much victory over it. If you get bit and it hurts you, and you don't die--by a rattler especially--you've got victory over it even if it did hurt ... I've always got the victory ... [I]f you've got fear, you've got doubt there. It's the same way with a serpent bite ... Victory's not fear ... To get victory, you've got to keep praying, and believing that God's going to take care of everything. And He's going to take care of everything. He don't leave you out in the thin air. And if you die, well then, that's God's will ... [So victory is ...] ... overcoming fear. (P12)

In summary, the experience of serpent handling, as described by participants, involves a structure of meaning characterized by a pattern of four interdependent themes. This pattern involves a feeling of "Wanting to Do" the sign, in obedience to the scriptural mandate, and an awareness of "Death" through the use of poisonous serpents. Through a felt "Connection with God" (obtained either on the basis of "Faith" or the "Anointing"), an enablement to take up the serpent is experienced in which feelings of "Fear" are overcome by feelings of "Victory" ("Fear/Victory"). As "Connection with God" remains, the serpent is handled with impunity (regardless of physical outcome), and "Victory" is experienced in terms of feelings of spiritual celebration.

CHAPTER VII

THEY SHALL TAKE UP SERPENTS:

A MORE COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

The present study has concerned itself with describing the meaning of religious serpent handling from the perspective of the person who handles serpents. With as few presuppositions as possible, an attempt was made to explicate the meaning of this practice from interview texts; this approach is based on the assumption that only those who have handled serpents can adequately describe their lived experiences (Pollio et al., 1997; Kvale, 1996; Van Manen, 1990). Until now, this practice has not been analyzed on the basis of phenomenological interpretation derived from interviews with those who take up serpents. Given its atheoretical stance, the present study is uniquely positioned to provide illumination of the experience of handling serpents and to offer a more complete understanding of what other studies have previously described. Before proceeding with this task, however, it seems necessary to review briefly the major findings of this study and to provide a global, or nomothetic, description of the meaning experienced by participants in the taking up of serpents.

Summary of Findings and A Global Description

The interpretive analysis of the present set of interview texts, describing personal experiences of serpent handling, revealed four major themes. Taken in combination, they offer a pattern of meaning for the awareness of participants as they handled serpents. As is typical of this present methodology (Pollio et al., 1997), themes are presented, as far as

possible, in the actual words of participants. The thematic structure of awareness in the experience of serpent handling is outlined as follows:

I. "Wanting to Do" (the Word of God)

II. "Death"

III. Connection with God (on the basis of)

A. "Faith"

B. "Anointing" ("God Moving on Me")

IV. "Fear"/"Victory"

From the perspective of participants themselves, the experience of taking up a serpent begins with an awareness of wanting to do what God has expressly commanded in His Word--that is, to take up a poisonous serpent. Through the presence of the serpent, however, an awareness of death and potential harm is experienced on the basis of fear for one's safety. Amidst this conflict--between wanting to obey God and fearing for personal harm--the person becomes aware of focusing on God and thereby experiences connection with God, either through faith or the anointing, and sometimes both. On the basis of an experience of faith--that is, by actively believing that the Bible says believers can take up serpents--the person feels a confidence that relieves fear and provides a sense of God's permission to proceed in taking up the serpent. In experiencing the anointing, the person feels God move on me, particularly on the basis of sensations on or in the body that are felt to strengthen in magnitude until all sense of fear is expelled from awareness and replaced by exuberant feelings of victory and protection from danger. In the experience of this connection with God, the person experiences the lessening (or complete loss) of fear

and feels enabled (or empowered) to obey God in the taking up of the poisonous serpent. As long as connection with God remains, the person handles the serpent without harm (even if bitten), and becomes aware of celebratory feelings of victory and a renewed sense of vitality experienced as a foretaste of eternal life.

As indicated by this description, the experience of handling serpents is infused with spiritual significance that affects the meaning of life for practitioners in a much broader context--an important aspect often overlooked by previous investigations concerning this subject. This understanding is only made possible by taking into account what participation in the practice means from the participants' point of view, a concern that has continually driven the present investigation. Given this observation, an effort will be made to use present findings in illuminating preexisting literature regarding religious serpent handling. This combining of the participant perspective (the present study) with that of the objective view (previous literature) should serve to present a more balanced and complete understanding of the practice.

Relevance of Findings for the History of the Pentecostal Experience

The settlement and social climate of the southeastern United States made it especially receptive to Holiness-Pentecostal-type worship service in the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. In tracing its early roots, Synan (1997) noted its appeal for supplying the emotional and spiritual demands of early settlers who forged their way through the mountainous regions and wilderness, facing emotional hardships brought on by the harshness of the land and by frequent conflicts with wild animals and other pre-existing inhabitants. For them, confrontation with death was not atypical in their struggles

to survive but was often an aspect of everyday life--hence the appeal of an emotionally-based religion (also see Conkin, 1990).

The later impact of industrialization on both rural and urban settings had various implications for these populations. Particularly in eastern Kentucky, Kimbrough (1995) noted the disruption of rural life brought about by the encroachment of mining and timber industries, a disturbance that was said to have played a large role in the acceptance of serpent handling by the Saylor family. On the other hand, many rural populations migrated to the cities in search of employment, where their experience with cultural "shock" resulted in fractured traditional value systems and disruption in their orientation to life (Holt, 1940). Like those who remained in the rural environment, migrants experienced the consequences of various social-psychological needs that tended toward ecstatic religious experiences of the type offered by Holiness-Pentecostalism.

Throughout its history, the Holiness-Pentecostal movement has emphasized the immediate, personal encounter with God as a meaningful experience (Synan, 1997; Cox, 1995; MacRobert, 1988; Hollenweger, 1972). As the context from which serpent handling emerged, it is not unrelated to the thematic structure of the present analysis, particularly to the themes of "Connection with God," "Fear/Victory," and sometimes even "Death"--as in the case of the early settlers. Within the history of Pentecostal experience, fear related to existential concerns is thematic, as are the celebratory feelings of overcoming such fears when experiencing an encounter with God. It is in this way that these themes help to enlighten the meaning of immediate experience with God from the larger context of Holiness-Pentecostalism.

Most relevant to the present study, however, is the practice of serpent handling itself that emerged from the context of Pentecostal experience (Kane, 1979; Burton, 1993; Kimbrough, 1995). Of particular interest is George W. Hensley's own conversion to the practice. Based on personal interviews with Hensley, Collins (1947) rendered a descriptive account of that event:

> The first phrase in St. Mark 16:18 had caused him much spiritual unrest ... His decision was to risk life in order to have rest from his spiritual burden ... In a great rocky gap in the mountainside he found what he sought, a large rattlesnake. He approached the reptile, and disreguarding [sic] its buzzing, blood-chilling warning, knelt a few feet away from it and prayed loudly into the sky for God to remove his fear and to anoint him with "the power". Then suddenly with a shout he leaped forward and grasped the reptile and held it in trembling hands. (Collins, 1947, pp. 1-2)

Though somewhat embellished by a successful news reporter, this descriptive account is consistent with the thematic analysis of the present study.

In first order, Hensley experienced a desire to obey the scripture--a perceived mandate for believers. Having found a serpent for use in the "sign," he then experienced fear at the sound of its "blood-chilling" rattle--an awareness of death. In the midst of this ambivalence, between wanting to obey and halting for fear, he knelt on the ground in prayer and sensed a connection with God through an experience of anointing. On the basis of this encounter, he felt empowered to overcome fear and to "shout" and "leap forward"--both characteristic of victory--and to take up the serpent with impunity. It should be noted that the description of "trembling hands," when the serpent was held, is not necessarily indicative of fear, but can also describe the "quickening" aspect of the anointing felt in the body, as reported by various participants of this present study.

According to Sundén's role theory (Holm, 1995), Hensley's serpent handling experience can be understood as an attempt to take up a specific role he found suggested in the sacred text. From this narrative, he observed the role of the believer, who desires to obey his Lord, and also the role of the Lord, who indicates His will for the believer to be done. Though not discreetly bounded, both themes of "Wanting to Do (the Word of God)" and "Connection with God" seem especially significant here. In describing the "wanting to obey the Word" in his own serpent handling experiences, P1 said that he felt the Word rising up within him, providing him substance to "eat" and "drink." This experience of the scripture provided him a source of "spiritual food" that, when given to meditation, brings into awareness a personalized will of God from the text as well as inspiration for carrying it out. As such, Hensley owned the role from the text as God's personal will for him, a revelation for which he felt himself responsible as a believer. In taking the role of God, Hensley heard God's "voice" through the text in the explicit words of Jesus, which involved an experience of connecting with God. Through this sensed connection, God's "voice" spoke in an immediate, personal, and directive manner, and in such a way that Hensley considered his own actions as a divine consequence of God being in "control"--a characteristic of the anointing. Within the framework of role theory, Hensley can be seen as personally transformed by the experience of handling a poisonous serpent "supernaturally" and without harm, as by transcending death in direct confrontation. Death for him had been conquered through the spiritual and was experienced as powerless for a time, even in the temporal world. So moving was this experience that, shortly thereafter, Hensley launched a career in evangelism based largely

on this practice.

In view of present findings, Sundén's role theory offers insight into how the practice of serpent handling is meaningfully constructed from the sacred text, although it does not account for the psychology of why that particular sign, neglected by most other Pentecostals, was selected as more meaningful by Hensley and by others who would follow the role he had modeled (Hood, 1991). For that concern, another type assessment of the immediate cultural context is required that is not the present interest of this study. It does emphasize the fact, however, that the text remains "forever fluid" and open to further cultural interpretation as social and psychological needs arise--for example, the need of believers for textual legitimacy in bringing serpents to worship in specially constructed boxes when they are no longer supplied by scoffers.

In regard to the history of Holiness-Pentecostalism, present findings help bring to light how the tradition has served to set the practice in a meaningful religious context. Viewing religion as a way of life--as a way of being-in-the-world--Pentecostals have experienced "spiritual" challenges and confrontations throughout their history, whether from concrete elements, such as the harshness of frontier life; from religious persecution, at the hands of other Christians and scoffers; or from perceived spiritual attacks, such as those contrived by Satan. Foundational to their religious heritage, however, is an immediate experience with God through which the threat of all such concerns is transcended, and the revitalization of spiritual life and happiness experienced. According to Cox (1995) and Synan (1997), it is because of such thematic qualities of meaning that Pentecostal experience has not only survived but expanded worldwide. It is from this same

context of experience and belief that those who take up serpents have come to understand their own experiences and to find spiritual meaning in their practice.

Relevance of Findings for the Contemporary Literature

Most prior investigations of serpent handling, whether media or scientifically oriented, have concerned themselves with presenting a certain view of religious serpent handling from other than the perspective of believers and, with respect to those studies of a scientific nature, from a particular theoretical stance. These perspectives are presented below in light of findings from the present study.

The Media Perspective

From its initial interest, media coverage seems to have been attracted to serpent handling by its novelty as an alternative Christian practice and, most especially, by its occasional consequences of bites and deaths. After all, it is the anomalous and the "tragic" that pique social interest and, as such, provide substance and platform for an industry whose success depends on stimulating and maintaining an audience (Birckhead, 1993). For this reason, the "sign" of serpent handling has been presented by the media as an isolated event, excised from its context of worship, which, when positioned in this way, makes it appear as a "strange," "bizarre," and "death-defying" practice that only "ignorant" and "crazy" people engage in order to "prove" their religion. Based on present findings, this perspective must be enlarged to situate the practice in its relevant context and to present a more complete and balanced picture.

What appears as bizarre and death-defying has been revealed by the present analysis to be a meaningful religious experience for those who take up serpents. With this

sign, practitioners see themselves as true believers who are obeying a biblical command through which God is experienced in ways that spiritually enrich their lives. In this sense, the view of the practice as a risk with death, or as a proof or test of faith, is clarified by understanding the spiritual meanings attached to serpent handling by participants. Results of this study also indicate that, although the sign is practiced in worship with some frequency, it is only one of various events that take place, and not one of primary importance. According to participants, the experience of the anointing may be for a variety of reasons other than for the taking up of serpents, e.g., healing, preaching, testifying, singing, etc. Of further interest is the fact that the practice usually occupies the space of only a few minutes in a typical two and one-half hour service.

As the perspective is broadened, participants emerge from the stigma of ignorance and pathology as being normal people who function typically as do others in society. In this study, participants were found to represent a range of persons that might be found in many different churches serving the lower and middle socioeconomic class. In their interviews, however, some spoke of the media and expressed an awareness of its social impact on how they were perceived. When asked of their feelings about the presence of media at their services, a variety of reactions was noted. Although some saw it as a genuine means of spreading the gospel, others viewed it as an intrusion on sacred ground or as an abusive ploy by others to make money at their expense. Virtually all who made comments were keenly aware of the pejorative label of "serpent (or snake) handler" that has come with such exclusive attention on this one of their many religious practices--a label that many have strongly rejected. As one participant asserted:

> We're just simple people with simple lifestyles, and by simple, I don't mean simple-minded. I mean we just live simple lives. We're just like everybody else. We get up in the morning. We love. We grieve. We just have a different way of expressing our religion. Some people light incense and candles and whatever. We handle serpents ... [T]he media controls what people think of us. What I object to is they give you that title, "Serpent Handler." I'm not a serpent handler. I'm a child of God who has that as a part of my religious belief. If you want to call me anything, call me a child of God. Call me a Christian. Serpent handling is not who I am or what I am. It's simply a small part of my religious belief. (P17; see Appendix B)

The Psychodynamic Perspective

Underlying this perspective is Freud's (1938b) notion that the practice of religious rituals is rooted in the unconscious conflict of desiring that which is culturally forbidden. According to this view, the behavior itself becomes an important symbol for interpretation that links the unconscious desire with an unwitting representation in the form of a symbol, a relationship couched in language vested with "double meaning" (Shafranske, 1996). With repression of such affective tendencies, the resulting intrapsychical conflict shifts toward the fusing together of related unconscious and conscious elements into a compromise-formation that eventually comes to stand as a symbol for the object of primal desire--a sufficient substitute infused with unconscious meaning (Jones, 1961). In the case of religious serpent handling, what seems to be at issue, and to hold the key for interpreting the practice, is the symbolic meaning of the serpent.

From descriptions of personal serpent handling experiences, participants ascribed what might be understood as both conscious and unconscious meanings to the serpent. Some referred to the serpent simply as a "poisonous snake," for the taking up as commanded by Jesus; others viewed the animal as "evil" or as the "devil," in association with the biblical myth concerning the Fall of humanity (see Howey, 1926). The meaning of

death also was commonly described in relation to the serpent, although an understanding of the serpent as a symbol of death may not have been conscious to the fullest extent--especially in terms of its role in the practice as a direct confrontation with death. Neither was the meaning of God (as the essence of everlasting or eternal life) equated with the serpent, although connection with God was clearly predominant in their descriptions of serpent handling. Concerning both symbolic meanings of death and God, "cultural taboo" prohibits the "touching" of either, as is evidenced by fear. In present society, one does not hazard death; neither does one directly confront God. Nevertheless, all participants described their taking up of serpents as "reaching" for the symbol.

If the serpent symbolizes death, that which gives rise to the conscious desire to obey the mandate could be an unconscious wish to confront death in the temporal world, transcend it, and thereby experience eternal life in such a way that death is experienced as vanquished. For example, in describing her closeness with God that follows the handling of serpents, one participant said:

> It's wonderful, cause you don't care, you know, if you wake up tomorrow, and to know that you're gonna go to a better place. You know, you don't worry about going down the road and a drunk driver hitting you cause you know you're gonna be with God. It's just--It's just a joy that's within you, you know, and it's just a happiness. You don't worry about your bills. You don't worry about anything, and that's where I like to be--in that state of mind that, if the sun don't come up tomorrow, I know I'll be home. (P3)

Based on such descriptions, participants, after handling serpents, can be viewed as living out in the present world a basic tenet of their faith tradition that concerns for them a futuristic event--the resurrection of the dead in which death will be swallowed up by eternal life forevermore (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). Since participants must continue

existence as mortal beings in the temporal world, the reality of death and its fear return, at which time the person, longing to experience eternal life again, takes up the serpent once more (see Hood, 1998).

On the other hand, the serpent could been seen as symbolizing God (eternal life). Within Western Christianity, which has its roots in Judaism, the characteristics of omnipotence, omniscience, and holiness, ascribed to the countenance of God, arouse awe and fear in the presence of mortals (cf. Exodus 33:18-23; Isaiah 6:1-5), yet to touch God is to experience eternal life (cf. Numbers 21:8-9). Mundkur (1983) has noted that the serpent inspires a cross-cultural phenomenon of awe and fear when gazed upon, and Howey (1926) has suggested that it symbolizes deity for various reasons--one of which is its power to elicit fascination from onlookers. In his classic work, The Idea of the Holy, Otto (1923) has observed awe and fear as the basic feelings captured in the expression "mysterium tremendum" when in the presence of the "numen" (God). While such an encounter involves an ineffable "mysterious" quality, it also provides a sense of awe, overwhelming power, and an urgent energy, all of which contribute to an aura of "tremor" that enticingly draws and, at the same time, fearfully repels (see Hood, 1998). It is of interest to note that various participants, in the present study, described the tendency of congregants to stop all activities and focus on the serpents when taken out and handled--an arresting experience described as both fearful (for the safety of handlers) and compelling.

If the serpent is taken to symbolize God, the conscious desire to obey the scriptural mandate to handle serpents would seem to be rooted in an unconscious

forbidden wish to touch God, which, when experienced, could arouse both awe and fear. Yet as fear is overcome, and the serpent is taken up, God is handled and eternal life is experienced--which again transcends death in the present moment. By its very nature, temporal existence eventually demands again the return of the repressed desire to touch God, at which time the practice is repeated for a renewed sense of eternal life. Given such spiritual meaning, it is little wonder that participants often expressed no interest in attending churches that do not believe in serpent handling. In the words of one participant, this experience is ...

> something that'll make you not want to go to churches that don't believe, you know ... There's nothing there. (P11)

If a psychodynamic perspective is taken, there is no need to restrict the meaning of the serpent to that of a phallus, nor to interpret the practice solely as the expression of a repressed sexual desire. Descriptions of participants gave no indications of such meanings but only of religious and spiritual connotations.

The Deprivation Perspective

According to this view, individuals participate in religion for the purpose of filling some void or ameliorating some need, whether this condition is experienced as "economic," "social," "organismic" (physical or mental), "ethical," or "psychic" (Glock, 1964). On the basis of comparisons made with others, some social group, or with a set of internalized standards, certain individuals are said to feel disadvantaged and to find in religion a mitigating factor that relieves the experience of such disparities. From their own perspective, however, individuals participating in the present set of interviews did not

speak of feeling deprived in any way, nor did they describe their participation in serpent handling as serving to alleviate needs other than the necessity for obedience to a perceived command of Jesus. Based on participant descriptions, the handling of serpents is a very moving experience in which God is encountered by participants in a life-changing way. God is experienced as their all in all, and everything else in life becomes of secondary importance.

The Psychophysiological and Trance-state Perspectives

This view has observed religious serpent handling, and other sect experiences (e.g., strychnine ingestion, fire handling, glossolalia, the anointing), with special concern for noting biological factors that coincide with the phenomena. On the basis of this approach, an effort has made to identify certain physiological concomitants--for example, brain patterns, blood chemical fluctuations, the onset of trance states and their biophysiological correlates--thought to facilitate, or at least to be related to, such religious experiences. Although valuable, such concerns seem to verify from an objective stance that a significant experience has in fact occurred. What they cannot supply, however, is the personal meaning of this experience, which may vary from one context to the next. Concerning descriptions provided by EEGs, for example, Gray (1994) quoted Hasset as saying, "We are like blind men trying to understand the workings of a factory by listening outside its walls" (p. 221). Through use of such observational procedures, rumblings of the inside machinery can be detected, and may even reveal the location of activity, although the way in which the machinery works and what it means are dependent upon insights provided by other methods of investigation.

Based on present findings, the described experience of connection with God can afford meaning to the psychophysiological perspective described above. What has been observed as a trance or dissociative state among glossolalics (Goodman, 1969, 1988; Burton, 1993), serpent handlers (Schwarz, 1960; Schwartz, 1999), and fire handlers (Kane, 1978, 1982; Schwartz, 1999) has been described by participants themselves as involving an intentional focus on God with whom they connect as an immediate presence, either through an experience of faith or on the basis of particular sensations of anointing felt in their bodies. Similar to Yogis, who withdraw from the world when meditating (Wulff, 1990), participants shift away from others around them and focus on God by "getting in" the service--which leads to a connection with God. Particularly through the anointing, a sense of protection is felt from dangers posed by poisonous serpents, toxic mixtures, and (one would suppose) the flame of fire, which, when confronted with success, involve feelings of indescribable victory.

As for the concern of trance and glossolalia (Goodman, 1969, 1988), all participants who mentioned speaking in tongues did so in descriptions that included the anointing. For example, one participant described his ability to discern the genuineness of tongue-speaking by others on the basis of whether he detected the presence of the anointing.

> They [hypocrites] speak in tongues whether its anointed or it's jumping on your "Hondi-and-tying-your-bow-tie" ... You can tell when someone's really speaking in tongues of the spirit, cause the spirit will bear witness, and you can tell it from one that's just jabbering a bunch of gibberish. (P2)

From this description, it seems this participant is always aware of the anointing (trance)--

or of God moving on the person--when speaking in tongues occurs.

When combined with findings of the present study, observations of chemical changes, brain patterns, and so-called trance states take on significant meaning and a broadened context of understanding. Without the perspective of the one undergoing the experience, such objective findings might also describe events observed in other contexts of human experience--for example: a skier conquering a challenging slope (chemical changes), a student in the library focusing in serious study for an exam (brain patterns), and a devoted football fan watching her team execute the winning play in the national championship game (trance states). As is the case in each of these situations, the religious context of the serpent handler provides the human meaning of observations made from a psychophysiological point of view. From the perspective of the participant, such observations define an immediate encounter with God.

The Descriptive Perspective

The present study contributes to the descriptive perspective in two ways: (1) its specific concern is for the "sign" of serpent handling; and (2) its description of the thematic meaning of serpent handling is derived from a systematic interpretive analysis of the experience as described by those who have taken up serpents. With the exception of one other study, most, if not all, other investigations have been concerned with describing numerous issues related to serpent handling sects--their history, sociological development, basic beliefs and practices, secular and legal conflicts--but not with serpent handling itself. The single study (Williamson & Pollio, 1999) that did give primary attention to the practice produced a description of meaning based on a thematic analysis of

extemporaneous sermons given by preachers about their serpent handling experiences.

Although the specific unity of the present set of themes vary from those found by Williamson and Pollio (1999), the overall structure of meaning of the experience of serpent handling is the same in both investigations. Only one subtheme described in the previous study--"The Established Versus the Sugar-Coated"--was lacking altogether in the present analysis of meanings; this omission may be accounted for by noting the different methods used in collecting descriptions of serpent handling. The present study used phenomenological interviews in which two people share information in an open-ended dialogue whereas the previous investigation made use of extemporaneous sermons delivered at church. As a platform for convincing unbelievers and skeptics, sermons are characterized by rhetorical attempts to persuade listeners to a particular point of view. If such is the case among serpent handling preachers--and there is no need to doubt this the case--it seems plausible that their criticism directed toward other faith traditions, as lacking in spiritual character for rejecting serpent handling practices, might be viewed by preachers as an argument in their attempt to persuade others and, at the same time, to justify their own interpretation of scripture.

This explanation may also account for one other difference in two sets of themes: the present subtheme of enablement to handle serpents by "Faith" was absent in the thematic description derived from sermons. As described by present participants, the most captivating type of handling is done through the anointing--that is, in terms of an experience that involves more emotion and (on the basis of my field research) is more compelling to observe. It follows, therefore, that preachers would speak to others about

experiencing God's presence in this more profound way. Despite these different points of emphasis, the overall meaning of the experience of serpent handling was relatively the same across both studies.

In summary, this present study has sought to produce a description of the meaning of the experience of serpent handling from the perspective of those who have participated in this practice. The aim, unfettered by acontextual theories, was to illuminate what that experience means to the practitioner with as few presuppositions as possible. The substantive findings not only bring understanding to the practice itself but also serve to situate this "sign" in a more explicit context of meaning that provides insight to other perspectives which, on the bases of their own theoretical positions, have understood serpent handling sect phenomena from a more distant stance. This blending together of perspectives affords a more precise explication of the "truth" of serpent handling than would be otherwise possible by viewing this practice within its interpretive context of meaning.

A Concluding Observation

One young serpent handling preacher of renown, who had agreed to participate in this study, was fatally bitten in a revival service five days before his scheduled interview. On a videotape that captured this event, the evangelist proclaimed these final words after experiencing the deadly bite: "No matter what comes, God's still God." Within minutes, he was stretched out on the floor, surrounded by believers in prayer. With no visible signs of improvement, he was asked by others if he desired medical intervention, at which time, being unable to speak, he simply pointed toward Heaven. Moments later he died.

Ironically, I spent the day, that was originally scheduled for this preacher's interview, attending his funeral and graveside service. At this event, it was no great surprise when the faithful, including the young man's father, gathered close to the body and took up poisonous serpents in the midst of the cemetery. In his own interview, one of the participants who handled serpents that day described his experience of the occasion.

> To me, that was an experience to be there to see the brothers preaching and getting in just like they would if the brother was right there with them, alive and getting in with them ... The brothers preached. The people sung. They shouted. They danced, and they handled serpents. They lifted their hands and praised God--even though it was raining. I thought, "It's raining today." But who was worried about rain? I didn't see many people that was worried about it raining ... I can't never remember being wet. That's how much glad I was that God blessed me like He did. (P15)

In this otherwise somber context, the stark reality of death (and harsh weather) was confronted and transcended by believers once more on the basis of a meaningful religious experience in which the temporal is fused with the eternal. Those who gathered for the service left knowing that this man's death was much less a loss than a far greater victory attained through the literal practice of his faith.

This context of meaning is emphasized even further by another participant who spoke freely of his own future death and particularly of his funeral arrangements.

> I told them I wanted them to have church when they put me away--just like we have church, just like I wasn't even here [in the coffin] ... Everything we do now, that's what I want them to do then ... I want to be rolled in here, put there, them have church over me that night, and handle serpents and everything ... I want it just like we're having church, and I want it to be real spiritual. (P12)

In the broader context of this worldview, such a request--that serpents be handled at his funeral--takes on necessity for believers. For in a time such as this, the reality of death is

experienced by the living as a threat not only to their temporal existence but also, more importantly, to their spirituality--a confrontation against which they must take a stand and again experience transcendence to reconfirm eternal life. As they already know at one level--but now must experience at another--the person for whom they shed momentary tears has already attained his or her ultimate victory--that is, "to be absent from the body ... [is] to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians: 5:8, KJV). Hence death, for the believer, would seem to be experienced not so much as a threat but as a divinely ordained access to God. From this perspective on life (and eternity), it is little wonder that P12 makes a further request regarding the conclusion of his funeral:

> I want some of them to sing, when they're wheeling me out, "I Won't Be Coming Back Anymore." That's what I want them to sing. (P12)

And who could charge him for making such a request? For what was experienced through his handling of serpents, in times past, is what P12 believes with all certainty will be experienced beyond death without time constraints--an eternal existence with God from which he would choose never to return, even if he could. This ephemeral experience of eternity comes to the faithful through serpent handling and is that which serves to make the practice completely meaningful to its practitioners.

Based on present descriptions, the "sign" of serpent handling has infused the lives of those who practice it with significant spiritual meaning. For them, this experience has transformed life from menial existence to purposeful living as faithful believers who are willing to live (and to die) in obedience to the command of their God. In confronting death in the practice, what is perceived by others as a tempting of death (or of God) can be seen

by the believer as an active type of faith, resigned to a particular event, that bridges for them the temporal with the eternal. It is through this experience that eternity for the obedient has already begun. When they do leave the present world, death for them only becomes a transition from temporal to eternal existence. Until that change occurs, the experience of handling serpents connects them with God in such a way that this life becomes much more meaningful and offers a clear prediction of what is to come. As summarized in the words of one participant:

> The Lord has been good to me. He's good. I've never felt nothing like Him. I was an alcoholic most of my life, and I've been high. I've been drunk, and I've never felt nothing like the anointing of God. It's not--I can't stress this enough--it's not the snakes. People say, "All those people want is snakes, snakes, snakes." It's not the snake. It's the idea that you can feel that that moves on you to handle that [snake] ... [God told him] "When your time comes, this is what you're gonna feel" ... When it comes my time to leave this world, I know what it's gonna feel like to die. And, Buddy, if you're living right, you're not gonna look back at your wife, your children, your mamma, nobody. You're gonna keep looking right at that that's touching you ... Beautiful. (P5)

As understood and described by this person, as well as others in this study, the practice of religious serpent handling involves a sense of the eternal--a taste of which is experienced by believers in the here and now.

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

Adams, S. L. (1993). Appalachian portraits. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

All need the Holy Ghost. (1910). The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(5), 2.

Alland, A. (1962). Possession in a revivalist Negro church. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1, 204-213.

Allen, E. R., & Swindell, D. (1948). Cottonmouth moccasin of Florida. Herpetological, 4, 1-15.

Alther, L. (1976). "They shall take up serpents." New York Times Magazine (June 6), 18-20, 28, 35.

Ambrose, K. P. (1970). Survey of the snake handling cult of West Virginia. Master's thesis, Marshall University, Huntingdon, WV.

Ambrose, K. P. (1978). A serpent handling church in a midwestern city: A study of commitment. Unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University.

Ammerman, N. T. (1991). North American Protestant Fundamentalism. Fundamentalisms observed (pp. 1-65). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Barbour, R. W. (1950). The reptiles of Big Black Mountain, Harlan County, Kentucky. Copeia, 2, 100-107.

Beard, S. F. (1924). Old Tennessee still rising. The Church of God Evangel, 15(31), 2.

Berger, P. L., & Luckman, T. (1966). The social construction of reality. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Birckhead, J. (1976). Toward the creation of a community of saints. Unpublished dissertation, University of Alberta, Canada.

Birckhead, J. (1993). "Bizarre snake handlers": Popular media and a Southern stereotype. In K. G. Heider (Ed.), Images of the South: Constructing a regional culture on film and video (pp. 163-189). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Birckhead, J. (1994). [Review of Serpent handling believers]. Appalachian Journal,

21(3), 333-337.

Birckhead, J. (1996). Snake handlers: Heritage, salvation, and celebrity in the '90's. Appalachian Journal, 23(3), 260-274.

Birckhead, J. (1997). Reading "snake handling": Critical reflections. In S. D. Glazier (Ed.), Anthropology of religion (pp. 19-84). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Bleicher, J. (1980/1990). Contemporary hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique. New York: Routledge.

Book of minutes. (1922). Cleveland, TN: Church of God Publishing House.

Bowdle, D. N. (1999). Holiness in the highlands: A profile of the Church of God. In B. J. Leonard (Ed.), Christianity in Appalachia (pp. 243-256). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Bowers, B. B., & Burghardt, G. M. (1992). The scientist and the snake: Relationships with reptiles. In H. Davis & D Balfour (Eds.), The inevitable bond: Examining scientist-animal interactions (pp. 250-263). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Boyd, B., & Adair, P. (Producers). (1968). Holy Ghost people [Film]. New York: McGraw-Hill Film.

Bro. George Hensley is conducting a revival. (1914). The Church of God Evangel, 5(37), 6.

Brouayer, G. T. (1921). Died in the faith. The Church of God Evangel, 12(19), 1.

Bruce, A. B. (1979). The synoptic gospels. In W. R. Nicoll (Ed.), The expositor's Greek New Testament (Vol. 1) (pp. 1-651). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Bullinger, E. W. (1975). A critical lexicon and concordance to the English and Greek New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Burkhart, J. B. (1922). Fire was seen. The Church of God Evangel, 13(1), 3.

Burton, T. (1993). Serpent handling believers. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Burton, T. G., & Headley, T. F. (Producers). (1983). Carson Springs: A decade

later [Film]. Johnson City: East Tennessee State University.

Burton, T. G., & Headley, T. F. (Producers). (1986). Following the signs: A way of conflict [Film]. Johnson City: East Tennessee State University.

Campbell, W. D. (1974). Which is the real evil--snake handling or the established church? Southern Voiced, 1(1), 41-48.

Carden, K. W., & Pelton, R. W. (1976). The persecuted prophets. New York: A. S. Barnes and Company.

Carter, M. V. (1987). From the "hollers" to High Street: A brief look at the Appalachian serpent handler's presence in the urban Midwest. In R. M. Shurden (Ed.), Faculty studies (pp. 12-22). Jefferson City, TN: Carson Newman College.

Clark, E. C. (1934). An exposition of Mark 16:18. The Church of God Evangel, 25(28), 1.

Clark, E. C. (1942). Kentucky rules against snakes. The Church of God Evangel, 33(31), 4.

Clements, W. M. (1977). Review essay: Snake handlers on film [Review of They shall take up serpents and Holy Ghost people]. Journal of American Folklore, 90(358), 502-506.

Clements, W. M. (1979). [Review of The Jolo serpent handlers]. Journal of American Folklore, 92(363), 127-128.

Cobb, A. L. (1965). Sect religion and social change in an isolated rural community of Southern Appalachia. Unpublished dissertation, Boston University.

Collins, J. B. (1947). Tennessee snake handlers. Chattanooga, TN: Chattanooga News--Free Press.

Conkin, P. K. (1990). Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Conn, C. W. (1955). Like a might army. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press.

Conn, C. W. (1977). Like a might army (rev. ed.). Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press.

Conn, C. W. (1996). Like a mighty army: A history of the Church of God: Definitive edition. Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press.

Cotton, C. (1910). Revival at Coalburg, Ala. The Church of God Evangel, 1(9), 7.

Coulson, J. E., & Johnson, R. W. (1977). Glossolalia and internal-external locus of control. Journal of Psychology and Theology, 5(4), 312-317.

Covington, D. (1995). Salvation on Sand Mountain. New York: Penguin Books.

Cox, H. (1995). Fire from heaven. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Creech, J. (1996). Visions of glory: The place of the Azusa Street revival in Pentecostal History. Church History, 65(3), 405-424.

Crews, M. (1990). The Church of God: A social history. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.

Cult snakes: Why cultists prefer copperheads to rattlers. Scientific American, 163(4), 215.

Cutten, G. B. (1927). Speaking in tongues: Historically and psychologically considered. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

Dalley, Mrs. D. (1921). Revival at Maryville, Tenn. The Church of God Evangel, 12(45), 2.

Daugherty, M. L. (1976). Serpent handling as sacrament. Theology Today, 33(3), 232-243.

Daugherty, M. L. (1978). Serpent handling as sacrament. In J. D. Photiadis (Ed.), Religion in Appalachia (pp. 103-111). Morgantown: West Virginia University.

Daugherty, M. L. (1999). Serpent handlers: When the sacrament comes alive. In B. J. Leonard (Ed.), Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in religion (pp. 138-152). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Davidson, C. T. (1973). Upon this rock (Vol. 1). Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House.

Dittes, J. E. (1971). Conceptual deprivation and statistical rigor: Comment on "social deprivation and religiosity." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 10, 393-395.

Duncan, B. (1975). Keepers of the faith: The worm and the snake. New Republic,

173(3176), 19-22.

Duncan, B. (1993). The worm and the snake. In K. G. Heider (Ed.), Images of the South: Constructing a regional culture on film and video (pp. 190-200). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Eigen, M. (1981). Comments on snake symbolism and mind-body relations. American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 41(1), 73-79.

Ellis, J. B. (1914). Oneonta, Ala. The Church of God Evangel, 5(19), 8.

Ernest, C. H. (1992). Venomous reptiles of North America. Washington: Smithsonian Institute.

Esler, G. (1983). Snakes in church. The Listener, 110(2822), 2-4.

Evans, A. D. (Ed.) (1943). A. J. Tomlinson: God's anointed--prophet of wisdom. Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House.

Fee, J. R. (1989). The night I lost my religion at the "holy roller " church. Appalachian Heritage, 17(2), 41-47.

Fortunato, F. (1980). Snake handlers--risking death as a test of faith. Hustler, ?(4), 50-54, 58, 123-124.

Fortune, R. F. (1924). The symbolism of the serpent. International Journal of Psych-Analysis, 7, 237-243.

Foxfire. (1973). [Entire issue], 7(1), 2-75.

Freud, S. (1938a). The interpretation of dreams. In A. A. Brill (Ed. and Trans.), The basic writings of Sigmund Freud (pp. 179-549). New York: Random House. (Original work published 1900)

Freud, S. (1938b). Totem and taboo. In A. A. Brill (Ed. and Trans.), The basic writings of Sigmund Freud (pp. 805-930). New York: Random House. (Original work published 1913)

Gadamer, H. G. (1960/1975). Truth and method (G. Barden & J. Cumming, Trans.). New York: Seabury.

Gadamer, H. G. (1976). Philosophical hermeneutics. Berkeley: University of California Press.

General Assembly minutes: 1906-1914: Photographic reproductions of the first ten General Assembly minutes. Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House.

Gergen, K. J. (1992). Toward a postmodern psychology. In S. Kvale (Ed.), Psychology and postmodernism (pp. 17-30). London: Sage.

Gerlach, L. P., & Hine, V. H. (1968). Five factors crucial to the growth and spread of a modern religious movement. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 7, 23-40.

Gerrard, N. L. (1968). The serpent handling religions of West Virginia. Trans-Actions, 5(6), 22-28.

Gerrard, N. L. (1971). Churches of the stationary poor in Southern Appalachia. In J. D. Photiadis & H. K. Schwarzweller (Eds.), Change in rural Appalachia: Implications for action programs (pp. 99-114). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gerrard, N. L. (1978). Churches of the stationary poor in Southern Appalachia. In J. D. Photiadis (Ed.), Religion in Appalachia: Theological, social, and psychological dimensions and correlates (pp. 271-284). Morgantown: West Virginia University.

Giorgi, A. (1970). Psychology as a human science: A phenomenologically based approach. New York: Harper and Row.

Giorgi, A. (1971). Phenomenology and experimental psychology: II. In A. Giorgi, W. F. Fischer, & R. von Eckartsberg (Eds.), Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Vol. 1 (pp. 17-29). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A. (1975). An application of phenomenological method in psychology. In A. Giorgi, C. T. Fischer, & E. L. Murray (Eds.), Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Vol. 2 (pp. 82-103). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A., Fischer, W. F., & von Eckartsberg, R. (Eds.). (1971). Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Vol. 1. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A., Fischer, C. T., & Murray, E. L. (Eds.). (1975). Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Vol. 2. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A., Knowles, R., & Smith, D L. (Eds.). (1979). Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Vol. 3. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A., Barton, A., & Maes, C. (Eds.). (1983). Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology: Vol. 4. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Glock, C. Y. (1964). The role of deprivation in the origin and evolution of religious groups. In. R. Lee & M. E. Marty (Eds.), Religion and social conflict (pp. 24-36). New York: Oxford University Press.

Goodman, F. D. (1969). Phonetic analysis of glossolalia in four cultural settings. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 8, 227-239.

Goodman, F. D. (1972a). Altered mental state vs. "style of discourse:" Reply to Samarin. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 11, 279-299.

Goodman, F. D. (1972b). Speaking in tongues. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goodman, F. D. (1988). Ecstasy, ritual, and alternate reality. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Grant, M. (1977). Jesus: An historian's view of the gospels. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Gray, P. (1994). Psychology (2nd ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.

Guignon, C., & Pereboom, D. (Eds.). (1995). Existentialism: Basic writings. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Harris, R. W. (1949). Snake handling. The Church of God Evangel, 39(47), 8-9.

Hassall, J. C. (1919). The serpent as a symbol. The Psychoanalytic Review, 6, 296-305.

He hath shed forth this which you now see and hear: Speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance the evidence of the baptism with the Holy Ghost [sic]. (1910). The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(6), 3.

Headrick, W. (1918). Birchwood, Tenn. The Church of God Evangel, 9(15), 2.

Heath, S. J. (1928). Signs following believers. The Church of God Evangel, 19(30), 3.

Heidegger, M. (1927/1962). Being and time. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

Herzog, H. A., Jr. (1990). Experimental modification of defensive behaviors in garter snakes (Thamnophis sirtalis). Journal of Comparative Psychology, 104, 334-339.

Hine, V. H. (1969). Pentecostal glossolalia: Toward a functional interpretation. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 8(2), 211-226.

Hollenweger, W. J. (1972). The Pentecostals. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Holliday, R. K. (1966). Tests of faith. Oak Hill, WV: The Fayette Tribune.

Holm, N. G. (1991) Pentecostalism: Conversion and charismata. International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 1(3), 135-151.

Holm, N. G. (1995). Religious symbols and role taking. In N. G. Holm & J. A. Belzen (Eds.), Sundén's role theory--An impetus to contemporary psychology of religion (pp. 129-151). Abo: Abo Akademi.

Holt, J. B. (1940). Holiness religion: Cultural shock and social reorganization. American Sociological Review, 4, 740-747.

Hood, R. W., Jr. (1983). Social psychology and religious fundamentalism. In A. W. Childs & G. B. Melton (Eds.), Rural psychology (pp. 169-198). New York: Plenum Press.

Hood, R. W., Jr. (1991). Commentary: Holm's use of role theory: Empirical and hermeneutical considerations of sacred text as a source of role adoption. International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 1(3), 153-159.

Hood, R. W., Jr. (1995). [Review of Salvation on Sand Mountain]. Appalachian Heritage, 23(3), 54-56.

Hood, R. W., Jr. (1998). When the Spirit maims and kills: Social psychological considerations of the history of serpent handling sects and the narrative of handlers. International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 8(2), 71-96.

Hood, R. W., Jr., & Kimbrough, D. L. (1995). Serpent handling Holiness sects: Theoretical considerations. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 34(3), 311-322.

Hood, R. W., Jr., Morris, R. J., & Williamson, W. P. (1999). Evaluation of the legitimacy of conversion experience as a function of the five signs of Mark 16. Review of Religious Research, 41(Fall), 96-109.

Hood, R. W., Jr., Spilka, B., Hunsberger, B., & Gorsuch, R. (1996). The psychology of religion: An empirical approach (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Hood, R. W., Jr., & Williamson, W. P. (1998). Nuances of serpent bite death: Secular influences on theological perspectives. Paper given at the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Cleveland, Tennessee, March.

Hopkins, E. D. (1919). Report. The Church of God Evangel, 10(28), 3.

Horton, G. B. (1989) With signs following: " ... They shall take up serpents." The Church of God Evangel, 79(10), 19-21.

Horton, H. (1934/1975). The gifts of the Spirit. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House.

Howey, M. O. (1926). The encircled serpent. Philadelphia: David McKay Company.

Hunter, H. D. (1988a). Serpent handling. In S. M. Burgess & G. B. McGee (Eds.), Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (p. 778-778). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Hunter, H. D. (1988b). Tomlinson, Homer Aubrey. In S. M. Burgess & G. B. McGee (Eds.), Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (pp. 848-849). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Index to the roster of ministers: 1886-1921 (n. d.). Computerized document archived in the Church of God Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN.

Jackson, P. (1936). We are living signboards. The Church of God Evangel, 27(20), 3.

James, W. (1902/1982). The varieties of religious experience. New York: Penguin Books.

James, W. (1961). Psychology: The briefer course. New York: Harper Tourchbooks. (Original work published 1892)

James, W. (1983). The principles of psychology. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1890)

Jones, E. (1961). Papers on psycho-analysis (5th ed.). Boston: Beacon Press.

Joslin, G., Fletcher, H. & Emlen, J. (1964). A comparison of the responses to snakes of lab- and wild-reared Rhesus monkeys. Animal Behavior, 12, 348-352.

Joyner, C. (1994). "Believer I know:" The emergence of African-American Christianity. In P.E. Johnson (Ed.), African-American Christianity (pp. 19-46). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kane, S. M. (1973). Aspects of Holy Ghost religion: The snake handling sect of the American Southeast. Master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Kane, S. M. (1974a). Holy Ghost people: The snake handlers of Southern Appalachia. Appalachian Journal, 1(4), 255-262.

Kane, S. M. (1974b). Ritual possession in a Southern Appalachian religious sect. Journal of American Folklore, 88(346), 293-302.

Kane, S. M. (1978). Holiness fire handling in Southern Appalachia: A psychophysiological analysis. In J. D. Photiadis (Ed.), Religion in Appalachia (pp. 113-124). Morgantown: West Virginia University.

Kane, S. M. (1979). Snake handlers of Southern Appalachia. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University.

Kane, S. M. (1982). Holiness ritual fire handling: Ethnographic and psychophysiological considerations. Ethos, 10(4), 369-384.

Kane, S. M. (1984). Snake handlers. In S. S. Hill (Ed.), Encyclopedia of religion in the South (pp. 698-699). Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.

Kane, S. M. (1987). Appalachian snake handlers. In J. C. Cobb & C. R. Wilson (Eds.), Perspectives on the South: An annual review of society, politics and culture (Vol. 4) (pp. 115-127). New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers.

Kane, S. M. (1989). Snake handlers. In C. R. Wilson & W. Ferris (Eds.), Encyclopedia of Southern culture (p. 1330). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Keen, E. (1975). A primer in phenomenological psychology. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Kerman, K. (1942). Rattlesnake religion. In L. N. Jones (Ed.), Eve's stepchildren (pp. 93-102). Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, Ltd.

Kierkegaard, S. (1844/1980). Concept of anxiety (W. Lowrie, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1941a). Concluding unscientific postscript (D. Swenson & W. Lowrie, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1846)

Kierkegaard, S. (1941b). Fear and trembling (W. Lowrie, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1843)

Kierkegaard, S. (1941c). The sickness unto death (W. Lowrie, Trans.) Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1849)

Kildahl, J. P. (1972). The psychology of speaking in tongues. New York: Harper and Row.

Kimbrough, D. L. (1995). Taking up serpents. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Kirkpatrick, L. A., Hood, R. W., Jr., & Hartz, G. (1991). Fundamentalist religion conceptualized in terms of Rokeach's theory of the open and closed mind: New perspectives on some old ideas. Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, 3, 157-179.

Klauber, L. M. (1956). Rattlesnakes: Their habits, life histories, and influence on mankind (Vol. 2). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kramer, K. (Producer). (1977). The Jolo serpent handlers. New York: Karen Kramer.

Kuhn, T. S. (1996). The structure of scientific revolutions (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1962)

Kvale, S. (1992). Postmodern psychology: A contradiction in terms? In S. Kvale (Ed.), Psychology and postmodernism (pp. 31-57). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1996). Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

La Barre, W. (1962/1992). They shall take up serpents: Psychology of the Southern snake-handling cult. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Laffal, J. (1965). Pathological and normal language. New York: Atherton Press.

Lapsley, J. M., & Simpson, J. G. (1964). Speaking in tongues: Infantile babble or song of the self? Part II. Pastoral Psychology, 15(146), 16-24.

Lee, F. J. (1925). The unruly member. The Church of God Evangel, 16(25), 2.

Lippy, C. H. (1999). Popular religiosity in Central Appalachia. In B. J. Leonard (Ed.), Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in religion (pp. 40-52). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Lovekin, A. A., & Malony, H. N. (1977). Religious glossolalia: A longitudinal study of personality changes. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 16, 383-393.

Lundin, R. W. (1991). Theories and systems in psychology (4th ed.). Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company.

MacRobert, I. (1988). The Black roots and White racism of early Pentecostalism in the USA. London: Macmillan.

Maguire, M. (1981). Confirming the word: Snake handling sects in southern Appalachia. Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress, 38(3), 166-179.

Malony, H. N., & Lovekin, A. A. (1985). Glossolalia: Behavioral science perspectives on speaking in tongues. New York: Oxford University Press.

Martin, C. C. (1917). Hayesville, N.C. The Church of God Evangel, 8(37), 2.

May, R. (1950/1977). The meaning of anxiety. New York: W. W. Norton.

May, R. (1983). The discovery of being. New York: W. W. Norton.

McCauley, D. V. (1995). Appalachian mountain religion: A history. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

McLain, T. L. (1910). The latter rain. The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(1), 7.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1961/1994). Phenomenology of perception. London: Routledge.

Miller, G. R. (1915). Report from Dividing Ridge, Tenn. The Church of God Evangel, 6(44), 4.

Miller, K. A. (1977). Religious revitalization: The serpent handlers of Appalachia. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH.

Mineka, S., Davidson, M., Cook, M., & Deir, R. (1984). Observational conditioning of snake fear in Rhesus Monkeys. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 93(4), 355-372.

Mink, K. (1973). Tennessee snake cult. Argosy, 377(8), 44-45, 86-87.

Minton, S. A., & Minton, M. R. (1980). Venomous reptiles. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Minutes of the eleventh annual Assembly of the Churches of God. (1915). Cleveland, TN: Church of God Publishing House.

Minutes of the fifteenth annual Assembly of the Church of God. (1920). Cleveland, TN: Church of God Publishing House.

Minutes of the sixth annual Assembly of the Churches of God. (1911). Cleveland, TN: Walter E. Rogers Print.

Moore, J. K. (1986). Socio-economic double entendre in the songs of the snake handlers. Hymn, 37(2), 30-36.

Mulkey, N. P. (1915). Soddy, Tenn. The Church of God Evangel, 6(34), 3.

Mundkur, B. (1983). The cult of the serpent. Albany: State University of New York Press.

National affairs: Georgia: Any deadly thing. (1947). Time, 50(10), 25.

Nichol, J. T. (1966). Pentecostalism. New York: Harper and Row.

Nietzsche, F. W. (1974). The gay science. (W. Kauffman, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1887)

Otto, R. (1923). The idea of the holy. New York: Oxford University Press.

Parrish, H. (1980). Poisonous snakebites in the United States. New York: Vantage Press.

Pavelsky, R. L., Hart, A., & Malony, H. N. (1975). Toward a definition of act and process glossolalia: Social, physiological, and personality determinants. Unpublished manuscript, Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary.

Pedrini, L. N., & Pedrini, D. T. (1966). Serpent imagery and symbolism. New

Haven, CN: College and University Press.

Pelton, R. W., & Carden, K. W. (1974). Snake handlers: God fearers? Or fanatics? Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.

Pentecostal Testimony. (1910). Manifestation of the Spirit. The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(17), 3-5.

Persinger, M. A. (1984). Striking EEG profiles from single episodes of glossolalia and transcendental meditation. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 58, 127-133.

Photiadis, J. D. (Ed.). (1978). Religion in Appalachia: Theological, social, and psychological dimensions and correlates. Morgantown: West Virginia University.

Pinney, R. (1981). The snake book. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc.

Pitts, W. F. (1993). Old ship of Zion: The Afro-Baptist ritual in the African diaspora. New York: Oxford University Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience (pp. 41-60). New York: Plenum Press.

Pollio, H. R. (1982). Behavior and existence: An introduction to empirical humanistic psychology. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.

Pollio, H. R. (1990). The stream of consciousness since James. In M. G. Johnson & T. B. Hensley (Eds.), Reflections on the principles of psychology after a century (pp. 271-294). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pollio, H. R., Henley, T. B., & Thompson, C. J. (1997). The phenomenology of everyday life. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Poloma, M. M. (1989). The Assemblies of God at the crossroads. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Pruyser, P. R. (1963). [Review of They shall take up serpents]. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 3(1), 136-137.

Radnitzky, G. (1970). Contemporary schools of metascience. Gothenburg, Sweden: Akademiforlaget.

Reed, R. (1922). Serpent as phallic symbol. Psychoanalytic Review, 9, 91-92.

Religion and snakes. (1914, October 1). The Cleveland Herald, 41(41), 3.

Richardson, J. T. (1973). Psychological interpretations of glossolalia: A reexamination of research. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 12(2), 199-207.

Roberson, G. (1935). Snake handled at Odum, Ga. The Church of God Evangel, 26(27), 9, 15.

Robertson, A. (1950). That old-time religion. Boston: Houghton.

Rousselle, R. (1984). Comparative psychohistory: Snake handling in Hellenistic Greece and the American South. Journal of Psychohistory, 11(4), 477-489.

Rowe, D. (1982). Serpent handling as a cultural phenomenon in Southern Appalachia. Master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

Rowe, D. (1986). Serpent handling as a cultural phenomenon in Southern Appalachia. New York: Carlton Press.

Rubio, M. (1998). Rattlesnake: Portrait of a predator. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press.

Samarin, W. J. (1972a). Sociolinguistics vs. neurophysiological explanations for glossolalia: Comment on Goodman's paper. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 11, 293-296.

Samarin, W. J. (1972b). Tongues of men and angels: The religious language of Pentecostalism. New York: Macmillan.

Samarin, W. J. (1972c). Variation and variables in religious glossolalia. Language In Society, 1, 121-130.

Samarin, W. J. (1973). Glossolalia as regressive speech. Language and Speech, 16(1), 77-89.

Samarin, W. J. (1974). [Review of Speaking in tongues: A cross-cultural study of glossolalia]. Language, 50(1), 207-212.

Sargant, W. (1949). Some cultural group abreactive techniques and their relation to modern treatments. Proceeding of the Royal Society of Medicine, 42(5), 367-374.

Sartre, J. -P. (1943/1956). Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology (H. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library.

Sartre, J. -P. (1957). Existentialism and human emotions (B. Frechtman, Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library.

Schreiter, R. J. (1985). Constructing local theologies. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Schwartz, S. (1999). Faith, serpents, and fire: Images of Kentucky holiness believers. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Schwarz, B. E. (1960). Ordeal by serpents, fire, and strychnine. Psychiatric Quarterly, 34, 405-429.

Shafranske, E. P. (1995). Freudian theory and religious experience. In R. W. Hood, Jr. (Ed.), Handbook of religious experience (pp. 200-230). Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.

Sheehan, T. (1989). The first coming: How the kingdom of God became Christianity. New York: Vintage Books.

Siegler, S. (Producer). (1973). They shall take up serpents [Film]. Skokie, IL: Film Inc.

Simmons, E. L. (1939). Believers and signs. The Church of God Evangel, 30(36), 4.

Simmons, E. L. (1940). Religion and snakes. The Church of God Evangel, 31(14), 4.

Simms, P. (1996). Can somebody shout amen! Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Smith, D. S., & Fleck J. R. (1981). Personality correlates of conventional and unconventional glossolalia. Journal of Social Psychology, 114, 209-217.

Smith, L. (1995). Saving Grace. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Snakes in demand: Church of God adopts new stunts to prove presence of "The Power." (1914, September 17). Cleveland Herald, 41(39), 1.

Spanos, N. P., & Hewitt, E. C. (1979). Glossolalia: A test of the "trance" and

psychopathology hypotheses. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 88(4), 427-434.

Spilka, B., Hood, R. W., Jr., & Gorsuch, R. L. (1985). The psychology of religions: An empirical approach. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Stagg, F., Hinson, E. G., & Oates, W. E. (1967). Glossolalia: Tongue speaking in biblical, historical, and psychological perspective. New York: Abingdon Press.

Stekert, E. (1963). The snake handling sect of Harlan County, Kentucky: Its influence on folk tradition. Southern Folklore Quarterly, 27(4), 316-322.

Strom, A. J., & Malony, H. N. (1979). The use of Kirlian photography to assess altered states of consciousness and group differences between glossolalics and non-glossolalics. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, October, San Antonio, Texas.

Stone, J. (1977). The Church of God of Prophecy history and polity. Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House.

Strong, J. (n. d.). Strong's exhaustive concordance of the Bible. Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible Publishers.

Svorad, D. (1957). "Animal hypnosis" (totstellreflex) as experimental model for psychiatry. Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry, 77, 533-539.

Swanson, G. E. (1978). Trance and possession: Studies of charismatic influence. Review of Religious Research, 19(3), 253-278.

Synan, V. (1988). William Joseph Seymour. In S. M. Burgess, G. M. McGee, & P. H. Alexander (Eds.). Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Synan, V. (1997). The Holiness-Pentecostal tradition: Charismatic movements in the twentieth century. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Tellegen, A., Gerrard, N. L., Gerrard, L. B., & Butcher, J. N. (1969). Personality characteristics of members of a serpent handling religious cult. In J. N. Butcher (Ed.), MMPI: Research developments and clinical applications (pp. 221-242). New York: McGraw-Hill.

The Church of God: Teaching. (1910). The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(12), 3.

Thompson, J. T., Locander, W. B., & Pollio, H. R. (1989). Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. Journal of Consumer Research, 16(9), 133-146.

Tomlinson, A. J. Journal of Happenings. Typed transcript of the original journal archived in the Church of God Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1910). Supernatural occurrences--A little girl's experience. The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(6), 1-2.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1914a). General Overseer's annual address. Echoes from the tenth Annual Assembly of the Churches of God (pp. 6-18). Cleveland, TN: Church of God Publishing House.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1914b). Sensational Demonstrations. The Church of God Evangel, 5(38), 1-3.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1914c). The Assembly. The Church of God Evangel, 5(45), 1-4.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1914d). Faith is developing. The Church of God Evangel, 5(46), 1-3.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1914e). Extracts from an address. The Church of God Evangel, 5(48), 1-3, 7.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1916). Editorial notes. The Church of God Evangel, 7(6), 2.

Tomlinson, A. J. (1922). Manifestations of the spirit. The Faithful Standard, 1(6), 1-2, 12.

Tomlinson, H. A. (1968). The shout of a king. New York: The Church of God, U.S.A. Headquarters.

Tripp, P. S. (1975). Serpent handlers: A case study in deviance. Master's thesis, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

Valle, R. S., King, M., & Halling S. (1989). An introduction to existential-phenomenological thought in psychology. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.). Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience (pp. 3-16). New York: Plenum Press.

Van den Berg, J. H. (1972). A different existence: Principles of phenomenological psychopathology. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Van Hoorebeke, K. (1980). The rhetorical paradigm in the service of the snake handling cult. Master's thesis, Western Illinois University, Macomb.

Van Manen, M. (1990). Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy. Ontario: State University of New York.

Vance, P. R. L. (1975). A history of serpent handlers in Georgia, North Alabama, and Southeastern Tennessee. Master's thesis, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

Watterlond, M. (1983). The Holy Ghost people. Science, 30(May), 50-57.

Watts, A. (1973). The world's most dangerous book. Playboy, 20(12), 119-122, 136, 278-280.

We had the pleasure. (1914). The Church of God Evangel, 5(40), 6.

Whidden, M. T. (1910). Latter rain revival. The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel, 1(1), 3.

Williamson, W. P. (1995). An attributional basis of the Church of God's rejection of serpent-handling. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, March, Savannah, Georgia.

Williamson, W. P. (1998). Response to a research challenge. International Journal for the Psychology of Religion. 8(2), 97-100.

Williamson, W. P., & Pollio, H. R. (1999). The phenomenology of religious serpent handling: A rationale and thematic study of extemporaneous sermons. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 38(2), 203-218.

Womeldorf, J. A. (1947). Rattlesnake religion. Christian Century, 64, 1517-1518.

Wood, W. W. (1965). Culture and personality aspects of the Pentecostal Holiness religion. Paris: Moulton.

Wuest, K. S. (1973). Wuest's word studies: From the Greek New Testament (Vol. 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Wulff, D. M. (1991). Psychology of religion: Classic and contemporary views. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Wulff, D. M. (1998). Does the psychology of religion have a future? Psychology

of Religion Newsletter: American Psychological Association Division 36, 23(4), 1-9.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

As a graduate student in experimental psychology, I am presently engaged in collecting data for doctoral dissertation research. The topic of my research interest is the meaning of serpent-handling in a religious worship setting. My hope is to gain a greater understanding of the experience of serpent-handling and contribute this to the existing literature on the subject.

I am asking you to participate in this endeavor by contributing the data. Specifically, your participation will include a one- to two-hour audio taped interview, during which I will ask you tell me about some times when you have taken up serpents. Since my goal is to understand as much as possible about your experience, I will ask further questions about aspects which seem unclear to me until both of us feel satisfied that it has been communicated as much as it can be. I will also record some non-identifying demographic data - your age, level of education, marital status, length of time you have been a serpent-handling believer, and a handler.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. The risks involved in participating are minimal. You will choose the incidents and experiences you wish to talk about. You are free to discontinue your participation or withdraw from the study at any time, without question or penalty. Many people find that exploring their experiences and communicating them to another person is satisfying. While I cannot promise this will be the case for you, I hope that it will be.

All material obtained from you will be held in strictest confidence. The audiotape, transcript, and demographic data will be identified by code number, rather than your name. This signed consent form will be kept in a locked file drawer, at the address given below, separate from the one where I store the tapes and transcripts. Access to the audiotape of your interview will be restricted to me, the professor who is my advisor, and the typist who transcribes it, all of whom have promised to keep confidentiality. Any potential identifying information in the interview will be edited out of the transcript.

It is possible that this study, when completed, will be published or presented in a public forum, such as a professional conference. By signing this form, you are consenting not only to participate in the interview, but to allow all or part of your interview, as edited and transcribed, to be used in such a publication or presentation.

If you have any questions at this time, or at any point later in the study, please do not hesitate to ask them. If you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of this form to keep, and I encourage you to contact me at the following address any time you have questions or concerns about this research project:

W. Paul Williamson
University of Tennessee
Department of Psychology
401H Austin Peay Building
Knoxville, TN 37996-0900
Phone: (423) 974-6060

I have read the above Information and Consent Form, and agree to participate in this project, as well as to have all or part of my interview, as transcribed and edited, included in any publication or presentation of the completed study.

Name: Date:

Signature: _____

APPENDIX B

A SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (P17)

I. As you know I'm interested in learning more about what taking up serpents means to people who follow the Lord in the fullness of the signs, and one of the best ways you can help me to understand that is to think about some times that you've taken up serpents and describe for me those times--what was going on, and what you were experiencing at those times, so can you think about one particular time?

P. There's one that always comes to mind when I'm asked that question. One night the Lord had spoken to me and He had told me to go into a box of copperheads and there was probably, I don't know, between six and ten copperheads in a wad in the box. And in fact I have it on film at home, and the Lord spoke and said, "Take up the copperheads," and I said, "Lord, if it's--If you really want me to do that, just have Mom to go in and get them out for me. And He said, "No, you do it." And I said, "Lord, please, just let Mom go in the box and get them out for me, and I'll handle them." He said, "No, you do it." So I went in, and I got the whole wad of copperheads out, and I just really had a great blessing. I was really anointed. And the anointing, I don't know how to explain it to you. It's, I guess, probably like trying to explain colors to somebody that's been blind since birth, it's just such a feeling of love and peace and goodness, and you just feel like you could just hug the whole world--your worst enemies on up, you know.

I. Yeah.

P. And I really--Why that stands out in my mind is Mom had gotten up to testify later on in the service and she had stated that she had wanted to go in the box and get those copperheads, but she knew that she wasn't suppose to, so she didn't. And that was a witness to me. The Lord was just showing me that I could do it if I had the faith, and because I was just afraid to go in the box and get that many copperheads out, because I had just started giving my life back over to the Lord at that time--and this was a couple of years ago--and I had been out in sin for 12 years, and it was just, you know, you have to get your faith built back up.

I. Okay.

P. And not so much in God, but in yourself that you feel worthy to do it, and, you know, you really have to have your life in order when you go in that box, or you <u>better</u> have, because that could be instant death, and if you're not ready to go-- ... Just because you die of a serpent bite, I don't feel it's a one-way ticket into heaven. If you're not living right you're no more saved than anyone else ... And another time ...

I. Let me ask you a few things about this so I can understand it a little bit better. You said

that whenever you were in service that God spoke to you.

P. Yeah.

I. And I'm wondering, what is it like to have God speak to you?

P. It is a very quite thing. He doesn't BOOM at you, and a lot of times if you're not really in the spirit, and you're not listening, and you don't have your mind on God, you will miss what He tells you. You know, you'll think it is just a thought that's floated through your head. It's just a very soft, very soft spoken ... like, whatever He tells you, a simple command, whatever--like He said, "Get the copperheads." And, you know, you think there's something. You don't even talk out loud, and I just--Like when you pray silently, sometimes, and I just said, "Lord, please let Mom get them out," and He said, "No, you do it." It's like someone talking to you, only you don't actually hear the physical voice.

I. So it's not an audible voice.

P. It's not an audible voice. It's almost like you're thinking, but you know the difference, if you really have your mind on God.

I. How do you know the difference? How do you come to that?

P. Because, quite frankly, I wasn't going to go into a box of copperheads on my own. You just know. When you have the Holy Ghost, you have the spirit inside you, you know. It's like ... I don't know. Have you ever had an instinct and just known something without any physical reason? You just had an intuition ... a gut feeling? It's similar to that. That's the best way I can explain it. There's really no words, I don't think, in the vocabulary of humans to describe this, because it's really not a flesh thing. It's spiritual, and if you don't have that spirit, you don't understand it. You can't understand it. It's beyond human comprehension. It's what the Bible refers to as a carnal mind, a worldly mind. You have to have a spiritual mind and have the spirit in you so that you can understand. Did that clear up anything?

I. That helps a lot. So here you are, you're standing there in the service, and there's singing and worship going on at this time?

P. Yeah.

I. And then God speaks to you and tells you to go to this box where there are serpents, copperheads.

P. You just know. He just gives you that knowledge. You know, you've been there [at church]. You've seen there's several boxes there. There could be a box of copperheads

here, and a box over here, and rattlers and copperheads, whatever. I just knew which one He was talking about, I just knew because He let me have ... have that knowledge, I guess.

I. And you hesitated. What is it like to be there and thinking that's God speaking to you, and you are hesitating on that?

P. I think, you're still human, you know, you're still human. You have this fear in you but you still--And then the devil too is going, you know. You've got him over here going, "No, don't do that," because that's what the Lord wants you to do and he's going to tell you not to do it. And I people will probably think, "Oh, they hear little voices in their head." It's not that type of thing. It's ... You know. I mean you just know the voice of the Lord, and the Bible says you will know His voice and a stranger you will not follow. But it's a still voice and, like I said, sometimes the flesh will come override the spirit, you know. You can disobey God, you know, just like you can break a commandment. If the Lord speaks and tells you to do something you can not do it. You have that choice not to do it. I mean He doesn't physically take you and put you in there. You still have that choice to say, "No." I mean you want to be obedient to the Lord when you serve Him.

I. Okay ... I also remember you saying something about there being a great blessing to this. Can you say a little bit more about this?

P. It's just, like I said, it's a feeling of love, just great. It's a euphoria. It's like the happiest moment you've ever had in your entire life, and ten fold. It's just a great happiness, peace, love. It's just a good feeling. It's a very, very, extremely good feeling. It's better than any high you could ever get from alcohol or drugs or anything like that ... It's just being so ... Well, God is love and you just feel this great love, and it's just a happy feeling. You just feel so happy. All the cares are careless. You don't care about anything. All your worries are gone for the point in time where you're anointed.

I. Okay. You said something about the anointing. Did you experience any of the anointing of God at this time?

P. Yeah. I have handled serpents on faith, but I prefer to have the anointing, and you know. It's like anything else. You just know ... And you'll know, too, if the Lord speaks and tells you to pray for someone ... you know ... there's an anointing. The anointing is all from God. It's all a blessing from God. But you have the anointing like to pray for the sick. You have the anointing to speak in tongues. You have the anointing to take up serpents. You have the anointing to handle fire. You have the anointing to drink strychnine. I've had the Lord speak and tell me to drink strychnine. I've had the Lord speak and tell me to pray for somebody, and it's all still--It's a commandment from God, but you feel the love and you want to do these things. You want to help others when He tells you to pray for someone, but you know what the Lord wants you to do.

I. What is it like to feel the anointing? Is that different from the blessing that you're describing? How do you know when you're experiencing the anointing?

P. When you get anointed, that is a blessing. It's kind of an interchangeable feeling. We refer to it as getting a blessing because it feels so good. Like I said, "You're so carefree and loving and peaceful and everything. And it is a blessing to feel that anointing. It's just ... Do you understand what I'm saying? Have I clarified it?

I. Okay ... Let me just kind of put it back within the context of what you were describing as you were being spoken to by God to take up serpents out of the box. You're there. God is speaking to you. You did say that you did felt the anointing at that time. Can you tell me how it was for you?

P. Like I said, the only thing I can explain is just a feeling of love and peace and carefree--no trouble--just peace, I guess, is probably the biggest thing. You just feel so ... It's almost like you step outside of yourself, and you just leave all of your worries and cares behind, and all you have on your mind is God. Yeah. There's nothing else ... That's the best way that I can--I don't know. I told in an interview the other day that it's something probably more extreme even than the astronauts when they first stepped on the moon--that feeling of euphoria that they must have had. I mean, it's much greater than that, but it's really hard to explain the feeling of the anointing unless you've actually felt it, you know. It's just very difficult to explain, and you just have to feel it. It's like--I don't know ... You can't really explain what it's like--and I don't even really like to use this analogy--but you can't explain to someone else what it's like to be drunk, or to be high on drugs or whatever. It's just a feeling that is wonderful above anything else that you would ever feel.

I. Okay. When God was speaking to you, and you felt the anointing, what happened then? You went into the box?

P. I went to the box and unlocked it and ...

I. What was it like reaching inside that box? Do you remember that?

P. It was just a ... At that point I had no fear, no fear whatsoever.

I. And you did beforehand.

P. Yeah, before I became obedient, and I was standing there, and I was, "Lord, let Mom take them out." But the fear--I knew that if, I would go in that box, I wouldn't be hurt because the Lord just wanted me to know that I could do that--that that fear should not stop me because, you know, fear is a torment about anything. If you have a fear of spiders, or whatever, fear is just a torment, and when you're truly anointed, and you accept that anointing--You have the choice, like I said, to not accept it. But if you accept that

anointing, all fear goes. I mean you have no fear because you know that you're right there in the palm of God's hand, and that you're going to be okay.

I. That's a good place to be, isn't it?

P. It is, and it's a wonderful feeling. Like I said, you can't explain it.

I. So you opened up this box, and you had no fear, and you reached in, and what happened?

P. I just scooped them up, and I stood there, and I held them, and I just praised God for His blessings, His anointing, for the victory for not being bitten. And then, when He spoke and told me to put them up, I put them back in the box. And He didn't have to tell me twice to do that.

I. Was there anything going on? Do you remember anything going on with you when you were there just holding these poisonous serpents?

P. I was just praising God's name, and thanking Him for His love and His mercy, and for the anointing. That's all. You keep your mind on God. That's all. You're just praising His name ... You keep your mind on God.

I. How did you know that the time had come for you to put them back in the box?

P. The same way I knew when it was time to take them up. He spoke and said, "Put them up now." You just know. You just know.

I. You put them back in the box. What did you do after you put them back?

P. I just praised the Lord that I didn't get bit. If I had been bitten, that would have been fine, too. I would have still praised His name if He had seen fit for me to be bitten, for whatever reason. That would have been fine, too. But of course I would rather not be bitten, but I just--When you're in church, that's mostly what you do. You just praise God's name, and if you're a singer, you sing your praises. If you're just standing there, you just praise His name. You just have your mind on God through the whole service.

I. Okay ... You said something about being worthy to do this.

P. Well, when you first start church, you have done so many things out in the world that--I mean I didn't go out and kill anybody or get into drugs, or anything like that, but I went to some night clubs, and drank socially, and cursed, and smoked, and did things, and wore pants, and things that the church did not believe in--and which, I wasn't doing them at that time, but you just feel so unworthy because God is so great, and He is so awesome, and

we're really just filthy rags at our best, compared to God, and I just--I really didn't think--I thought Lord, "I've been out. I turned my back on you for 12 years," and I just didn't--You know, it's like I didn't feel worthy of that blessing because I had done so much wrong. Does that clarify what--I just didn't feel worthy to have such a wonderful blessing from God because I just felt like that I had been wrong for so long. As I said, this was back when I had very first given my life back over to the Lord.

I. Right. You mentioned about being bitten. Have you ever been bitten?

P. No.

I. You never have. Thank God for that.

P. Yes, praise the Lord for that.

I. What does it mean when someone is bitten?

P. I'm not being flippant, but they're just bitten. I don't think there's ... Well, sometimes I think there may be something that you've been really disobedient to the Lord about. Other times, it may be a sign from the Lord that--because they tell so many things, like the serpents are milked, which is impossible to do because they recharge their venom in less than three seconds. Isn't that right? Something like that--that we defang them, that we charm them, that we freeze them, that we ... I mean they just tell--"they" being the "world," I guess--I don't know who "they" are supposed to be ... [laughs] ... People tell that we do all these things in order to able to handle these serpents. I know you've been around when people have been bitten. They suffer. They swell. You cannot get an immunity to these serpents. You can ask DC. He's been bitten 150 times, I think, and some his last bites have been the ones that have about took him out of this world. And sometimes, like I said, it's a sign to someone else to see that this is not a show. This is not fake. This is not a carnival. Sometimes the Lord wants you to--maybe you've gotten too haughty, you know, you just think you're the grandest thing because you can do that. And sometimes, maybe the Lord has told you to put it up, and you've gotten in yourself, and you wanted to go on with it, and He'll let you get bitten. And I know your next question is going to be: "What does it mean when somebody dies?" I don't know, other than, just that was the way that the Lord wanted them to go. My mom's sister was bitten and died when she was only 23. I don't know. I don't have all the answers. I don't think any of us do. I don't know that my grandmother or my grandfather could answer that question. It's just ... I know it's a pat answer, but it was the Lord's will. And if you're bitten, you're just ... Sometimes maybe it's to bring the church together because there's never any more unity than when someone is very, very sick or they are serpent bit, or something like. Sometimes, it's to bring the church back together. Maybe there's been a little argument here or there between somebody, or maybe people are just drifting apart, like families do, and the Lord wants you back closer together. I really don't know. There could be a

million and one reasons, and I really can't question God. I just accept it, and just pray that if it's His will that they survive, and if it's not His will that they not suffer much. We're all in the hands of God. Why does anyone get in a car wreck? Why does anyone get killed in a car wreck? And I know that that has nothing to do with the serpent handling, cause people wonder, "Well, that's different." But I don't know. I don't know. I don't have the answers, and I don't pretend to have the answers. But I do know this: I don't think that if someone is bitten that--and they die--I don't think it's because that they have this big sin in their life. I just think that's the way the Lord wanted to take them out of the world, as opposed to a car wreck, or a cancer, or whatever?

I. So it's the will of God ultimately.

P. It's the will of God, right.

I. You also mentioned a few minutes ago something about the Lord gave you the victory. Can you say a little bit more about what victory is?

P. That is just that you don't let that fear hit you, because sometimes you will. You'll let that fear, you know--Usually, when I let that fear hit me, if I can't get it to leave, if I can't get victory over it, I just put the serpent up because, when you have that fear, you've got your mind on something besides God. You've got your mind on other, you know, different things and also, of course, that it didn't bite you. Very simply that's all it is.

I. Okay. Are you--when you are handling the serpent, for example, in this instant you mentioned--are you aware of anything else that's going on around you at that time?

P. Yes you are, but you're not focused on it. It's just kind of on your peripheral. You're not totally out of your mind, you know, so to speak. You're still aware of where you are and what you're doing and who's around you and things like that. You're just not focused on it. It's just on the outside of your awareness.

I. And the focus is on...

P. On the serpent and on God--mostly on God. I mean I have handled the serpent with my eyes closed but ...

I. Are you aware of how the serpent feels in your hands as you are taking up the serpent?

P. You know, I've often thought about that after I've handled one ... You're not focused on it, but yet, if you actually stop and think about it, you're not thinking about it at the time because, I guess, the anointing-- ... Sometimes your hands will go kind of numb and tingly, and you don't really feel the serpent per se--you know, the skin of the serpent--but really, when you're so focused on God, you don't really pay that much attention to how it

feels. You're not focused on it. Like I said, you're main focus is God. I mean you're on a one-way street with God.

I. You said your fingers feel tingly?

P. Yes.

I. How is that? I mean, is that related to the anointing?

P. I guess it's just the anointing. Yeah.

I. Do you feel the anointing in you any other ways?

P. Sometimes the anointing will be so strong you'll just get weak. It's like, if you ran ten miles or something, you're just weak because the spirt of God is so strong that--You know, sometimes, it's stronger even than this flesh, and you just get weak because the physical flesh just cannot stand up to that kind of power. You know, you just get weak, and sometimes I have seen people falling, falling on the ground, and it's just the power of God. It's just so strong. It's like when, at Mawmaw's grave-service on ... I'm thinking it was Sunday night. You weren't there. The power of God was so strong, it was like a mist in the church. It was just--You can see the evidence of the power of God, when it is strong enough. Like I said, it can be strong enough it can just make your body just go limp, and you can see it like a mist in the air. It's just because there are so many people there, so focused on God, and there's so much of His power that He is just pouring down on you, in that area, that you can actually--Kind of like when the children of Israel saw the cloud that led them by day and the pillar of fire by night, it's just a mist that you can see--the power of God.

I. And everyone experiences it all the same time when it's on that scale?

P. I won't say-- ... Everyone that's focused will. Everyone that has their mind-- ... Now there may be somebody over here, you know, that's talking to Jane Doe beside of them. They're not-- ... Now if they would look, and if they had-- ... Sinner people, I don't think, pay a lot of attention to it because they don't know what to look for, and they don't know what to feel, but, yeah, if you're focused on the Lord, and you're actually participating and praising God and in the service, you will feel it, and you will see it.

I. Okay ... You mentioned something about your faith being built back up. Do you recall that? What did you mean by that--your faith being built back up?

P. Well, when you first, like I said, when you've been out in the world, and you turn your life back over to God, it's hard to get your mind focused back on the Lord because, sometimes, you'll stand there and you're praising God, but you'll be thinking about

something that you just needed to do after church, or that you've done before church, or whatever, and you have to get back into being able to get yourself focused on God because you're used to your mind just going in fifty thousand different directions. And you know ... You don't exactly forget how strong the power of God is exactly, but in a way you do. You know what I'm saying? You just--In the back of your mind, you remember what it's like, but your consciousness--you've kind of lost contact with that. It's kind of like, you don't know how much you're going to miss somebody until they're gone ... Well, you need to get your faith built back up in yourself mostly. It's not so much God even than yourself because, like I said, you don't feel worthy because you feel like you have done God wrong by doing these things that you've been commanded not to do.

I. Okay. You mentioned about--when you were talking about the anointing--you also mentioned about you had handled by faith? Did I understand you to say that?

P. Yeah.

I. Can you think about a time that you did handle by faith?

P. I've had someone offer, "Did I want to take it?" And I've taken it just because I knew I had the right to do that because the Bible says, "They shall take up serpents." It doesn't say that you have to be anointed. It doesn't say that you have to wait on the anointing. I just feel safer waiting on the anointing because--especially if it's a really mean serpent--and I think if you're anointed and you get bitten, you're that much closer to victory. That's just my personal opinion. That's just how I think.

I. Yeah, that's what I'm interested in--what your experience is.

P. Someone else may totally disagree with that, but, like I said, you don't have to be anointed to handle serpents because you have that commandment, "Whosoever believes shall take up serpents." But now, for instance, if I was to walk out this door right now, and there would be a copperhead or a rattler laying out there, I'd probably run back in here ... [laughs] ... But if I felt like the Lord said, "Stop and pray," and I felt like I got a hold of the Lord, I would reach down and take it up. I sure would--if I felt like that's what the Lord wanted me to do. If not, I'd run just anyone else.

I. Right behind me.

P. Yeah, exactly. But I have handled them without actually being anointed to begin with, and a lot of times, if you take it on faith like that, the Lord will pour the anointing down on you.

I. Can you think about a specific time that you did handle by faith?

P. Yeah.

I. Tell me what was going on in the service that led up to that.

P. The same thing that's usually going on: just singing, music playing, praising God, nothing out of the ordinary. RE, he turned around and handed out a black rattler towards me, and if I wanted it, I could take it. If not, I didn't have to. And I reached out and took a hold of the serpent and handled it. Later, he said that the Lord had told him to turn around and give it to me. I think that was right after PB had died, and you always ... I guess I was just standing there thinking about him and how the serpent handling ... They had taken his kids and all that, and I wasn't really--I mean I was praising God and everything, but I wasn't 100% focused on God like I should have been. I just--but I knew, like I said, I could take that serpent on faith.

I. So here's RE, and he's handling. Others were handling as well at that time?

P. The best I can remember.

I. And there he is, and then he turns around and offers you that serpent. What goes through you at that point?

P. You stop and you, more or less, you say, "Lord, should I?" Because you never want to do anything out of the will of the Lord, cause it's like disobeying your parents. Somewhere down the line, you're going to be chastised for it. I just asked the Lord, "Should I take it?" And this goes on very briefly. It doesn't take five minutes, and I just felt like--I felt like the Lord wanted me to take it, so I took it, but I wasn't actually anointed at the time. Of course the anointing came to me after that. I got that blessing, that feeling of peace, and everything that you get with the anointing.

I. But initially you acted on faith, just believing because the Bible says, "They shall take up serpents"?

P. Yeah.

I. And then you did reach. Did it [the anointing] come at the time that you took it, or afterwards?

P. Very briefly afterwards.

I. Did you handle it long?

P. Not long. For a few minutes. Until I felt like, you know, that it was time to give it back--I think I reached it back to RE.

I. Well, did the anointing leave before or at the time you handed it back to him?

P. No. No. Sometimes, you know, if you stay focused on God, and don't let something else come into your mind, the anointing stays right there. I mean I have gotten a blessing and never even handled a serpent. The anointing will come down on you just to give you a blessing. You don't have to handle a serpent, or pray for somebody, or drink strychnine, or any of the signs. The Lord will bless you for just simply being obedient to Him, and because you're praising His name, and you're getting focused on Him, and you're getting in the spirit.

I. Okay ... Often times, I've heard individuals and even you talk today about when you do handle by faith, God speaks. And then, even when you handle by the anointing, God speaks. So God speaks in either case?

P. Yeah. He can. Sometimes He doesn't speak to you. Just like I said, I stopped and asked the Lord, "Should I?"--in other words, if it wasn't out of His will for me to take that serpent. You like to check with God. It's kind of like a two year-old when they get to that infant stage. They'll run ahead, but they'll always look back to make sure their parents are there. That's just my personal thing. I just like to get a feel for things and see what the Lord wants me to do because I try not to do anything if it's out of His will. I don't take a job. I don't--There's a lot of things I pray about. This interview ... I told you when you asked me, I said I would have to pray about it. I didn't answer you immediately. And it's been what? Almost a year? Well a year now I guess. I try not to do anything without-- ... I don't even go out and buy a vehicle without praying about it first because I feel like, if the Lord makes a way, and it's in the will of the Lord-- ... Because I think you can go out here and buy a big car, and it not be in the will of the Lord, and you not really need it, or whatever, and it's not going to profit you anything. But if it's something you need, the Lord will make a way for you, and I just like to make sure that everything I do is in the will of the Lord.

I. So that I can understand and get it clarified in my mind a little bit better, can you tell me how that handling by the anointing is different from handling by faith?

P. The feeling is much stronger--the blessings, the euphoria is much stronger--is the only difference.

I. And you said something about the anointing being that--feeling that it's safe.

P. Yeah. Saf-er.

I. Can you say what it is to feel saf-er in that situation?

P. It's just not having the fear. If you take it by faith, you're going to have a certain

amount of fear there, as opposed to, when you have the anointing, all fear is gone.

I. So by faith, there is still fear that is there.

P. For some people. Like I said, that's my personal belief. With somebody else, that may not be.

I. What is it like to be down front in the service when others are around you taking up serpents and you to be worshiping in that context? What is it like to be there participating in church?

P. I'm not sure exactly what you're asking me.

I. For example, when you were down front, and RE was handling the serpent--and I'm assuming you were worshiping the Lord, which is commonly what is done by everybody ... Whenever serpents are taken up, people--I have seen--come down and begin to worship God. What is it like to be in that particular setting down front? What goes on with you at that time.

P. Well, the best I can answer that--the best I can understand what you're saying--I praise the Lord. I have a good feeling, a happy feeling, and I'm praising the Lord and doing what He's told me to do. And when someone else is handling a serpent, you pray for them, you know, you pray, "Lord, give them the victory. Lord, have mercy. Lord, help them." You just watch and pray for your brother or sister that they'll be safe, and you just praise His name. You just continue to praise His name. That is really the whole point of anything--of the whole church service, of being a Christian. In all that, you're just praising His name, and that's what you do in the service. You sing praises. You play music. You play praises, and that's what you're doing when someone else is handling a serpent. You're glad for them that they're getting a blessing--you know, like you would be happy for someone else that bought a new home, or whatever. Does that answer what you're asking?

I. I think so.

P. It's just a feeling that you're happy. You're just focused on God, and that's all I can keep saying is ... you're focused on God.

I. You mentioned earlier that, I believe, your aunt, CH, was handling, and she was bitten and later died. Were you there at that service?

P. Yes and no ... [laughs] ... My mother was carrying me at the time ... [laughs] ... Yeah, she died the year I was born.

I. Okay, I wasn't sure exactly when that was.

P. I couldn't resist that ... [laughs]

I. That's good. That's good. That's good. Okay ... You mentioned that you had also drunk strychnine. Can you tell me about a particular time that you did that, and what was going on in the service?

P. I was 16 years old, and my grandmother, BE, she had poured some out in a lid, and she just reached it out to me. If I wanted to take it, I could take it. If not, you know ... And I did take it, and I felt like--I asked the Lord, and I did take it, and I did drink it.

I. You did you drink it more by faith than the anointing?

P. Yeah.

I. What was going on with you at that time when your grandmother held this out to you?

P. I had never--I was only 16 years old, and I had never drunk strychnine. And the thought crossed my mind, "What will this do to me? What if it does hurt me?" But of course, I was only 16 at the time. I didn't have a--and I had only been a Christian, probably, just a few months at the time. And I did have the Holy Ghost at that time, and I knew that that was--as long as you have the Holy Ghost, I felt like, if you die, you're going to go to heaven. Having never done that before, the thought did cross my mind, "Will this hurt me? Or what will it do if it does?" Sometimes, you just, what they call, "get down on it." You just feel some of the symptoms of the poison, but you don't actually die. But I had no symptoms. It did not hurt me at all.

I. After you drank it, did you give it back to your grandmother?

P. Yeah.

I. What was going with you then?

P. I was, like I said, just praising God, and was singing, and singing praises to the Lord. And then there was another time that I was anointed, and I felt like the Lord was wanting me to go get the strychnine, and I had went up on the pulpit. But I've only drunk strychnine probably, maybe three or four times. But I've never been hurt. It never hurt me. And I did drink enough, probably, to have killed me.

I. And so this time that you were anointed to drink strychnine, could you say a little bit more about that?

P. It's just--It's similar to the anointing for praying for the sick or handling a serpent. It's just that euphoria ... You just know what the Lord wants you to do.

I. What is it like--either drinking strychnine, a solution that can potentially kill, or handling a serpent that can potentially kill--what is it like after you put the serpent down, you put the strychnine bottle down, knowing that you have done that?

P. I didn't do it. The Lord did.

I. Okay. What is it like for you knowing that the Lord did it through you?

P. It's wonderful, and it's just ... It's so hard to explain. It's just something that you really would have to experience. It's just a feeling of well-being ... just, you know ... It's just wonderful! I mean you just have this feeling of, of ... It's awesome. There's just no words. There are really no words that can describe it. You know, it's just a great feeling of goodness, greatness.

I. And this is what you're describing as the victory?

P. Yeah.

I. Or is the victory different from that?

P. Well if you drank poison, and you knew that it was enough to kill you, and you'd handled a serpent, how would you feel?

I. Well, I'm asking you? Is victory different ...

P. [laughs] ... That's what I'm saying. Yeah, you know, of course you feel better if you've not been bitten, or if you don't get hurt on the poison, but if you do, you still praise the Lord. Of course, like I said, I've never been bitten, and I've never gotten hurt with the poison, so I really don't know what it feels like on the flip side of that. I know that I would go ahead and praise the Lord. I would be thankful, because if that's what He wanted, and it's the will of the Lord, then I want to do it because He said those that suffered with Him would reign with Him. And if you don't lay down your life for Him, then you can't take it up again in the afterlife.

I. Okay ... Is there another time that you've taken up serpents that stands out in your mind?

P. I think one time I was pregnant with my son, and the Lord had spoken and told me to get out a rattler out of a box. You know, I just wanted to make sure it was Him and everything. The anointing came down on me so strong that I had went across the press area, as we refer to it, and I just, the Lord just, it was almost like He just threw me down in front of that box. I mean I was just so anointed I just fell down in front of that box.

I. On the floor?

P. On the floor, and I just reached up, and unlocked it, and lifted the lid up, and reached in, and got it. And that was a real good anointing. You have different strengths of that. It's like sometimes you're just happy, and sometimes you're really happy, and sometimes you're just totally--I hate to keep using the same adjectives--but there's different degrees of it. You know, you can go from being happy, to being very happy, to extremely happy in the anointing.

I. You did say that you were carrying your child at the time?

P. Yeah.

I. And you were in service, and you said you walked across the press. What is the press?

P. The press area up front where we keep the serpents and all that--up where we, the believers, stand up front and we praise God, and all that, as opposed to doing it in the back where everyone else is.

I. So it's a restricted area.

P. Yeah.

I. It's called the press area.

P. Yeah. That's where we stand up there and press for the spirit and praise God, and that way, it's safe for the people that come in from the outside. You know, the serpents are always kept up in the front part of the church, as opposed to what people tell on us--that we just dump them out everywhere, all through the congregation and all. But I was up in the press area.

I. And you pressed for the spirit?

P. But I was on one side. The serpent box that I was to go into was on this side of the church, and I was over here--was what my point was--and it was like the Lord just pushed me over this way and just, "This is where you go."

I. What was going on with you before God pushed you over there. I mean, what were you doing in service?

P. I was just singing and praising His name and maybe clapping my hands.

I. And then, what happened?

P. I just knew that He wanted me to--His spirit just came down on me very, very strong, strongly, and I knew what He wanted me to do. He just spoke and told me.

I. Did you have any hesitancy or anything?

P. No.

I. And you just what ...

P. I was just, like I said, I was so weak, and I was making my way over to that box, and it was like, you know, the spirit was so strong, and I was just--right there in the floor I went. I just couldn't even stand up, the power was so strong.

I. You went down before you got to the serpent box?

P. Yeah. Like right in front of it.

I. And then what happened?

P. I just, like I said, I just stayed right down, and I got up, and I just opened up the box, unlocked it and opened up the box, and got the serpent out and handled it. Then when I felt like it was time to put it up, I put it up. No. Actually, if I'm not mistaken--Excuse me, I take that back. I think my grandfather reached and took it from me.

I. Did you handle it for very long?

P. Probably ... I don't know ... four or five minutes maybe.

I. And you just knew when it was time to put it back up.

P. Yeah.

I. After you had given the serpent back to your grandfather, what happened with you then?

P. I just praised the Lord for the victory that I had escaped a bite one more time, and I just thanked Him for that blessing that He gave me--that feeling of happiness. You don't know what it's like--I mean you go out here all week long, and you have to deal with the world, and cares of the world just like anybody else. Only, if you turn your life over to the Lord, it's not as bad, but you still, you still--especially like, you might even worry about your kids, and blah, blah, blah, but not as badly as someone that doesn't have the Lord in their life because they don't have that faith to know that the Lord is going to take care of them.

I. Okay ... You said, in both of these encounters of taking up serpents, you said that you went to the box. Are there times you don't go to the box?

P. Oh yes. There's been times that I've taken a serpent from someone else. I've reached out--and someone had one--and I've reached out and taken it.

I. Okay. Is there a difference between taking it from someone else and going to the box.

P. Some people will tell you no, but for me, it takes more faith to take it out of the box because ... I don't know. It just seems like that you're more likely to get bitten if you take it out of the box because the serpent's in there. It's undisturbed, and then you just go in, and it startles them to start with. I mean, they'll bite at any time. You know that. They can be handled for 15 minutes, and then just all of a sudden reach out and bite you. But, for me, it just seems to take more faith. You know, just that anointing needs to be a little stronger. But there is really no difference as far as safety, really, it's just kind of in your mind, you feel--for me. Now Dewy might tell you something else, but for me, it just seems to take more faith to actually go in the box and get it out. Because, if it's already out, and somebody's handling, your flesh-mind says, "Oh, well, they've got it. It hasn't bitten them. I can handle it." I mean thoughts like that do flit through your mind.

I. Yeah. That makes sense. It sure does.

P. They shouldn't, but they do. It's the same power that goes in that box as takes it from someone else. It's the same God. It's just in you--how much faith you have in you.

I. So it requires a stronger faith.

P. For myself.

I. And a stronger anointing.

P. For myself.

I. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about some experiences you've had when you've taken up serpents?

P. None that I can think of. I mean, it's just like I said, it's just really hard to describe. There just really aren't any words that-- ... Because it is a spiritual thing, and we don't have spiritual words, and it's just a power that you have to experience to even understand. I mean, if I look at Mom and say, "Boy, I was really anointed for that serpent." She knows exactly what I mean because she's experienced that. You can't really understand what I mean because you've not experienced that. Should you ever experience it, you would. It's hard to explain to people that ... It's like, I don't know, anything that you do that you try

to explain to someone else the feeling of doing it--like riding a motorcycle to someone that's never ridden a motorcycle. You know, it's just hard to describe ... I mean, I have an education, and everything, but it doesn't matter how much education you have or don't have, it's just a feeling. That's the bottom line. It's a feeling. There are no words. It's just a feeling, and it's beyond anything--the greatest thing that you could ever imagine, it's beyond that.

I. Well you've certainly done a good job describing it in different ways. You sure have.

[At this point, the participant had concluded her descriptions of serpent handling experiences, and then was asked to describe her feelings about a few other issues related to serpent handling.]

I. You mentioned earlier that your vocation is in the medical field. Sometimes people seek medical aid for a serpent bite, and sometimes they don't. Given that your field is in the medical, I was wondering what your reaction is to that.

P. As a nurse, it is very hard, as far as the flesh part is concerned, to watch someone suffer. I mean it's hard anyway, but knowing--being in the medical field and knowing that there are things that can-- ... Alright, you can take a pain pill and alleviate the pain. But what you have to understand, and what people don't understand is, they say, "Well you go to the doctor for a heart attack," or "You go to your doctor for cancer," or whatever, diabetes, blood pressure ... The best way I can explain is those things are physical. With the serpent bite, it's a spiritual thing. Of course, we administer CPR should someone go into cardiac arrest. If there's someone around that can do CPR, we do do that. Everyone is always--and I would like to stress this--everyone that is ever bitten is always, <u>always</u> offered medical attention ... always without exception. They can either accept, or they can refuse. You are not looked down on. They are not ostracized. They are not ... anything, if they choose to go to the hospital or get medical attention. It just depends on the person's faith. And you don't know--I can't say. I've never been bitten. I've never come that close to death. I don't know how I would react. I'm not saying I won't go to the hospital. I'm saying I hope I don't. I don't think I would because I would just put my faith in the Lord. And like I said, people say, "Well you put your faith in doctors for anything else." It's different when it's the sign because it is a spiritual thing. That's the best way I can explain that. If it's a car wreck, or a disease, it's physical whereas, with the serpent handling, a serpent bite is spiritual.

I. Okay. Have you ever been to a service where one has been fatally bitten?

P. Not in the service. I've never actually ... Come to think of it, I really have never been there. I've seen them come very, very close. Actually, I wasn't even in church, but one time Mom was bitten and she died, and they prayed and brought her back. I mean they brought her back to life. She had stopped breathing.

I. You were there at the time?

P. I was there. I was 19. I was backslidden on the Lord, but I was there. I actually saw it with my own eyes.

I. You did? What happened in that service? Do you remember much about it?

P. I was not at the service. I was at--afterwards when she had died. They had taken her to her home. At that time, she had lived across the road in front of the church.

I. Can you talk a little bit about that, the best you remember about it?

P. It's really ... It was really a hard time for me because I wasn't--my life was not turned over to the Lord, and it was very hard for me to lay there--watch my Mom lay there and suffer and watch her die. I mean it's hard to lose anyone. It was just an extremely difficult time for me, but when she died, and they brought her back, that was just wonderful. You just really see how powerful and almighty that God is. I mean, He is just everything. He's everything. He has all power. He has all power over everything ... sickness .. and He has all wisdom. He has all victory. He is just the ultimate of everything and anything.

I. Were you there before she died?

P. Yes. I was helping take care of her. I can remember this. I will never forget this. She way lying on the bed, and the saints were around her, and they were praying and everything. I remember she was laying there, and she started looking around the room at each and every person that was in that room, and I knew ... This look that she had in her eye--just a mother/daughter bond--and she just had this half-smile on her face, and she just looked at everyone in that room like she was looking at them for the last time. And I remember so clearly, I said, "Mom, don't." Because I knew what she was going to do. She was going to close her eyes and go to sleep forever, and I said, "Mom, don't." She just closed her eyes. Her eyes just rolled back in her head, and she just--and her eyes closed, and she was gone. She had stopped breathing ... everything. My sister B just went into hysterics, and they put them out of the room. Dewey and BH--he's passed on now--they got up in that bed, right up in her face, and they were screaming and praying. I mean they were yelling and praying and asking God to bring her back, and asking God for victory. After a few minutes, she came back, and it was just awesome! Don't ask me how that felt because I cannot even begin to explain that. It was just awesome. It was wonderful. I mean when you've seen the dead raised, you've seen something, and you know that the Almighty has all power ... over doctors, over everything.

I. It's ultimately in His hands, isn't it?

P. Why that happened? Maybe for me, because I was just so upset. At that time I was

resentful of the serpent handling because that's all I was, was flesh. I didn't--I wasn't serving God. And that was just the flesh part of me. You know, losing my mother to a serpent bite, that was just not acceptable to me at that time.

I. What kind of effect did that have on you immediately afterward?

P. I had even thought to myself, "If she dies, I will never handle another serpent." It changed my mind. I thought that the Lord was showing me, "I can take her, or I can leave her here, and it's my choice--not yours." Really I think the Lord wanted me to come back to Him, too.

I. Did you turn around shortly after that, or was that a turning point in your life?

P. That was another turning point. I think there, after a little while, I did give my life back over to the Lord. Of course I had backslidden again after that. That was when I was out there 12 years ... But I would like to mention that I believe all five signs, not because I've been taught from grandparents, parents, whatever, cause, like I said, I was away from it for a long time. I believe it because that's what the Bible says. It's not because it's something I've been taught. It's not because I don't know any better, or because it's tradition. I honestly, with all my heart, believe that that's what God wants us to do. It's right there with all the rest of things He wants us to do. I understand, in a way, why people are so interested in it because it's not everyday that people go out and pick up poisonous reptiles and hold them. But, to me, it's no bigger deal than laying hands on the sick and people being healed, like Mawmaw was healed of cancer and tuberculosis. There's other people in the church that have been healed. I have been healed myself when I was a little baby. To me, it's no different than speaking in tongues. I mean, a lot of people have no idea what that's like. There's a blessing in that. That's when you're just--you're really at one with God. There's nothing else in this world on your mind but God. And I believe it because the Bible says it. Jesus said it. I believe it, and that settles it ... [laughs] ...

I. I understand that.

P. That was the last message that Jesus gave us before He ascended back into heaven.

I. It sure was ... How do people that know you on your job-- ... Are they aware that you do practice the signs?

P. Not at the job that I'm on now, but my previous job--yes they did.

I. How did they react to the fact that you do practice all signs?

P. Well, you get all kinds of reactions. You get people that think that you're just totally

looney. When I first started this particular job, I worked there for probably three, three and a half years, and I was not in church, and I didn't participate in handling serpents and laying hands on the sick and the other signs. I was just out there in the world, a sinner, as we say. They saw me go from this person who had really short hair, wore makeup, wore all kinds of jewelry, wore pants, cussed like a sailor, you know, and went out and partied on the weekend, sometimes. I wasn't an alcoholic or anything, but just social. And they saw me go from that person to someone that did not cut her hair, did not wear jewelry, did not wear makeup, did not wear pants. I did not cuss. I took a lot of things. I was always a person-- ... I didn't take anything from anybody. I didn't dish it out, but I didn't take it. I would just as soon cussed you out as to look at you, if you made me mad. I went to where I would--you know, if somebody said something to me--I would just take it and go on, like Jesus said we had to. You have to be humble and all that. You can't rail up at someone. And then they found out that I believed in handling serpents, and I had mixed reactions. Some people just thought--they just think you're totally stupid--which they knew I was educated. They knew it wasn't something that I just didn't know any better, or I just did it just cause "that's the thing to do." But they knew that I had made a change in my life ... a BIG, BIG change in my life. And most of them were pretty supportive. Most people, most people, they don't understand it, and they kind of look at you really weird, and it makes them stop and look at you a little differently, but I don't think that's so bad either, because then they have time to take stock of the change in you that you're not a cusser, a drinker, a smoker, and they look at the other changes in your life also. Then you have people that just--they make smart remarks. They call you a "snake handler" or a "snake lover" or a "snake worshiper"--which we do NOT worship the snakes. We do not. That's part of our religious service, and we worship God, and God alone. But you get different reactions. Some people, once they find out that you're a serpent handler, they don't want to be seen out in public with you. They avoid you. Yeah, they will avoid you. It's not very many. There are people ... It takes all kinds to make up the world. As for my friends, they don't really understand it, but they accept me for me. And they know that I've got something in my life that they don't have. I've got that extra-- ... And most people, they say, "Wow! You have a lot of faith. I wish I could have that much faith." Everybody can have this much faith. It doesn't take any more of God to pick up a serpent than it does to heal the sick. It's the same ... The same God does both of them.

I. Well, you know who they seek out when they need prayer, don't you?

P. Oh yeah. You know, that's the thing with me. I made a comment about that [in another interview] ... We have letters from all over the United States and probably some foreign countries, and people, when they see us, like in an interview, on TV, or a newsclip, or a documentary, whatever, you would be amazed at the people that will actually call if they can get a hold of your number. They'll go through everything. People in other countries will actually call the visiting center in your state--the state welcome center--and see if they can get in touch with you, or where it is, or whatever, that people will--They will write letters and ask you to pray for them because they know you have got a hold of something-

-those that don't think you're totally crazy. I think that they're really earnest in heart, and they really have the Lord in their life. They see that there's something. You know, there's higher heights and deeper depths in this, and I grow daily. I grow daily. I don't care how many times you read that Bible ... I think if you had the whole understanding of that whole Bible all at one time, the human mind--You would not be able to comprehend it. It would just be too mind-boggling, so the Lord gives you a little bit at a time, and every time I read that Bible, I find something in it. I go a little deeper into it and understand it a little better.

I. I just have a couple more questions. You kind of touched on the media. What is your general feeling about the attention serpent handling gets from the media?

P. I think it's unnecessary. I mean, like I said, I can understand that people are interested because it's different. It is different. But we're just simple people with simple lifestyles--and by simple, I don't mean simple-minded. I mean we just live simple lives. We're just like anybody else. We get up in the morning. We love. We grieve. We just have a different way of expressing our religion. Some people light incense and candles, and whatever. We handle serpents. I think honestly--I'll just be honest with you, and this is why I'm so hesitant to do interviews, is because I did one when I was 16. I don't care how well-written that it is, most reporters, or journalists, whatever, tend to put a slant on things. You know yourself you can put words in there that give it flavor and a slant that we're just rednecks, simple-minded people who don't know any better, no education, and they always want to pick on Appalachia. I tell you there are a lot more churches--There's probably more churches outside of the Appalachian area that handle serpents than there are in the Appalachian area. There are churches in Michigan, Ohio, North Carolina, probably on down in Florida, and on into Arizona, whatever. The media controls what people think of us because ... They do it honestly to make money. You know, it's something different. They want to cash in on it. It's just like Elvis, or whatever, all these biographies that are unauthorized by other people that have been written. I just don't like the slant that they put on us. We ended up in, I believe it was, Hustler magazine at one time. And, you know, that was just the most terribly-written article I've ever read in my life. The man used the "f" word in it, which, of course, we would never do. I mean he just out and out--What it was is he wasn't actually, I don't think, the original writer, but whoever had written it had sold this story to someone who wrote one of the editors of Hustler magazine, which, you know, some people would say, "You know, that would reach people that would normally never see it because--you know, really bad people." But the point being--my objection was not so much being in Hustler magazine. It was the way that the story was written, and he had just totally slung on us and tried to make it something that was perverted. That's why ... I feel like Jeanie and Fred will do a good job, and they let us edit it, and like you said, this is going to be--You won't go through this and put your interpretation on it. It's what I've said, and it will be left like that. I don't mind that. I don't mind that at all. Some people say, "Well, it says to go into all the world and preach the gospel." Yes it does. But it says for "you" to do it--meaning the preachers, not journalists, not people that don't understand what this is about. People of the world

can't preach the Word because they're not of the Word. And what I object to is, you know, they give that title "Snake Handler." I'm not a snake handler. I'm a child of God who simply has that as part--that's just part of my religious belief. If you want to call me anything, call me a child of God. Call me a Christian. Serpent handling is not who I am, or what I am, it's simply a small part of my religious beliefs. That's what I object to, is just the slant that they put on it. They try to make the people seem uneducated and simple-minded and things like that--redneck, you know. It's the flavor that they put into the article, is what I object to. It's not so much giving interviews. It's what they do with it afterwards. Like, this one man took a picture, one time, of one of the children that was up close to the box--which was not dangerous at all. And we try to keep them away, but kids dart. I mean they're away from you like that. But he just happened to be there at the time and snapped that picture, and it just looks bad on us. That's why it's so hard on people are in the serpent handling religion--when, for instance, PB, when you lose your kids. Stuff like that really goes against you, and I just don't think that's fair because there has never, ever been one incident in any church that I have ever known of in the history of serpent handling where a child has ever been hurt--ever.

I. There's never been a child to die of a serpent bite--that I've found, anyway.

P. You know, they try to make us look like we're just--And the adjectives they'll use to describe us, like fanatic, or frantic, or guttural--the way they try to ... They don't even have the words to explain speaking in tongues, and it comes out looking like that we're just out of our minds, and like they did in the Bible, you know: "These men are drunk." And when we say that God speaks to us, they want to do the thing, like I said, "Oh they hear voices." No, I don't hear voices in the trees telling me to kill someone or voices in the trees telling me to pick up a serpent. I just know that that's right, and it's God's business. The incident I told you about where the Lord had told me to go in [and get the copperheads], and I wanted Mom to get them ... and she testified that I had not said one word to her. She was on the other side of the church, and I was here. But God gave me that as a witness. I handle serpents because I know it's right because of what I've felt, not because of what I've been taught.

I. I've only got one other question, and you've touched on it a little bit, and it has to do with the history of serpent handling in this area. Do you know more than what you had already mentioned to me about your grandmother--how she got started with George Hensley?

P. No. Sorry. I don't. I've read books, like anyone else, on it. You know, but my information, like I said, is second-hand. All I know is that my grandmother, she started out. She would just talk about how that the Lord--That's how she felt, that it is was, you know ... She knew it was right. The Lord had brought her from Freewill Baptist, which is, of course, anything goes, to the Church of God, which gets a lot stricter--which the Church of God used to be a lot stricter than they are now, to begin with. And then, from

that, she went into the serpent handling itself.

I. Is there anything there anything else you'd like to say?

P. No. I think I've pretty much, right now, just--We're normal people. In fact, we're probably more normal than a lot of people out there. I mean I've been to California ... [laughs] ... We live simple lives, but we're not simple-minded. A lot of us are educated--which education has nothing to do with it, you know--my point being, it's not like that we don't know any better. And like I said, we're not serpent handlers. We're not snake handlers. That's just a part of our religion. It's not who we are, or what we are. Nobody's forced to do it. I wanted to bring that up and stress that. No one is forced. It is a choice, and they do stress you better make sure that you're not hypocriting, that you're living a good clean life, because when you take up that serpent you stand a chance of being bitten and dying. And like I said, if you're not truly saved, you're not going to heaven any more than anyone else. We don't think that's a one-way ticket into heaven. It's just a <u>part</u> of our religion.

I. Okay.

P. Other than that, I guess that's about it. It's just we are normal. We're not freaks. We're not weirdos, or we don't worship the serpent.

I. Okay ... Well, P17, I really appreciate you talking with me. You did real well.

APPENDIX C

A SAMPLE EXCERPT FROM AN INTERVIEW PROTOCOL DESCRIBING A NEAR-DEATH BITE (P4)

[The participant had brought up the issue of his serpent bite earlier in the interview.]

I. Can you tell me about that time that you got serpent bit?

P. Things were going fast, at that time. I had a revival coming up. The transmission had went out in my van, and I was pretty much concerned about how I was going to get--how I was going to do the work of God, you know, how I was going to get that trailer pulled around to these different revivals cause I already--I already had before spring even got there--I already had about five revivals, and it was just like a door was opened up. And my tent was in Dahlonega, and we had a good revival there. And I just started a job working third shift, and me and my wife--we didn't really have a settled place to live, you know. We'd been living over on her daddy's land, you know, in a camper for a while, and God was blessing us though.

I. Uh-huh.

P. I was close to God, so I started that job. I went up on that mountain--up on Dahlonega--and I was coming back across Bear Mountain, and the trailer came loose from the truck I was pulling it with--turned the trailer over in the road.

I. My goodness.

P. And so, it didn't discourage me a whole lot, because I was pretty determined. I had a revival to run the next week, and I was going to be there--if I told the people I was going to come. I said I was going to come, one way or another. So, it was kind of scary. I had to call my wife's uncle--four wheel drive--turn the trailer back over, you know, for me, and we finally got back. Everything was going just so fast. All this was happening. I'd just started this job, third shift. So it was like on Monday, I believe it was. I was running late. I had a--like on the front of the van, you know, on one of the tires, I had a bad spot, and so it was just ... Everything seemed to be going bad ... [laughs] ... So I got lost way over next to the Alabama line somewhere, and I was running late, and so everything was going real fast, and so we finally got in, and the service got started, you know, and people started really packing in. I was surprised that night cause there was quite a bit of people beginning to come out, and I--I remember one of the brothers, from down at the church, he got the serpent out, that I got bit by, and when he did, it tried to eat him up. He had it by the tail, and I mean it was striking around everywhere. I mean it was--it was mad. And so he tried to, you know, he was working with it, him and the Lord, you know, and he didn't get bit or get hurt. I thank God for that. You know, it's like--it's like, you know, like you said--

could I explain what it means when somebody gets bit or whatever? I don't know the reasons. I don't know the mind of God. I don't--I really don't know the mind of God--why God does things. And I don't worry about it like a lot of other people do. I've learned to accept--whatever reason God does it, it's fine with me.

I. Uh-huh.

P. But you know Brother JM's quite a bit--he's quite a bit older than I am, and if he would have gotten bit, he might not could of-- ... And if it had of hurt him, he might not have been able to stand it like me, you know, maybe. Maybe it was better for me to get bit than somebody else to get bit that night, or later on that week. It could have been the next night, but the service went on. We had some singing, you know, and we handled a copperhead and that canebrake that I got bit by, and so I began to preach, and I preached, and I was coming to the end of the message, and I reached in the box, and I got him out, and he was coiled up and sat right in my hand, and I didn't even see him. He just struck and hit me right there in the wrist, and when he did, I believe he hung--he hung on to me because I remember shaking my arm, and he landed way over here behind me. And I had a pulpit in front of me, so in order for him to get that distance in that short amount of time, he had to have hung onto my arm.

I. Uh-huh.

P. I mean he just latched on. He didn't just hit like a lot do and pull back. He just stuck there. So when he hit me, I knew I was bit, you know, and it felt like a baseball had popped me on the wrist. I knew I was bit, but I just kept on talking to the people and preaching, and then I began to rejoice a little bit--move around a little more than I should for somebody that had just got bit for the first time--so this venom began to hit me quick. Within five minutes, I was down.

I. Wow. He was a large rattler, wasn't he?

P. Oh, yeah. He was, you know ... The serpent handlers--within their ratings of small, medium, and large--he was between medium and large. He was--he was a good size.

I. P4, you said you began to rejoice a little bit. Can you tell me about that? You had just been serpent bit, and then you rejoiced a little?

P. When it first happened, I have to admit there was a little bit of sudden fear hit me--which is not good--it's not a good thing. I believe the Lord said in one place over there, He said, "I'll laugh at your calamity. I'll mock when your fear comes." I believe that it's not good to be fearful and unbelieving, but for a moment, I believe that I was a little fearful and unbelieving, and that's not good when you're serpent bit. But then I began to try to overcome that, and I began to rejoice, you know. I began to run around a little bit. I

was in the front of the tent, and I began to run around a little bit--try to praise God. But I believe that that was the wrong thing to do--not so much physically, but spiritually--because the Lord said, "Rejoice not that the devils are subject to you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in the Book of Life." So I believe sometimes that we can kind of get--We can do things the wrong way, you know, out of ignorance, but we have to learn from it. So even when I take up serpents now, I try to rejoice that I have a place in the kingdom of God, not because that a serpent is subject to me, or a devil is subject to me, or sickness is subject to me. But I want to rejoice because I have a place in the kingdom of God and be humble about it.

I. You said that whenever that you were bitten, that within five minutes you were down?

P. I was in a bad--probably ... Well within five minutes, I was drunk. I felt, you know, I felt drunk. That's what the canebrake, or the timber rattler, does to you. Sometimes you get that drunk feeling, and everything begins to seem like it gets black, and ... I know what poison is, when it's in your system. I spent a little of time being a drunk. I know what it feels like when you get poison in your body. God--You know I'm a firm believer that God didn't mean for us to put things like that in our body for pleasure. I think a lot of people--the worldly people that don't know the ways of the Lord--they've even said things like that, you know: "Do you drink?" You know, "Why not? You-you drink this deadly thing." They kind of get in carnal thoughts, and they ask you questions. But other than drinking the deadly thing, and obeying the scriptures--the holy Word of God--I don't believe that we should put things like that in our body. So I know what it feels like to be intoxicated on something, and that's the way the snake venom was like at first. It was like being intoxicated on alcohol at first. It wasn't a pleasant feeling because it's--it's--it's a great amount more than what it's like to be intoxicated on alcohol. It's more extreme. Everything's getting black, and it's hard to focus on what's going on. Instead of seeing a wide amount of what's going on, everything begins to just narrow off. You just can only focus on maybe one or two things around you.

I. Something like a tunnel?

P. It's kind of like being out in space, and only one person is standing in front of you. All you can see is darkness but that one thing, and that's kind of like how it is when you're trying to focus, and you're only seeing spots and different stuff that's going on around you. That's kind of the way it was. And then--then one of the brothers walked me up the road. We probably walked about an eighth of mile up the road and back, and I didn't feel like I could go on. I was going to have to--I felt like I was going to have to lay down on the road, you know, but he said, "Well, you need to walk, you know, kind of just walk a little bit." And so, when I got back to the tent, I was on the ground then. That was as far as I could go. That was it. Then I started having sharp, stabbing like--stabbing pain and, you know, it was the poison. I'd been on--I'd been on a fast. I hadn't eaten anything.

I. So the poison worked very quick.

P. Oh yeah, it was-- ... That's probably all I had in my body because when I began to throw up, you know, there was nothing there, but that poison started coming out of me--that yellow stuff. So I had the full effects of a rattlesnake bite. I didn't have anything there to absorb any of it or ... It was just poison.

I. What did that ... How did that impact you continuing in the signs? What was your immediate reaction to that bite?

P. My reactions was--when I got back to the tent--was ... I don't remember a whole lot when I was on the road walking, but I knowed that there was one of two things ... I was going to live or die, and that was it. It's all I knowed--I was going to live or die. It didn't matter what was going on around me. I just knowed I was either fixing to--that I was going to live--spend some time here on earth, or I was fixing to meet eternity.

I. How was that for you, at that point?

P. Uh ... anxious. It's kind of like, you know, it's kind of like ... It's kind of like going somewhere when you're a kid and you've never been there before. You're anxious and you're scared at the same time. So you're fixing to meet-- ... You know, what goes on in our everyday life is just a small proportion of what's going on in eternity, or what's going on with the whole world. A lot of people never think about that. I have. Most people just focus on what's going on in everyday life. I've thought about it with a lot of numerous things, you know, probably some people never have thought much about. You may come in here and you sit and work on your computer, you're never aware of what your neighbor's doing. So what you're doing is just a small proportion of what ten other people's doing, and that's kind of the way I'm trying to explain the way it is with eternity. This life here is--the Bible said this life is but a vapor. It's here and then it's gone. So when you're looking and facing eternity, it's kind of scary cause you're fixing to have to face the Man, God Almighty, that created the whole world, the stars, the universe--all the things that the scientists are trying to understand. I'm having to--I'm fixing to have to face the Man that understands it all and created it all.

I. And right there at that moment ...

P. That's the scary part. It's not that--It's not leaving this life, cause this life ... What is <u>this</u> life? You know, this is a good life, but what is this life compared to the life to come? It's nothing. It's just a--It's like a grain of sand in the sea. So that's the only way that I can explain it in words that people can understand. I was scared because I felt like I was fixing to have to face God or I was either going to live-- ... You know, the human mind--the greatest, all the scientists, and all of the philosophers, and everybody through the whole world--that's one thing I don't guess that they can explain ... what the life

hereafter's going to be like.

I. Yeah.

P. They can explain everything in this life, just about, but in the life to come, there's not many answers.

I. Yeah ... So, what happened as result of the serpent bite? How did you heal from that?

P. I remember one time, that they were either taking me from surgery or into surgery. I can't remember because I think that--I think before surgery, I think it might have been. The one day that I remembered, they took me into a room, and I was waiting to be took into surgery. And there might have been some other people around me--I can't remember--but, they may have already gave me something, then, to kind of get me going, or something, but I remember thinking, "Will I ever work in the signs again?" ... cause I had my doubts about it for a moment, and then I remember talking to my mother on the phone. She said, "Well, God wouldn't make you go through this suffering for Him--suffering through this, serving Him." And it was then, for the first time, that God spoke to me, and I began to know He was there, and that was a few days from the time that I was preaching and [when] I felt the power of God preaching and ministering. And from the time then [when speaking to his mother] to the that time I got bit, I never felt God. I never heard God, up until God spoke to me, and He said, "Consider my servant, Job, how I said in my Word that he was perfect and upright, and still, he suffered greater things than you're suffering now." And it was then that I realized that though the confusion of my family and words that people--the things that they say--it was then that I realized that God has--that God knowed what I was suffering, what I was going through, what I had been through, knew all about it, and that He was going to help me through it.

I. So there was a time, between when you were bitten and that point, that you felt forsaken by God in some way?

P. Well, it's like I told you. I believe that you can get bit. Even if you get hurt, God can still quicken you. He can--I mean, from the information that I got from my other brothers and stuff, some of them are near death [when they get serpent bit], and then the next day, they're just--they're sitting on the porch watching traffic, you know, watching people go by, and things like that. So I was waiting for one of two things ... God to quicken my body--to strengthen me--to help me just come out of it. That's what I expected. Even when I was on--when I was on the ambulance, I was looking just any minute for the Lord Himself to swing the back doors open. I was fixing to walk off and be perfectly fine, like nothing had ever happened to me. But it never--it never happened. I never felt the Lord. But, you know, I did tell you that--that when you're sick, that [anointing] it shakes you. Later on, I begin to--I had people call me asking me to pray for them ... [laughs] ... Here I am in the hospital. I'm serpent bit, and it was one of the ladies back when I was in the Full

Gospel Church, and she called me. She asked me to pray for her, and it was then I found myself down on the hospital floor, and I was praying for other people that were sick.

I. Wow! ... [both laughing]

P. And then, I told you about the shaking--the shaking, you know, that quickening power. I began to feel that some in the hospital, too, so I believe the Lord began to help me to recover then. Even from what all the doctors and everything that they had done, I believe that God began to, you know, take over then, in some of my recovery. I felt forsaken, cause God didn't speak to me. God didn't move, but I believed that He was in me. I believed it was the spirit of God that was keeping me alive. Even before the MTs came, I had plenty of time to have died. I believe it was the spirit of God that was keeping me alive then. I mean, I have a report that one of the reporters done down in Augusta, from The Chronicle. He done a--He got some information from the MTs, and he sent me a copy of it and all. Within the time that I'd been bit to the time that I was on transport to the hospital, I had plenty of time to die. He got some information from the MTs. I reckon he got to talk to them later on about my blood pressure and all, and I asked my wife--it was recorded in the report, or the thing that he had done, Steve had done. And I asked my wife, you know, being an LPN, "What point in life, medically, was I at, according to my blood pressure?" She said, "You were dead." But I remember that one of the MTs, he was using foul language and stuff. I was all over him ... [both laughing] ... I remember them trying to put oxygen on me, and I told them, I said, "You're going to have to get that oxygen off of me. It's about to smother me to death. I can't handle it." So I felt like I was doing good, and others felt like I was--which "I" say was doing good. I knew I was serpent bit at that time. I knew that I wasn't like I was before I got serpent bit, but I felt like I was doing alright, you know, considering that I'd been bit. But this is quite, you know, quite a bit later. I'd had spent quite a bit of time under the tent throwing up--a lot of stuff, so ...

I. What was that feeling like when you were--What were you aware of when you said you were feeling good?

P. Well, I believe that--Well, it was hot, you know, it was like June the 2nd that I got bit, or it was somewhere right in there. I believe it was June the 2nd, and it was hot. It was the hot time of the year, and when I'm sick, I like it to be cool anyway. The times that I have been sick, you know, the heat-- ... When you're sick, heat will take a toll on you, quick. Well, when I got on that ambulance, they had air conditioning in there, and when that air conditioner, you know-- ... It was like I began to feel different, and I felt good in the Lord. That was, I guess, at one of the points where it looked like, I thought, "Well, the Lord's fixing to swing the back doors open on this ambulance. It's going to stop somehow, and He's just going to take me right on off of it. Everything's going to be alright ... Get to go on home."

I. And you would be a real testimony, too.

P. But that didn't happen ... So, you know, a lot of people would say, "Well, it was the venom taking a toll on your mind," or whatever, but I don't think it was. I was still in my right mind. It was hard to focus and things, but I knowed what was going on around me, you know. I knowed what kind of shape I was in. I knowed what I was going to have to face if the Lord didn't move, so I was going to fight for everything I had ... A lot of things are hard to explain about it.

VITA

I was born the son of a minister on April 8, 1955, at Sewanee, Tennessee. Because of my father's frequent pastoral changes, my family lived in various cities and towns across the state until relocating to a more lengthy assignment in northwest Tennessee where I attended and graduated from Dyersburg High School in 1973. Deferring college after graduation, I elected to pursue a marketing career with a national food company, which eventually led to a management level position. At age 23, however, I decided to follow in my father's footsteps as a minister and, four years later, began a part-time college career that eventually challenged me to think more critically about my religious tradition and personal experiences. My undergraduate career culminated, in 1992, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. It was at that same institution that I later earned a Master of Education degree, in 1995, with a concentration in Community Counseling. Given my transition toward an intellectual perspective of religion, I felt increasing discomfort with my religious vocation and resigned from pastoral ministry, in the fall of 1995, to accept a teaching assistantship at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The following year, I terminated my ministerial ordination to focus on a career in education and graduated with a Ph.D. in Psychology in November, 1999. As an adjunct faculty member, I have taught at Cleveland State Community College and The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.