

Serpents in the Sanctuary:
A Study on the Ritual of Serpent Handling in Appalachia

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Abstract

The one overarching aim of this paper is to complicate the oversimplistic views on snake handling that have been pushed by religious groups, the media, and some academics. It opens with an exploration of the history and biblical basis of snake handling. The framework of this study draws on fieldwork, practitioner interviews, and extensive analysis of books, articles, and videos. Using Cristina Bicchieri's theories of unwritten rules, the research explores how implicit norms, such as the necessity of the "anointing," sustain the ritual's spiritual integrity and communal adherence. Richard Schechner's performance theories reveal the interplay between structure, spontaneity, and the dual purposes of efficacy and entertainment. Additionally, Niel Van Leeuwen's perspective on religion and "make-believe" offers insight into how ritual creates a shared world of meaning that is both imaginative and deeply real for practitioners. By analyzing serpent handling as an embodied practice and a lived religion, this study demonstrates how the ritual bridges personal faith and collective identity. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural, religious, and social dynamics that shape and sustain this unique tradition.

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1 Chapter 1: And These Theories Shall Follow

While parking for the first time on a small gravel strip that constituted the parking lot for the snake handling revival, my mind was racing. For months, I had prepared in every way imaginable: consuming every book, documentary, article, YouTube recording that I could find. It seemed the more research that I did, the more complex this phenomenon seemed. Before ducking through the tiny door that was covered in carved wooden crosses, I knew that no amount of research could have fully prepared me for what I was about to witness.

It is for this reason that I embarked on this project. The phenomenon of snake handling is far more complex than it may first appear. The spontaneous nature of these services was one of my central research questions, could I find any structure in services like this? Even in the services I attended, the pastor would often begin each service by asking the congregation what they wanted to do, what he should preach on, and even if he should preach. It is this spontaneous nature that fascinated me. This became challenge number one: to find the “rules” that govern the service, whether explicit or implicit.

I then focused on how I could explore the concept of the anointing within the context of snake handling. While there is a wider idea of what the anointing is—in some wider Pentecostal, holiness, non-denominational churches, etc.—there is an evident distinction: this anointing enables these people to handle venomous snakes, drink poison, and burn themselves in fire. The anointing is entirely experiential. When I asked the pastor how he would describe the feeling of the anointing to someone who has not felt it, he ultimately concluded it would be impossible for someone to understand it who has not experienced it. Thus, this became challenge number two: could I find a way to understand and describe an entirely experiential phenomenon?

Challenge number three was seemingly simpler. While far from an experienced Biblical scholar, I found it curious that this group of Biblical fundamentalists took the Bible literally and

had ended up with snakes. How could they have “gotten it wrong?” Everything I read or watched demonstrated to me that this group was very conscious and engaged with the Bible, and that was reinforced in my time attending. While I may not solve the problem for readers who consider this a mere deviant or fanatical group that has no legitimate grounding in scripture, I hope if nothing else, to complicate this overly simplistic view.

The final challenge I hoped to address was how to understand the service itself. I became interested in performance theory as one way to interpret the roles of those involved and encountered Richard Schechner and his *Performance Theories*, which offered a rich avenue for exploring the dynamics of the wider service. As my research questions took shape, it became clear that direct observation would be essential to understanding the lived reality of these gatherings. In the spring of 2025, I attended a weekend revival at a church in West Virginia as part of my fieldwork. The congregation was entirely white, with an almost even split between men and women. Few children and teenagers were present. The number of adults between the ages of 20 and 40 had been more than I had anticipated from my research. Despite my outsider status, I found the congregation to be remarkably welcoming and open, always willing to answer my questions and share their experiences. The only time my credentials were ever questioned, was when I was asked if I was a “church-goin’ boy.”

Both the demographic mix and the openness of the congregation challenged some of my assumptions and added yet another layer of complexity to this already intricate phenomenon. These experiences underscored just how much there is to learn from direct engagement but also highlighted the limits of any outsider’s understanding. It would take beyond a life’s work to even begin to adequately understand and effectively communicate each of the aspects of this phenomenon. As such, this project is constrained to its parameters as an undergraduate thesis.

For anyone interested in scholarship that fully understands snake handling and entirely explains it. I would recommend that you be born and raised deep in the mountains of Appalachia, have a snake handler as a father, and see the world through the eyes of those who have lived this tradition.

Before delving into the main body of this work, I want to provide a clear set of definitions that are tailored to fit the context of this study. While I acknowledge that terms such as “ritual” may be subject to debate in broader academic discussions of religion, the definitions presented here are intentionally constructed as second-order terms. These terms serve as analytical tools to interpret and understand the first-order practices and beliefs of the serpent handling community. By framing these heuristic definitions within the specific cultural and religious context of serpent handling, I aim to offer a focused and academically defensible framework that facilitates a deeper exploration of the people, objects, and actions central to this study. My approach recognizes the unique interplay of physical and spiritual elements in serpent handling practices, while also allowing for a nuanced analysis that respects the lived experiences of the participants. My definitions are as follows:

-Ritual: My definition of ritual is intended for the purposes of this specific study. This definition is not intended to be universal by any means, but rather highlights the unique allotment of time, characteristics, and characters that constitute a snake handling service. In this context, the wider ritual in which snake handling is engaged in can be understood as a structured, symbolic act that facilitates a transformative experience for practitioners, creating a connection between the physical and spiritual realms.

-Serpent-Handling: A religious ritual practiced within certain Holiness-Pentecostal movements, in which participants take up and interact with venomous snakes as an act of obedience to scripture, specifically Mark 16:17-18, and as a demonstration of faith in divine protection.¹

-SHS: Throughout this work I will use the term “SHS.” This simply means Snake/Serpent Handling Sects. This is shorthand for the community popularized in the work of Ralph Hood.²

¹ Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and David L. Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects: Theoretical Considerations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, no. 2 (1995): 311–12.

² Sometimes there is a second H that implies “holiness,” implying their connection to the holiness movement. I refrain from utilizing that as the connection between SHS and the Holiness movement seems to have been severed over the years of development.

-Serpent Handlers: Individuals who actively participate in or facilitate the ritual of serpent handling, including those who obtain, maintain, and bring the serpents to religious gatherings. They are described as believers who "perform acts of obedience to scripture" and view the practice as a visible sign of their faith and divine empowerment.³

-Biblical Literalism/Fundamentalism: An approach to scripture that interprets the Bible as the inerrant and direct word of God, requiring strict adherence to its teachings. This perspective often results in practices such as serpent handling, which are based on a literal reading of passages like Mark 16:17-18.⁴

-Anointing: A spiritual experience where the Holy Ghost empowers a person by giving them the confidence and sense of readiness to handle serpents. It is described as a strong bodily sensation, where "you can't wipe it off of you . . . [and] ... you can't walk out from under it."⁵

-Signs Following: A term used to describe the visible acts of faith, such as serpent handling, drinking poison, and laying hands on the sick, as outlined in Mark 16:17-18. These acts are seen as demonstrations of divine power and protection, confirming the believer's faith and obedience to scripture.⁶

- Pentecostal Worship Context: The broader setting in which serpent handling occurs, characterized by "intense preaching, singing, shouting, dancing, glossolalia, and prayer," all of which contribute to the emotional and spiritual atmosphere that facilitates the ritual.⁷

To better understand the ritual of serpent handling, it is essential to draw on a range of theoretical perspectives that illuminate the ritual's complex nature. This approach acknowledges that no single theory can fully encapsulate the complexity of serpent-handling practices and communities. As Hood and Kimbrough note, "The complementary use of diverse theories holds great promise for understanding SHS and their differential appeal."⁸ This underscores the need for a nuanced and multifaceted analysis. My approach utilizes Cristina Bicchieri's theories on unwritten rules and social norms, Neil Van Leeuwen's *Religion as Make-Believe*, and Richard Schechner's performance theories.

³ Thomas G. Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 19.

⁴ Hood and Kimbrough, "Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects," 311.

⁵ W. Paul Williamson, "Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling" (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1999), 214.

⁶ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 6.

⁷ Williamson, "Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling," 208.

⁸ Hood and Kimbrough, "Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects," 321.

This thesis unfolds as follows: Chapter 1 sets the stage, outlining the framework for this study. Chapter 2 wrestles with the Bible's stance on serpent handling, examining scriptural sources that appear to condemn, justify, or even command the practice. Chapter 3 charts its history, tracing its origins, key figures, and evolution to the present day. Chapters 4 through 6 break down the ritual through three theoretical frameworks, examining its function, meaning, and significance. Finally, Chapter 7 ties everything together, bringing the discussion full circle, with ideas for future exploration.

I begin with Cristina Bicchieri's framework on unwritten rules and social norms in Chapter 4. This framework offers a compelling perspective on the implicit structures that govern serpent-handling rituals. Bicchieri's concept of "normative expectations" highlights how shared beliefs about appropriate behavior sustain social practices.⁹ In serpent handling, the unwritten rule that participants must only handle serpents when "anointed" exemplifies this dynamic. As Williamson notes, "When the anointing does move upon the handler... it relieves worry and fear about the immediate situation. As God is felt to move upon the body, the serpent handler loses personal concern for danger and feels fully prepared to obey God in fulfilling the biblical mandate to take up serpents."¹⁰ This reflects a collective understanding that divine guidance is a prerequisite for participation, ensuring the ritual's spiritual integrity.

Bicchieri's idea of "conditional preferences" further explains how adherence to these norms is reinforced by the belief that others in the community are also following them.¹¹ The communal nature of serpent handling is demonstrated when Hood notes that "No serpent handlers we have interviewed claimed to have read the Bible and then picked up a serpent on

⁹ Christina Bicchieri, *Social Norms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁰ Williamson, "Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling," 214.

¹¹ Bicchieri, *Social Norms*, 12.

their own... Instead, the normative practice itself is modeled by experienced handlers.”¹² This closely aligns with Bicchieri’s emphasis on the social reinforcement of norms. These unwritten rules serve not only to maintain the ritual, but they also create a shared framework of meaning, preparing participants for the transformative, communal experiences.

In Chapter 5, I explore the paradox of snake handling through the lens of Neil Van Leeuwen’s cognitive theory of religious credence.¹³ Snake handling presents a puzzle: how can individuals who fully understand the dangers of venomous snakes willingly engage in such risky rituals? Van Leeuwen’s framework distinguishes between “factual belief”—the everyday, reality-tracking knowledge that snakes are dangerous—and “religious credence,” a distinct cognitive attitude activated within specific religious contexts.¹⁴ This chapter argues that snake handlers do not ignore or deny the risks; rather, their religious credence operates alongside factual belief, guiding meaning and motivation only within the ritual setting.¹⁵

Drawing on examples from cognitive science and philosophy, I show how this “two-map” model explains the coexistence of practical caution and spiritual conviction, as well as the compartmentalization and inferential curtailment that allow religious credence to shape action without overriding factual knowledge.¹⁶ By situating snake handling within this cognitive framework, I move beyond simplistic notions of irrationality, instead highlighting the complex interplay of belief, context, and group identity that underpins this dramatic religious practice.

Richard Schechner developed his performance theories drawing on the work of thinkers like Victor Turner. As a renowned playwright and theatre specialist, Schechner approaches the

¹² Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 321.

¹³ Neil Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 9.

¹⁴ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 202.

¹⁵ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 34.

¹⁶ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 119.

concept of ritual from the perspective of performance theory. In Chapter 6, I utilize Schechner's concept of restored behavior, which he describes as “behavior that can be repeated, that is, rehearsed,” to explore the traditional and rehearsed aspects of serpent handling.¹⁷ Additionally, his binary continuum of “efficacy and entertainment,” where performance fluctuates between making things happen and providing entertainment, offers a lens to analyze the dual nature of serpent handling as both a spiritual act and a communal spectacle.¹⁸

By integrating Schechner's insights, this chapter will examine serpent handling as a transformative ritual that bridges spontaneity and structure, personal and communal experience, through the lens of performance theories. It is this approach that will explore the wider service, highlighting the music, congregation, importance of the “stage,” and more. Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate how performance theories provide a unique perspective on the dynamics and meanings of this ritual.

In summary, this thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of serpent handling as a religious ritual by examining its scriptural foundations, historical development, and physical manifestations. By working with terms built around the context of this ritual and employing a multidisciplinary approach that integrates social norms, ritual theory, and performance studies, this study attempts to illuminate the complex interplay of physical and spiritual elements in serpent-handling practices. Through this exploration, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of serpent handlers and the cultural, religious, and social dynamics that sustain and evolve this unique tradition. The following chapters will delve into these aspects in detail, beginning with an examination of the biblical texts that underpin the practice of serpent handling.

¹⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 324.

¹⁸ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 156–57.

2 Chapter 2: Testing God or Trusting Scripture?

At the very end of the book *Handling Serpents*, authored by Pastor Jimmy Morrow—a now deceased, but very prominent serpent handler—he has a section titled “King James Bible Quotations.”¹⁹ I lead with this for two reasons. First, the King James Version holds a near-sacred status within serpent-handling circles. As Billy Summerford, another prominent handler, succinctly put it, “Always get you a King James version.”²⁰ Second, this section lists every biblical reference cited in the book—a staggering 141 entries spanning both the Old and New Testaments. This meticulous cataloging highlights the profound scriptural engagement of serpent handlers, a nuance often overlooked by critics who dismiss the practice as either fanaticism or a misreading of scripture.

Take, for instance, Bart Ehrman’s commentary on the subject. In a blog post, he quips that while we have serpent-handling churches, he is surprised we do not also have “poison-drinking churches.”²¹ With all due respect to Dr. Ehrman’s scholarly credentials, I must point out that we do, in fact, have both. Poison drinking, like serpent handling, is a ritual rooted in the same biblical passage—Mark 16:17-18—and often practiced by the same communities. To dismiss these acts as reckless or absurd is to miss the opportunity to understand the theological framework and cultural context that give them meaning. One studying this ritual must take time exploring what the Bible says on this topic. As one handler put it, “If I don’t believe in all of that word, my whole religion is in vain.”

¹⁹ Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow’s Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus’ Name Tradition*, ed. Ralph W. Hood Jr. and W. Paul Williamson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 209–10.

²⁰ Ralph W. Hood and W. Paul Williamson, *Rock House Holiness Church Service*, video recording, Sand Mountain, AL: Rock House Holiness Church, June 19, 1999, Ralph W. Hood and W. Paul Williamson Holiness Churches of Appalachia recordings and interviews, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://digital-collections.library.utc.edu/digital/collection/p16877coll2/id/29/>.

²¹ Bart Ehrman, “Snake-Handling and the Gospel of Mark,” *The Bart Ehrman Blog*, February 20, 2014, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://ehrmanblog.org/snake-handling-gospel-mark/>.

To be clear, this chapter does not seek to advocate for serpent handling or poison drinking as a religious practice. Instead, it aims to challenge the notion that these communities are biblically illiterate, irrational, or unaware of biblical scholarship. By exploring the biblical justifications and intellectual traditions that underpin these practices, I hope to demonstrate that dismissing serpent handlers as mere fanatics oversimplifies a complex and deeply rooted religious phenomenon. What may seem like folly to some is, to others, an act of ultimate faith—one that deserves to be studied with the same rigor and respect as any other religious practice.

The Bible verse most often referenced for the act of serpent handling is found in the “longer ending of Mark,” that is—Mark 16:9-20. As Ralph Hood, a prominent scholar in the field of serpent handling puts it, “Mark 16:17-18 is the most commonly cited text for legitimating serpent handling, one that every SHS member, whether a serpent handler or not, is likely to know by heart.”²² Biblical scholars more qualified than I, such as the aforementioned Dr. Ehrman, have made it clear these verses were not a part of the original gospel of Mark, thus resulting in the idea of the “longer ending.” However, it is worth exploring and understanding these verses, as serpent handlers understand these verses not only as a justification for the practice, but a direct command from Jesus to. These verses are as follows:

“17 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; 18 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

“And these signs shall follow them,” or some iteration of the phrase is worth keeping in mind, because it seems to serve as one way to identify serpent handling churches.²³ While most

²² Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 313.

²³ Denis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 23 Denis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 23.

charismatic, Pentecostal, fundamentalist, and holiness groups believe in inerrancy of Scripture and the literal translation of the all of these verses, it is the application of these five signs—casting out of devils, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), healing the sick, drinking deadly things without harm, and finally serpent handling—that can differentiate these various churches.²⁴

Mark is far from the only verse that serpent handlers point to in defense of their practice, as the following verse in the Gospel of Luke explains why some handlers will lay a snake on the floor and walk on it, often barefoot:

“19 Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.”
—Luke 10:19

The final story I will highlight from the New Testament that serpent handlers point to in defense of their practice can be found in Acts, when Paul is bitten by a serpent:

“3 And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. 4 And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. 5 And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. 6 Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god.”
—Acts 28:3-6

The story above is a unique one in the context of serpent handling. The best way to understand it is in the aftermath of the bite; Paul does not die, and he does not even swell up. This story can be best understood as a demonstration of the possibilities of being in the anointing being carried out.²⁵ There is another verse attributed to Paul that critics of serpent handling often cite. In a letter addressed to the Corinthians, Paul says:

“9 Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents.”

²⁴ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 313.

²⁵ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 319.

—1 Corinthians 10:9

This verse, however, is much in line with most serpent handlers thinking, that the ritual is not meant to tempt or test God. They argue that handling snakes is simply an act of obedience to God's will, rather than a challenge to God to protect them. This is not a group recklessly demanding divine intervention or testing God's power, but people who view this as an act of ultimate submission to God's presence. In one sermon I attended, this concept was addressed head on, utilizing stories primarily from the Old Testament where characters such as Moses called out to God and witnessed his power in some way. One preacher exclaimed, "People are too afraid to call out for God's power nowadays!"

Although the above verses from the New Testament are the primary biblical justification for the act of Serpent Handling, practitioners might also cite stories and verses from the Old Testament. One example that practitioners cite is the story of Moses and the rod as an example of a human able to pick up snakes with the anointing of God:

"2 And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. 3 And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. 4 And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand."

—Exodus 4:2-4

One thing that makes this story significant is the active role of God in it. When read literally and with prior context, it is not difficult to see how this verse serves as a powerful justification for the practice of serpent handling. In Numbers, there is the story of the fiery serpents and the serpent of brass. While not as easily read as a justification for serpent handling, there are themes in it that could be developed—the role of the serpent as an instrument to test faith and obedience, a very active God, faith healing, and so on:

“6 And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. 9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.”

—Numbers 21:6-9

There are many more verses with subtle undertones, such as Psalm 91:13 and Isaiah 11:8.

However, verses such as these are understood as apocalyptic literature, primarily framed within the paradise that results from Jesus conquering the world, so that an infant could put their hand in the “adder’s den.”²⁶

Finally, I will include an excerpt from A. J. Tomlinson’s editorial titled “Signs Following Believers,” as it demonstrates less obvious, but important justifications for the act. “And to help Mark about the matter the writer of Hebrews shows that the signs followed, because he says ‘God, also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers[e] miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will.’ (Heb. 2:3-4)... Paul encourages and endorses the signs following believers when he says, ‘I have therefore whereof I may glory through Jesus Christ... to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed, through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God...’ (Rom. 15:17-19).”²⁷

It is worth noting that at one of the services I attended, amid a sermon the preacher brought up how he believed that these verses were later additions to Mark. He began by saying that he is thankful for the work of Biblical scholars—they are helping “simple-minded men” like him understand his Bible more and more. This truly surprised me; I did not expect the topic to

²⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVUE)*, Isaiah 11:8.

²⁷ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 72.

come up, and if it did, I expected it to be dismissed as scholars trying to debunk the Bible. The preacher went on to say that this did not bother him in the slightest, he believes he has an all-powerful God that can “add to that scripture anytime he’d like.”

It is this level of complexity, biblical engagement, and engagement with the outside world makes this community remarkable. It is more than just snakes, fire, and the consumption of poison that makes this community worth studying. They demonstrate remarkable biblical literacy. They are not only aware of but engage with biblical scholarship. Within the holiness tradition, one can find a substantial number of verses, themes, and stories that seem to vindicate the handlers. Even something like the “theme of Christ's triumph over death is a common one in SHS, and the handling of serpents is often used as proof of that.”²⁸

While I do not seek to advocate for or against the position that these verses provide adequate justification for the ritual, it is evident that, when read literally, the cited scriptures appear to give grounds for the ritual. While these verses do seem to provide a foundation for the practice of serpent handling, their interpretation remains a point of contention, reflecting broader debates about scriptural authority and religious expression. After all, one person’s divine mandate is another’s theological headache.

“I don’t think it’s crazy that we read our Bible and picked up snakes. I think it is crazier that other people claim to have read the same Bible I have and don’t.”

- SHS Preacher in West Virginia

²⁸ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 314.

3 Chapter 3: The History of Serpent Handling

The history of serpent handling is as complex and fascinating as the practice itself. This chapter explores the origins and development of serpent handling, tracing its journey from the early rituals of Ophitic Christian groups to the modern-day practices found in Appalachia. By examining the cultural, social, and theological factors that have shaped this tradition, we gain a deeper understanding of how a practice as controversial and dangerous as serpent handling has persisted and thrived in certain pockets of the United States. This exploration uncovers not only the historical roots of the practice but also the unique cultural and religious significance it holds for its practitioners. This chapter unravels the threads of history, belief, and identity that have woven this extraordinary practice into the fabric of religious life, offering insight into its enduring appeal and resilience.

The earliest documentation that historians have found of Christian serpent handling is found in the 2nd century CE. In his extensive work *The Mythic Image*, Joseph Campbell uses the writings of 4th century saint Epiphanius who documents the practices of these “Ophitic” sects. “They have a snake, which they keep in a certain chest... they not only break the bread in which the serpent has rolled and administer it to those present, but each one kisses the snake on the mouth, for the snake has been tamed by a spell.”²⁹ While there are some parallels to modern Appalachian serpent handling—such as the use of a snake box and the centrality of the snake in ritual—their theological frameworks diverge significantly.

Upon closer examination, Ophitic sects are far from comparable to modern day serpent handling groups. While both groups have a snake as a central part of their rituals, the role of the snake is different. Scholars have determined that the snake itself was the object of veneration in

²⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 278.

these early Ophitic groups. While there are differing accounts as to the extent of this veneration—some accounts have the snake as preferred to Christ while others identify Christ with it—any form of veneration of the snake itself is incompatible with modern day serpent handling.³⁰

Clifford Geertz famously wrote that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”³¹ In the case of Ophitic sects and modern serpent-handling groups, one might say that man has an animal suspended in webs of significance—specifically, the snake. Yet, the webs in which these serpents are suspended could not be more different. For the Ophites, the snake is enmeshed with cosmological and theological meaning and implications. It is venerated as a divine or semi-divine creature deeply tied to wisdom or even Christ. In contrast, for modern serpent-handling groups, the snake is caught in a web of biblical literalism and performative faith, serving as a test of devotion rather than an object of worship. In both cases, the snake is a symbol, but the webs of significance—the cultural and religious frameworks that give it meaning—are spun from entirely different threads.

These threads of ancient Christian rituals with snakes reemerged in a radically different form in Appalachia when the serpent is reintroduced into Christian ritual—not as an object of worship, but as a test of faith, a living testament to the power of an active god, and so much more. Most sources seem to agree that while the date this ritual began is questionable, it is unquestionable that around 1910, a man named George Hensley is credited with beginning “the practice that initiated the serpent-handling holiness sects.”³² To be clear, there remain plenty of

³⁰ Tuomas Rasimus, “Ophite Gnosticism, Sethianism and the Nag Hammadi Library,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 59, no. 3 (2005): 235–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1584571>.

³¹ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 311.

³² Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 319.

questions surrounding this origin. Why exactly would a disgraced preacher—better known in his early years as a moonshiner and occasional convict—begin to pick up venomous snakes claiming to have the anointing of the Holy Ghost? Why now? These verses had been in the canon for centuries. Was George Hensley simply the first to read this part of the Bible?

To address the second question, it is worth noting that there are some accounts of earlier examples of isolated incidents of snake handling. The distinction widely agreed upon by scholars is that Hensley was the first to practice “the literal imperatives of all five signs in Mark 16:17-18 in a manner that attracted followers.”³³ So, while there may have been snake handlers before Hensley, he was the first to begin to tap into the performative element of this ritual, quickly garnering attention. But why did he begin to do it in the first place? There is a skeptical answer, supported by Hensley’s first wife. She claims, “George had seen someone else take up serpents prior to handling them himself.”³⁴ This is certainly one potent answer. However, the story Hensley tells is far more entertaining and worth exploring.

The story, according to Hensley, goes as follows. Hensley was loosely connected to the Pentecostal-Holiness sects that had begun to spread throughout the region. Many rural Appalachian communities, facing economic hardship and social upheaval in the early twentieth century, were especially receptive to new forms of religious expression that promised personal empowerment and direct spiritual experience. These sects emphasized Biblical literalism, the idea that nothing in the Bible was allegory or poetry, but the words were meant to be taken literally. Upon encountering these verses in Mark, Hensley found this passage “troublesome” and went up a nearby mountain to pray for interpretive guidance.³⁵ While praying, a rattlesnake

³³ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 318.

³⁴ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 32.

³⁵ Matthew M. Ball, “Targeting Religion: Analyzing Appalachian Proscriptions on Religious Snake Handling,” *West Virginia Law Review* 117, no. 4 (2015): 1428.

approached him, and Hensley felt empowered to pick up the rattlesnake. He did so without being bitten, and had his proof that those verses in Mark were intended to be taken literally and acted upon.³⁶

There is this Moses-like moment that occurs then. A man experiencing this powerful moment that serves as a revelation from God in isolation on a mountain. Upon coming down from the mountain, Hensley serves as a catalyst at a perfect moment in time. This moment in time is explored thoroughly by Jonathan Williams' thesis on the cultural and social history that gave rise to this movement. There is much to be said on this topic, but there are three reasons that Hensley and the wider movement would have success at this time in this region.

One, there was a cultural system in the mountains that "accepted the dual interaction of the physical and spiritual world bred a social environment where miracles could exist."³⁷ Two, the region was experiencing a rise in fundamentalism, pushing back against the "encroaching pressures of liberal and secular theology."³⁸ Third, "The radicalism of snake-handling, its push against prescribed 'middle-class' ideologies, and its focus on spiritual riches in the afterlife gave the movement economic life among Appalachia's most impoverished citizens."³⁹ This was especially significant as snake handling emerged during a period when Appalachia was undergoing rapid industrialization.

The arrival of coal mining, timber companies, and railroads brought profound changes to the region. This resulted in significant changes to the traditional ways of life and a sharp increase in poverty and economic insecurity. For many, the promises of industrial progress were never

³⁶ Burton Quote

³⁷ Jonathan Williams, "'And These Signs Shall Follow': A Cultural and Social History of Appalachian Snake-Handling, 1910–1955" (master's thesis, Western Carolina University, 2013), 34.

³⁸ Williams, "'And These Signs Shall Follow'" 112.

³⁹ Williams, "'And These Signs Shall Follow'" 37.

delivered. Instead, communities faced exploitative labor practices, environmental degradation, and dislocation. In this context, snake-handling churches offered an alternative source of meaning and hope, emphasizing spiritual wealth over material success and providing a sense of empowerment and belonging to those left damaged by economic change. The movement's rejection of mainstream values and its embrace of ecstatic, direct religious experience resonated deeply with people struggling to find stability and dignity amid the upheavals of early twentieth-century Appalachian life. It offered them the empowering sense that they could do something no one else can—something that defies conventional logic and expectations.

Coming down from that mountain, Hensley was in the perfect climate for this movement to explode, there was a ready and imitative audience. All it would require was a little bit of charisma, of which Hensley had plenty.⁴⁰ News of this spread like a wildfire, and there began to be more and more instances of this ritual being practiced.⁴¹ This was aided by Hensley, who had begun to travel and spread this new emerging church. It is widely accepted that most of this spread is the direct result of his travels, as most preachers attribute their engagement with the movement to being influenced by Hensley, either directly or indirectly.⁴²

As he grew in fame, Hensley became connected to the Church of God. He was a traveling preacher for the Church of God based out of Cleveland, and his revivals often sparked similar congregations in the regions he traveled to.⁴³ The Church of God was crucial in this stage of the movement, it published a paper that spread throughout Appalachia. This meant that the practice reached secluded churches who may have otherwise not heard of the practice, and began to

⁴⁰ Hood and Kimbrough, "Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects," 319.

⁴¹ Williams, "And These Signs Shall Follow" 102.

⁴² Hood and Kimbrough, "Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects," 319.

⁴³ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 38.

implement it.⁴⁴ Hensley began to influence fellow preachers such as James Miller, and the Church of God papers at the time speak about Appalachia as a “battlefield,” where missionizing became crucial to winning.⁴⁵ Throughout the region, these charismatic preachers would preach in any homes, tents, brush arbor, holler, or patch of ground that would allow them.⁴⁶

This is not to say it was easy. These preachers experienced pressure and opposition from all around. To the media, they were freaks. To the legal authorities, they were a problem. To other Christians, they were deviants. However, to some, they were the truth. In this region where stereotypes and stigmas were prevalent, this practice served as a true expression of a few common beliefs: the Bible was meant to be taken literally, God is very active, and outside opposition simply reinforced belief.

Over the years, snake handling has varied in size and popularity. The snake handling church seems to be fraught with the same problems that affect every other church in America. Disagreements in doctrine lead to fragmentation, charismatic leaders who interpret Scripture in their own way, and tensions over leadership succession or handling practices that often spark new offshoots. Even in a church where faith can be measured in venom tolerance, no one is immune to the bite of church politics.

One primary example of this—which I was privileged enough to witness—occurred over the course of a single weekend. On the first night, a visiting preacher delivered a sermon on the power of the name of Jesus. He emphasized, with growing passion, how that name alone was sufficient. The congregation, however, seemed restless. I couldn’t quite tell what was wrong—until he proclaimed that baptism in the name of Jesus was all that was necessary. At that moment,

⁴⁴ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 53.

⁴⁵ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 9.

⁴⁶ Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 112.

it was as if the air had been let out of the room. The guitar fell silent, the drums stopped, and the dancing abruptly ceased. The following service, the usual preacher took the pulpit and, with passionate urgency, spent a significant portion of the sermon correcting what had been said the night before.

One of the potential explanations that I came across for the continuity of this practice inside the confines of Appalachia was related to former heroin and cocaine addictions. Almost all of the practitioners I encountered mentioned—whether in sermon or casual conversation—that this is the tradition that pulled them from the clutch of drugs that had wreaked havoc on the region in the early 2000s. As such, there is likely something to be said for the idea of a “cross-addiction” for recovering addicts. This is defined as when “people with drug and alcohol addiction seek an immediate alternative to feel the same rush experienced with their original addiction.”⁴⁷ Snake handling services—whether it be the bodily sensations of the anointing, the consumption of poison, and certainly the handling of snakes and fire—clearly offers a supplemental thrill or risk.

Of course, drug addiction is not unique to Appalachia, nor is the search for meaning or transformation in the wake of addiction. While attending a church based in West Virginia may make this theory feel particularly resonant—given that West Virginia has been a clear outlier in the devastation of the drug epidemic.⁴⁸ This explanation alone cannot fully answer the question, “Why snake handling and why in Appalachia?” Rather, it highlights one aspect of a much more complex tradition, suggesting a correlation between the search for intense experience and the

⁴⁷ “Transfer Addiction: Switching Vices and How to Stay Grounded - The Berman Center,” September 27, 2023, <https://bermancenteratl.com/transfer-addiction/>.

⁴⁸ “Drug Overdose Mortality by State,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 10, 2025, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/drug_poisoning_mortality/drug_poisoning.htm.

appeal of snake handling, but not a direct cause. As one member eloquently put it, “Come get you a snort of that Holy Ghost, this is the only stuff you’ll ever need!”

The history of serpent handling reveals a practice deeply rooted in specific cultural, social, and theological contexts. From its early associations with Ophitic Christian rituals to its reemergence in Appalachia as a literal interpretation of biblical scripture, serpent handling has evolved into a distinct religious expression. Its persistence can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the cultural and economic climate of Appalachia, the wider rise in fundamentalism, and the prominence of charismatic leaders like George Hensley.

From the beginning, the practice has faced significant opposition from legal authorities, media, and other religious groups. However, throughout its history it continues to serve as a meaningful expression of faith for its practitioners. By examining the historical and cultural forces that have shaped serpent handling, we gain insight into how this controversial tradition has endured and adapted over time.

4 Chapter 4: A Manual on Serpent Handling

I was in a campus coffee shop one night when it was announced that a jazz band would be performing. While not a connoisseur, I am someone who quite enjoys music—I was very much looking forward to the performance. After the first few songs, I realized something was bothering me—everyone around me knew when to clap. I certainly did not want to seem rude; I was quite enjoying the performance. Desperate to fit in, I texted my partner who is musically gifted and asked her when I should clap. She said, “It’s jazz! There are no rules. If you are feeling the music, you clap.” Well, that simply did not work for me—how did I know when I was “feeling the music?” Should I clap slow or fast? The rules were clearly there, everyone around me seemed to know them, I just could not find them.

It is these reflexive moments when we are experiencing something and feel out of place where implicit rules become obvious. These are unwritten rules that dictate the roles, norms, and regulations of human experience. They are defined by the participants, yet very rarely vocalized. They are learned and relearned, until they inevitably become implicit in the minds of the participants. In the case of my jazz show, it began with a feeling of awkwardness and feeling out of place. I then began to closely observe and mimic the actions of the people around me. At some point, the rules became implicit—I was no longer thinking; I was merely “feeling the music” alongside other members of the audience and I knew just when to clap.

Similarly, in serpent handling services, participants navigate a set of implicit rules that dictate when and how to act, that allow them to achieve spontaneous and unpredictable moments. Like jazz, serpent handling leaves room for spontaneity, but it is also governed by shared, unspoken understandings. Much like my experience at the jazz performance, within minutes of the music beginning at the service, I realized how little I knew and how much I had to learn by observing others.

To begin, we must first understand the social norms that participants follow. This is distinct, however, from codified rules, although they are public and shared. They also cannot only be identified as normative beliefs or simply recurrent actions, as they involve both belief and actions. To comprehend this better, I will utilize a simplified version of Bicchieri's demonstration of how to understand social norms in the context of my jazz example, before transitioning to a set of social norms that will serve as a manual for how to attend a snake handling service.⁴⁹

We can understand a behavioral rule as R , which is utilized in specific situations S . There is an individual I who exists as part of a wider population P .⁵⁰ In this context, I knows that R exists, but only inside of the context of S . This means that inside of S , I will default to conforming to R on a primary condition:

- **Empirical Expectations:** I thinks that most of P will conform with them to R inside of S .⁵¹

The definition of a social norm cannot end here, because it does not explain why people conform to these behaviors. This is explained in Bicchieri's ideas of normative expectations and sanctions. Call back to the proposed scenario:

- **Normative Expectations:** I will ultimately conform to R , because I believes that there is a large amount of P that is expecting that I will conform to the belief.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8–13. Throughout this chapter, I apply Bicchieri's model of social norms—including the concepts of empirical and normative expectations, sanctions, and conditional preferences—to analyze the practices of serpent-handling communities.

⁵⁰ Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*, 11–13.

⁵¹ Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*, 13.

⁵² Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*, 13–14.

This is an example of an individual (*I*) conforming to norms in a group because *I* thinks people expect *I* to.⁵³ At the jazz performance, *I* clapped at the end of a solo (*S*) because viewers had a learned understanding that in order to show appreciation for the musician's performance, they clap at the appropriate time. *I* observed others clapping after solos and understood that this was the expected behavior (*R*).

The stakes are raised with the introduction of sanctions. In this context, sanctions are not simply actions that punish members of a group but also may reward.⁵⁴ If we utilize our example, we see as follows:

- *I* believes that a large amount of *P* is expecting *I* to conform to *R* inside of *S*. If *I* does not cooperate, *I* may be sanctioned by *P*.

In the context of wider social norms, this becomes quickly evident. At the jazz performance, if *I* does not cooperate with the rest of the audience (*P*) and claps at an inappropriate time (breaking *R*), the behavior may be negatively sanctioned. This could take the form of disapproving looks or a sense of alienation from the group. Alternatively, if *I* conforms to the rules and claps at the right moments, *I* may feel a sense of inclusion and shared appreciation with the audience—in which case the behavior was sanctioned positively.

Now that we have a foundational understanding of social norms and the conditions under which they emerge, we can explore how these norms manifest in the unique context of serpent handling congregations. These services, much like the jazz performance described earlier, are governed by implicit rules that participants learn through observation and participation. By examining these norms, we can better grasp the shared expectations and behaviors that define this practice. Most importantly, this chapter serves as a How-To manual for readers to attend and

⁵³ Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*, 12–13.

⁵⁴ Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*, 14, 24.

participate in a serpent handling service. I would emphasize that this is not an all-encompassing approach to identifying all norms in SHS communities. This is due to the individualized nature of these specific churches, often with their own unique beliefs and values. However, these seem to be the most consistent norms that I have come across in my research, and can personally attest to, having witnessed them at services.

Norm #1: Show Up Announced

Before attending a serpent handling service, it is essential to announce your visit to the congregation. This expectation is rooted in the social norms of these close-knit communities, where trust and familiarity are highly valued. Using Bicchieri's model, we can break down this norm to better understand why it exists and how it functions.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Anyone attending is expected to announce their attendance before arriving at a serpent handling service.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies when anyone, particularly an outsider, plans to attend a service.
3. **Population (P):** The congregation, including both regular participants and visitors, collectively upholds this norm.

All members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation expects everyone to announce their attendance beforehand. This belief is reinforced by observing how others consistently communicate their plans and by the community's shared emphasis on trust and mutual respect.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to follow this rule as a demonstration of respect and commitment to the group's values. Failing to do so may be interpreted as a lack of consideration for the community's shared practices and trust, especially if it is an unannounced outsider.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Arriving unannounced may result in suspicion, discomfort, or even exclusion from the service. This could damage your relationship with the congregation and hinder your ability to participate.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Announcing your visit demonstrates respect and goodwill, which will result in a warm welcome and a more meaningful experience.

By following this norm, you align yourself with the congregation's values and demonstrate your willingness to respect their practices. This small but important step ensures that your visit is both respectful and enriching, while also fostering trust between you and the community.

Norm #2: Dress Accordingly

In snake-handling communities, there is a clear emphasis on dressing accordingly. While there is no codified or uniform understanding of what "dressing accordingly" entails, participants learn this norm through observation and participation. Using Bicchieri's model, we can break down this norm to better understand its function.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Participants are expected to dress modestly and respectfully when attending a snake-handling service.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies during all gatherings for worship, particularly during snake-handling services.
3. **Population (P):** The congregation, including both regular participants and visitors, collectively upholds this norm.

All members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation will dress modestly and respectfully. This belief is reinforced by observing how others dress and by the community's emphasis on humility and reverence.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to follow this rule as a sign of respect for the sacred nature of the service and the shared values of the group.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Dressing inappropriately may result in disapproving looks, subtle exclusion, or even direct correction from community leaders through targeted sermons. This could lead to a sense of alienation or a perception of disrespect toward the group's values.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Dressing modestly and respectfully demonstrates alignment with the community's values, which fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to be seen as respected participants in the congregation.

This norm is not simply about clothing but also about signaling one's commitment to the community's shared values. By dressing accordingly, members demonstrate their respect for the sacred nature of the service and their alignment with the group's identity.

Norm #3: Get Up with the Others

In snake-handling communities, one of the most significant social norms is the collective act of standing up and moving together during the service. This act represents a shared physical movement toward anointing, a spiritual state that the congregation seeks to achieve collectively.

The norm emphasizes unity, shared purpose, and the collective experience of worship.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members of the congregation are expected to stand up and move together at specific moments during the service, often as a collective response to the movement of the Spirit.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies during moments of heightening spiritual activity, understood as when the congregation feels the presence of the anointing.
3. **Population (P):** The collective in the congregation who is responding towards the presence of the anointing.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation will stand up and move together during these moments. This belief is reinforced by observing the collective behavior of the group and the shared understanding of the importance of unity in worship.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to move with them as a sign of solidarity and shared movement toward the anointing. Failing to do so may be interpreted as a lack of engagement with the group's spiritual goals.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Remaining seated during these moments may result in disapproving looks, a sense of alienation, or even subtle corrections from other members. This will signal a lack of participation or spiritual alignment.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Standing up with the congregation demonstrates unity and shared purpose, which fosters a sense of belonging and spiritual connection with the group. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to feel included and closer to attaining the anointing.

This norm highlights the collective nature of worship in snake-handling communities, where the congregation moves together as one body toward the anointing.

Norm #4: Sing, Pray, and Dance

Another key social norm in snake-handling communities is the expectation for individuals to express their personal experience of the anointing through singing, praying, and dancing. These actions are individualized and deeply personal yet occur within the shared space of the congregation, reflecting both individual and communal dimensions of worship.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members of the congregation are expected to sing, pray, and dance as expressions of their personal connection to the Spirit.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies throughout the service, particularly during moments of heightened spiritual activity.
3. **Population (P):** The entire congregation, including regular participants and leaders, collectively upholds this norm, while allowing for individual variation in expression.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation will engage in singing, praying, and dancing as part of their worship. This belief is reinforced by observing the others who are also demonstrating individual expressions of spirituality and the community's encouragement of these behaviors.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to engage in these actions as a demonstration of their personal movement toward the anointing. Failing to do so may be interpreted as a lack of spiritual engagement or sincerity.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Failing to sing, pray, or dance may result in subtle disapproval or a perception of spiritual disengagement. This could lead to a sense of isolation or a lack of connection with the group. Additionally, remaining disengaged from the service could affect others' worship states or make the collective unable to achieve the anointing.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Engaging in these actions demonstrates an individual's spiritual commitment and alignment with the congregation's values. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to feel spiritually fulfilled and connected to both the Spirit and the wider community.

This norm highlights an individual's role in worship, where personal expressions of faith contribute to the overall collective spiritual atmosphere. By singing, praying, and dancing, members demonstrate their personal movement toward the anointing while reinforcing the shared values of the community.

Norm #5: Feel the Burn

In snake-handling communities, the act of drinking poison and burning oneself with fire is often used as a preparatory step leading up to the sacred act of snake handling. This norm reflects the community's belief in testing and demonstrating faith, as well as a means for building spiritual readiness for the anointing. These acts are seen to deepen one's connection to God and prepare the congregation for the heightened spiritual state required for snake handling.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members are expected to engage in acts such as drinking poison or burning themselves with fire as a demonstration of faith and spiritual preparation before handling snakes.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies during moments of heightened spiritual activity, particularly as the congregation gets closer toward the anointing.
3. **Population (P):** These acts are typically performed by those who feel spiritually led, as such, it may only be a few members of the congregation. However, it will likely be initiated by a spiritual leader.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation will engage in or support these preparatory acts as part of the spiritual progression toward snake handling. This belief is reinforced by observing others perform these acts and the community's strong emphasis on faith and trust in God.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to participate in or support these acts as a demonstration of their faith and spiritual readiness. Failing to do so may be interpreted as a lack of commitment or trust in God's protection.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Refusing to engage in or support these acts may result in disapproval, exclusion, or a perception of spiritual weakness. This could lead to an inability to participate in the other parts of the service.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Participating in these acts demonstrates faith, spiritual readiness, and alignment with the congregation's values. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to be seen as spiritually strong and demonstrate the anointing.

This norm serves as a critical step in the spiritual progression of the service, allowing members to demonstrate their faith and prepare themselves for the sacred act of snake handling. By engaging in these preparatory acts, the congregation collectively builds toward the anointing, reinforcing their shared values and spiritual connection.

Norm #6: A Spiritual Leader Initiates the Act of Handling Snakes

As is demonstrated in the name, in snake-handling communities, the act of handling snakes is one of the most sacred and spiritually significant practices. A key social norm is that this act is initiated by the pastor or a recognized spiritual leader. This norm reflects the community's emphasis on spiritual authority, guidance, and the belief that the anointing must lead the congregation into this sacred act.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** The pastor or a spiritual leader is expected to initiate the act of handling snakes during the service.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies during the peak moments of spiritual activity, when the spiritual leaders in the congregation feel the presence of the anointing.
3. **Population (P):** Spiritual leaders are responsible for this initiation, and anyone participating follows their lead.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that the pastor or spiritual leader will be the first to handle the snakes, as this is the established practice. This belief is reinforced by observing past services and the community's respect for spiritual authority.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects the pastor or spiritual leader to initiate the act as a sign of their spiritual readiness and leadership. Failing to follow this norm would disrupt the order of the service and could be seen as disrespectful to the authority of the leaders.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** If someone other than the pastor or spiritual leader attempts to handle a snake first, it may result in disapproval, correction, or even exclusion from the service.
- **Positive Sanctions:** When the pastor or spiritual leader initiates the act, it demonstrates their spiritual authority and understanding of the anointing. This fosters trust and respect within the congregation and sets the tone for the sacred act.

This norm underscores the importance of spiritual leadership in snake-handling communities. By allowing the pastor or spiritual leader to initiate the act, the congregation ensures that the practice is guided by someone who is spiritually prepared and attuned to the feelings of the anointing.

This not only reinforces the sacred nature of the act but also maintains the community's shared values and traditions.

Norm #7: Demonstrate Faith and Do Not Show Fear

In snake-handling communities, a central social norm is the expectation to demonstrate unwavering faith and avoid showing fear, whether you are actively handling a snake or observing others doing so. This norm reflects the community's belief that fear signifies a lack of faith in God's protection and the anointing. By adhering to this norm, members affirm their trust in divine power and their alignment with the spiritual values of the congregation.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members are expected to demonstrate faith and avoid showing fear, whether they are handling a snake or observing others handle one.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies during moments when snakes are being handled or are present in the service.
3. **Population (P):** Everyone in the congregation who is witnessing or participating in the act of handling snakes.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation will demonstrate faith and avoid showing fear. This belief is reinforced by observing others' calm and confident behavior during the service and by the community's emphasis on absolute trust in God.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to remain calm and composed as a sign of their faith. Showing fear may be interpreted as a lack of trust in God's protection and the anointing, which could undermine the spiritual atmosphere of the service.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Showing fear, such as flinching, stepping back, or expressing hesitation, may result in disapproving looks, subtle correction, or even a perception of spiritual weakness. This could lead to feelings of alienation or diminished respect within the community. Additionally, for others, such behavior could disrupt the service and the presence of the anointing, which they may believe could lead to potential harm.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Demonstrating faith by remaining calm and composed fosters a sense of spiritual strength and alignment with the congregation's values. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to be seen as faithful and spiritually prepared, earning respect and inclusion within the group.

This norm highlights the deep connection between faith and courage in snake-handling

communities. By demonstrating faith and avoiding fear, members affirm their trust in God's protection and is a testament to the collective spiritual atmosphere of the service.

Norm #8: Do Not Lose Concentration

In snake-handling communities, portraying a maintained individual focus on God and remaining in a spirit of worship is a critical social norm. This norm emphasizes the importance of spiritual readiness and attentiveness to the anointing. Members are expected to avoid distractions and refrain from engaging in sacred acts if the anointing is not present—such as handling snakes, drinking poison, or burning themselves with fire. This norm reflects the community's belief that these acts must be guided by divine inspiration, not human will.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members are expected to remain focused on God, stay in a spirit of worship, and refrain from handling snakes, drinking poison, or burning themselves with fire unless the anointing is present.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies throughout the service, particularly during moments of spiritual discernment (i.e. this really the anointing?) and heightened dangerous activity.
3. **Population (P):** Everyone involved in a dangerous act must maintain this concentration. Those witnessing must also maintain this concentration to allow for a collective spiritual movement.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that most of the congregation will remain focused on God and avoid engaging in sacred acts unless the anointing is present. This belief is reinforced by observing others' behavior and the community's emphasis on spiritual discernment.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to maintain a spirit of worship and avoid sacred acts without the anointing. Failing to do so may be interpreted as reckless, disrespectful, or spiritually unprepared.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Losing focus, becoming distracted, or engaging in sacred acts without the anointing may result in disapproval, correction from leaders, or even spiritual consequences. This could damage one's reputation within the community and signal a lack of spiritual maturity.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Remaining focused on God and refraining from sacred acts without the anointing demonstrates spiritual discipline and alignment with the congregation's values. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to be seen as spiritually prepared and respected within the group.

This norm underscores the importance of spiritual discernment and attentiveness in snake-handling communities. By maintaining focus on God and refraining from sacred acts without the anointing, members demonstrate their respect for the sacred nature of these practices and their trust in divine guidance.

Norm #9: Ending the Service

In snake-handling communities, the conclusion of the service is a sacred and intentional act. The service typically ends with a final prayer or blessing, allowing the congregation to collectively transition out of the heightened spiritual state. This norm emphasizes gratitude and reverence as the congregation closes the service together.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members are expected to end the service with a final prayer, blessing, or moment of reflection, maintaining a spirit of reverence.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies at the conclusion of the service, after the final spiritual acts, such as snake handling, singing, or other sacred practices.
3. **Population (P):** Typically a spiritual leader does the blessing or prayer.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that the rest of the congregation will participate in the final prayer or blessing, to maintain a collective spirit of reverence. This belief is reinforced by observing others' behavior and the community's emphasis on unity and gratitude.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to participate in the closing acts as a sign of respect for the sacredness of the service and the shared spiritual experience.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Failing to participate in the final prayer or blessing or acting in a way that disrupts the sacred atmosphere, may result in disapproving looks from members or correction from leaders. This could signal a lack of reverence or spiritual engagement.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Participating in the closing acts demonstrates gratitude, reverence, and shows that you are aligned with the congregation's values. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to feel the full spiritual fulfillment from the service.

This norm ensures that the service ends on a unified note, allowing the congregation to collectively honor the spiritual experience and transition out of the worship space.

Norm #10: Live a Good Spiritual Week

In snake-handling communities, leaving the service is not just about physically exiting the space of worship but also about carrying the spiritual lessons and experiences into the week ahead. Members are expected to leave in a calm and respectful manner, while also committing to live a spiritually fulfilling life—not “backsliding”—until the next gathering. This norm reflects the community's emphasis on continuity between worship and daily life.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members are expected to leave the service respectfully and live a spiritually disciplined and faithful life throughout the week.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies after the service has ended and as members transition back into their daily lives.
3. **Population (P):** Everyone in attendance partakes in this part. However, it is initiated and performed by a spiritual leader.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that it is important that all members of the congregation should leave respectfully and strive to live according to the community's values during the week. This belief is reinforced by observing others' behavior and the community's emphasis on faith and discipline.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation has an expectation to carry the spiritual lessons of the service into their daily lives, demonstrating their faith through actions, prayer, and adherence to the community's values.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Leaving in a disruptive or disrespectful manner or failing to live a spiritually disciplined life during the week, may result in subtle disapproval or a perception of spiritual weakness. There is a significant emphasis on living spiritually and not "backsliding" throughout the week. If one does so, they may have to publicly repent, have a sermon targeted at them, or face potential removal from the community.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Leaving respectfully and living a spiritually disciplined life demonstrates alignment with the congregation's values and fosters a sense of spiritual growth and fulfillment. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to feel connected to the community and spiritually prepared for the next service.

This norm bridges the gap between worship and daily life, ensuring that the spiritual lessons of the service are carried forward. By leaving respectfully and committing to a good spiritual week, members reinforce their faith and their connection to the community.

Norm #11: What To Do If Something Goes Wrong

In snake-handling communities, a deeply ingrained social norm governs how members respond if something goes wrong, such as a snake bite. Of all the norms I encountered, this one stood out to me for its prevalence. Members are expected to demonstrate unwavering faith by refraining from seeking medical attention and instead relying on prayer and trust in God's will. This norm reflects the community's belief in divine protection and the spiritual significance of enduring trials as a demonstration of faith.

1. **Behavioral Rule (R):** Members are expected to refrain from seeking medical attention if bitten by a snake or if something goes wrong and instead rely on prayer and faith in God.
2. **Specific Situation (S):** This rule applies during and after a mishap, such as a snake bite, that occurs during the service.
3. **Population (P):** If an individual is harmed, they are expected to endure the trial with a consistent, unwavering faith in God. Those who are around are expected not to encourage the individual to seek medical help, but pray alongside them.

Members conform to this rule because of two key expectations:

- **Empirical Expectations:** Members believe that it is best if congregation responds to a mishap by praying and demonstrating faith, rather than seeking medical attention. This belief is reinforced by observing how countless others have responded in similar situations and the community's emphasis on divine protection.
- **Normative Expectations:** Members also believe that the congregation expects them to rely on prayer and faith as a demonstration of their trust in God's will. Seeking medical attention may be interpreted as a lack of faith or trust in divine intervention.

The norm is further reinforced by sanctions, which can be both positive and negative:

- **Negative Sanctions:** Seeking medical attention or expressing doubt in God's protection can be seen as spiritual weakness and could result in alienation from the community. This could signal a lack of alignment with the specific congregation's values and beliefs.
- **Positive Sanctions:** Responding with prayer and faith demonstrates spiritual strength and alignment with the community's values. Members who conform to this norm are more likely to be seen as faithful and committed. Importantly, regardless of the outcome they feel justified through relying on God's plan.

This norm underscores the community's unwavering trust in God's protection and the belief that trials, such as snake bites, are opportunities to demonstrate faith. By responding with prayer and refraining from seeking medical attention, members reinforce their commitment to the congregation's shared values and spiritual practices.

The social norms of serpent-handling communities are deeply embedded in their shared spiritual practices and beliefs. These norms, while implicit and unwritten, govern every aspect of the service—from how members prepare for worship, to how they engage with the anointing, and even how they respond to moments of crisis. Much like the jazz performance described earlier, these norms are first witnessed, then awkwardly mimicked. Eventually—with repetition—these norms become instinctive, having been successfully learned.⁵⁵

Each norm serves a very specific purpose, whether it is fostering respect for tradition, maintaining the atmosphere of the service, or demonstrating unwavering faith in God's protection. In serpent-handling communities, social norms function as the implicit framework that governs behavior, ensuring cohesion and alignment among members. These shared norms

⁵⁵ Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*, 69.

and practices not only reinforce the sacredness of snake handling but also highlight a deeper puzzle: how do participants reconcile their awareness of real physical danger with their commitment to such risky rituals? To get to the heart of this question, we need to look past the rulebook and into the rule-makers' minds—because, as it turns out, the real action is happening upstairs. This is where Van Leeuwen's distinction between different types of belief offers valuable insight.

5 Chapter 5: But Seriously, What Do They Actually Believe?

Snake handling in its simplest form is a practice involving voluntary interaction with venomous snakes in a religious context. It presents a clear puzzle: how can individuals who understand and have experienced the physical danger of these snakes engage in such risky behavior? This is a prime example of the “Puzzle of Religious Rationality,” which questions how generally rational people can hold and engage with seemingly irrational religious ideas and practices. So, how do snake handlers square the circle— they know the risks, yet reach for the rattlesnake? To untangle this paradox, we will need more than just nerves of steel; we will need a new map of the mind, and that’s exactly where Van Leeuwen comes in.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that many of the examples used to illustrate these cognitive distinctions—such as the “brick as a sandwich” scenario—are drawn from children’s play or imaginative contexts.⁵⁶ This is not intended to be pejorative or to trivialize religious practice. Rather, these examples are commonly used in philosophy and cognitive science to clarify how different types of belief and imagination function in the mind. They serve as helpful tools for understanding the unique features of religious credence, not as judgments about the seriousness or value of religious experience.

Van Leeuwen argues that to understand religious practices, we need to distinguish between different cognitive attitudes. In the case of snake handling, I will be examining factual belief and religious credence. My goal is to identify and explain the important differences where they exist in snake handler’s mental states regarding their religious ideas and actions. By doing so, I will show how Van Leeuwen’s solution to the “Puzzle of Religious Rationality” is

⁵⁶ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 41

applicable to snake handlers.⁵⁷ It will demonstrate how the behavior stems from a distinct cognitive attitude that operates differently from factual belief.

The core idea is that the mental state involved in religious commitments is termed “religious credence.”⁵⁸ This is psychologically distinct from “factual belief,” which refers to the kind of mental state people hold about everyday realities—facts that guide their inferences and actions in ordinary life.⁵⁹ Factual beliefs are reality tracking; they shape how we interpret the world and respond to it.⁶⁰ In the case of snake handling, for example, participants possess many factual beliefs: they know that venomous snakes are dangerous, and they understand that being bitten can result in serious injury or even death. These beliefs reflect an unchanging reality, grounded in direct experience and common knowledge about the risks involved. While factual beliefs are grounded in everyday experience and guide practical action, religious credence operates according to a different set of rules, shaping meaning and motivation within specific contexts.

Religious credence differs from factual belief because it functions as a secondary cognitive attitude—one that does not necessarily track reality in the same way as factual beliefs do. As Van Leeuwen puts it, religious credence is “made over and above factual belief and not conflated with it.”⁶¹ In the context of snake handling, religious credence might manifest as the conviction that the act holds deep spiritual significance, that participants are under divine protection during the ritual, or that they are fulfilling a scriptural commandment. These attitudes shape how individuals interpret and experience rituals. However, they do not override or replace their

⁵⁷ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 199

⁵⁸ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 24.

⁵⁹ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 9.

⁶⁰ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 7.

⁶¹ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 9.

factual understanding of the risks involved. Instead, religious credence operates alongside factual belief, guiding meaning and motivation within the specific context of religious practice.

When you combine these two ideas, you arrive at Van Leeuwen's central conclusion: a religious person's "belief" in supernatural entities or events is fundamentally different from their factual beliefs about everyday matters.⁶² For snake handlers, this means that during the ritual, they hold many factual beliefs—they know the snake is deadly, and they recognize the warning signs when it prepares to strike. These factual beliefs are not erased or ignored; instead, they coexist with religious credence, such as the conviction that they are under divine protection or fulfilling a spiritual command.

This is the essence of Van Leeuwen's two-map cognitive structure. According to this theory, many religious individuals operate with two distinct "maps" of the world. It's not that they fully suspend reality or always believe in supernatural forces. Rather, they oscillate between a map of the world where such things exist (within the religious context) and a map where they do not (in everyday life).⁶³ The first map is the factual belief layer, which represents how things "really are" in the ordinary world. For a snake handler, this map includes accurate knowledge about the snake's physical properties, the risks of a bite, and the consequences of mishandling. The second map is the religious credence layer, which processes ideas about the supernatural within a specific framework. In this map, handling a snake becomes a symbol of spiritual forces at work, an act of faith, and a demonstration of divine power. Experiences of safety or danger during the ritual may be interpreted as signs from God within this layer.

There is a clear asymmetry of cognitive governance between these maps. Factual beliefs supply the default and basic information for inferences within the religious credence map, but

⁶² Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 202.

⁶³ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 68.

religious credence does not govern factual beliefs. This asymmetry contributes to “nonconfusion,” another concept from Van Leeuwen that explains how individuals keep the two frameworks distinct.⁶⁴ A snake handler’s factual knowledge about the anatomy of the snake and the venom it possesses is not contradicted inside of the factual map by their religious beliefs about protection. This dual mapping of the mind raises an important question: how do individuals keep these frameworks distinct, ensuring that religious credence does not override factual knowledge? Here, Van Leeuwen’s concept of reality tracking becomes crucial.

A crucial element of Van Leeuwen’s two-map model is the mind’s ability to track which beliefs are meant to correspond to reality and which are not. This process, known as “reality tracking,” ensures that individuals do not confuse their religious credences with factual beliefs about the world.⁶⁵ This is not just about distinguishing between factual beliefs and religious credences in the abstract; it is also about knowing when and where each type of belief is relevant. The best example of this comes from Van Leeuwen’s, “The Parable of the Playground.”⁶⁶ There is all kinds of reality tracking going on in a group of kids playing with dolls at recess. They meet up at noon because that is when it is time to play. They put the dolls away when recess is over. While playing with the dolls, they consider the height, size, and weight of the dolls.⁶⁷

Inside the context of the ritual, such as during a snake handling service, religious credence takes on a heightened significance. Beliefs about divine protection, spiritual significance, and obedience to scripture become the primary guides for action. However, this does not mean that reality tracking is suspended. On the contrary, snake handlers remain acutely aware of the physical realities of the situation. The best example I came across was how much attention was

⁶⁴ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 5

⁶⁵ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 7.

⁶⁶ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 1.

⁶⁷ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 7.

given to the snake's behavior—if the snake tenses up or shows signs of agitation, the handler may change their grip or adjust their movements to avoid being bitten. This demonstrates that factual beliefs about the snake's danger and the need for caution are still very much in play, even as the ritual context frames the act as one of faith.

This is not to dismiss the practice, but rather to highlight another one of the unique nuances present. The phrase, “Beware of an old man in a profession where men usually die young,” is especially resonant here. There is a certain “skill” associated with handling snakes. If I were to hand you an agitated snake, would you have any idea where to grab it? How to hold it? When to change hands? It is not that the handler is making active decisions to do these things. Rather, even inside of the context of the ritual where religious credence is heightened: his actions are instinctively guided by his tracking of reality.

Religious credence is not always active. An important part of Van Leeuwen's argument is that there is a context that triggers religious credence. Religious credence only guides action within specific religious or “charismatic” practical settings. This is different from factual beliefs, which govern action universally. Snake handling is a practice that is almost exclusively confined to the specific charged setting of a religious service. This aligns with Van Leeuwen's idea of “compartmentalization.” Compartmentalization is the idea that “secondary cognitive attitudes have ‘off’ switches: they stop guiding behavior outside their special practical settings.”⁶⁸

This is illustrated in the book with the brick as a sandwich example. Taken from Paul Harris's *The Work of the Imagination*, he tells of an experiment where kids as young as one and two were watching a show where Teddy ate a sandwich. After watching the show, researchers handed children a brick and asked them to demonstrate what Teddy does with his sandwich. The

⁶⁸ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 34.

kids all began to engage with the brick as if it were a sandwich.⁶⁹ This example illustrates many of Van Leeuwen's points. As soon as the "play" ended, the brick went back to being a brick. Clearly, there was a contextual contingency on the children treating the brick like a sandwich. Furthermore, there is evidence of reality tracking. The children—even while playing and treating the brick as if it were a sandwich—clearly recognized that it was a brick. Nobody tried to take a bite out of the brick.

This shows how our factual beliefs do continue to govern our imagined play. Yet, the example also shows that in certain contexts, our imaginative beliefs become activated. For snake handlers, the cognitive attitude that permits or compels snake handling is likely activated and guides action primarily within the sacred space and time of the church service. Outside of this setting, their behavior concerning venomous snakes is like everyone else's. They are guided by factual beliefs about danger, leading to avoidance and measures taken for protection. This was exemplified in my conversation with one pastor. He was telling me that the morning before a church service, he uses a snake hook to move the snakes into the box used for transportation. A few hours later, he was holding that same copperhead.

Beyond individual cognition, religious credence is also deeply intertwined with group identity and the performance of symbolic actions that reinforce communal values. This is because religious credence is deeply connected to group identity, and they are what motivate symbolic actions. I want to expand on this, that some religious actions may have no practical utility in an everyday sense, but they serve as powerful expressions of commitment to the group and its sacred values. He uses the term "markers."⁷⁰ These are the things that make us, us. In doing so, they also separate us from them. As such, even if a religious action may seem as if it

⁶⁹ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 40-41.

⁷⁰ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 259

has no observable benefit or purpose to someone who is not “us,” it may still fulfill this function of distinguishing and guiding.

Snake handling epitomizes this. It is a highly symbolic act. Outside of the context of the group, the act of handling a venomous snake has no practical utility and in fact is against conventional norms and rationality. Yet, inside of the specific religious community that practices it, it signals unwavering faith, obedience to divine command, acceptance of the divine power, and a deep commitment to the values of the group. It also distinguishes between an “us” and “them.” I heard many examples of this, even with other Christian groups. The comments ranged from “true Christian,” to “absolute followers of the Word,” to the “real church.”

So how does this all work? Having fully laid out the puzzle of religious rationality and explored Van Leeuwen’s framework, it’s helpful to ground these abstract ideas in personal experience and concrete reality. I have a fear of snakes. Even something as small and harmless as a garden snake elicits fear in me. If I were to walk through the woods and hear a rattling noise from a nearby bush, I would likely drop everything and run. I would be inclined to never return to that trail again. This is based off factual beliefs that I have developed over the years. Yet, a snake handler has even more reason to be afraid than I. I have never been bitten by a snake, let alone a venomous one. In gruesome detail, these people I met described the pain and agony that they experienced after being bitten. There is no one who fears the bite of a venomous snake like these people who have experienced the days of suffering that they have.

Yet, they go back every Sunday and do it again. This is where Van Leeuwen’s idea of “inferential curtailment” comes in.⁷¹ Within the framework of religious credence, the inferences that would normally follow from factual beliefs are limited or curtailed. While factual beliefs

⁷¹ Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 119

about snake venom are based on real conceptions of harm, the religious credence operating in the context of the ritual does not license the same range of inferences. The belief in divine protection does not override or erase the factual belief that snakes are dangerous; rather, it restricts the inference of likely harm to contexts outside the ritual. In other words, the credence that “God will protect me during worship” only applies within the specific context of the ritual. It does not generalize to all situations involving snakes.

Van Leeuwen illustrates this through the following way. Imagine you were to tell someone who believed in the Bible stories that you could not actually survive in the belly of a whale for three days.⁷² That person would likely hesitate, their factual beliefs are contradictory to what their religious credence is telling them. They know that, according to the laws of biology and physics, surviving inside a whale for three days is impossible. There is a clear physiological impossibility of a human surviving without air, food, or water inside a whale for three days. Furthermore, the physical constraints of the environment inside a whale—such as lack of oxygen, pressure, and the mechanics of digestion—make it clear that this religious idea is not concurrent with their factual beliefs.

Yet, their religious credence compels them to accept the story as true within the context of their faith. This does not mean that the individual is unaware of the facts. Their factual map is still there, but inside of the specific religious context guided by religious credence, the inference is suppressed and countered by the belief in divine protection. For example, if I told this same person that I had survived inside a whale for three days, they would likely dismiss my claim as impossible. However, if I told them my name was Jonah and I was fleeing Nineveh, suddenly the

⁷² Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe*, 258.

story makes sense within the religious framework. When applied to snake handlers, this becomes even more apparent.

The individual is very aware of the potential danger. Their factual map is still present. However, in the specific context of the ritual, which is guided by religious credence, the inference about likely harm is curtailed. The belief in divine protection applies only within the ritual and does not extend to all situations involving snakes. This is the essence of inferential curtailment: religious credences do not function like factual beliefs in everyday reasoning, but instead have their inferences limited to specific contexts.

While Van Leeuwen's two-map theory offers a compelling framework for understanding the cognitive dynamics of religious practices like snake handling, it is important to acknowledge that this approach is not without its critics. Some philosophers and cognitive scientists argue that the apparent differences between religious and factual beliefs can be explained by the inherent complexity and context-sensitivity of all beliefs, rather than by positing a distinct category of "religious credence." According to this view, failures of compartmentalization, cognitive governance, or evidential vulnerability are not unique to religion but are common features of belief in general, especially when dealing with abstract or emotionally charged topics. Some critics also question whether religious commitment is truly analogous to pretending. One of the more prevalent critiques of Van Leeuwen's framework is that most religious practitioners do not experience their faith as a form of make-believe.⁷³

However, I would push back on this specific critique. It is worth considering that the subjective experience or preferred label of religious practitioners does not necessarily determine the underlying cognitive structure at work. The fact that individuals do not describe their

⁷³ Joseph Sommer, "Religion as Belief: A Realist Theory: A Review of Religion as Make-Believe, A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity," unpublished manuscript, 2023.

religious engagement as “pretending” does not eliminate the possibility that similar psychological mechanisms—such as compartmentalization or context-dependent attitudes—are involved. It is not my intention here to resolve these broader debates or to take a definitive stance on the nature of religious vs factual belief. Rather, for the purposes of this paper, I employ Van Leeuwen’s framework as a useful interpretive tool for analyzing the specific case of snake handling.

With this interpretive lens in mind, applying Van Leeuwen’s framework allows snake handling in Appalachia to be analyzed not as a straightforward factual belief that snakes are harmless, but as a complex practice rooted in a distinct cognitive attitude. This is what Van Leeuwen terms “religious credence.” It is specifically triggered in a compartmentalized religious setting, guided by sacred values and group identity, involves symbolic action, and allows for inferential curtailment regarding the factual risks within that context. Through this approach, we can understand the practice within a framework that acknowledges the complexity of religious cognition and action, moving beyond simplistic views that might label practitioners as simply irrational or delusional.

If Van Leeuwen gives us a map of the mind, then perhaps it is time to ask: what happens when that map is brought to life on stage? After all, snake handling is not just a matter of belief. It is a spectacle, a drama, a high-stakes performance with a live (and sometimes wriggling) cast. Much like an actor who fully inhabits a role while always remaining aware of the edge of the stage, snake handlers step into a ritual world without ever losing touch with reality. To truly appreciate the choreography of faith in action, I now turn to Richard Schechner to illuminate what happens when religious credence meets the bright lights of performance theory.

6 Chapter 6: Snake Handling on the Southern Stage

This chapter draws on Richard Schechner's performance theories to examine serpent handling as a transformative ritual found at the crossroads of spontaneity and structure, efficacy and entertainment, and personal and communal experience. I open with an introduction to Schechner's concept of restored behavior, considering how serpent handling weaves together tradition, rehearsal, and moments of spontaneous inspiration. The analysis then turns to the idea of "dark play," emphasizing the ritual's embrace of risk and unpredictability as central to its performative power. I move on to focus on the transformative potential of serpent handling, analyzing how direct confrontation with danger and fear can generate profound spiritual and communal change.

The chapter also investigates the fluid continuum between efficacy and entertainment, illustrating how serpent handling blurs the lines between personal devotion and communal spectacle. Schechner's notion of the "subjunctive mood" is introduced, building on Victor Turner's theories of liminality and *communitas* to reveal how the ritual space becomes a site of possibility and transformation. Attention is also given to the vital role of the congregation, whose participation enhances both the efficacy and the performative dimensions of the ritual. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the value of interpreting ritual through the lens of performance theory, highlighting the unique insights this approach offers for understanding the complexities of serpent handling.

Serpent handling exemplifies Schechner's concept of "restored behavior," blending rehearsed tradition with spontaneous divine inspiration. Restored behavior, as Schechner describes, is "living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film." These "strips of behavior" can be rearranged, reconstructed, and are independent of the original causal systems—social, psychological, or technological—that created them. They exist as separate entities that

can be manipulated, transmitted, and performed.⁷⁴ This concept is central to understanding serpent handling, as the ritual is deeply rooted in tradition yet shaped by the lived experiences of its practitioners.

Schechner observes that ritual studies is moving away from focusing on the final product and instead focusing on the whole performance sequence. This is broken down into the following: “training, workshop, rehearsal, warm-up, performance, cool-down, and aftermath.” He writes, “When this whole sequence is considered, it becomes clear that the ritual process is identical to what I call ‘restored behavior,’ ‘twice-behaved behavior,’ behavior that can be repeated, that is, rehearsed.”⁷⁵ In other words, we can understand ritual as performance.

This sequence he lists is evident in serpent handling. The “training” phase occurs as new practitioners observe and gradually participate, learning both the spiritual and practical dimensions of the ritual. I was able to witness some informal “workshops” and “rehearsals.” They were simply experienced handlers guiding newcomers, sharing stories and techniques outside of formal services. The “warm-up” is embodied in the ritual itself, found in the prayers, singing, and emotional build-up that precede the act of handling. The “performance” is the public act of taking up serpents, while the “cool-down” and “aftermath” are seen as the congregation returns to ordinary worship and reflects on the experience. This cyclical process highlights how serpent handling is not a static tradition but a living, evolving performance, perfectly illustrating Schechner’s theory of restored behavior.

Handlers are socialized into the practice through observation and participation, a process that mirrors Schechner’s idea of “twice-behaved behaviors,” or behaviors that are rehearsed and

⁷⁴ Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35–37.

⁷⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 323–24.

repeated within a cultural framework. Hood notes that “No serpent handlers we have interviewed claimed to have read the Bible and then picked up a serpent on their own... Instead, the normative practice itself is modeled by experienced handlers.”⁷⁶ New participants do not become serpent handlers immediately.⁷⁷ Instead, they learn by watching others, internalizing the ritual’s meaning and structure over time.

Understanding that, Schechner’s emphasis that restored behavior is not necessarily an exact replication of an original act but rather a performance shaped by social memory, reinterpretation, and even myth, is particularly important. There is seemingly a contrast here: participants believe they are engaging in an unbroken biblical tradition, and yet, their actions are shaped by the lived experiences of previous handlers, the expectations of the congregation, and the evolving dynamics of faith. As Schechner explains, the “original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted— even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed.”⁷⁸ This is particularly relevant in serpent handling, where practitioners emphasize biblical foundations yet enact a ritual that has been filtered through generations of Appalachian religious experience.

One understanding of why this is, is through the idea of the performer who is enacting restored behavior. Hood notes that “a powerful charismatic personality can unveil a text for a receptive audience—a text in which a potential role has heretofore been ignored.”⁷⁹ In the case of serpent handling, that initial powerful charismatic personality was Hensley, “a complex man and troubled in his faith... Upon the fortuitous appearance of a rattlesnake, Hensley spontaneously

⁷⁶ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 321.

⁷⁷ I will caveat this by pointing out that it is possible for someone in their first attendance to partake in the act of picking up a snake and handling it in a service. However, I again draw the distinction here between handling serpents and being recognized as a serpent handler.

⁷⁸ Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, 36.

⁷⁹ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 319.

handled it and found himself unharmed.”⁸⁰ This spontaneous act, rooted in a literal interpretation of scripture, became a foundational moment that shaped the tradition of serpent handling. Hensley’s actions modeled the practice for others, creating a ritual that continues to evolve within its cultural and religious context.

Briefly revisiting the idea of the anointing is important to understanding why this is the case. Serpent handling is a tradition that is built on the idea of spontaneity—relying on the presence of the anointing: this divine sensation that empowers handlers to act. Williamson describes this as “a physical and spiritual sensation that provides a sense of knowing when it is time to take up a serpent,” adding that it is “compelling in the sense that ‘you can’t wipe it off of you... [and] you can’t walk out from under it.’”⁸¹ This spontaneity introduces an unplanned element to the ritual, making each performance unique while still grounded in a structured framework.

Finally, if we revisit Chapter 2, the ritual’s grounding in scripture provides a textual script that guides its performance. Hood notes, “Handlers justified cultural and religious provocations of both rituals citing the Biblical affirmation found in Mark 16:17-18 where Christ beckoned his followers to handle serpents and perform miracles.”⁸² This scriptural basis, combined with the lived experiences of previous handlers, creates a ritual that is both deeply rooted in tradition and open to reinterpretation.

Schechner’s concept of “dark play” is central to understanding the risk-laden, unpredictable nature of serpent handling rituals. While Schechner developed this idea within performance studies, he drew significantly on earlier anthropological work, particularly that of

⁸⁰ Hood and Kimbrough, “Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects,” 318.

⁸¹ W. Paul Williamson, “Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1999), 214.

⁸² Williams, ““And These Signs Shall Follow,”” 77.

Clifford Geertz. In his essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” Geertz is looking at the high-stakes world of Balinese cockfighting, where both participants and spectators are drawn into a game whose outcome is uncertain and whose risks are real. Geertz observes, “In genuine deep play...they are both in over their heads.”⁸³ This phrase captures the essence of Geertz’s deep play, that would become Schechner’s dark play: a space where the boundaries between control and chaos, safety and danger, are deliberately blurred.

In the context of serpent handling, dark play is enacted through the ritual’s embrace of genuine physical risk. Handlers and congregants alike are aware that the outcome of each service is unpredictable—no one can know for certain what will happen when a venomous snake is taken up, even with faith. As one pastor put it, “That’s the thrill of it. Me, you, and nobody else don’t know what’s about to happen.” This uncertainty is not an accidental byproduct but a central feature of the ritual, heightening its emotional and spiritual intensity.

The willingness to face genuine danger becomes a powerful demonstration of faith, which transforms the ritual into a dramatic and emotionally charged performance. The congregation, much like the audience at a cockfight, is witnessing an event that is simultaneously structured and unpredictable, and the stakes could not be higher. Understanding serpent handling as a form of dark play, following Schechner’s framework, reveals how risk and uncertainty are not unintentional threats to the ritual but are instead essential elements that generate meaning, solidarity, and awe within the community. The excitement and anxiety of not knowing what will happen next are precisely what give the ritual its transformative and compelling power.

Building on the previous section’s focus on “dark play” and the role of risk as a performative element within serpent handling, this section shifts attention to the outcomes and

⁸³ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 71.

significance of that risk, examining how it acts as a catalyst for personal and communal transformation. One of the simplest explanations for the external focus on serpent handling is the genuine risk and peril that it possesses. If we flip this now, to examine it from the perspective of the practitioner: the transformative power of serpent handling lies in its ability to confront fear and risk, creating a profound spiritual and communal impact. Schechner emphasizes the transformative power of performance, writing, "Performers specialize in putting themselves in disequilibrium and then displaying how they regain their balance, psychophysically, narratively, and socially."⁸⁴ This idea resonates deeply with serpent handling, where the act of taking up serpents requires the handler to confront fear and trust completely in God's protection.

The element of explicit risk is central to this transformation. Handling poisonous snakes, holding a flame to one's bare skin or drinking poison involves a real danger of injury or death. While it happens less than people would first assume, Hood does note that death resulting from partaking in these rituals is well documented.⁸⁵ This element of danger not only underscores the handler's faith but also heightens the emotional and spiritual intensity of the ritual for the congregation. The audience witnesses the handler's act of faith and trust in divine protection, which creates a shared sense of awe and reinforces the spiritual significance of the performance.

Williams further explains how the physical risk contributes to the ritual's transformative power: "The physical/spiritual framework provided by Appalachian dualism... justified the use of material properties like serpents and fire to actively become ritualistic mediums that could be used to acquire spiritual favor and divine healing."⁸⁶ The physical danger of handling serpents or

⁸⁴ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, xix.

⁸⁵ Hood and Kimbrough, "Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects," 316.

⁸⁶ Williams, "And These Signs Shall Follow," 44.

drinking poison elevates the spiritual stakes, making the ritual a profound demonstration of faith and divine intervention.

Schechner's distinction between "transport" and "transform" is useful here. For many handlers, the ritual is transformative: it is intended to change the individual, deepening faith and spiritual power.⁸⁷ Yet, the ecstatic states and a feeling of divine presence does serve to "transport" both handlers and congregation into a liminal reality. Thus, serpent handling can be understood as both a vehicle for personal and wider communal transformation and as a means of transporting participants into an alternate, spiritually charged world.

This interplay between risk and transformation aligns with Schechner's broader theory of performance, where the intensity of high-stakes acts creates a powerful connection between the performer and the audience. The handler's confrontation with danger becomes a shared experience, drawing the congregation into a heightened emotional and spiritual state. This dynamic illustrates how the physical risk inherent in serpent handling amplifies its impact as both a personal and communal act of faith.

In this section, it is important to point out a dichotomy that exists between the performer (handler) and audience (congregation). As always, I will first concede that as in all other cases explored thus far in serpent handling, the lines are blurry. However, in this section I hope to explore Schechner's continuum of efficacy (act with the intention of a desired outcome) and entertainment (performance that is crowd oriented). This continuum highlights the interplay between two poles: efficacy, which is goal-oriented and transformative, and entertainment, which is focused on enjoyment and aesthetic engagement.

⁸⁷ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 191.

To address the elephant in the room, I am content with the conclusion that for the handler this ritual can most clearly be understood through the lens of efficacy. Schechner writes, "Performance originates in the binary system efficacy—entertainment which includes the sub-set ritual—theater."⁸⁸ In the context of serpent handling, the ritual—for the handler—leans heavily toward efficacy, as it is performed as an act of obedience to scripture (Mark 16:17-18) and as a demonstration of faith. It seems evident that for the handler the primary goal is not simply entertainment but spiritual transformation, divine connection, and the manifestation of God's power.

However, as Schechner notes, ritual and entertainment are braided together. As he put simply, "In all entertainment there is some efficacy and in all ritual there is some theater."⁸⁹ While serpent handling could be understood as an individual act strictly focused on efficacy, it also contains performative elements that engage the congregation. Before going further, this distinction is not intended to be offensive or reductive to the practice. Serpent handlers would agree that if you reduced this ritual to its furthest point, this serves as one way to convince non-believers. As one handler put it, "You come up here and you just handle that snake just to be handling that snake, that don't prove nothing... If the Lord's moving on you, thank God, somebody can see that, and they'll know there's something real about that."⁹⁰ To be clear, I am not advocating for this position, I merely hope to demonstrate that this idea of the entertainment and efficacy in a serpent handling service is far more fluid than it initially seems.

If we look at the role of the handler (performer), there is clear efficacy that results in a form of entertainment for onlookers. Williamson describes this as "an embodied event emerging

⁸⁸ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 157.

⁸⁹ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 152.

⁹⁰ Williamson, "Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling," 211.

from the context of Pentecostal worship,” where the body becomes “the modality through which the handlers experience this sacred world and God.”⁹¹ This embodiment of faith transforms the handler into a vessel for divine power (efficacy), while the congregation witnesses a dramatic and awe-inspiring act of devotion (entertainment).

Ultimately, serpent handling exemplifies the braided relationship between efficacy and entertainment. Its efficacy lies in its spiritual purpose—demonstrating faith, invoking divine protection, and fostering transformation—while its theatrical elements captivate and unify the congregation. This duality reflects the complexity of serpent handling as both a deeply personal and communal act, blending the structured framework of ritual with the immediacy and emotional engagement of performance.

In this section, I will focus on Schechner’s idea of the “subjunctive mood.” Before going further, it is important to note that a large part of this theory is built on Turner’s concept of liminality, which explores the ambiguous, transformative phase within rituals. Schechner draws on Turner’s work but extends it by introducing his own perspectives, particularly regarding the experiential and imaginative dimensions of ritual. Therefore, in this section, I will primarily concentrate on the physical space of the ritual, as this is the point at which Schechner begins to supplement Turner’s framework with his own insights. By examining how the physical environment contributes to the creation of a “subjunctive” or “what if” atmosphere, we can better understand the unique qualities that Schechner attributes to ritual performance.

The worship space itself in serpent handling becomes a liminal zone where the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds blur. Schechner explains, "Performance can create a 'subjunctive mood,' a space of possibility where participants can explore new realities."⁹²

⁹¹ Williamson, “Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling,” 208.

⁹² Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 189.

In serpent handling, the church or worship space is transformed into a sacred site where divine power is made manifest. As Williams notes, "The physical/spiritual framework... justified the use of material properties like serpents and fire."⁹³ This transformation of space aligns with Schechner's observation that performance can create a "subjunctive mood," allowing participants to step outside ordinary reality and engage with the sacred.

Schechner's concept of the "as if" quality of performance further illuminates this transformation. He describes how performers, through techniques such as psychophysical exercises and yielding to impulses, can enter a state of vulnerability and transparency, enabling them to "drop into" their roles. As Schechner notes, "The vulnerability of ecstasy can be suddenly transformed into the totality of trance possession."⁹⁴ This resonates with the serpent handlers' belief that their actions are a direct manifestation of God's power and protection. The ritual creates a liminal space where participants experience the divine "as if" it is present in the here and now, reinforcing their faith and connection to God.

The physical space of the ritual also plays a crucial role in this transformation. Schechner observes that "at the level of the staging there are costumes and masks, exercises and incantations, incense and music, all designed to 'make believe' in the literal sense – to help the performer make her/himself into another person or being, existing at another time in another place."⁹⁵ In the context of serpent handling, the material elements such as serpents, fire, and music serve as ritualistic devices that bridge the physical and spiritual realms. This aligns with Williamson's analysis that "the phenomenon of serpent handling may be described as an

⁹³ Williams, "And These Signs Shall Follow," 44.

⁹⁴ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 202.

⁹⁵ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 192.

experience of the body being moved upon by a pattern of special meanings within the context of Pentecostal worship."⁹⁶

Returning to the idea of efficacy and entertainment, the role of the congregation can also contribute to efficacy. In performances leaning toward efficacy, the audience often participates actively, as seen in serpent handling, where the congregation's prayers, singing, and emotional responses amplify the spiritual experience. This contrasts with entertainment-focused performances, where the audience typically observes passively. There is a clear fluidity in the role of the crowd, the congregation's active participation reinforces the ritual's efficacy, while the performative elements create a shared emotional and spiritual experience.

Although this section is brief, it is crucial that the congregation participates in the ritual. There are many examples of this I came across. The pastor did not handle alone, even if he was in the confines of the church. "I need that guitar, and I need that worship," he said. There is an impact of having a congregation there participating. Even if they are present, it is also vital that they buy in to the ritual. At one service I attended, the audience was blamed for not "letting their minds go and really worshipping." This had a tangible impact: the Spirit did not move, the snakes were quickly put back into the box, and the service ended on a sour note.

Examining serpent handling through the lens of Richard Schechner's performance theories reveals the ritual as a dynamic and evolving practice that cannot be reduced to simple categories of tradition or spectacle. Through applying concepts such as restored behavior, dark play, efficacy and entertainment, and the subjunctive mood, it is clear that serpent handling is continually reshaped by the lived experiences, risks, and faith of its practitioners. The ritual's transformative power is due to its ability to blur boundaries—between rehearsal and spontaneity,

⁹⁶ Williamson, "Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling," 209.

performer and audience, danger and protection—creating a liminal space where personal and community identities are both tested and affirmed. Schechner's framework not only deepens our understanding of serpent handling but also demonstrates the broader value of performance theory in illuminating the complexities of religious ritual.

7 Chapter 7: Faith, Fangs, and Final Thoughts

This project was ambitious. Snake handling is a phenomenon that has a complex history, a troubled present, and a very uncertain future. Throughout my time researching—whether it be in a library or in a service—I found that for every question I began to answer, more would spring up. This is not simply a deviant or sensational practice, it is a deeply meaningful demonstration of faith, community, and communal resilience. Through a multidisciplinary approach that draws on social norms theory, ritual studies, and performance theory, I hope to have illuminated the complex interplay of belief, tradition, risk, and shared experience that sustains this unique religious ritual.

At its core, snake handling is an embodied expression of faith. It is rooted in scriptural tradition and reinforced by powerful social norms. There are unwritten rules that govern who may handle, when, and under what conditions they can. These serve not only to protect participants but maintain the spiritual integrity of the ritual—by ensuring that anyone partaking has the divine will of God. These norms are learned through observation, participation, and positive and negative reinforcement within the community. This ensures that while snake handling churches are highly individualized, there will be some continuity and cohesion across generations.

There is a complex “irrationality” to this ritual, rooted in the unique interplay of cognitive attitudes described by Neil Van Leeuwen. When participants face the real dangers of handling venomous snakes, holding flames to their face, or consuming strychnine, they do so guided by what Van Leeuwen calls “religious credence.” Unlike factual belief, which tracks everyday reality and informs practical caution, religious credence is activated within the specific context of the ritual, shaping meaning and motivation in ways that transcend ordinary risk assessment. In these moments, participants do not deny the factual dangers; rather, their religious credence

operates alongside their factual beliefs, allowing them to interpret and endure these acts as expressions of faith and commitment. The ritual thus becomes a powerful demonstration of how religious credence can guide action and experience within a compartmentalized, sacred setting, transforming perilous acts into meaningful religious practice.

Richard Schechner's performance theory further reveals how serpent handling exists at the intersection of structure and spontaneity, efficacy and entertainment. The ritual is both rehearsed and immediate. It is shaped by a tradition, yet it is open to the unpredictable movement of the spirit. The congregation is not a passive audience, but an engaged and active participant in the service. They amplify the spiritual intensity through collective prayer, singing, and deep emotional engagement. In these moments we can see elements of *communitas*—a unity that transcends typical individual boundaries, while reinforcing the community's shared values.

The best way to understand the complexities of snake handling is to be born into it—raised by a father who preaches and handles every Sunday. For outsiders, gaining a deep understanding of this community is not a matter of months or even years, but a lifetime of work. It is imperative that future studies acknowledge the importance of nuance. They must recognize the influence of lived experience and generational knowledge on shaping the beliefs and practices of snake handlers. They should consider long-term ethnographic engagement, striving to build trust and relationships over extended periods.

Only in engagement at this level will a researcher ever begin to fully appreciate the nuances of faith, risk, and tradition within these communities. Approaches to studying should strive to be interdisciplinary: combining approaches like anthropology, theology, psychology. Even hard sciences like health sciences or evolutionary sciences could yield richer insights into the motivations and worldviews of these practitioners. Above all, any future research must

approach the subject with humility, respect, and a willingness to learn. Due to the nature of these churches—being the “most persecuted” as one preacher put it—some aspects of this tradition may remain inaccessible to outsiders.

The study of snake handling resists easy answers, demanding both intellectual rigor and empathetic engagement. By tracing it through the lenses of social norms, ritual, cognition, and performance, this thesis has sought to move beyond sensationalism and toward a deeper understanding of faith enacted at the edge of risk. The ritual’s power lies not only in its confrontation with physical danger, but in its capacity to forge and reinforce communal bonds, transmit generational knowledge, and sustain a sense of shared purpose amid marginalization and misunderstanding.

Throughout this research, it has become clear that snake handling is not static. It is a living tradition, continually shaped by the interplay of individual agency, communal expectations, and broader cultural forces. Future scholarship must resist the temptation to reduce snake handling to a mere spectacle. Instead, it should embrace the complexity and ambiguity that defines this tradition. Researchers must be attentive to the ways in which tradition is both inherited and reinvented, and to the subtle forms of resilience and resistance that sustain these practices amid external scrutiny and internal divides.

Ultimately, the study of snake handling challenges us to reconsider our assumptions about risk, ritual, and religious life. It invites us to see beyond the fangs and the flames. It opens the door to seeing the deeper processes of meaning-making and community-building that are the byproducts of this tradition. We can best understand the enduring enigma of snake handling not as a barrier to understanding, but an invitation to deeper inquiry. In the end, the only thing more unpredictable than a snake in a sanctuary is the story it continues to write.

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