

Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion

Robert A. Orsi

At the end of a compelling account of his two-year sojourn among snake-handling Christians in southern Appalachia, Dennis Covington, a Georgia-based reporter for the *New York Times*, describes the night he realized that he could not join the handlers, whom he had come to love and respect, in their faith. I want to borrow this instance of one man's discovery of radical religious otherness—a discovery that led him to turn away in sorrow and disappointment from his friends—as an opening onto the question of what a renewed emphasis on moral inquiry might mean for the academic study of religion.

The discipline of Religious Studies has always been organized around a distinct and identifiable set of moral values and judgments, most often implicit and commonly evident more in convention than in precept. Disciplinary theorizing about religion has proceeded in accordance with these embedded moral assumptions, even when Religious Studies insisted most vehemently on its “scientific” status.¹ The usually unacknowledged centrality of these values in the working life of the discipline has limited the range of human practices, needs, and responses that count as “religion”—excluding, for example, experiences of the power of holding poisonous snakes against one's face or brandishing them in righteous anger against one's foes. A revival of moral inquiry in Religious Studies should not be simply an explicit embrace of the old implicit values and judgments: to reauthorize the embedded normative cultural core of the discipline at a moment when the field has an opportunity to break free of it would be a regrettable failure of nerve. Before we practitioners of Religious Studies can introduce moral questions into our approach to other people's religious worlds, we must first excavate our hidden moral history. Otherwise, all that a revival of moral inquiry will be is the discovery, as if we had come upon something new, of our unacknowledged assumptions and prejudices as moral concerns.

Snakes and the Nature of God

Dennis Covington first entered the culture of snake handlers on assignment from the *Times* to cover the trial of a minister accused of attempting to kill his wife by forcing her to put her hand in a crate of poisonous snakes.² Drawn by a religious idiom that fused domains others considered irreconcilable—heaven and earth, spirit and snake, vulnerability and control—and that generated experiences of tremendous visceral power, Covington stayed on. He came to see snake handling as a way for poor, displaced people in a ravaged land to contend with and surmount (at least once in a while, with the snakes in their hands) the violence and danger that bore down on them in their everyday lives. His account is never reductive nor does he stay aloof from the people he writes about. He smells the “sweet savor” of the Holy Spirit moving in the room when the snakes are taken out of their boxes—a smell like “warm bread and apples,” discernible, he says, just beneath the smell of reptile—and finally he takes up serpents, too. Until the last night of his years with snake handlers, Covington offers a good model for an engaged, interpersonal, participatory religious study.

But on this last evening, at the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Kingston, Georgia, Covington watches in horror as his photographer, a young woman well known by then to the handlers, is verbally assaulted—by a minister Covington had considered his spiritual father—for her usurpation of man’s scripturally mandated role (as the community understood this). Covington rises to witness against this denial of spiritual equality to women, but he is silenced by his mentor. Then another preacher, a legendary figure named Punkin Brown who was known among other things for wiping his sweat away with rattlesnakes, reached into the serpent box, pulled out a “big yellow-phase timber rattler and slung it across his shoulder like a rope.” As he does so, Punkin Brown makes a sound that Covington records as “haaagh,” an explosive, angry grunt; and as he bears down into his nasty, woman-hating sermon, the preacher uses this sound to set the cadence of his attack and to underscore his rage. Covington makes sure we hear this: “haaagh” appears ten times on one page—and it is thus—haaagh!—that he reestablishes the border between himself and the handlers that he had up until then so courageously been tearing down.

Covington signals and solidifies his new position vis-à-vis the handlers with a change in rhetoric. Before this evening in Kingston, he had seen an eerie, otherworldly beauty in the moans and movements of the handlers; in particular, his descriptions of female handlers, sobbing and trembling as they drew bundles of snakes close to themselves in religious “ecstasy,” are charged with a fierce, unacknowledged erotic intensity. But now he gives us Punkin Brown, a vile, primitive force, “strutting” about the sanctuary with the big snake across his shoulders, his body contorted, his face flushed with blood and hate. The evangelist brushes his lips with the serpent and wipes his face with it, and always there is the brutal “haaagh,” like “steam escaping from an *underground* vent.”³ Punkin Brown has become a nightmare figure, a subterranean creature, a snake himself.