

**THE SERPENT HANDLERS FROM THE APPALACHIAN
MOUNTAINS IN THE SOUTHERN STATES OF THE USA**

by

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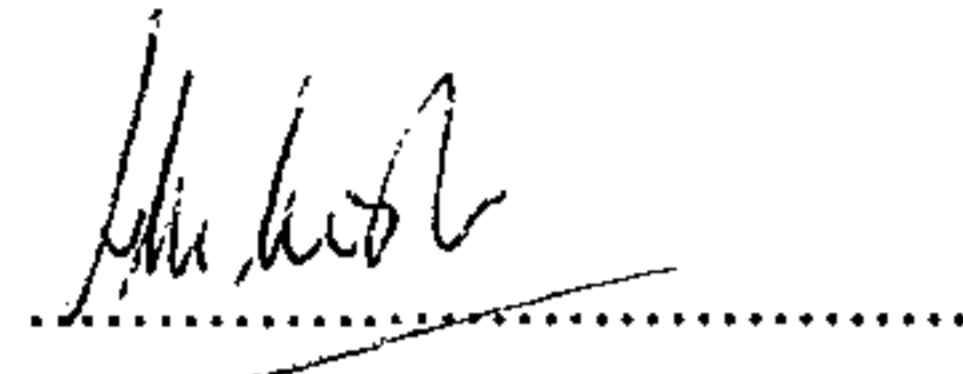
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SUMMARY

The southern Appalachian mountain region is home to a sincere group of religious fundamentalists. They obey Jesus' last command that serpents should be taken up (Mark 16:17-18). They believe the Holy Ghost anoints them and gives them the power to handle serpents, drink poisons, handle fire, and to heal the sick. Nevertheless, they are fully aware that they may be bitten and may even die. Each church is autonomous.

KEY WORDS

anointment

Appalachian

Church of God

death

handlers

Hensley

Holy Spirit

Pentecostal

rattlesnakes

taking up serpents

PREFACE

To avoid unwieldy writing I shall use personal and reflexive nouns and pronouns interchangeably. These will denote either the male or female or both. The term "man" will be used to denote humanity both male and female. "Serpent handlers" or "handlers" shall denote those people who handle serpents as part of their religious services in the southern states of the USA.

When dealing with this Christian group of people and their church services, which are so out of the ordinary and so unlike any traditional service, it is tempting to be sensational. Magazine and newspaper journalists have highlighted this sensationalism at the expense of the absolute sincerity of the handlers themselves.

Reports on the handlers have often been very dramatic. Prof. Jim Birckhead¹ wonders whether any person besides a handler can really write about them. Those who have participated in serpent handling services and then have written about them still do so as observers. Obviously an element of subjectivity is involved.

Besides corresponding with Prof. Birckhead I have also managed to communicate with Mark Brown, a snake handler and a minister in the church. His father is a pastor as was his late brother, Punkin Brown². As each church is autonomous Mark can speak only for his own group. The handlers constantly attend each others' services and sometimes even preach in each others' churches. Therefore, presumably there will be few differences among the handlers. I have also corresponded with Prof. Tom Burton³.

¹ Birckhead did his research for PhD. D. in 1976. He states that when he visited the old church in 1995, it was no longer the same - the group and their lives had changed dramatically. In his church serpents have not been handled for at least 13 years. The group now belongs to a non-serpent handling church. Birckhead for example writes about "his church" and "his people" even though he is not an official member of the church, nor has he taken up serpents during their services.

Jim Birckhead actually lived with a family in Cutshin Creek. In 1966 he joined the Williams family of nine, living in a rough timber shack with a washing machine on the porch but no television. He lived with the family as a full family member. He ploughed planted, weeded and harvested. He even butchered a hog. He worked on the "happy Pappy" program in which they fixed the roads, dug graves, etc. He thus had been intimately involved with daily life of handlers and he believes that this experience gave him an advantage in writing about the handlers (Birckhead in Glazier 1997:39-40).

² Punkin Brown and his wife Melinda were both bitten during church services and died. She died two years before he did.

³ Mark Brown introduced Tom Burton to me. Burton kindly replied to my questions.

INTRODUCTION

The serpent handlers are continuously involved in battles of good and evil, life and death and simply for survival.

Mankind lived and still lives in a world subject to continual stress, anxiety, uncertainty and powerlessness. I believe that a belief in a Supreme Being assists the human being to deal with these fears and stresses⁴. It also enables man to blame outside forces for illnesses, disasters and death, whilst simultaneously empowering him to rejoice in the blessings bestowed on him. Thus man fears the Devil and honours God. The gods do not take advantage of man's fears, it is man himself who does so⁵. This was and is done by priests or shamans who use people's beliefs that they have been given special powers and special knowledge, their direct contact with the unknown gives them a certain mystique and they must be treated with great respect or even with fear.

The handlers lived in an extremely harsh environment. Emotions such as fear and wonder or awe affect religious customs. They use snakes to overcome their fear of the reptiles and to demonstrate their obedience to Jesus' last command⁶. They handle the snakes to prove their victory over Satan. In the monotheistic religions the serpent, the image of Satan as he appeared to Eve in the Garden of Eden, can be a mean adversary or a potent ally. Satan, the epitome of evil, can be blamed for man's weakness and for disasters. He is a wonderful invention in that

⁴ For those people who believe in a god or gods do accept that their Supreme Being is more powerful than they are. Many modern people accept that they cannot control all life, nor can they deal with all the disasters that afflict mankind. They need to turn to a power more powerful than they are. It is expected that God will help if so requested. In times of drought, great veldt fires, floods, illnesses etc. people tend to turn to a supreme power that is understood to be almighty, omniscient, omnipresent and all-caring. Park Saylor said, "Many people who had hard times turned to the church during those times. That's all we had" (Kimbrough 1995:90).

⁵ Magicians, medicine men, and spiritual leaders have for many centuries used their "knowledge of the invisible forces" to control people in their sphere of life. They had secret knowledge divulged to them by the gods. To enforce their will on the people they supposedly acted on behalf of the gods/God. The power of the shamans medicine men, priests, etc. remained unchallenged until knowledge became available to every person through literacy and the media. Many religious institutions and priests acted as god's representative on earth and they to a large extent controlled their followers.

⁶ The gospel of Mark details that immediately prior to the ascension Jesus commanded his disciples to go into the world and to preach the gospel to all nations and he finished the command by promising that believers will be saved; and, that those who picked up snakes or drank poison would not be harmed (Mark 16:15). The handlers do not accept that this was not part of the original gospel.

man can shift guilt from himself unto the devil. e.g. the familiar “the devil made me do it”.

In this dissertation which of necessity will be mainly historical and descriptive, I will highlight the aspects of the physical snake as “the Totally Other”. I shall briefly look at a few serpent symbolisms in the ancient world, specifically the biblical serpent. I shall briefly detail the Pentecostal movement and the “Church of God with signs following”, an outline of the services themselves, especially the effects of the anointing. I shall include a brief summary of the founder, George Went Hensley, and two other takers up of serpents⁷ typical of the handlers. A survey of their early social and economic conditions, as well as the handlers’ need to handle serpents, their ideas on death and life after death, the state laws in conflict with the handlers and how they may survive in the future will follow.

⁷ Because of the great similarity in lifestyles and beliefs it would be somewhat repetitive to deal with several handlers in their individual capacities.

CHAPTER 1

THE BIOLOGICAL SNAKE - "THE TOTALLY OTHER"

It is necessary to know a little about snakes. Most snake behaviour cannot be predicted though it is known that some species are more shy than others, that some are very agile and others move more slowly. No one can predict when a snake will bite, how much poison will be released or whether it will remain docile. Man does not develop an immunity to snake venom no matter how often he is bitten, on the contrary he may develop an allergy to the poison.

Mundkur states that Fowler, the lexicographer, distinguished between "serpent" and "snake". He believed the serpent was terrible, powerful and beautiful, whilst snakes were insidious, cold and contemptible. However, the serpent is simply a reptile, so is the snake. Another differentiation labels the serpent as a large reptile, whilst the snake is the smaller of the species (Mundkur 1983:2). The distinction between "serpent" and "snake" is semantic.

Rudolph Otto called the ultimate Supreme Being, the "Totally Other". With apologies to him I shall use this phrase to describe the snake or serpent.

One of the most ubiquitous and mysterious animals in the world is the serpent. Unlike all other animals, it exercises a power over man, a power beyond its physical abilities to attack its enemies or to defend itself. Many people are terrified of the snake and suffer from strong associations of absolute evil and horror at the mere thought of the serpent. There frequently is a total identification of the serpent with Satan. However, there are also many people who keep snakes as pets. Some people breed them as a delicacy or as food for human consumption.

The snake is seldom seen before it poses a "threat" as it slithers noiselessly into view. It suddenly appears and disappears. The silence and swiftness of its coming and going sends adrenaline glands into overdrive. The unexpected appearance of the little mouse has a similar effect on people.

Mundkur describes the snake as "an animal so primitive in its brain structure that every phase of its social and reproductive activities is mechanical and determined by transient changes in its body chemistry" (Mundkur 1983:173).

The snake is a cold-blooded, legless, voiceless, earless, deaf animal. With no hearing, no voice and no brain it seems logical that the snake must live a life in isolation. It has a most unusual locomotion. It slithers sideways yet forwards with remarkable speed. This mechanical method of movement is specific to the snake. Its vertebrae and stomach scales have been so designed that it is its

only means of locomotion. Its bite may or may not be poisonous but it will create deep anguish and distress to the victim. Its perpetually flickering bifid tongue, its staring, lidless, never-closing eyes and its unique anatomy appear ominous and menacing. It is able to survive for weeks and sometimes months without food. Once it has immobilised its prey, it swallows it whole. This is an act both repulsive and violent to most humans. It is truly a "totally other".

The snake's ubiquity and its totally otherness contributed to its being venerated and even being deified. The serpent is one of the very few creatures that has been elevated in its own right to either a divine or satanic status. Some Gnostics believed that the serpent was the incarnation of Jesus come to earth, whilst other early Christians equated the serpent with the devil (Campbell 1968:154-158).

The serpent also appears to have life immortal. It continually renews itself by shedding the old skin and assuming the new. Even when killed it continues to move for a very long time¹. Dead snakes are rarely found but the shed skin is seen frequently and if undamaged is greatly prized by medicine men.

The serpent or snake is one of the few animals that does not react to man's attempts to befriend it. It never responds to any human warmth. It remains wary of man's presence. It will accept food from its captors. It may get used to being handled but it cannot hear any soothing talk. It simply reacts to vibrations or an alteration in the temperature in its immediate vicinity. Snakes in captivity remain unpredictable and will strike if so inclined. Nevertheless, the majority of snakes remain their own creatures, often solitary, especially during the warmer weather. They are apparently content with their own company. The snake is the "totally other", a solitary creature, sufficient unto itself, yet, in the colder regions, when hibernating, snakes may congregate in caves or rocky shelters. When the warmer weather arrives they will separate again.

It is reasonably safe to handle snakes. Mundkur speculates that in the majority of opholatrous societies non-poisonous snakes were handled. Most house snakes were not venomous (Mundkur 1983:60). As a species of animal the serpent is easy to procure. It requires little care and needs to be fed only occasionally.

¹ Klauber decapitated 13 rattlesnakes. He studied the dead heads and the headless bodies. Dead heads were dangerous up to one hour after being severed from the body. The heads would contract the eye pupils, would bite a stick if inserted into the mouth and erect the fangs if a hand approached. After 43 minutes one head bit a stick and discharged venom. The headless bodies squirmed for up to seven hours after death and hearts continued beating for two days. One sidewinder's heart beat for 59 hours after 'death' (Morris and Morris 1965:147).

The snake handlers only handle un-mutilated and healthy snakes. The snakes are not defanged². They do not tie their mouths with wire or thread. They catch their snakes in the wild and bring them to the churches in special snake boxes. They keep their snakes for only a season and then release them into the wild. They also prefer to use snakes that they have caught and not those that have been raised in captivity.

Mark Brown told me that snakes that do not eat or that look ill are released into the wild. They also take baby snakes and pregnant females to areas where only a few snakes exist and which are not over-populated. The handlers try to ensure the continued survival of the snake. Mark Brown emphasised that they do not intentionally ill-treat any of God's creatures (Mark Brown:2001).

The snake's spatial orientation is easily upset especially when it is jostled, jerked, tossed, dropped overturned or is swayed rhythmically. It cannot cry out due to the pain and abuse. Snakes have died due to rough handling during the church services.

1.1 Snake symbolism

The snake is so very different to other animals. This gives it a mystique or mystery which is ideal in its use for symbols. In countries from North to South and from East to West snake symbolism is common. Snake symbolism covers centuries of religious practices and is not a new phenomenon in the modern world.

Snakes are closely associated with meanders and labyrinths. Artefacts dating back to about 20,000 BCE depict spirals, meanders and labyrinths which signify the sacred way to a dimension invisible to human senses, where the visible meets the invisible. The most ancient meander discovered dates back to 135,000 BCE at Pech de l'Aze in the Dordogne (Baring & Cashford 1993:24).

Snakes and serpents frequently appear in creation stories which many writers have interpreted as the awakening of the conscious and subconscious in man. Freud and Jung and other psychologists pay much attention to the

² To remove the poison sac the upper lip is turned up and the sac is removed. In India the wound is sealed with a hot iron thus effectively destroying any remaining sac parts. In India they de-poison and defang cobras (Morris 1968:106). Snakes can also be kept in the refrigerator to calm them (ibid:111). Showmen may use snakes in their acts. Morris states that as snakes cannot be trained the success of the act depends on the performer. The artist must have complete control over the reptile and must know how to pick up and handle the snake. An illusion must be created i.e. that the snake is an active partner in the act (ibid:109).

subconscious and have tried to explain or interpret its meaning. Most people experience the conscious as powerful actions and reactions. These are simply governed by the immediate needs or situations without consciously waiting for the subconscious. In the case of the handlers there appears to be no underlying need to handle the serpents other than as an act of implicit obedience to Jesus' injunction to do so. They believe they have superior power and knowledge. Obedience wins approval from the higher power and eventually eternal life.

Most snake symbolisms, snake gods, and the reverence and/or worship of snakes are related to natural phenomena such as water, life, death, etc. Life is associated with the waters breaking from the womb before birth and the mother goddess and also the water in the semen. It was not until the seventh millennium BCE that a gender distinction occurs. At this time the fecundating womb and the fertilising phallus appear (Baring & Cashford 1993:65). The male is granted the power of regeneration. By the time of the Bronze Age the serpent becomes the consort of the snake goddess (ibid:65). This may have prepared the psychological stage for the empowerment of the male as he, like the gods, could generate life.

In the sky the serpent represents the rays of the sun and also lightning. It lives in the underworld and like creation it emerges from the waters. The snake mediates between the three worlds.

The snake appears in a variety of symbols. It is usually male but can be female. It is a creature highlighting the dichotomies of life. It is either the saviour of the world or Satan. It heals or kills. It can ensure fertility for man or for the land or it can cause total barrenness, etc. It is associated with danger, fear and death.

The serpent frequently guards the sacred tree, the king's treasures, and the gates to the over- or under-worlds. A staring eye is associated with evil whilst an all-seeing eye with wisdom. If all is seen then all is known. Nothing can be done in secret. The snake is everywhere and he is very wise. There already is the idea of omniscience and omnipresence which is later attributed to God.

Specific symbols were:

1.2 The Ouroboros

The Ouroboros is the serpent swallowing its own tale. It is the negative side of the mother archetype which connotes anything secret, dark, hidden, the abyss and the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces and poisons, anything that is terrifying and inescapable like fate (Mundkur 1983:75-7).

The Oroboros also has its positive traits. These are clearly highlighted in the uniting symbol of the Theosophists. It is the Oroboros which encircles the badge. It symbolises the total circle of life and death, of decay and regeneration, of immortality and wisdom. The descending arc of the serpent signifies the body's descent into matter, whilst the ascending one is the evolution of the spirit. It is also related to the Hindu circular symbol signifying the in- and out-breathing of the cosmic creator, Brahma. When Brahma exhales the worlds come into being. When he inhales all is re-absorbed into the divine essence (Mundkur 1983:267-9).

There also existed a partnership between the serpent and the great earth mother. Like her, the serpent enjoyed intuitional wisdom. Not only did the mother goddess bring life through birth but she also took it into herself. The souls of the dead would re-enter the womb for a new birth. The snake, as the oroborus swallows its own tail, enters its own womb and ensures eternal life. It is the never-ending circle of life and death (Cooper 1992:212).

1.3 The Uraeus

In Egypt the serpent hieroglyph, the uraeus, became the sign of deity which was incorporated into the royal crowns of the Upper and Lower Egyptian kings. The uraeus, the sacred serpent in the king's head-dress, was the sign of protection and power³. Like the serpent the divine king had to die and had to be replaced by another human embodiment of the immortal king. He, like the serpent, which when it changed its skin, would be restored (Lurker 1974:125).

The uraeus is a common symbol in early ophiolatry. It has been found in China, in Britain, Italy but especially in Persia, Egypt and Mexico and many other areas. The circle is the symbol of the divine or the whole circle of the heavens, totality, rebirth and immortality. It may appear as a circle and two snakes or a snake superimposed on a circle which was symbolic of the Sun (ibid:125).

³ According to one version of Egyptian mythology the eye of Ra is the visible sun with its light and warmth, the source of all life, and is simultaneously also a burning fire. One day Ra sent his eye on a mission and the eye failed to return. When it was brought back by Shu and Tefnut the eye was enraged because another eye had grown in its place. Ra took the eye and placed it on his brow in the likeness of a serpent. Subsequently the solar eye, as the cobra, governed the whole world. The cobra had become the symbol of Ra's power. Ra's radiating eye is the uraeus, a powerful protector and a disastrous destroyer (de Lubicz 1982:151).

1.4 The Caduceus

The serpent was symbolic of the healer. Like Hermes (Mercury) in Greece, so Ningishzida in Babylon carried the physician's staff with two snakes entwined around it. To the Greeks and the Romans the snake was the spirit of life and reincarnation. Anubis of Egypt, Cybele of Assyria, Hercules Ogmius of the Celts, Demeter, Dionysius and Mars all used the caduceus. Sometimes the caduceus had wings. It always had the entwined serpents. And finally the serpent raised by Moses in the desert was also a caduceus (Cooper 1992:35).

The serpents on either side of the rod in the caduceus also reflect the opposites in all things and events. They are the serpents of poison and death and the serpents of healing and life; they represent fire and water, good and evil, sleep and awakening i.e. they are hermetic and homoeopathic (Cooper 1992:38).

Pausanias wrote that "the snake among the Greeks was full of *mana*, was intensely sacred ... because he is himself a life-*daimon*, a spirit of generation, even of immortality" (La Barre 1969:69). Asklepios, a Greek snake-shaman was killed because he saved so many souls. This angered Zeus until he repented. He raised Asklepios to life. Hence his special symbol was the serpent who after sloughing its skin rises from its own "death" (ibid:70).

Hermes was the phallus snake. His emblem was the caduceus or the herald's wand. Hermes was the mediator between the spirit world and the world of men, he was the messenger of the gods. He separated two serpents in deadly combat by using his rod. Today the medical profession use the caduceus with the two entwined serpents as their logo, as the symbol of healing.

1.5 Phallic Symbolism

Many people are still influenced by Freudian concepts e.g. La Barre who understood the snake handlers in Freudian terms. He strongly associated the snake with sexual symbolism. He posits that in the ancient eastern Mediterranean world including Egypt, the phallus and the serpent were symbolically and explicitly equated in religious rituals. He states that "the attributes which belong properly only to the phallus were repeatedly projected onto serpents" (La Barre 1962:54). He also claimed that the snake was man's own sexuality because "The snake is an uncanny creature primarily because, like the phallus, it has an independent and autonomous will of its own". It "is pleasurable and dangerous, good and bad at the same time" (Mundkur 1983:9).

La Barre suggests that the snakes have beards or bodily hairs as a result of their phallic symbolism. In nature there are no snakes or serpents that are hairy or have any beards, yet the symbolism persists throughout Africa, the Middle East and in the Americas. Mundkur disputes the extent of the snake's sexual symbolism. He admits that there is a sexual aspect concerned mainly with fertility rather than the phallus. Primal peoples understood sex as a natural phenomenon (Mundkur 1983:172).

La Barre states that snake handling as practised in the South-eastern states of the USA is Semitic, specifically biblical. He also states that the snake in the Semitic regions is unmistakably the phallus whilst the shedding of its skin indicates its immortality. He then links these two phenomena with the Hebrew circumcision. It is through sex that future life is ensured. Whilst giving life to others one's own life is depleted. Therefore, sexuality must end in death i.e. the sin of sexuality leads to death. He posits that salvation comes through symbolising i.e. the phallus equals the snake which has achieved immortality by sloughing its skin. Man should also be able to obtain salvation by sacrificing part of himself, the foreskin. A part is offered for the whole. Man is purified through this magical symbolic act (La Barre 1969:78-79).

Besides the phallic symbol La Barre looks at the snake's oral symbolism. This includes the snake's reputed drinking or suckling milk from breasts and udders and its eating bread. He also suggests that there is a urethral symbolism incorporating fire and water which is associated with lightning and rain (La Barre 1962:98,100). This also includes the symbolism of the oroborus, the snake swallowing its own tail. This in turn suggests the role of the circle, the beginning and end of all life and its continual renewal. As a circle it is also a symbol of perfection, a ring without a beginning and without an end.

At Luchon in the Pyrenees serpents are burnt alive on the eve of St John's Day. At Cucullo in the Abruzzi (Italy) snake handling is a central feature of a festival celebrated during May. Men collect snakes for nine days and these are then carried in a procession before the image of St. Dominice of Folingo. The statue is adorned with snakes until the villagers arrive at the church. The snakes are then removed to be killed and buried. Thus the villagers ensure that they will be free from snakebite and toothache throughout the following year (Morris and Morris 1968:45).

The snake is understood by many Christians to be the epitome of evil, no less than Satan himself. Many Saints are credited with vanquishing the serpents and even today festivals are celebrated in their honour.

Christianity was and is not immune to snake symbolism. Christ, like the serpent, was raised on the cross, the tree of life, and as Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation so Mary crushed the serpent's head overcoming the evil of

the Fall. Even today statues of Mary show her crushing the serpent's head. The serpent at the foot of the cross is evil. It is the cross that defeats the evil.

1.6 A cursory Glance at Some Snake handlers in ancient times

I look at some ancient serpent handling traditions simply to show that serpent handling is not a modern phenomenon. There is no evidence that the contemporary handling of snakes by any other group of people e.g. shamans, has influenced the handlers in any way. However, they do quote Moses' handling snakes (Ex 4:3-5) in obedience to God and to Paul's being bitten without any harm to himself (Acts 28:2-6) as examples that snakes can be handled. The handlers claim that they have not copied customs and rites from other groups. Yet the manner in which they handle their reptiles by picking them up and holding them in the middle of the snake's body is the common way of holding reptiles⁴.

Ancient rock paintings and sculptures frequently reflect snakes being held or handled by gods and goddesses. Greek and Roman families kept non-venomous snakes in their homes (Mundkur 1983:60) either as protectors of the home or to control the rat and mouse populations. The household snakes were considered to be guardians of the family and were cared for by the family (Morris 1965:111-2).

Mythologies tell how snakes were found in all countries of the world. In Africa snakes played an important role in all regions e.g. in Dahomey, Africa, the king consulted the python about government problems. The snake, Danh-gbi the god, had a large number of priests attending to him, but it was also given many wives. Young girls between eight and twelve years were provided as brides. It was this snake god that was imported to Haiti. Here it was renamed Damballah-wedo, the basis of Voodoo practices (Morris & Morris 1965:21).

⁴ Observers of the handlers such as Burton and Kimbrough state that the handlers simply put their hands into the snake boxes and pull out the serpents, they do not deliberately decide where or how to hold the snakes. Covington reported that at one service he noticed that people lifted snakes out of the several snake boxes "in no apparent order and with no apparent plan." However, he does say that most of the time the handlers "held the snakes lightly, right in the middle" (Covington 1995:104). Kimbrough reports that he has seen many dead snakes over a period of time (Kimbrough 1995:29). Snakes are fragile creatures and cannot tolerate rough handling. On one occasion Covington saw a handler hold snakes by their tails with one hand and stroking them with the other hand as though "he were straightening a rack of ties". The rattlers appeared to have turned to rubber (Covington 1995:100). Such stroking induces a cataleptic state (Mundkur 1983:89).

In South Africa among the Zulus snakes are caught and handled by both diviners and novice diviners⁵ Some novices catch live snakes during their training and they return after their period of isolation with these snakes around their necks. Later the vertebrae of that snake will be used to make a necklace for the new diviner. The spirits decide who will be a shaman and as spirits frequently manifest in snakes. Snakes are important in their culture (Berglund 1976:24-5).

In India, like many parts of Africa, the cobra was used for religious rituals e.g. the Nagas were offered milk, fruit and other food. During some festivals such as the Naga Panchami snakes were caught and released as an act of religious merit. Besides the religious handling of snakes there are the secular snake charmers. Snake charmers are also found in Egypt (Morris & Morris 1965:24-5).

The Amerindians used and venerated snakes. One of the most famous snake gods is the Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent.

In Greece Zeus, in one of his manifestations, appears as Zeus Meilichios, an enormous bearded serpent who represented the underworld powers of dead ancestors. Athena, guardian of Athens, had a snake which was the guardian spirit of the city. This snake had temple priestesses attending to its needs. When Philip of Macedon found a snake lying next to his wife he deserted her bed as he did not dare violate the sanctity of one wedded to someone greater than he. Alexander the Great always claimed that his father was a god who had manifested himself as a serpent (Morris & Morris 1965:34).

The Babylonian and Mesopotamian peoples worshipped serpent deities. Ishtar the great mother goddess was identified by her snake emblem. In Israel she was worshipped as Astarte. Abraham came from Ur where serpent deities were worshipped in many shrines (Morris & Morris 1965:32).

The Gnostic group of Ophites kept snakes in their sanctuaries and encouraged them to crawl over the sacramental bread before the celebration of the Eucharist. They then kissed the snake on its mouth. The Naasenes actually worshipped the snake who they claimed was an incarnation of Christ. It was he

⁵ Closer to home we may look at the Zulu diviner. Berglund calls the "living-dead" ancestors, the shades. He details how the shades choose and call a person to become a diviner. Once the prospective diviner has accepted the call he or she must undergo extensive training under an experienced diviner. The diviner novice met the shade snakes or pythons (amahlwathi) in a deep pool of water. After communicating with the many shade snakes in the pool he returned with one snake around his neck with its head on his head (Berglund 1976:140-6). Where no pythons exist the ixhanti is the snake seen by the novice diviners. It is not a shade snake. *Ixhanti* is the name given to the upper row of dorsal vertebrae in humans and animals. Here lies the seat of the shades, hence many diviners will include vertebrae in their bone sets.

who tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. As the Ophites believed that the serpent was Christ's emissary on earth. His contact with the bread divinised the bread and ensured life immortal on those who consumed it. Manes who taught Christianity in Persia taught that Christ was the incarnation of the Great Serpent which glided over the cradle of the Virgin Mary (Morris & Morris 1965:48).

The biblical legends tell us about the winged serpents, the seraphim who guarded the gates of paradise and who also appear in the book of Revelations singing and praising God. These are related to the Egyptian winged serpents. Cooper highlighted the fact that in Egyptian mythology the good serpent was always depicted in an upright position whilst the evil one was crawling. In a tomb in Biban in Malook three headless victims kneel before a massive serpent whilst the officiating priest is still holding his sword (Howard 1955:30). This would indicate that people had been sacrificed to the great serpent who needed to be appeased.

In the ancient world priests, shamans and medicine men handled snakes, or they appointed others to do so. The handling of snakes was a fairly common practice. Ugaritic inscriptions detail how the cobra must be subdued by clasping its tail, how to hypnotise the animal by gestures and rhythmic swaying and how to maintain a minimal distance to thwart any unexpected strikes and how to extract or sear its venom glands (Mundkur 1983:84).

1.7 The Biblical Serpent

Adam, Eve and the Serpent are key figures in the biblical myth about creation. God created all the animals and amongst them was the serpent "more crafty than any of the wild animals" (Gen. 3:1). The roots of this snake's origin date back many centuries into the eastern and mid-eastern mythologies. It was already associated with good, evil, life and death (Morris 1965:41). Ever since in the monotheistic religious regions both Eve and the Serpent have been blamed for the sins of the world. After the Fall, God started his ascension towards total purity and goodness and Satan sank into evil and wickedness. The serpent was burdened with the image of Satan; God was good, Satan was evil.

The roots of this snake's origin date back many centuries into the eastern and mid-eastern mythologies (Morris 1965:38-9). The snake was already associated with good and evil, life and death and all the dichotomies of life

Not only was there a serpent in the Garden of Eden, but Moses handled serpents in front of Pharaoh (Ex 4:3-5) and again in the desert (Nu. 41:4-9).

God had commanded Moses to take up the serpent, and, the handlers believe that Jesus instructed them to handle serpents.

Egyptian priests had handled snakes, as had their magicians. Both Moses and Aaron were familiar with the trick of holding a benumbed and stiff serpent like a rod (Howey 1955:211). The Hebrews were after all Semites and hence familiar with the serpent-venerating Phoenicians, Assyrians and Babylonians (Morris 1965:40). Furthermore, Moses had been educated by Pharaoh's daughter. He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:20-22). The children of Israel had lived in Egypt for so many generations that it may be assumed that they too were well aware of, and partook in Egyptian religious rites.

Early Canaanite and Israel religions teemed with gods and goddesses and the Bible reports how the Hebrews were tempted and continually decided to return to the pagan religions. The goddess Asherah, (Astarte) was essentially an ophidian goddess. Asherah's statue and the Brazen Serpent made by Moses in the desert remained in the Jerusalem temple until the Babylonian exile.

It would appear that within the community of Israel there were serpent handling groups as they, like so many primal peoples, had many myths about people and serpents. Up to the first exile, Matronit⁶, the goddess of the Kabbala, was a prominent figure. She was lawfully promiscuous and blood-thirsty. Both traits were balanced by a basic chastity. Mundkur quotes that:

"Samael as the prince of evil, or the "fearsome venom of God slays men with a drop of poison." He uses the form of the repulsive serpent to profane the Matronit. Power is the raw impulse of the desire to dominate, of sexual lust and gratification. Another version is that prior to the Matronit being identified with God's Shekhina, Moses became the husband of the Matronit (Mundkur 1983:69).

La Barre also claims that in African and pre-Greek history the serpent is no less than the high god himself. He wonders whether the snake was the familiar of the shamanic figures of Moses and Aaron. They both handled serpents and used their serpent canes to produce water in the wilderness. Also, the Levites and presumably the Leah tribes worshipped a seraph, the winged serpent, whilst Yahweh was venerated in the Jerusalem temple in the image of a serpent (La Barre 1962:59).

⁶ Every year the people of Israel sinned with tragic inevitability, which enabled Samael, the Satan (or Azazel), to bend the Matronit to his will. Samael in the form of a serpent, or riding a serpent, lurks at all times near her privy parts in the hope of being able to penetrate her. Whether or not he succeeds in gratifying his desire depends on the behaviour of Israel. As long as Israel remains virtuous, Samael's lustful design is frustrated, but when he has the opportunity he glues himself to her body with the adhesive force of resin and defiles her" (Mundkur 1983:69).

The Hebrews perceived the snake to be unclean. It represented the souls of the damned in Sheol. The snake is evil, yet it is homoeopathic as "like heals like". Moses was commanded to make a fiery brazen serpent and to raise it on a pole when during their sojourn in the desert the Hebrews were afflicted and bitten by serpents. All who looked on the serpent would be healed and would not die. Thus Moses raised either the caduceus or the Egyptian seraph in the desert and healing took place. The biblical record highlights that when the Hebrews arrived in the promised land the people of the northern kingdom were serpent worshippers. In the southern kingdom the bull or calf was worshipped whilst in Canaan the Hivites worshipped the serpent. The Hebrews intermarried with them and continued worshipping the serpent (Cooper 1992:215).

The snake handlers of the United States do not worship the serpent. They too use the power obtained through handling the serpent for healing and blessings. They do not base their handling of serpents on Moses' example but in obedience to Jesus' last command⁷ given to the apostles. They do stress, however, that Moses did handle serpents. They also often mention that Paul was bitten on the island of Mellitus. He had faith and simply took the serpent off his hand. He suffered no ill effects. John states that "as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3, 14). Howard believes that the seraph raised by Moses in the desert was the Egyptian seraph, the symbol of the Sun-god and known to the people as Jehovah. It has also been suggested that king David belonged to a family owning the serpent as its totem (Howard 1955:83-7).

It is thus evident that handling serpents in a religious situation dates back many centuries. There also are secular handlers of snakes such as the snake charmers. They handle the snakes to entertain the public and not for religious reasons.

⁷ Mark records that Jesus instructed his disciples to go into the world and to preach the good news to all creation and then he added that believers will be able to handle serpents and drink poisons without any harm coming to them. As soon as Jesus had spoken to the apostles "he was taken up into heaven" where he sat at the right hand of God (Mark 16:18-9).

CHAPTER 2

CHURCHES IN THE APPALACHIAN REGION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The southern Appalachian mountain area was poorly developed before the influx of industry. Few people had settled in the area. Itinerant preachers served the communities. As mentioned elsewhere the main traditional churches were often sponsored by the industrialists and mining magnates. These churches remained loyal to their sponsors but the poor people had little faith in their integrity. The Holiness movement on the other hand understood the problems experienced by the poor and organised camp meetings which were often held in the open (Covington 1995:126).

The Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell of the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon distinguishes between the evangelicals, the Pentecostals and the fundamentalists. "Evangelical" is an umbrella term associated with being born again, the inerrancy of the bible and the spreading of the gospel and the end of time. Pentecostals overlap with evangelicals but they stress the immediate and spontaneous experience of the Holy Ghost. The fundamentalist believe in the authority of the bible which they interpret literally (Sewell 2001:20). The Pentecostals enjoyed this immediate experience of the Holy ghost.

Dr Sewell writes that Charles Strozier in his book *Apocalypse* explains that all fundamentalists he had met described their lives as unhappy, unfulfilled and usually evil. They had been healed through faith and their coming to Christ. They became transformed people, always aware of Satan lurking everywhere. As the poor people felt socially stigmatised they found solace and hope in the new movements.

The Pentecostals wanted more music, more movement, more incarnational expression which included the body and the emotions. They wished to express their faith through their whole being. They recognised evil, demanded morality and called for a deep personal commitment. This appealed to many people who were searching for some spiritual values (Sewell 2001:2).

2.1 Pentecostalism and religious revival in the Appalachian Mountains

Charismatic religious movements had successfully swept across the Appalachian regions. This religious influence could not be ignored and I feel that it must be mentioned as many early snake handlers had belonged to the Holiness churches before breaking away. Itinerant preachers and camp

meetings had helped stimulate the religious revival in the harsh mountain regions (Kimbrough 1995:65).

Between 1907 and 1911 several Pentecostal groups had become established in the Appalachian regions of Mississippi, Tennessee, the Carolinas and Georgia. Wacker believes that Pentecostalism was so successful because at the personal level it offered certitude about the reality of the supernatural. It also met the needs of the people in their loneliness and in death (Wacker in Marty 1993:202). Circuit-riding Methodist preachers and Baptist farmer preachers identified with the hardships of the mountain people and were more readily acceptable (Kimbrough 1995:65).

Holiness movements and Pentecostalism are off-shoots out of Methodism, which itself was a reaction to the rigid services of the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian Churches⁸. By 1840 in North Carolina the "anti-mission break" was complete. Missionary activity was seen to be a "waste of time" as the mountaineers believed salvation was gained only by God's grace (Kimbrough 1995:68). Sunday school, temperance societies and church conventions were rejected. The mountaineers distrusted centralised authority and would not accept dictates from governing bodies (ibid:68).

Both the Holiness movement and the Pentecostal groups believed that conversion should be followed by the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Galanter highlights that both groups were deeply concerned with the work of the Holy Spirit. This initiated a new understanding of the meaning of the religious experience and a new conviction of the dialectic of divine judgement and promise (Wacker in Marty 1993:190).

John Wesley believed in the moral life leading to sanctification i.e. a second blessing for those who sought salvation through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism teaches the importance of the nine gifts as promised in 1 Corinthians. These are the Word of Wisdom which is inspired by the Holy Spirit; the Word of Knowledge which allows knowledge not obtained through normal means; faith which is the "mountain moving" type of faith, not faith unto salvation; healing, this applies to physical and psychic healing; miracles which look at the situation and needs of the moment; prophecy which highlights the needs and problems of the present situation; discernment of the spirits i.e. the differentiation between divine, human and demonic powers; speaking in

⁸ During the early eighteenth century various religious groups such as the Anabaptists, the Mennonites, Quakers, Baptists, etc. had settled in North America. The harshness of frontier life and the lack of ecclesiastical organisation disrupted routine conformity whilst encouraging revivalist movements (McManners 1990:335). John Wesley was among those who had gone to America to preach. John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist

tongues through which the inexpressible is expressed and God is praised in new speech; interpretation which refers to the speaking in tongues. Glossolalia is not a verbatim translation of what is uttered but is an interpretation giving the gist of what was said. It is the receipt of interpretation from God. All these gifts must be motivated through love and piety (Jorstad 1973:119-122).

In 1901 Charles Fox Parham had concluded that that glossilalia⁹ was evidence of baptism in the Holy spirit. In 1906 in San Francisco several black saints had met to await baptism by the Holy Spirit. All Pentecostal churches were started as fundamentalist groups. Fundamentalists tend to be intolerant of those who do not adhere to their idea of religion and religious practice. (Wacker in Marty 1993:1999).

Between 1907 and 1911 several Pentecostal groups had become established in the Appalachian regions of Mississippi, Tennessee, the Carolinas and Georgia. Wacker believes that Pentecostalism¹⁰ was so successful because at the personal level it offered certitude about the reality of the supernatural. It also met the needs of the people in their loneliness and in death (ibid:202).

Pentecostalism stressed the role of Jesus¹¹. In some instances, such as with the snake handlers, God the Father appears to be less important than Jesus. Within the handler community the "Jesus only" people believed the Father and the spirit are included in the name of Jesus. Demons and angels are also very real. The serpent physically represents the devil or Satan, yet Mark Brown talks of the serpent as "God's creature".

church. He had hoped that it would operate within the ambit of the Church of England (Cross & Livingstone 1988:1466).

⁹ Those who have studied 'speaking in tongues' say that it is usually unintelligible, yet it has the pattern and inflection of regular vocabulary resembling regular human speech (Jorstad 1973:33).

¹⁰ The snake handlers accept the nine gifts of the spirit as promised in 1 Corinthians. However, they do not want an organised authority, nor doctrines. Each church must remain independent and the pastors must be called to preach. They need no formal training. To remain viable the main Pentecostal groups had to accept a central authority and their pastors needed training as the general population enjoyed more and more education.

¹¹ The American Holiness Movement was rooted in the Wesleyan emphasis on the personal experience of Christian perfection after redemption. By the end of the nineteenth century groups and individuals had split away from the main movement. Thus the Church of God was one group that broke away from the main body. They introduced the handling of serpents into their services. Other Holiness groups that had split from the main body became the Pentecostals. The original eight members called themselves the "Christian Union" in 1902, and in 1907 they changed the name to the "Church of God". However, this was a name used by some 200 different independent groups in the United States (Burton 1993:6).

Tomlinson was the overseer of the Church of God in 1908. It was at one of his services that Hensley and four other sinners were "saved". Hensley received the "gifts of the Holy Spirit" and started preaching. He had given up moonshining, tobacco and other evils. Hensley began his ministry as a free Pentecostal evangelist (Kimbrough 1995:42).

Elaine Lawless believed that Pentecostalism is based on things that happen to people. The essence of their experiences is important and needs to be communicated to others. The tenets of the faith are conveyed within the context of the church service itself (Lawless in Kimbrough 1995:185). Many serpent handlers belonged to the Pentecostal or charismatic churches before joining the handlers. Many also returned to their original churches after a while. Some of the serpent handling churches have given up the handling practices and have become more traditional Pentecostal churches. In the very early church it was the slaves and the poor people who became Christians. Similarly it was the poor and struggling people and some middle-class people that were the most attracted to Pentecostalism. They believed that compensation for their poverty and inferior social status was that they had been given special knowledge; they had the assurance that they "were right with the Lord" and salvation was theirs. They would be given their reward in heaven (Kimbrough 1995:190).

It did not take long before people from all sections of society joined the Pentecostal movements. All the groups made their meetings as informal as possible. This included the clothes worn by both men and women. The parson determined the proceedings in the service and people were allowed to express their emotions such as joy, sadness, etc. Some groups encouraged women to be actively involved in leadership roles (Jorstad 1973:22-3).

Miners earned very little and most of their salaries went back to the employers in the form of rent and the payment of debts to the company stores. The large mining companies also often sponsored the mainline churches. Thus industrialists and big business people earned their loyalty. The serpent handlers were well aware of this. Handling the snakes proved that they could conquer evil, that God was on their side. The poor people in the area preferred the itinerant preachers who understood their problems and who had grown up under the same circumstances. They had little empathy with the traditional ministers of churches that betrayed them.

Father Killian McDonnell stated that "Roman Catholics are altar-centred and the Lutherans are pulpit-centred, Pentecostalism of all varieties are pew-centred." The Pentecostal groups accepted itinerant faith healers, preachers and revivalist ministers and approved the use of the bible to enforce their points of view (Jorstad 1973:24).

Important events in a person's life such as a religious conversion will be remembered. Through the reliving of the experience it is constantly revived and entrenched e.g. Christians celebrate Easter every year, reliving and re-experiencing the death and resurrection of Christ, the Jews celebrate Passover and annually relive their redemption from slavery. Similarly the handlers relive

God's grace and mercy and their obedience to him. Every time they handle the serpents whilst under the anointing they relive the sacred moment and their unity with the Almighty.

Williamson and Pollio analysed the services and found that they centred around five concepts - being "moved" upon by God, a life/death vitality, an us/them specialness, the power of true knowledge, and absolute joy. The mystical experience and the spiritual infusion of the Spirit are forceful experiences for the handlers. So much so, that they claim that one can never get enough of the Spirit. There also is a mental stimulation in their singing and dancing and they actually enjoy their services. They enjoy going to church.

They accept their hardships because they have been psychologically enriched. Some poverty stricken people have only their hopes and dreams to take them from day to day. The handlers also have hopes and dreams but they also have a God who is actively involved in their lives. They have a faith that has helped them survive from generation to generation. However, modern living may nibble away at the foundations of this pillar of strength.

Early observers of serpent handling e.g. la Barre and Kane interpreted the ritual in terms of unresolved sexual conflicts or repressed oedipal conflicts. Hood and Kimbrough believe that the handling of serpents also concerns the ideas of death and resurrection. Daugherty believed that the handling of the serpents was a sacramental act especially at funerals. To her it resembled the lifting of the host by a Roman Catholic Priest. Obviously there are psychological factors and problems but I do believe that the handlers take up serpents a simple act of obedience. They do not weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of doing so. If they are bitten, so be it. They do not bargain with God. They do not challenge God. They do not believe that handling more than one serpent at a time will bring greater rewards. Many congregants have never handled a serpent, others did so but no longer take up snakes.

The anointing is the important event. Under the anointing they are protected and they experience emotional highs. They are literally drugged with the Holy Spirit. This is not a negative experience.

2.2 The economic conditions of the handlers

Economic conditions such as endured by the settlers in the southern Appalachian regions must of necessity influence their daily lives. This impacted on their religious practices, and on their social and economic perceptions. Therefore' the economic conditions must be taken into account.

It would seem that the Appalachian mountain areas of the southern USA were always a harsh environment and settlers struggled to survive. The mountainous terrain and the sparse population hampered industrial and commercial development. The snake handlers had chosen this area and they, like previous settlements, continued the struggle for survival¹². It is feasible to presume that they could not afford to settle in the more fertile valleys where the purchase of land would have much more expensive..

The Cherokee American Indians inhabited the Appalachian regions for many centuries. European traders searching for animal furs had lured the Cherokees into an export market, luring them away from and destroying their agricultural based economies. By 1780 the Cherokees had lost 60% of their ancestral land to European speculators. Much of the land was made available to speculators and industrialists, so much so that 90% of the land was owned by absentee farmers. Industrialisation was slow to develop and remained very limited to a few select areas in the mountains. The rest of the land remained under-developed and difficult to farm. The elite and rich landowners saw the poor families as "a distinct and despicable class". Many of the poor people could never redeem their debts and passed their poverty on to their children (Dunaway 1996:319-324).

The handlers equated the serpent (the devil) with the capitalists who had invaded the states with their mining and lumbering activities. The devil had enabled the church, state and the wealthy industrialists to abuse exploit and enslave whole groups of poor people. Churches, governments and industrialists supported each other and frequently took advantage of illiterate and poor people¹³. The church worked hand in glove with the state. The churches themselves justified their non-payment or underpayment of workers by claiming that to work for the church is to work for God. They violated, aided and abetted others to do the same. They ignored basic human rights.

The Southern States of the United States had survived the civil rights movement, the civil war and were now being subjected to industrialisation. New towns had sprung up around the mining and milling industries. They boasted civic centres, libraries, theatres and other entertainment centres. Marijuana had been a major cash crop on the mountains and now found a ready nearby

¹² Very few Afro-Americans had settled in the Appalachian mountains and hence there almost no black people in the handler groups. If they wanted to join services there was no adverse reaction to them (La Barre 1969:36).

¹³ The Home Missions had approved the transfer of land to capitalists and industrialists. They approved the converting the settlers to a property-less but wage earning society. This undermined the settlers' self-sufficiency and autonomy (Kimbrough 1995:82). Missionaries and educators tried to "make legitimate the exploitation ..." in an effort to force the settlers to accept the new ways. Children were taught to be ashamed of their heritage (ibid:86).

market. Over many years the handlers had been involved with the drug trade and many had brewed their own whiskey. Harsh economic conditions had encouraged the illicit trade simply to ensure the survival of the family (Covington 1995:xiv).

Grant Wacker reports that Pierson and Gordon attributed the "estrangement of the masses" from the traditional church to "caste spirit" by modern Christianity which perceived the poor as unclean. The overcrowded conditions had made "impossible not only refinement, but even decency." Gordon said that at heart of the problem was the "money hoarded up in the hands of Protestant Christians. ... it is not an orthodox creed which repels the masses, but an orthodox greed" (Wacker in Marty 1993:182).

Mary Lee Daugherty is involved with handlers in West Virginia. Serpent handling has not been outlawed in this state. She talks about the poor whites who belonged to holiness type churches. She highlights the fact that the handlers lived in a harsh environment where people descended into deep black holes to bring up the coal. Many were killed in the mines. Copperheads and rattlesnakes were common in the rocky terrain. She states that few people had travelled more than a few miles from home and that there was little awareness of other churches and other religions. (Daugherty in Marty 1993:168-171). However, this does not agree with statements made by Burton, Kimbrough and Covington who name and speak of people who will travel up to ten hours and more to attend each others home-coming¹⁴ services.

Kimbrough states that the snake became a symbolic intermediary between the "evil capitalists" who operated the coal mines and lumber mills and the "poor mountain people" (Kimbrough 1995:95). They destroyed the mountain societies with their worldly ways. He writes that the coal mining was "a frightful distortion of the mountain social and economic order, and snake handling represented a form of supernatural retaliation" (Kimbrough 1995:95-6). Company teachers and preachers were used to harness any destabilising factors that endangered the interests of the mine and timber owners.

World War II had impacted on the southern areas of the United States. More work had meant better wages, better health, less isolation from the rest of the world but also the loss of the traditional way of life. The hill people, though very poor, had been proud of their self-sufficiency. They grew what they ate, bartered for that which they could not grow. They made their own furniture, produced and slaughtered their own livestock.

¹⁴ A home-coming service is a re-union of members and families who have moved away from a certain church. Usually members from other churches also attend

The "Appalachian Journal" reports that President Johnson's war on poverty lifted much of Appalachia out of the deep destitution of 30 years ago (Williamson 1996:251). The number of high school graduates has risen from one in three to two in three and the income in the communities has risen by 48 percent faster than elsewhere. Such improvement in the material status of the handlers may well present them with greater opportunities outside of their communities. Wealth often impacts negatively on man's immediate need for church and salvation. As wealth is accumulated people move into better areas and often mix with more cosmopolitan people. Those who move are subjected to a new *Weltanschauung*.

The snake handlers hated the capitalists. Yet they actually benefited by earning regular wages¹⁵ which enabled them to improve their homes and education. Today many of them have been to high schools, colleges and universities. This in turn means that they are exposed to the "outside world", to outside influences.

Many handlers are no longer poverty stricken and they look, live and dress as a part of modern society. Dr. Ralph Hood is adamant that they are educated and drive fine vehicles¹⁶. He believes that the handlers accept that they are literally under the mandate of God. They even die obedient to God. There is an intensity about their faith (Hood 1996). Burton does not concur. Kimbrough states that the serpent handling societies have become market orientated and market dominated which is geared to the accumulation of goods and the stress on the self-value of the individual (Kimbrough 1995:92).

2.3 The Social Status of the Handlers

The social milieu of any family or group influences that family's or group's perception of life. Most people want to be accepted by their fellow men. Poverty and lack of education are tremendous drawbacks within a social setting. The early social and geographical isolation of the handlers tended to inculcate a sense of exclusiveness. They became convinced that they were the

¹⁵ Coal companies paid wages in their own scrip and only company commissioners would honour the scrip. Settlers had to buy their tools of trade as well as their food and other necessitates from the company stores. The company stores encouraged people to buy on credit and charged high rates of interest. The miners called the stores "pluck-me stores". Miners who bought goods outside the company stores were dismissed, beaten or killed. In 1925 the US Coal Commission found that the living conditions in the mining camps were among the worst in the nation (ibid:87).

¹⁶ This would depend on which area Hood researched as Burton specifically wrote (in June this year) that many are still economically deprived.

saints and the others the sinners and they learnt not to trust outsiders. This too must be heeded when dealing with the handlers.

The Cherokee Indians had been driven out of their mountains by white settlers. When the Scottish and Irish settlers arrived in the Appalachian mountain areas they came into contact with the Melungeons¹⁷ who then moved out West. The Melungeons had also struggled to eke out a living in the harsh mountains of Appalachia (Williamson 1996:244-5). The handlers did not move into well established fertile farmlands. They simply had to continue the struggle for survival. However, they were not the only people in the South who struggled to survive.

The Jehovah's Witness movement had started during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Rapid industrialisation, urban growth and technical development was the order of the day, however, many people remained poor unable to overcome their lack of education, their social and economic disadvantages (Abrahams in Marty 1993:44). Russell¹⁸, the founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, believed that the world's strife was due to the split between capital and labour. Like the serpent handlers Russell was aware of the co-operation between capitalists, government and religious institutions. He blamed the giant corporations for the misery and poor performance of the small companies who could simply not compete with the big ones. As the rich grew richer small farmers and businesses were forced off the land or had to close their firms. Times were very difficult for many of the less educated people. The Southern states were particularly hard hit and they had little good to say about the rich and powerful capitalists. The handlers were and are not associated with the Witnesses but they have the same idea about capitalism.

The origins of the snake handling churches are vague as researchers have had to rely on oral records. People often interpret an event differently and later remember the same event conflicting. Also rumours may have embellished the core event. At a later time many people may retell the story as it had been told to them. Eventually oral history becomes the basis for tradition and becomes accepted as fact. Memory is after all a reconstructive process, not a tape

¹⁷ Melungeon is a Turkish work for "abandoned by God" (Williamson 1996:245). They claimed to be of Turkish, Indian, Moorish and Portuguese descent.

¹⁸ The Jehovah's Witness movement was an offshoot of Adventists teachings in the late nineteenth century. This was the period of American Populism, a movement against big business and big government. The Witnesses understood the outside world, especially the institutionalised churches, human government and big business to be their enemy. The enemy represented "the false teachings in the so-called churches, the tyrannies of human governments and the oppressions of business" (Ahlstrom in Tucker 1989:118). They also believed that God, rather than man, must be obeyed. Thus the background to the Jehovah's Witness movement was very similar to that of the snake handlers.

recording. Man also has the inclination to forget unpleasant or unacceptable facts (Kimbrough 1995:4).

Most handlers came from, and themselves have or had large families. Family ties were secure and the extended families were loyal to each other. Marriages often involved extended family members or people from similar groups. Usually when a group of people becomes isolated in an "inferior" status or as being 'odd' they tend to draw closer together. They become more supportive of each other and become more exclusive¹⁹. There is an attempt to shut out those that disapprove of them (Covington 1995:xiv). Many handlers had been involved in moonshine activities, had used drugs and had womanised before being saved. Many had backslid but were taken back into the fold when they repented. They all knew what it was like to be poor.

Everybody, parents and children, had to work to contribute to the family's survival²⁰. Many children and adults suffered from affection starvation as there was no time to play with the small children, nor was there time for family relaxation. After a hard day's work the whole family was simply too tired to play. Many children could not attend school for more than a few months or even weeks as they needed to be at home to work.

The man was the head of the family, the woman was a mere chattel²¹. It was a strongly patriarchal society e.g. in Carl Porter's church in Kingston, Carl turned on Melissa, one of Covington's photographers, and told her, "It's not godly for a woman to do a man's job, to wear a man's pants! Or to cut her hair like a man does his! It doesn't please God to go on like that, acting like Adam was made out of Eve's rib instead of the other way around! A woman's got to stay in her place! God made her for a helpmate to man! It wasn't intended for her to have a life of her own! ..." (Covington 1995:227-8). Covington objected to women being told that they had an inferior status and said so. The congregation was up in arms. Covington's association with the handlers ended.

Many people from the Appalachian areas moved to the industrial towns during the 1940s and 1950s. Those who stayed behind became even more destitute as the mines were laying off more and more workers. The migrants found life trying in the big cities. They had different habits and customs and were

¹⁹ At Fort Wayne, Arnold Saylor organised a school to protect his young church members from the hostile Fort Wayne school system. The media and the authorities also re-re-enforced the handlers' idea that the world was hostile to them (Kimbrough 1995:178-9).

²⁰ Kimbrough states that the children were a significant part of the labour force (Kimbrough 1995:63). La Barre states that few older people could read or write, their schooling had been limited to a few weeks or months as their labour had been needed in the fields (La Barre 1969:16).

prepared to work for lower wages which did not endear them to other job seekers. They also experienced the hostility and unwillingness of the city dwellers to help (Kimbrough 1995:85).

Those who came from the mountains and had already found work and homes tried to help their relatives and friends. A family network within the cities came into being and this helped to reduce the handler's sense of insecurity. They also established their own churches in the big cities and continued handling snakes. Sometimes preachers from the Appalachians came to the cities to hold revival meetings (Kimbrough 1995:172-176). Due to the harshness and destitution of the mountain areas there was no new infusion of settlers. Thus the handlers' culture and religious beliefs were not subjected to any new infusions of ideas and rituals.

Schooling in the home was minimal. Some children were taught to read using the Bible as the reader. Others attended schools in the villages. Here the children from snake handling families were teased and mocked. The teachers were biased against them. The children often had lower grades than the city dwellers. Without proper guidance such children felt inferior and ostracised. Their results were below average. When they came home they had to work and they were also be expected to attend the many services which were held during the week. Kimbrough says that the attacks by the media and authorities reinforced the handler's feeling that they lived in a hostile world.

There is, of course, another reaction. Some children and adults could take their ostracism as a challenge to make good in spite of all the odds against them. Defiance of those who humiliate one or who despise one can, and often is, a great stimulus enabling some people to pull themselves out of the poverty trap. Among the handlers there was a great spirit of looking after each other and helping each other. The whole community benefited from the rewards of regular salaries and work.

Many of the preachers came from families who had been involved in the moonshine business, who had made lots of money and had lost more. Many had been imprisoned as criminals. Many preached for a time and then "backslid" on the Lord e.g. Carl Porter had preached for many years when he suddenly "backslid" and for seven years he drank, womanised, "did drugs" and drove heavy rigs. George Went Hensley had spent time in jail for moonshining. When Carl Porter returned he took up preaching again and ran his own little church (Burton 1993:89-125). Another preacher, Summerford, was jailed for 99 years for attempting to murder his wife by forcing her to put her hand into a

²¹ This attitude towards women may have been more pronounced in this congregation. Other groups may have more liberated approaches towards their women.

serpents box. Many preachers were very human and suffered from familiar human frailties.

CHAPTER 3

THE SERPENT HANDLERS FROM THE APPALACHIAN AREAS IN THE SOUTHERN STATES OF AMERICA

“Foolish things confound the mighty”

(Park Saylor in Kimbrough 1995:30)

In this section I wish to show that despite their desperate poverty and social disadvantages the handlers remained fiercely independent and also loyal to each other. I try to see how their poverty effected their religious concepts and how their social destitution strengthened their beliefs and family bonds. Despite their social and economic problems and their out of the ordinary church services they are very well adjusted group of people.

Emil Durkheim posited that the key to religion is not so much beliefs and doctrines. Rather it is the social rituals which in turn form the substance of social solidarity. Religion is created by society which develops its moral forces and which in turn awaken a sentiment of refuge or shield and a guardian of support. Durkheim adds that “if religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion” (Durkheim in Frazier 1975:139).

Each individual has his own secondary sacred beings, formed in his own image and are bound to his destiny. These beings are objects of rites which the individual can celebrate by himself, however, a persona can only re-animate himself within a group or society of fellow beings. Moral forces can be sustained and can grow within a society of fellow beings (Durkheim in Frazier 1975:144). This necessitates meetings, services, celebrations and other get-togethers. This leads us to the snake handling practices.

The origin of the ritual of handling snakes is firmly tied to the social conditions of the handlers and their religious beliefs. Also the fact that only they abide by Jesus’ last commandment gives them exclusivity as the saints of God. The creation of social unity intensified their social and religious fabric. They accepted everything as being either good or evil. There is and was no grey area between these two extremes. However, because the handlers are very normal people their behaviour is not always in accordance with their church rules. Even the saints will sin. They will drink, smoke, womanise²², etc.

²² Covington details how Elvis Sayer had been called the devil because he had married after being divorced. His marriage was classified as fornication. Sayer had been told not to talk to Covington. Sayer also said that the handlers may accept you at first, but “if you see something that is not right and mention it,

Covington, like many other researchers, attended numerous services. He had visited many handlers in their homes. He also made lasting friendships, as had Burton, Kimbrough and many others. Burton writes that popular representations and common sense make it difficult to write about the handlers in the current environment. He posits "snake handling has been so over-represented and sensationalised by popular print and tabloid television reproductions that it has emerged as one of several mythic signifiers of Appalachian difference." (Birckhead 1994:333-7).

Scott Schwartz insisted that apart from handling serpents and drinking strychnine the handlers are like the rest of us. Like us they put on their pants one leg at a time, and they have the same stresses and strains that we do (Cathy Dyson 2001:Internet). Psychologists have also declared that the handlers are neither psychopathic nor abnormal.

Many Anglo-Irish and Anglo Scottish people left the stark regions of their homelands to try and escape the poverty trap. Covington called the snake handlers "spiritual nomads from the high country that surrounded Scottsboro (Covington 1995:24)."

A dispatch from the New York Times, dated April 14, 1862 reported that an hour before sundown the reporters had reached a barren region inhabited by "poor white trash"²³. They believed that the pitiless monopoly of the slave-holding class had driven them to this hostile land. They had given up some of the superstitions that they had brought with them, no longer did they hang out coloured glass bottles to catch evil spirits, nor did they lay platters of salt on their stomachs to ensure the immortality of the soul (Covington 1995:111,24).

Economic desperation had forced them to go to the towns to seek work. However, as they were people who spoke in tongues, anointed one another, drank poison, handled snakes and held fire they remained isolated and had to cope with prejudice from the outside world and further isolation from society as a whole. The early settlers did not settle in the fertile valleys, but went to the plateaux. They had a reputation for being noisy, quarrelsome and proud" (Covington 1995:86).

Until the middle of the twentieth century the southern states of the USA were sparsely populated. When the Scots-Irish settlers arrived in the mountains life was very difficult. Existence and subsistence depended on themselves. When the vast quantities of coal and timber were discovered big business moved in.

they'll prophesy against you or say you are lost." He had been exiled from his group of handlers (Covington 1995:210-211).

²³ Covington says that a census taker had described his great-grandparents as illiterate and had also marked the boxes for deaf, dumb, blind, insane and idiotic (Covington 1994:667).

The poor resented the new authorities. Industrialists that took advantage of them and their lack of education. The spread of the cult was largely dependent on the press which reported sensational events and stimulated interest in the handling communities (La Barre 1962:46).

The handlers had nowhere and no-one to turn to except to God. It was Jesus who became the embodiment of the godhead. Jesus had promised them power in faith. Abrahams states that Richard Niebuhr had written that sects and cults with their millenarianism attracted mainly the "socially disinherited." (Abrahams in Marty 1993:44). Niebuhr had also written that religion "is so interwoven with social circumstances that the formulation of theology is necessarily conditioned by these" (Stephens 2001:1).

When the snake handling movement started few members were well educated. This has changed since then²⁴. The handlers' isolation, their shared religious beliefs and practices, their suspicion of strangers and their heritage created strong bonds of community. Today many have either lost their farms or have sold them.

The first church used by the Snake Handlers in Scottsboro, Tupelo Pike, was burned down and arson was suspected. Tyres were slashed and windows broken. People complained about the noise made by the handlers. Therefore, they tended to move out of town to somewhat deserted areas (Covington 1995:25-6). The handlers remained isolated. They were seen to be odd people with odd customs and odd religious practices. The traditional churches did not satisfy their needs, and continued to understand them as poor and bizarre people.

The rapidly changing modern world produced situations in which the sects and cults fulfilled a need for the emotional expression of anger and resentment by the outcasts (Morris 1965:47). Burrige postulated that all religions organise and manipulate power because they all involve a redemptive process in which mankind seeks salvation. Many people have an intense desire to be free from all obligations arising from acute emotional tensions, dreams, and general frustrations. For the millenarian religious groups the millennium promises absolute bliss.

Many of the Pentecostal groups arose in the period of 1790-1860. Poloma identified Pentecostalism with a "non-rational approach to religion that stands in opposition to the contemporary secular order" (Poloma in Hood 1998:73). It was and is a protest against modernity. Also they sought tangible evidence that they

²⁴ In private correspondence of June 4, 2001 Thomas Burton states that many handlers still have severe financial constraints. Regarding the general level of education he also writes that some handlers have a better education, "certainly not all, nor most."

had been baptised by the spirit and this they found in glossolalia (ibid:75). The handling of serpents enforced their abhorrence of secular and other authorities. Snake handling in religious services started in about 1910 as an offshoot from the Holiness church. People had sought economic freedom and an improved life. They had discarded the yoke of the Calvinists, the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of England. However, they could not simply throw off their social and economic burdens.

Burridge believed that cultural change involved "old rules", to "no rules" to "new rules." As society changes, social unrest results from the break-away from the then traditional values as social, political and religious rules are discarded. Neither old nor new values are applicable at this stage. It is precisely now that the millennial movements, searching for new values, tend to materialise. These are new religious, social or political movements. New rules become established and remain in force until the next upheaval. Millenarian movements do not last as the millenarians realise that the millennium is not at the door (Burridge in Marty 1993:74).

The snake handlers do fall into the Weber-Troeltsch tradition²⁵ in that the groups are small, they usually have a charismatic leader, an informal structure and they have a distinctive experience (Crapps 1977:50). It remains to be seen whether they will develop from their sect/cult status to that of a church. The handlers themselves use religion to perpetuate and to legitimate the normal religious practices (Kimbrough 1995:189-190). Outsiders are sinners and cannot be trusted.

Birckhead states that there are probably only 2500 to 3000 handlers (Birckhead 1996:261). They meet in bush arbours, abandoned barns and garages or other old buildings. They revamp the buildings before using them as a House of God. The interiors of the buildings remain basic and any adornment consist of various pictures depicting Jesus.

Hood mentions that the churches themselves have only a relative handful of stable locations. Many churches are established in isolated locations for a time and then fade away (Hood 1998:83). Mark Brown sent me a list of the churches that he knew.²⁶

²⁵ Crapp states that the Weber-Troeltsch ladder or tradition is clearly illustrated by the Pentecostal churches where people have moved up the economic scale, have made peace with their surrounding culture and have progressed from cult to sect to church (Crapps 1977:50). Many handlers have found regular jobs, have improved their economic situation, and have improved their education. They are climbing the ladder and they are overcoming their socio-economic disadvantages.

The churches are in Edwina, Morristown, LaFollette, New Tazewell in Tennessee; Marshall North Carolina; Middlesboro, London, 2 in Berea in

The "Original Pentecostal Church of God" is another serpent handling church²⁷. However, they do not believe that God must be tempted and hence they do not handle the snakes in church. They will handle snakes if they encounter them in the open.

3.1 George Went Hensley

George Went Hensley, the accepted founder of the movement, was presumably born on the 2nd May 1880. Some records indicate 1881. The likely venue of his birth is Rogersville, Hawkins County, Northeast Tennessee. His daughter's birth certificate claims he was born in Scott County, Virginia.

Hensley is accepted as the first contemporary handler of serpents as a religious ritual (Burton 1993:41-50). However, his first wife denies this. She claims that he had seen someone else handle snakes. There are no written records and many of the original handlers have died or their memories have faded. Another problem is that people tend to remember selectively and the same event may be related differently especially when their knowledge comes from hearsay.

Burton recorded as much information as he could find on Hensley. This was a rather difficult task. He writes that Hensley's life is so convoluted that it is difficult to keep the story in order.

A widely circulated version tells how Hensley went up to the White Oak Mountain near Ooltewah, Tennessee to a spot called Rainbow Rock. There he prayed for a sign which would reveal to him how he was to interpret Mark's recording of Jesus' command that believers should take up serpents. Suddenly a rattlesnake appeared before him. He picked it up without being bitten. He took the snake down the mountain to the Grasshopper Church of God. He entered the church with the serpent. Members of the congregation followed his example and also handled the serpent. It would seem that the date was 1908 (Burton 1993:32).

Homer Tomlinson also claims to be involved. He wrote in "The Shout of the a King" that "The accounts which we will give will show that miracles of healing,

Pineville, 5 or 6 in Harlan in Kentucky; Scotsboro, Alabama; Rosehill in Virginia; Jolo in West Virginia; and Fort Wayne in Indiana (Mark Brown:2001).

²⁷ Many Pentecostal or Holiness groups use the words "Church of God" in their names. Burton states that this is confusing because some 200 independent religious groups in the United States use the words in one form or another (Burton 1993:6). Some Church of God churches no longer handle serpents and some have disassociated themselves from handler groups. As individual people who feel called to the ministry set up their own churches many die a

and all the other signs in Mark 16-18, started right with me, or rather I should say I was present" (Burton 1993:33). When Tomlinson invited the sinners to come to the altar to kneel there, to be saved and sanctified, and to be filled with the Holy spirit, Hensley was one of those who came forward. Burton accepts this story with a little scepticism but feels that Tomlinson's version may be generally correct but some details may be inaccurate (Burton 1993:35).

Hensley had been heavily involved with moonshining and gambling. Now he was equally dedicated to spread the Word of God (Kimbrough 1995:47). He brought many to salvation through handling the serpents. This act in itself brought many curious people to see what was happening. Hensley handled serpents in bars and in the open. He preached and handled wherever he found an audience (Kimbrough 1995:53).

Apparently Hensley started preaching in 1910 and became a member of the Church of God in 1912. There is no agreement on a single date for the taking up of serpents as a religious ritual, nor is there absolute consensus about his initiating the practice. Prior to 1901 Hensley had been a member of a Baptist church (Burton 1993:36).

Hensley married four times and was divorced four times. He never was a good provider for his families. In about 1922 Hensley "backslid" and a year later he was jailed for four months and fined \$100 for moonshining. He repented and once more took up preaching. He never stayed long anywhere. He preferred the life of an itinerant preacher.

Hensley claimed that he had been bitten more than 200 times without any ill effects. He was charged for handling dangerous snakes in public i.e. a breach of the peace. This did not stop his handling serpents. To him it was more important to obey God's law as opposed to laws made by man.

On July 24, 1955 George Hensley was fatally bitten by a large rattler. He died a few hours after the bite, but not before he had whispered that the snake would not have bitten him if someone in the audience had not been afraid. Reports say that he had been bitten 401 or 446 times. Written records noting snake bites do not exist and it difficult to verify verbal claims.

None of Hensley's children took up serpents, not even his son James Roscoe Hensley who became a preacher.

Another early handler was a Baptist minister, James Miller of deKalb County. He took up serpents in northern Alabama. He was banned from the ministry in the Baptist church. However, he continued preaching and taking up serpents.

natural death when the pastor dies. Some churches are lucky and find successors to administer to their needs in the same buildings.

Presumably he was not as active or as charismatic as Hensley and, therefore, it is difficult to find records of his ministry.

3.2 The Church of God and Signs following

"And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mark 16:17-18)

and

"Behold I give unto you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over the power of the enemy: and nothing by any means shall hurt you" (Luke 10:19)

and

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isaiah 43:2).

"I may take up serpents, but I am not a snake handler. Snake handlers are in the circus" said Alfred Ball (Birckhead, 1997:24). The handlers are adamant that they handle the serpents out of obedience and faith and not for show.

Jesus' last command was given immediately before his ascension. It is important to note that it says that they SHALL (emphasis mine) take up serpents, i.e. it is a command to do so. It differs from Jesus' chiding the apostles that they had little faith. Jesus promised them that if they had faith they would be able to move mountains. Some handlers believe that Jesus was a handler of serpents as John 20:30 had written that Jesus did many signs in the presence of his disciples and which were not recorded (Kimbrough 1995:15).

The literate serpent handlers read the King James bible. Those who could not read, requested that certain portions be read for them. They had grown up with the bible and knew it. In some homes it was the only book available. Some parents used the bible to teach children to read. They did not use the more modern or newer translations. They believed the King James bible was the most faithful translation of the original biblical texts. To them the whole bible is inerrant (Daugherty in Marty 1993:180). As many depended on their memories and that of their parents it is possible that some biblical passages were

remembered out of context or enjoyed more importance than in the original text. Biblical interpretation was used by the pastors and congregations to legitimise their rules and regulations.

Any religion is essentially an experience, an experience of God (Jorstad 1973:50). The serpent handlers are obviously a hands-on group. They are actively involved with the religious experience. Snake handling is the symbol of this special group as is the drinking of toxins, healing the sick, and exposing themselves to hot flames. They "follow the signs" as an act of obedience, as a test of their faith. They deny that they are effectively challenging God to honour his promise of protection.

The handlers try to live their faith. They do not believe in backbiting or gossip and if possible they will avoid arguments among themselves. They are always hospitable to strangers, even though they may not trust them. They try to obey God's commands at all times. Their lives must reflect God's love and power. This is obviously a somewhat utopian description as the handlers do backslide²⁸ on the Lord. They are normal human beings subjected to enormous social and economic pressures and they, like other normal people, at times will react with less than the perfect Christian vision or love.

Like most Holiness churches the handlers forbade the use of lipstick or other make-up. They neither cut, dyed nor curled their hair. It was left to grow naturally. The women had to wear modest dresses and no jewellery²⁹. The men usually came to church in clean denims, overalls, or slacks and long-sleeved open-necked shirts. The dress code determined that no one should delight in worldly ways and worldly adornment. Tobacco and alcohol usage was also forbidden and the use of medications³⁰ was discouraged. Many old rules and regulations laid down by the mainline Protestant churches were discarded. They had set their own new rules which they enforced with an iron rod. However, rules varied from church to church as each church was an autonomous unit determining its own regulations (Kimbrough 1995:32).

State authorities were defied if they interfered with the handlers' religious practices. The handlers believed that those who had faith and who stayed "in the Word" would experience no barriers to the kingdom of God. Their value systems were not those of their neighbours. The handlers closed their ranks

²⁸ "Backslide" and "backslid" are terms used by the handlers to indicate that some member became a "sinner" and left the church and his faith. The handlers call themselves the "saints" and outsiders are "sinners."

²⁹ In some groups even a wedding ring was considered too worldly and too extravagant. These groups also banned the wearing of watches. These injunctions are based on Peter' saying that mankind was not redeemed with corruptible things like silver and gold (1 Peter 1:18).

³⁰ Non-belief in healing through prayer was a manifestation of a lack of faith in God's ability to cure the sick.

and became very suspicious of any strangers especially anyone from the press (Kimbrough 1995:32).

In 1923 the Church of God broke up into two groups - the "Church of God"³¹ and the "Church of God of Prophecy." The Serpent handling believers called themselves "saints" and all others were "sinners." Handlers were found in Tennessee, Kentucky, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Arkansas and in Texas. Services were held in tabernacles, brush arbours, homes and out in open fields.

Within the contemporary serpent handling churches (The Church of God with Signs Following) there are two strong divisions. These centre around the Trinity and "Jesus Name"³² churches. A person is baptised either in the name of "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" or simply "in the name of Jesus Christ". The former accept the usual concept of the triune God. The latter believe that the name of Jesus includes the Father and the Holy Spirit. To them the titles specify the different natures of the Christ person. The name "Jesus" is a name designating a specific person or god, whereas "God" or "Holy Spirit" are simply nomenclatures. There are also differences in the interpretation and practice of foot washing, the Lord's Supper, and of divorce and remarriage rules (Burton 1993:20-1).

In some churches visiting handlers may be allowed to preach but not to handle serpents. In others they may do both, or they may be allowed to only handle serpents and not to preach. Each church is independent and the minister determines its policies. There is no overriding controlling body. The common feature in the several churches is the use of only the King James bible. This they translate literally, either as they remember the scriptures or as the Spirit leads them to interpret any given passage (Burton 1993:20-1).

Covington describes one communion service. However, by and large, the handlers celebrate the Eucharist³³ infrequently. Some of the churches have a footwashing³⁴ ritual prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Men wash

³¹ Within the Holiness movement there were more than two hundred churches using the name "Church of God" (Burton 1993:6).

³² Jesus Only, Unitarian, or Oneness churches belong to this group as they all believe that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are the same being. The Three God people, "the Threeness", believe that the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost were three separate individual beings (Kimbrough 1995:31).

³³ Mark Brown states that "We partake of the body and blood of Christ with unleavened bread and wine, we do this in remembrance of his death." In most Christian churches children or new members are confirmed or baptised before partaking of the Eucharist. Mark mentions that they have no confirmation services for their children who, when the time comes, will decide whether to become full members of the church or to leave.

³⁴ This ritual also varies from community to community. At The Church of the True Jesus Christ (Ross Point, Kentucky) a blanket is hung to separate men

men's feet, and women who have been separated from the men by a curtain, wash women's feet. Neither ritual is as important as the anointing by the Holy Spirit and the handling of the snakes³⁵. Mark Brown denies this as he believes that the faith in the Lord and obedience to his will is the most important element within the church.

After a service, described by Covington, an altar call was made. It invited people to relent and repent, to give up the ways of the sinful world and to enter into a new relationship with God. Any conversion would be followed in a public ceremony by baptism in a creek or river with a complete immersion. Baptism was the symbolic transformation and release from the old sinful man to that of the new-born man. This was also a commitment of oneself to the ethos of the church community (Kimbrough 1995:75).

During the early days of the handlers the devil was as real as was God. He could be blamed for the bucket of spoilt milk, strange dreams, untimely deaths. The demons were ever present. As capitalisation and industrialisation took a firm hold in the area and as some of the mountain people lost their land and livelihoods people experienced more difficult times and needed to blame someone or something. Kimbrough states that community anxiety and social inter-relationships fed belief and fear, and the power of the demons became more obvious. This supported the Holiness attitude that society was a war between the agents of the Devil and the servants of God (Kimbrough 1995:66).

The handlers believed that possession by demons was a real threat to them. Unbelievers and people with weak spirits were likely victims of demons who actively looked for entry into weak people. Casting out demons and devils was a definite need for the handlers. Any victim would be surrounded by members of the congregation who would lay hands on him and would pray until the spirit departed. Some claimed that they could see the evil spirit leaving.

from women, as men and women may not wash each others feet in public (Schwartz 1999:23). The footwashing ritual is to teach members humility.

³⁵ This is a debatable point in that Mark Brown states that a snake is simply a snake without any further symbolism. As each church and each person is entitled to interpret their rituals there must be several different aspects to the service.

Schwartz attended a communion service at the Church of the True Jesus Christ and he describes it. Broken up "Saltine Crackers" on a paper plate and a glass of blood red wine, poured from an unlabelled gallon jug, were used. The wine and the crackers were lifted and a prayer - "Thank you sweet Jesus, for the food that we're about to take" - was said. The mood was jovial as the minister handed out the bread and the wine saying "Take this bread, for it is the body of Christ, and drink this wine, for it is the blood of Christ." The saltine wafer is taken as is a sip from a plastic chalice. The women are served first, then the men. It also was the first communion for Gary, an eight year old boy. He mimicked the actions of his parents. The cracker was eaten with a smile, but the wine elicited an expression of pain. He said "I thought this would taste like grape juice" as he wipes his tongue with his shirt sleeve (Schwartz 1999:23).

In response to one of my questions I quote Mark Brown's letter as received on the 19th April 2001:

"as to the question about the snakes serpent handling is portrayed as the focus of our religion and that it is a vital importance that we do it. That is not the case. serpent handling is a vital part yes, but no more important than other sign or gift. the foundation of our church is Jesus Christ and him crucified and that he rose on the third day. believing in Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers is what the focus should be of any Christian church. we believe the word of God and his signs are confirmation that his word is true. we believe his power is real and can work in men today just like it did in the apostles day. as for the snakes.....we feed and take care of the snakes if they don't eat or seem ill, we turn them back into the wild. we also take babies and pregnant females to new areas that aren't populated so they can replenish. we don't mistreat any of God's creatures intentionally."

The handlers did not obviously use any special techniques when handling the serpents. However, children would have watched parents handling the snakes and may have learnt certain techniques without doing so consciously. There are special techniques which may be used to avoid being harmed such as knowing how to handle the reptile and where to hold it³⁶. Accidents did happen and the handlers knew that a snake could bite them any time and that they could die as a result of this. Frequent checks on the serpents verified that no tampering occurred. Such checks were conducted by outsiders. Poisons were checked and found to be lethal, yet the handlers drank the strychnine, battery acid, lye, etc. without being concerned about any ill-effects.

3.3 Services in the Serpent Handling Churches:

Holy Ghost won't you take my mind
let me feel your spirit divine
and lead me to that home of mine
Holy Ghost won't you take my mind
(Mark Brown 2001).

McCauley posits that the roots of the Church of God lie in pietism as practised by the plain folk in their camp meetings, also the pietism as practised in the Calvinism of the Scots-Irish settlers that fused revivalism and sacramentalism,

³⁶ Mundkur mentions that snakes can be handled with relative safety if the right techniques were followed. None of the authors that I have read mention that snakes were taken out of the boxes with any particular care. Sometimes the handlers simply put their hands into the boxes and pulled out the snakes. However, examination of photographs shows many handlers hold the serpents in the middle of their bodies. It is possible that this is done without any conscious thought as one tends to do certain things automatically.

and in the Separate Baptist religious culture of the early nineteenth century (Lippy 1996:78).

Those who conducted the services were called pastors or preachers. They had reacted to a "call" to lead a congregation. All had grown up with the Bible at home and they knew it. There was no formal training, they simply relied on their memories and felt that the Holy Spirit would put the words into their mouths³⁷.

Mark Brown wrote that in his church, "The House of Prayer in the Name of Jesus Christ", the term "minister" is someone called by God to preach. A "deacon" and a "pastor" are officers in the church. A pastor is set over the church to preach and to watch over the church. They must ensure that someone does not bring in a false doctrine or cause trouble amongst the people (Brown 2001). In the older generation there were illiterate people and they relied on their memories and their oral tradition.

The handlers as a group never formulated church dogmas, nor did they develop any theological theories. Anthropologist, Steven Kane, stated that the serpent handlers used a "vigorous and perduring institutionalised system of belief whose symbols are public, socially shared and sanctioned and transmitted across generational lines" (Burton 1993:130). Sermons usually involve "Praise the Lord", "Hallelujah", promises of salvation, and power through the Holy Spirit. Sermons are all delivered within the parameters as accepted by a particular congregation. In an informal group like the handler churches it is, of course, the congregation and the pastor who determine what is true and acceptable, and how biblical passages must be interpreted.

The preachers have not been trained. Mark Brown confirmed that none of the current snake handling preachers has had any formal theological training even though some of the younger people have been to college. As an offshoot from the Holiness Churches they adhered to the tenets of confession, repentance, sanctification and salvation. They had to be baptised and it would seem that some were baptised more than once³⁸ (Kimbrough 1995:71-2).

In the church services people received what they did not get in their childhood or at home. Their poverty had forced people to work, work and work. Their only relaxation and socialising occurred in the church where they were part of a cohesive group of people. In the church they could feel special. They could experience God's spirit taking control of their lives. They could handle snakes. They could drink poisons. They could hold burning blow torches to their faces

³⁷ Unless one has specifically memorised biblical passages one presumably transmits paraphrased versions of such passages.

³⁸ Mark Brown wrote that a person could be baptised more than once. There is no limit to the number of baptisms and every time when a "backslid" member

or arms. And they could heal the sick through prayers. They were a special group, apart from the sinners of the world. As a group they were very suspicious of any strangers (Kimbrough 1995:62). Here they could release pent-up emotions and frustrations (Moore 1986:32). They could sing and dance, shout or speak in tongues. They could reach for and achieve new emotional highs. One could never get enough of the Spirit and there was as much of the Spirit as one needed. In the contemporary situation the children go to school regularly.

When Birckhead revisited the handlers he was frustrated by their secretiveness. His problems stemmed from the fact that many of the people he had known were now dead and others had left the area. Eventually he made contact with a handler who invited him to the Church of God at Pine Mountain where serpents had been handled since 1931. When he arrived he felt uncomfortable as he was aware that everybody was staring at him and people were whispering about him. However, at the next service people were much friendlier. Matters improved. Eventually Birckhead calls the handlers "my people" and the church "my church" (Birckhead in Glazier 1997:49).

Birckhead wonders why snake handling when transferred from the secular to the sacred becomes loaded with social stigmatisation. He believes it has to do with the dislike people have of cults. People also showed their aversion to inbred and degenerate hill people who were fanatics, who flirted with danger, sex and death. The handlers maintained and still do so a boundary between themselves and the sinners of the world. Some people have called the handlers a cult, others have named them a sect. Either description in common usage has a negative connotation and an intolerance of the group by outsiders. There is a perception that the members are not "normal" in their religious practices, behaviour and dress. "Cult" and "sect" refers specifically to religious practices. The handlers do have a most unusual way of celebrating church services.

Birckhead detected an immense emotional intensity, sadness and tragedy in many people's testimonies. He also felt that sometimes politics entered the services. This was especially evident in instances where the handlers felt that they needed to stand up and be counted in their opposition to those who misused power.

Services, writes Birckhead, could become extremely emotional and intense "with people 'dancing' 'wildly' 'in the Spirit' to a driving rock beat, punctuated by shrill screams and the eerie sounds of 'unknown tongues'." The Spirit may cause a person to collapse, even to blackout for a few minutes to a few hours. Even an observer can feel the presence of the spirit; he hears, feels, sees and

returned to the church he would be baptised before being accepted once again

hopefully understands. The Spirit does not affect only the serpent handlers, but also those who drink poisons and those who handle fires (Birckhead in Glazier 1997:48).

Covington describes a service. He states that the music was a cross between Salvation Army and acid rock; played on tambourines, an electric guitar, drums, cymbals, and voices that careened from one note to the next as though the singers were being sawed in half. Sermons are delivered and may be short or long and they are followed by prayers. Many men and women move to the altar where they kneel, others remain in their pews. Everybody says his own prayer, usually out loud - "... each voice on a separate strand of meaning but weaving with the others into a kind of song, rising and falling, gathering and dispersing high above it all like a descant ran the voice of Glenn Summerford's mother ..." (Covington 1995:6). Volume and pitch changed and eventually the shared rhythm gradually tapered off. Throughout the prayers the rattlesnakes could be heard.

Schwartz derides Covington's description of the music as a cross between Salvation Army and acid rock. He calls it a "grievous offence against the ones carrying out these unique performances" (Schwartz 1999:37). He claims that the music is both entertainment and inspirational prose. He believes that the music is like the umbilical cord that nourishes the body when the "body transcends its physical limits for fleeting moments of spiritual anointment." He accepts that the music does affect overt physical behaviour. It also effects the handlers' expectations for, and their physical reactions to, their music, and to the spiritual experience which is more intuitive than analytical. Their behaviour is learned and shared amongst the handler communities. He feels that the metrical and tonal structures are not significant. Rather it is the bonding through the music of the charismatic service and the spiritual condition that is important. The bass pounds and the music becomes a blur of sound as the Holy Spirit speaks through it. The music is played mainly in the major keys. Schwartz states that "there is no order to the songs, and you can't help sensing that some greater power is conducting the service (ibid:38).

Kenneth Moore studied the music of the handlers. He found a similarity with the spirituals sung during their trance-like states and pre-and post Civil War Black Spirituals. However, there were double meanings in the Black Spiritual songs, in their protests against discrimination and their search for freedom. Moore finds no conscious double meaning in the music of the handlers. His study showed that the songs concerned those that condemned the established order, they were songs of escape or songs of hardship and yet another group were multifaceted (Moore:1986).

as a full member of the church.

It is agreed that the music gets your mind on the Lord and that it stirs up the people. A fast song works better than the slower ones. Music has of course been used since time immemorial to induce and control moods. David played the harp to alleviate Saul's depression, the children of Israel danced to music to praise the Lord. Song and dance has been used by primal peoples to celebrate life. Music is used in churches and temples. And then music is used in the secular world in dance halls, discos and simply for tranquil entertainment and relaxation. Music does effect the heartbeat rate, muscular tension and respiration. The music played in the churches by the handlers is obviously very significant to the listeners. They expect to respond to it and to be anointed by the Spirit during the playing of the music (Burton 1993:145).

As the snakes are deaf they cannot react to the music, but they would presumably be effected by the drum beats and the stomping of feet. Snake bites occur both during the playing of music and when there is no music. People can be anointed with the Spirit without the music. This was demonstrated by Liston Pack who was not subjected to music whilst having his EEG.

Schwartz wrote that the music was an adaptation of commercial bluegrass and country / western music or in some instances improvisations of secular recorded music. He says that the instrumental ensemble starts the service off in a form of a jam session. A vocalist may lead the session and the musicians may enter sporadically once a "communal" key and rhythmic tempo have been established. The tonal centre and the tempo may shift several times during the first stanza and termination may occur abruptly. There is also melodic repetition which may continue for fifteen to twenty minutes. Schwartz also states that at the peak of the service there is no eye contact between the musicians. They, like the handlers, become self-involved in their performance. Each musician appears to be more concerned in creating a personal performance which can lead to expressions that appear chaotic as each musician is led by the Spirit. When the music comes to an end the musicians once again play in unison (Burton 1993:145-8).

Scott Schwartz also describes a service where Sherman Ward, the minister, sings Amazing Grace and the congregation join in. "His tempo is slow and self-assured, as if the gospel song were a majestic march promising to lead its followers to Heaven's gateway. Everyone's attention is drawn to the preacher. The anticipation of something spiritual brings an almost electric feeling to the room. Without warning, the pent-up energy of the entire congregation explodes in a frenzy of dancing, rattling tambourines, and clanging cymbals" as the rest of the hymn is sung. "The rhythmic pulse of the over-amplified electric bass pounds my chest; the music's volume is deafening" and Schwartz has joined

the clapping and "the Holy spirit is infectious; I feel its presence throughout the room" (Schwartz 1999:8).

Covington pointed out that when people handle the snakes and when they are anointed with the spirit their faces looked pained, as if something had been taken away from them. Some of these expressions are evident in the photographs taken by Schwartz. I would assume that essentially the person has lost himself to the experience of a union with God (Covington 1995:99).

The anointing with the spirit was not immune to the powers of witchcraft. Charles McGlocklin had warned Covington that if witchcraft was present it could zap the anointing leaving one without the Spirit of God (Covington 1995:155). This also applied if there were people in the church who were not right with God. The handlers' ancestors had brought their superstitions with them when they immigrated. Superstitions, like habits, die hard. Disasters, ill-health, etc. if not sent by God, must have some other cause. With more education, causes for natural disasters and illnesses will become known and the need to find another cause will fall away.

Other descriptions of church services are in a similar vein. The sermons are frequently admonitions to get right with the Lord for the day of Judgement is near.

No member of the church is required to handle snakes, no one is forced to do so. Children up to the age of 18 are not even supposed to do so. However, if they feel the urge they may be allowed to handle one. Adult women were allowed to handle snakes. Many members have never handled a snake. Liston Pack always made a point of reminding people that snakes could strike and those who handled them should not forget this (Burton 1993:168).

In the early days of the movement if any one was bitten by a serpent or died after drinking poison it was seen to be the result of some wickedness, lack of faith or as punishment for pride. Today it is accepted that those who handle snakes will be bitten and it is not necessarily a sign of a lack of faith. It could be punishment from God for daily sins, or it proves that the snakes have not been tampered with and still are deadly. A snake bite does test the faith of the victim and of the bystanders. It also gives God the opportunity to show his healing powers. It is not a challenge to God (Burton 1993:162).

3.4 The Anointing and the psychology of the handlers

It is so simple to label the snake handlers as bizarre and pathological. They, like many of the Pentecostal groups, vent their joy in dance, music and

glossolalia³⁹. To this the handlers have added the taking up of serpents which is a most unusual form of worship. Their services manifest the physical expression of worship and joy and also of becoming anointed. This can be compared to the experience of the mystics⁴⁰ who also sought union with God through meditation and prayer. Mysticism is the experience of the ultimate reality, the union with God and the entrance to such ecstasy is self-surrender.

For the handlers mystical experiences are not limited to a single occurrence. Whenever the Spirit overcomes the handler, he or she has a mystical experience. "One can never get enough of the Spirit" is commonly heard. After each handling the handler feels renewed and revitalised. Outsiders are allowed to watch the services because the handlers feel that in this way the Word is spread and others may come to accept the true way to Jesus. This too, is why in many churches they will allow filming of services and the writing of articles and books. Other churches will not permit working journalists and film crews to record their services (Burton 1993:175).

Kenneth Moore believes that the handlers are a combination of perfectionism and charisma. They believe that one may achieve moral perfection and overcome sinful desires whilst also receiving the blessings. They believe grace is received when the soul is filled with the spirit as in the anointing (Moore 1986:30-34). The anointment legitimises religious serpent handling rituals and it gives it meaning for it is God who moves on them.

The anointment by the Holy Ghost is the experience of the Spirit of God descending upon, entering and possessing the individual. It also involves the baptism of the person. Bud Gregg of Morristown, Tennessee said that when the Spirit enters people they became new creatures. They are no longer like they used to be, they are changed individuals. During the anointing the Spirit takes total control of the body, begins to move it around and speaks in tongues through it, it even shouts through the person (Burton 1993:139).

Galanter states that most people who join sects or cults come from troubled families, usually from the middle and upper middle class groups. Schwartz and Kaslow believed that many come from "overly enmeshed families" where the group accepts responsibility for its members. This encourages interdependence rather than personal autonomy and simultaneously gives support to those

³⁹ People who have studied the sounds of "speaking in tongues" say that it is usually unintelligible. It does have patterns of vocabulary and inflection resembling human language (Jorstad 1973:33)

⁴⁰ A mystic will deliberately seek a change in his state of consciousness (Ellwood 1983:152) until he loses himself in the ecstasy of union with God. The handlers also enjoy an altered state of consciousness as they receive the anointing by the Spirit.

people who feel inadequate, lonely and depressed. Sects also give members a feeling of belonging, of being wanted (Galanter in Marty 1993:118).

Galanter highlights the fact that when interviewing volunteer snake handling members one does not necessarily reach the more dysfunctional members. Many psychological tests involving the serpent handlers state that the handlers are perfectly normal and well-adjusted people. They even emerged better balanced than the control groups which were taken from traditional church groups in the area (Galanter in Marty 1993:118).

When dealing with an "abnormal" religious sect like the handlers any psychologist presumably starts such tests with many preconceived ideas. It would be difficult not to start with the perception that such subjects are sick or abnormal. Some sects will also attract people with certain personalities e.g. Deutsch found that most of the devotees who joined the Baba cult, and who had submitted to testing, gave histories of chronic unhappiness and unsatisfactory parental relations (Galanter in Marty 1993:119).

Salzman believed that sudden conversions might precipitate or be part of a psychotic process and it helped converts to deal with extreme and disintegrating conflicts. The conversion may be part of a coping system which provides for ego integration for the individual. Transcendental or mystical experiences may play an important part in the conversion process and may precipitate hallucinatory experiences in both psychotics and non-psychotics. Transcendental and mystical experiences may be experienced long after conversion and also by perfectly normal people (Galanter 1993:120).

Covington states that the snake handlers not only feel the power of the spirit, they can also smell it - something like the smell of fresh bread and baked apples. He states that one does not get used to the din and action in a service, rather one becomes enmeshed in it. He also feels that the more one experiences the services the more aware one becomes of the shifts in the moods and needs of the handlers. He describes how at the end of a service he felt drawn towards the front of the church. Here Carl Porter was handling a huge, acrid-smelling, carnal and very alive rattler (Covington 1995:169).

"But as low as it was, as repulsive, if I took it, I'd be possessing the sacred. Nothing was required but obedience. Nothing had to be given up except my own will. This was the moment. I didn't stop to think about it. I just gave in. I stepped forward and took the snake with both hands. Carl released it to me. I turned to face the congregation and lifted the rattlesnake up toward the light. It was moving like it wanted to get up even higher, to climb out of that church and into the air. And it was exactly as the handlers had told me. I felt no fear. The snake seemed to be an extension of myself. And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. Everything else had disappeared.

Carl, the congregation, Jim - all gone, all faded to white. And I could not hear the ear-splitting music. The air was silent and still and filled with the strong, even light. And I realised that I, too, was fading into white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake was the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self. It must be close to or conception of paradise, what it's like before you're born or after you die." He came back in stages as he became aware of the shouting and music around him, he realised that it was he who was shouting. As reality rushed back, the heat, the noise, the smell, etc. returned. He realised that he was still holding the snake which was no longer part of him and he handed it back to Carl. For a long period afterwards he felt as though he had not come back from the handling as "my feet were light, and my head was still encased in an adrenaline cocoon" (Covington 1995:169-170).

Covington is really describing how he let go of himself. How he experienced a union with the eternal, as he lost himself. Many people do need some crutch to reach this stage. A stage where they can really allow themselves to dissolve into, and unite with, the Great Void, the Supreme Being, The All, or whatever one wishes to call it. This is the climax of any religious experience.

People experience the anointing in different ways. Some feel a numbness moving through their bodies, others feel a tingling. Yet others feel at peace with themselves as they are under the Spirit's protection. Many describe the experience as intoxicating, euphoric or invincible. Yet others feel that there is a grey mist surrounding them with the image of Christ floating in the distance in front of them. Others feel they are bathed in a bright light that blinds them. Music is not always essential to receive the anointing, but the music lifts the spirits of the handlers and it is essential to their services. Anna Prince, daughter of Charles Prince, described the anointing as the strand of power which links humans to God. It is a burst of energy, always brand new, it brings good emotions. It confirms that you are right with God and with your fellow man. It is "a roar of happiness, a power surge that is near to a light electrical shock and a sexual orgasm simultaneously." Once hooked on the feeling one wants to join others to get a bigger and better high. One is free of guilt, pain, shame or pull-downs, one feels akin to God (Burton 1993:140).

J.L. Dyal also a handler, described the anointing as "It's love, that is all it is. You love the Lord, you love the Word, you love your brother and sister. You're in one mind, in one accord, you're all combined together. The bible says we're each a part of the Body, and when it all comes together ... hey!" (Dyal 1994:692).

Schwartz checked on the fire from a blow torch used by the handlers and which they were stroking against their faces. They suffered no harm. The temperature varied between 650 and 675 degrees Fahrenheit. This would normally cause severe burning. Patricia Maslar suggested that music reduces the psychological stress, tension and anxiety resulting in a reduction of the perception of pain. Such a hot flame should cause severe burning of the skin and should leave at least a blister or burn mark. Even if music reduced the perception of pain, there should be physical evidence of being burnt e.g. a blister or reddened skin. There was no such evidence (Schwartz 1999:47).

Mark Brown writes that the drinking of poisons is not practised to the same extent as the handling of snakes. "It is the only sign with an *if*". This implies that it is not an injunction preceded by a *shall* as in "they shall take up serpents".

In primal religious and healing rituals the shaman leads the people. He is largely responsible for inducing altered states of consciousness. In more modern societies charismatic leaders may lead such events in churches, political gatherings etc. The handler ministers or pastors lead the congregation, but it would seem that it usually is a group event. Several people pray for healing, several people lay hands on the sick, only occasionally will healing be the result of a mono-effort.

Many altered states of consciousness do have biological bases (Winkelman in Glazier 1997:398-9). Induction techniques alter the biology of consciousness in which the parasympathetic system dominates the frontal cortex manifest in the slow wave patterns. This involves the alpha, delta and theta waves. Such activities may be stimulated by drugs, jogging, hunger, thirst, drumming, chanting, etc. Intense stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system breaks down the balance of the autonomic system and this aids the altered state of consciousness. Drumming, chanting and music are able to stimulate a new consciousness. Nutritional deficiencies, or lack of food and water can also induce altered states of consciousness. Extreme sensory stimulation e.g. burns, extreme cold, pain, injury and toxic substances, can result in the same situation as extreme sensory deprivation (ibid:398-9).

It is thus obvious that the social milieu in which the handlers handle snakes is conducive to states of trance-like or heightened emotional responses and to transcendent experience as they receive the Holy Spirit. Crapps states that some support exists for a pathological model explaining cultic practices. High temperatures and the closeness of rooms or buildings may increase the intake of carbon dioxide, enough to induce psychological changes conducive to mystical and visionary changes (Crapps 1977:45).

Birckhead reports that the anointing was experienced by people in different ways. It was tangible and real. Physically many experienced numbness in the

hands, mouth or tongue, some had heart palpitations, others experienced involuntary movements of the limbs, tongue, eyes, some felt their vision blurred and others simply collapsed (Birckhead in Glazier 1997:25).

Galanter reports that recent studies of mystical experiences in the resolution of psychopathology, including suicidal tendencies and schizophrenia, decompensation and affective psychosis, have been recorded. He highlights that in cases where substance abuse is involved the charismatic groups have been able to enforce new behavioural norms. This is similar to the group therapies by organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. (Galanter in Marty 1993:123-4).

Mary Lee Daugherty believes that the handling of serpents is tantamount to partaking in a sacrament. She posits that the ritual of serpent handling is their way of celebrating life, death and resurrection. Handling serpents is a life and death issue, and, if as a sacrament, handling snakes brings life, it can also bring death. It becomes a ultimate religious ritual or experience. They repeatedly prove to themselves that Jesus has the power to deliver them from death, here and now. She also maintains that their way of handling serpents at funerals resembles the Catholic priest's way of raising the host at a mass for the dead i.e. in the life and death of Jesus there is victory over death. "In the name of Jesus" they can conquer death, and, therefore, they will not abandon their serpent handling rituals. It remains central to their faith (Daugherty in Marty 1993:170).

Daugherty claims that though many members have been bitten few have died. The latest internet figure stands between 70-90 deaths. She also claims that when members die the handlers believe that God allowed it to remind the believers that the risk they take is very real. She adds that she has never heard them claim that a brother or sister died because they lacked faith. However, both Covington and Burton report that sometimes the handlers believed that the dead person had been "out of faith" when the accident happened. Daugherty is concerned mainly with the West Virginian group of handlers (ibid:171).

Daugherty stresses that the handlers' deep longing for holiness is demonstrated in their willingness to suffer dreadful pain from snake bites, even death, simply to experience God in their lives. She also states that the most often bitten person and the one who suffered the most is usually the leader. The mountain folk pursue holiness above all else. She seems to believe that they drink poison and handle fires when the snakes are hibernating. No one else mentions that they do not handle snakes during the winter (ibid:171).

Daugherty emphasises that very few of the handlers can read. Therefore, during services they often rely on their memories or they may ask a more

literate member to read for them. She also feels that they have three or four weekly services (each service lasting between three to four hours) because it is only here where they have status. They are powerful when filled with the Holy Spirit. Here they experience love and acceptance from their fellow handlers. They were despised and exploited by forceful industrialists, who did not adhere to God's laws. They did not respect God's creation. They were corrupt and they raped the land whilst digging for coal (Daugherty in Marty 1993:174)⁴¹.

Daugherty tells one strange story of a woman from Scrabble Creek who twice experienced the stigmata. Blood came out of her hands, feet, side and forehead. This was in response to a prayer by the woman. She had prayed that God should through her show others how Jesus had suffered for them by his death and resurrection⁴² (Daugherty in Marty 1993: 175).

Daugherty describes a typical church service. She states that because each service is spontaneous it is always different. The service usually starts with singing which may take up to 45 minutes. Then prayers are said, often aloud. Each person prays in his/her own words. They also pray that the Holy Spirit may anoint them and only them. She says that always serpents will be handled⁴³. Some people will be dancing ecstatically. The whole congregation keeps on calling on Jesus or calling out his name. She continues that once the service is over people will rejoice and dance. This is a dance of thanksgiving that no has been hurt. There also are prayers for healing. If someone should have been bitten they may all gather to pray for a recovery (Daugherty in Marty 1993:176-7).

Both Burton and Schwartz report that Dr Michael Woodruff conducted an electro-encephalographic analysis on Pastor Liston Pack during a spiritual anointment. This was done at the East Tennessee State University in 1985. He found no abnormalities associated with Pack's brainwave patterns during the anointing. There was a sudden conversion of alpha to beta patterns which suggested that the onset of the spiritual experience is "a very active state from the point of view of the cerebral neocortex." The patterns suggested a high state of arousal more typical of a hypnotic than a meditative physical condition (Schwartz 1999:60).

⁴¹ In the contemporary situation the handlers' poverty and poor education has improved as most of them earn regular salaries and the children attend regular schools and colleges.

⁴² Victims of Roman crucifixions had nails driven into the ankles and wrists and not through the hands and feet (Wilson Ian 1998:45). People who exhibit bleeding stigmata are presumably suffering from some psychosomatic problem or they are charlatans.

⁴³ Most references to snake handling refer to the fact that serpents are not handled at every service. Some churches no longer handle serpents even though they belong to the handler groups.

Burton adds that Pastor Pack had prepared for the session over a period of several months by fasting occasionally, by praying and asking his wife and congregation also to pray for him. The day before the EEG was done he had isolated himself, had stayed at home and taken no phone calls. Woodruff had found no evidence of seizure activity, no abnormal slowing or asymmetrical rhythm patterns (Burton 1993:144).

Those who handled fires were not hurt and Schwartz states that physiological and psychological behaviour fell outside scientific norms. Researchers from the University suggested that the euphoria and altered perceptions of pain experienced during the anointment could be attributed to specific types of neurological chemicals that are produced by the pituitary and adrenal systems. The beta-endorphin includes a supra-spinal analgesia blocking the feeling of pain. A test on Sherman Ward, by taking blood samples before, during and after a service, showed a 61% increase in adrenaline whilst he was handling the serpents. The epinephrine for the first and third samples measured 79pg/ml and 42pg/ml whilst the second sample measured 220pg/ml. Dopamine had risen by 38% during the service and norepinephrine had trebled whilst the beta-endorphin had increased by 28% and the cortisol by 525%. These results are consistent with an adrenaline-induced high. However, it does not explain the tolerance for pain nor the lack of tissue damage. This is suggestive of a physical and psychological addiction to the anointment (Schwartz 1999:65).

Austin⁴⁴, a neurologist, and other doctors and psychologists such as Drs Wulff, Newberg and d'Aquili investigated how the brain was involved in religious experiences. Their brain scans taken during "religious experiences" confirmed previous results. Drumming, dancing, singing, etc. concentrate sensory stimulation whilst simultaneously evoking powerful emotional responses. Robert Forman said that "in mystical experiences, the contents of the mind fades, sensory awareness drops out, so you are left only with pure consciousness" (Forman 2001:39-41). This latest neuro-theological experiment once again highlights the experiences of the handlers when they feel anointed. Dr Newberg posited in the same article that during intense concentration the brain is prevented from distinguishing between the self and the non-self. This is a typical reaction by the handlers when under the anointment.

Ralph Hood and Kimbrough (Hood & Kimbrough 1995:311-322) studied serpent handlers for several years. They have written several articles on them. They

⁴⁴ In Newsweek of 14th May 2001 an article on "neuro-theology" details an experience by Dr. James Austin. Austin had a sudden "sense of enlightenment". He says, "I had a sense of eternity. My old yearnings, loathings, fear of death and insinuations of selfhood vanished. I had been graced by a comprehension of the ultimate nature of things." Austin understood this experience "as proof of the existence of religion in the brain."

believe that the psychodynamic symbol theory argues the universality of the serpent as a source of body projection linked to the phallus, and to death and resurrection. Sunden's⁴⁵ role theory explains how the initial actions of the charismatic George Hensley acting out repressions was the source of the serpent handling practice⁴⁶.

Hensley could obviously impress and influence those around him. As a charismatic figure he could and did use a sacred text, that of Mark 16, to initiate a new role, that of handling serpents. By successfully handling the serpents, he affirmed the reality of the role, and the combination of the text and practice laid the foundation for the religious handling of serpents. Holm noted that "the mainstay of all religion consists of mythological narratives which have been codified as sacred texts and which are therefore transmitted to ever new generations" (Holm in Hood and Kimbrough 1995:317).

Hood states that once symbols have been drawn from the texts by appropriate modelling, a tradition will emerge. However, he adds, that only those who have a powerful affinity for the serpent symbol are likely to interpret the text as a command to handle the snakes (Hood and Kimbrough 1995:318).

Theological literacy is not common in the psychology of religion. The handlers have used it to achieve meaning, mastery and control within their contextual situation. Though the handlers have been subjected to much ridicule and to legal sanctions, they have firmly adhered to their interpretation of Christ's injunction that they take up serpents (Hood and Kimbrough 1995:319).

The handlers simply do not accept that everything in Mark after chapter 8⁴⁷ is an addition to the original gospel. They believe that the full gospel of Mark, as recorded in the King James bible, is the correct one and any denial of this is modernist criticism. They are not concerned with chronology or authorship, but only in being true and faithful to the Word. They do not limit themselves to the gospel of Mark but rather they use all the bible. Where texts forbid man to tempt or challenge God, they interpret this as an injunction that snakes must not be handled with pride (Hood and Kimbrough 1995:312-3).

⁴⁵ Sunden posited that personal experiences are largely derived from the enacting of roles. Hence for the believer sacred stories are legitimate sources for roles. The sacred stories provide legitimate prototypes within which experiences can be elicited and understood. When secular circumstances are inadequate or insufficient for role modelling a person may turn to sacred stories and then such experiences become specifically religious (Hood:317).

⁴⁶ In rural America during the nineteenth century there existed a custom of rattlesnake gazing which was not based on any biblical passage. In 1994 Lippy noted that rattlesnake gazing combined scientific, religious and occult views. This enhanced the cultural fear of snakes which were either dangerous or demonic (Volney 1995:314). There appears to be no link between the biblical serpent handling of the Appalachian groups and that of rattlesnake gazing.

⁴⁷ The five signs were probably added in the second century CE

Discussion on snake symbolism relies heavily on snake cults, folk tales and mythologies, say Hood and Kimbrough. A shared perception by psychologists is that snake symbolism relates to projections of the body. The serpent as a phallic symbol is an almost universal phenomenon. The authors maintain that body symbolisation can activate fantasies involving the whole body. Also the overt cultural transmission of symbols in folk tales, legends, myths, and religion can be supported partly by the repression of bodily desires and release is found in the symbol. Symbols often relate to opposites and hence the serpent is linked not only to the phallus but also to the vagina. Both body parts are also associated with water and hence so is the serpent, the waters of the semen and of the uterus, the waters of life (Hood and Kimbrough 1995:311).

Sexual fantasies link eroticism and death. Hood and Kimbrough posit that in psychoanalytic terms the handlers act out the potential sign of death. Therefore, the handling of serpents represents the return of the repressed i.e. the body and its early domination by the pleasure principle. The serpent handlers experience intense emotion during the taking up of serpents. It is a demonstrative religion. This acting out is the return of the repressed. It confers the sacramental element onto the serpents, and accounts for the intense emotionality which is anticipated and experienced (Hood and Kimbrough 1995:311).

3.5 Liston Pack⁴⁸

Liston Pack was one of twelve children living in a world "outside the laws of humanity or religion." He was 27 years old when he realised he had a conscience. He said that he had been a man of the devil before he became a man of God. He had been shot at and had shot back. He had been knifed and also used the knife on others.

He was born in 1940 in Cocke County, East Tennessee into a rural, agrarian community which was intensely poor. Liston's father had taught the children how to make illegal whisky. The unlawful activities meant that the family was constantly on the move. By the time Liston was twelve he had been arrested for brewing liquor. Schooling was minimal and he believed that he had not spent as much as 100 days at school. He was as tough and tougher than the strongest in the mob. He was arrested on an attempted murder charge and spent time in prison. During some weeks he made 18,000 dollars in illegal trade. Unfortunately he spent the money as quickly as he made it.

One August night in 1967 he walked into the Lincoln Avenue Church of God in Newport. He returned on the Saturday and Sunday. By Sunday he was saved.

⁴⁸ Fred Brown in Burton 1993:93-97.

Nobody who had known Liston believed that he had changed. He wished to be baptised, but not in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It had to be in the Name of Jesus Christ because "It was my conviction. To be baptised any other way would not have helped me at all. In the name of Jesus Christ is the name of the family of God in heaven and planted on Earth and everywhere else. See, father is not a name. Son is not a name. Holy Ghost is not a name. Jesus Christ is a name of the family of God" (Fred Brown in Burton 1993:93).

The Lincoln Avenue Church of God asked him to leave as they disagreed with the way in which he was baptised. He now attended various churches such as Methodist, Baptist, Holiness and also some home-made churches that were a "mess". Liston Pack did not want to be a minister, but he felt that he had been called and he learned to read and write. He became minister at Carson Springs in 1971. He is still alive and is still preaching and handling serpents.

In 1973 Liston's brother and the minister Williams died after drinking strychnine⁴⁹ during a service. The State took up the case. The court forbade the handling of snakes and the drinking of poisons during services. The handlers challenged the ban in the State Court of Appeals and in the Supreme Court. Liston had to serve time in prison as he refused to pay the fine.

Between 1976 and 1983 he backslid on the Lord and resigned as minister. His wife had left him and he lost all contact with her and the children.

When he returned to the fold he once again took up the ministry. He allowed women to do certain jobs in the church as they had the same spirit of God as a man had. However, he would not allow a woman to be ordained, all else she could do.

Liston accepted divorce, though many churches would not allow it. He maintained that if a man and his wife ill-treated each other then God is not pleased and a parting is better. He divorced his second wife in 1992.

Liston Pack believes that taking up serpents is a celebration of faith.

3.6 Charles Prince⁵⁰

Prince believed that taking up serpents denoted the victory over evil and it was in praise of God's name. His father had instilled these beliefs.

⁴⁹ Strychnine is a highly poisonous alkaloid substance. In small quantities it is stimulant of the central nervous system creating a euphoric state.

⁵⁰ Burton 1993:101-125.

Charles Prince was one of eight children. His family also suffered the ravages of the Great Depression. His father was an itinerant Baptist preacher who traversed towns in Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina. His father and mother handled snakes and took red-hot coals out of fires during services. Home life centred around God and prayers. The family was constantly on the move and the father never earned a salary. He never asked for help. The family depended on donations for their daily bread.

When Charles experienced the conversion he too became a minister. He was a charismatic preacher who took up serpents, drank poisons, handled fires and prayed for the sick. During his services "the floor would vibrate and bounce and the atmosphere would be charged with electric expectancy."

One day at the Apostolic Church of God in Greeneville a large yellow rattlesnake sank its fangs into the flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Charles did not acknowledge the bite. He continued his sermon and drank some strychnine from a clear mason jar. After the sermon he began to dance, whirling and hopping about. He waved a kerosene torch back and forth underneath his chin. He would sometimes stop, sit down and take another swig of strychnine. Eventually he became limp.

Charles died from that snake bite. His funeral was attended by people from Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Florida and Ohio.

Charles believed that the snakes did not hold the key to heaven nor to hell. His faith was strong. Handling the snakes made him aware that God was a good God as He gave him victory over evil represented by the snake (Burton 1993:101). He was bitten more than once. On one occasion he had been taken to John Brown's home where everyone prayed for Prince's recovery. The last time he was bitten he was taken to Carl Reed's house where no hospitality was offered. Anna, Charles' sister, believed that something was wrong in this house. God was not in control. Some of the people present had the wrong spirit.

Anna felt desperate and resentful. She had hoped that none of the siblings would take up snakes as she felt she had had enough suffering. Anna felt that Charles had become too self-reliant and had not always waited for the anointing.

Charles' father had tried to dissuade his son from taking up serpents. When Charles started taking up serpents the father stopped doing so. Of the eight children, only Charles had handled snakes. The rest had moved and had become successful business people. No longer do they keep rattle snakes in boxes under their beds.

3.7 Death and Resurrection

Researches who studied people who joined sects found that there was an amelioration of emotional stress in many people. Some people maintained this improved state of well-being for a considerable time. This may have been the result of the interactions and close relationships of the charismatic group. This also applies to the serpent handlers. They scored well in psychological tests. They are well-adjusted people who cope excellently with health problems and with the prospect of death (Burton 1993:129).

Many people were bitten by snakes. Snake bites were not always fatal. God had permitted the accident. It was a powerful manifestation of God's healing power. Very few victims would request medical attention. Most would refuse it. The handlers never tried to talk anyone into accepting help. On most occasions the members would gather around the victim and would pray for healing. Prayers were said not only for the sick people, but also for sick animals (Daugherty in Mary 1993:171).

A snake bite could indicate that a person had been out of the faith, had "backslid", or that God was giving him victory over Satan and evil, over illness and death. When Long, a handler, died from snake bite, another member said that the Lord just took him as he didn't need him on earth any longer (Kimbrough 1995:156).

The handlers also prayed for non-members who had been injured. Kimbrough tells a story which relates how the Rev. Saylor healed a man who had serious internal bleeding. The victim had been brought to the church. Saylor claims that God told him to go inside and to lay hands on Jackson, the victim. However, the devil told Saylor that "You are showing out." Saylor was devastated as he felt like a man who had never had God. He broke down and cried. He then rallied and spoke to God, saying "Lord, if you will put that back on me, I'll obey you in spite of every devil in hell." God then jumped him four or five feet into the air. He laid hands on Jackson who was instantly healed (Kimbrough 1995:158).

Other stories concern the healing of people from cancer, from broken bones, etc. In some instances the medical profession had given up hope. The handlers claim to have raised some people from the dead. However, not all prayers are answered. In such instances it is God's will that the person should die and go home. The possibility and immediacy of death is real. Also real is the question as what to do when somebody is bitten and refuses all medical help. Birckhead notes that two people in "my church" died of strychnine poisoning. Five others who sometimes attended died of snake bite. What is the legal implication if one

has carried in the box with the serpent that bit someone? He specifically states that he is afraid of snakes and did not desire to drink poisons or to subject his skin to fire; nor had he been born again in order to receive the anointing.

Volney Gay states it is surprising that some religious rituals actually promote and cause acute forms of anxiety. Every handler knows that if he enters the church and takes up serpents he may not leave the church alive. However, the handling ritual transforms the individual's death anxiety into a ritualised salvation. The ritual sublimates the private anxiety and desperation into a public behaviour that demonstrates the power of the ritual (Gay 1980:180).

Some serpent handlers believed that Satan manifested himself visually and corporeally in the serpent. The Devil objected to Charles Prince's helping lost people and, therefore, he caused him to be bitten. Dewey Chafin believed that each snake bite was a victory for Satan - he had been bitten over 100 times. Others believed that there had not been unity in the church and this gave victory to the serpent/Satan. By implication this would mean that every time a serpent is handled successfully, the Devil is subdued and the handler enjoys victory (Burton 1993:24-27).

Gay states that the handlers have a contempt for death. They could overcome the devil residing in the venomous snake. They deny the reality of death⁵¹. They overcome their fear and anxiety under the anointing by the Spirit. All fear is dissipated. It is important to remember that Gay based his short study on La Barre's conclusions. Today most psychological tests affirm the normality and sincerity of the handlers.

3.8 State laws and the handlers

Enshrined in the Constitution of the United States of America is a guarantee of freedom of religion. The First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Thus neither the government nor a state may regulate the unconditional absolute right of religious belief (Burton 1993:77).

Whilst the first Amendment guaranteed the freedom of religious beliefs there was a vagueness about the clauses guaranteeing the practice of such freedom. The law was hesitant to bring people to court and to try them under the First Amendment rules. One could also assume that a guarantee of religious

⁵¹ Nowhere else have I read that they deny the reality of death as they are constantly and totally aware of the fact that they may die from snake bite or

freedom would include the practice thereof. Belief without practice is incomplete. If the biblical injunction to handle serpents is demanded by one's belief system and the State bans it, there is an official interference in one's religious freedom.

Birckhead writes that because the members sought personal dispensation from the normal law of cause and effect, and for miracles and oracles, the church was a good site for interpreting questions of social order, meaning, reality constructions and the nature of minority belief systems and religious identity in the modern world (Birckhead in Glazier 1997:48-9). In some communities the handlers challenged the law to imprison them. They were willing to be martyrs for their faith. They were willing to go to jail for their beliefs. In other areas they warned each other when the police were on their way. Serpent handling had been outlawed in all States save West Virginia (Burton 1993:85).

In 1945 at the Shrine of Divine Healing (Lee County, Virginia) two thousand people attended the services for ten weeks. The services were "national snake handling demonstrations" including fire handling. Governor Darden instructed the police to break up the meeting to avoid deaths of the handlers and dangers to the public. The police arrived together with eight state troopers. They tried to stop the meeting by arresting some of the handlers. They also killed four of the eight large snakes. The handlers managed to save four snakes (Kimbrough 1995:136).

At another meeting Anna Kirk took up serpents. Again, the police tried to stop the handling. Anna was bitten. After giving birth to a baby who died within the hour, Anna also died. This time the police arrested Anna's husband and three others for having passed the snake to her. Harvey Kirk was indicted for murder. He was convicted of voluntary manslaughter. The Virginia Supreme Court over-ruled that verdict on a technical issue. Harvey was retried in a circuit court. He admitted to manslaughter and accepted three months in jail (Kimbrough 1995:136-7).

Darden's successor as Governor of Virginia, William Tuck, continued to do battle with the handlers. He ordered that all snakes brought to services must be confiscated and killed. He would allow the handlers to demonstrate the greatness of their faith by allowing them to pray for, and heal the sick. They were allowed to raise the dead and to cast out demons. They were not to handle serpents. By 1947 Virginia outlawed the snake handling practice.

Georgia had outlawed the practice in 1941. Included in the statute was the death penalty should a bitten person die after handling. The state laws were

from drinking poisons. They know that they may not return from a service where handling takes place.

futile as the handlers continued handling their serpents during the services. However, some of the services were held in secret in brush arbours or deserted areas.

Reverend Oddie Shoupe of Cumberland, Kentucky was arrested fifty times and jailed nine times. He continued handling the snakes. It is recorded that Shoupe preached, prayed and sang his hymns in jail until the jailer and the other prisoners could take it no longer. They opened the doors and told him to go, but he refused. The staff and Shoupe compromised. At night the staff would leave the jail door open and Shoupe would go out to preach, sing and pray. He would then return in the morning (Kimbrough 1995:138).

Another meeting held near Harlan, near the border of Kentucky and Virginia, in October 1947 was closely watched by the police from both states. The Kentucky police claimed they were there simply to keep an eye on the traffic. The Virginia police had warrants of arrest for anyone handling snakes on the Virginia side of the border. One World War II veteran was angered and claimed that he had not fought in the war so that he could come home simply to be persecuted for worshipping as he wished to. This meeting had been attended by about three thousand "sinners" (Kimbrough 1995:139).

At this stage Oddie Shoupe told the gathering that he would take his appeal all the way to the Supreme Court in Washington if necessary. He wished to handle snakes on the White House steps. Cindy Mays, Buck Hayes and Gladys Sturgill were also involved in the trials together with Shoupe. However, the Kentucky judge, James Forester, dismissed the charges at the request of the Commonwealth Attorney. Forester felt that if the handlers wish to kill themselves, that was their business (ibid:140).

As soon as the charges against Shoupe were dismissed he took up serpents on the steps of the Harlan County Courthouse. Shoupe was joined by one W.H. Edmunds who also took up serpents. Both men were arrested and fined \$100 each. The police chief warned them that he would never again tolerate snakes being handled on the City streets. The handlers continued to defy the police and the courts. A Baptist minister believed that the courts should repeal the law against the handlers as their being arrested simply created martyrs for their cause (Kimbrough 1995:140-142).

The handlers continued to defy the law. They would not give up their worshipping practices. In 1955 Valentine was handling snakes. Immediately before being bitten he exulted "We have champions in football. We have champions in basketball, but we are champions in the Lord." (Kimbrough 1995:144). This is an absolute affirmation of the strength of their belief.

Valentine was bitten behind his ear and died ten hours later⁵². Preachers from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia delivered eulogies to Valentine. Snakes were handled as part of the funeral service (Kimbrough 1995:146).

At another meeting right on the border between Kentucky and Virginia snakes were handled. As neither state permitted the handling of snakes, police waited on either side of the border. When a member was arrested the preacher declared that the police would not stop them, until they were six feet under. Another member shouted that the police were not there to protect the people, but rather to fight God (ibid:139).

Some judges refused to handle the snake handling trials. Judge Winburn of Louisville, Kentucky did not hesitate to admit that he was terrified of serpents. The police used to bring them into the court rooms as evidence (ibid:149).

Judges appeared to have different interpretations of the constitution regarding religious freedom. In 1967 Attorney Howell Vincent had requested that charges against some handlers be dropped. He maintained that the Kentucky law violated a person's freedom of worship as enshrined in the American Constitution. Judge William O'Neal agreed. He added that the state was also obliged to protect the welfare of its citizens. Eventually this trial was by jury and the handlers were acquitted (Kimbrough 1995:149-150).

Kimbrough states that in recent years the authorities have tended to ignore the handlers unless a death has occurred. State laws banning the handling of snakes stand in conflict with the country's constitution which guarantees religious freedom. The issue then becomes whether such a guarantee applies only to the belief or the practice or both. Mark Brown wrote that the law has nothing to do with them unless there has been an accident. He continues that the police are usually pretty good to them. There may be an odd exception when some officer will harass them (Brown: 2001).

There are also various cases heard in the Court of Appeals, the Tennessee State Supreme Court, etc. A case in point is that of Liston Pack and Alfred Ball of the Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name at Carson Springs, Tennessee. The Cocke County Circuit Court forbade the handling of serpents as tv/o

⁵² Valentine had been a "sinner" and he had lost seven children and still did not convert. When he, as a miner, was caught in a slate fall and the doctors almost gave him up for dead. A holiness preacher, Willie Napier, came to the hospital and prayed for him. Napier warned Valentine that if he had the operation the next day he would die, God had revealed this to him. Valentine refused the operation the next day as he placed his health into God's hands. Valentine was in the operating theatre when it is reported that a mist came down and the doctors and nurses fled from the theatre in fear. According to legend at this stage Valentine's bones snapped back into place and he was healed (Kimbrough 1995:146).

people⁵³ had died from drinking strychnine and another had been bitten by a snake during the previous week during a service. The case was based on common law, not on statutory criminal law. A second petition was filed to the Court. Pack and Ball were held in contempt of court, fined and sentenced. Pack had to pay \$150 and Ball \$100, also Pack was confined to 30 days in jail and Ball to 20 days. The sentences were suspended until any further handling occurred. Four months later the two were jailed for default of payment of the fines. They were banned in perpetuity from handling serpents (Burton 1993:75-8).

The state filed an appeal to the State Supreme Court whilst the defendants appealed to the United States Supreme Court which ruled that it was not necessary to look at the records of the lower courts. It repealed the ban on handling snakes in perpetuity. It stipulated that serpents must be handled in such a manner that the lives and health of persons were not subjected to any danger (ibid:75-6).

The Court experienced difficulties in interpreting and enforcing the First Amendment of the Constitution. By its very nature the religious freedom guaranteed to citizens must include the practice of such beliefs. Without the physical expression any religion is empty. However, the courts felt that the Constitution guaranteed religious freedom, not religious conduct. Hence if necessary such conduct, if detrimental to the general welfare of the society, may be prohibited. Any danger to the public must be substantial to justify any State interference. The State has a duty to protect its citizens to ensure a "healthy, robust, taxpaying citizenry." Hence in certain instances the State is justified in protecting its citizens even from themselves, but the State's interest⁵⁴ must be weighed against that of the individual. Also any measures

⁵³ The two men who died were Buford Pack, brother to Liston Pack pastor of the church, and a former pastor, Jimmy Williams.

⁵⁴ In *Jones v. City of Opelika* the Kentucky Court quoted from the US Supreme Court ruling (62 S.Ct. 1231, 1237, 86L.Ed. 1691). "Courts, no more than Constitutions, can intrude into the consciences of men or compel them to believe contrary to their faith or think contrary to their conviction, but courts are competent to adjudge the acts men do under colour of a constitutional right, such as that of freedom of speech or of the press or the free exercise of religion and to determine whether the claimed right is limited by other recognised powers, equally precious to mankind. So the mind and spirit of man remain forever free, while his actions rest subject to necessary accommodation to the competing needs of his fellows."

Amendment 1 of the United States Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ..." Also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 18 reads 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (Internet:2001).

taken by the State must not be excessive as the scales of justice must be in favour of the free exercise of religion (Burton 1993:77).

The Tennessee State Supreme Court overruled the verdict by declaring that those who handle snakes in the presence of other persons, and, those who aid and abet them, are guilty of creating and maintaining a public nuisance. The Court also forbade the ingestion of any poisons within Tennessee. The Court felt that "this practice is too fraught with danger to permit its pursuit in the frenzied atmosphere of an emotional church service, regardless of age or consent" (Burton 1993:80).

In 1936, the city of Bartow in Florida banned the handling of snakes because Alfred Weaver had died of a bite during a service. In 1940 Kentucky had declared the handling of serpents a criminal offence. In 1941 Georgia did the same and Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina and Alabama followed suite over a period of several years. West Virginia alone did not ban the practice. Kentucky was the only state that linked the handling of serpents directly to church services. Georgia declared that the handler of a serpent biting another person should be sentenced to death (Burton 1993:81).

Whilst the authorities continued to struggle with the religious freedom clause, the handlers, like the apostles, continued worshipping God in their particular way. Some states avoided the issue by simply charging handlers with a public nuisance charge especially as the services were very noisy and frenzied.

Did or do the handlers need to be protected from themselves? There is a clash between the "public nuisance" perception and the needs of the handlers. However, as most snake handling churches are situated in forsaken areas, away from the hustle and bustle of the villages and towns one wonders how the noise offends the outsiders, unless they have specially come to observe the proceedings.

CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Summary

Daugherty, Covington and Kimbrough are descendants of the Appalachian mountain people. They understand the language and symbols used by the handlers. They understand the poverty, harshness and dangers of their lives. They understand the need experienced by the handlers to belong.

They also stress that the modern handlers are better educated, dress better and they are financially more secure. Today they own modern appliances and new motor cars. They work in the towns and cities and draw regular salaries. Even though they are more learned today, many of the older people are still not able to read. In spite of their mixing freely with the general public in the cities and towns they have, as yet, not modified their views on the handling of snakes. They still drink poisons, expose their bodies to fires and they still handle snakes (Daugherty in Marty 1993:168). Burton wrote me that many, even most, are still living within limited financial restrictions.

All fundamentalists, be they established churches, sects or cults, be they Jewish, Christian or Islamic tend to rely on their exclusiveness for controlling their members and to ensure survival. Such control is usually enforced rigidly. The handler groups are no exception. They function in small autonomous groups without an overriding authority. Children, as in all strongly religious communities, are indoctrinated from an early age. Peer pressure is so strong that members feel obliged to adhere to the local customs.

Researchers report that those who settled in the Appalachian Mountains were fiercely independent people. They did not shy away from work and were largely self-sufficient. They did not simply sit back and expect the world to support them, instead they tackled it head-on. However, without the necessary funds they were not able to walk out of the poverty trap. Some had even inherited debts incurred by their parents. Others, because of their illiteracy, had been tricked by the industrialists and mining magnates into signing away their land. Those who joined the mines lived in houses provided by the mines and they had to shop at the mining stores. Here they had run up huge debts. Their salaries were simply funnelled back into the mining concerns (Kimbrough 1995:87). The poverty was a noose around their necks. They only had themselves, their self-respect and dreams.

There is no doubt that the handlers are honest and sincere believers. The practice of their faith is of paramount importance. They are well aware that many "normal" people believe them to be bizarre. It is their faith that has enabled them to survive the hardships of mountain life, the exploitation by industrialists and the rejection and abuse hurled at them by the society around them. In desperation they turned to God or to Jesus.

Because the handlers are an exclusive group they do not accept leadership from outside churches. Tess Walters of Blackmont, Kentucky stated that the handlers did not want organised churches as this would pass control of the church from God to a central organisation. They wanted each church to be sensitive to its members needs, to be contextual (Kimbrough 1995:194).

Burton wrote

"Since each person is viewed as responsible for his or her own interpretation according to one's own light, there is a wide variety and fluidity of explications of scriptural texts" (Burton 1993:10).

Not only does each believer determine his/her own interpretation but each church sets its own procedures and policies. The common ritual is that of using snakes during a service. Great diplomacy would be required to encourage every individual member and every group to give up their own ideas and practises in order to unite into one uniform group with a uniform tradition.

Even the snake's role is not clearly defined. Mark Brown writes that the snake is simply a snake, no more and no less. He does not perceive it to be the devil incarnate. He adds that why did God command Moses to raise a brazen serpent in the desert to heal the children of Israel. The snake was there to heal and could not have been the devil (Brown 2001)). Dewey Chafin, who has been bitten more than 100 times, believes the serpent is the embodiment of the devil. He believes that every bite is a victory for the devil (Burton 1993:31).

Whilst the handlers up to now have depended on their memories and traditions they believe that the Holy Spirit inspires them when they preach. The Spirit puts words into their mouths. More education and a study of the bible may create problems when they become aware of the many contradictions in the book. Though the bible text of Mark 16 is spurious, the handlers will not accept this.

The handlers have a good knowledge of the bible. Much of it depends on memory. Obviously some portions will enjoy more significance than others parts and will be quoted more frequently. It can be assumed that the handlers have made no comparative study of every differences in the reporting of various Christ events in the gospels. They are blissfully unaware, or unwilling to accept, any discrepancies. Any variances, once accepted, may create

tremendous tensions within the community and may fragment it. Certainty and security for the community lies in their blind faith and acceptance of biblical inerrancy. They may resort to the common theory that discrepancies occur due to reports referring to different similar events and occasions such as one hears over the radio.

On the other hand even highly educated people, belonging to the traditional churches, still blindly accept whatever the church teaches and the inerrancy of the bible. Instead of challenging their own feelings of insecurity, when making decisions about biblical interpretations, they are happy to leave this to others. They simply avoid responsibility by allowing others to take responsibility for certain concepts regarding heaven or hell, life after death, a life that lasts for ever. It is not advisable to take chances with the unknown.

It would seem that the handlers had figuratively built a wall around themselves, shutting out as much outside influence as possible and perpetuating their insular culture. As long as the charismatic and cohesive power of the leaders remains unchallenged there is little chance that there will be any change in their religious practices. Burton does say that secularism and materialism has effected the handlers' dress, recreation, life styles, etc. He speculates that this may eventually lead to a more liberal Church of God (Burton 2001). However, any change within the church must come from the members themselves.

The gift of healing is integral to the Pentecostal churches. Jesus laid hands on the sick and they were healed. He promised his disciples that they too could heal the sick if they had faith. Healing is inclusive in that the sick mind and the sick body can be healed. There is absolutely no evidence that there is any trickery or fraud involved in the serpent handlers' power to heal. Evil spirits must be exorcised through prayer. They rely on God's healing powers and the prayers of their fellow Christians. They also accept that God will not always heal the sick. They know that the "Lord giveth and the Lord taketh". When the Lord decides to call one home, the person will die. It is the Lord's will.

Death is no real threat to the handlers. They are not afraid of dying. Nobody dies unless it is God's will. Nobody dies before his time. Their faith is such that they are assured of eternal life. They have been totally obedient and judgement day is not a terrifying event.

If living in obedience to the Word and believing that God's will be done, then the handlers may be called fatalists. The handling of serpents and the drinking of poisons may be fatal. They are well aware of this. With a few exceptions⁵⁵,

⁵⁵ The mass media have given the handlers much publicity. This has usually been very sensational. Among the handlers are those who will respond to the TV cameras and will "show off". This is an ego problem, a problem of pride. Liston Pack admits that he saw a lot of phoney shouting before the mike and

they do not take up snakes without the anointing by the Spirit. It is not a careless attitude. They have not been promised eternal salvation if they handle serpents. Eternal life will be awarded only if they have obeyed God's laws and have lived a good life.

Sometimes the poor submit to a sense of fatalism. It was ordained that they should be poor, should suffer on earth to enable them to obtain eternal life, etc. This is a type of compensatory situation, a type of justification for their poverty or lack of success in the great big world. Hensley managed to convince many in his audiences that when they took up serpents, God would anoint them with the Spirit and give them knowledge and power over evil. Hensley, a very charismatic person, provided a role model and in terms of Sunden's theory this also sanctified the text. The communities where Hensley preached knew the Scriptures and handling the serpents during the services added a tangible aspect to their faith. They could overcome their fear of death and of the serpents. La Barre linked the snake handling practice to the ancient Hebrews, specifically to Moses.

Death is the entry to eternal life, the victory over non-existence. The handlers' firmly believe that they have been promised eternal life in heaven because of their faith in Jesus. It is the victory of good over evil. It is a transcendence over all that is negative. The handlers know that every time they take up serpents they may be bitten and may die. Under the anointing they face death in faith and believe that if it is the Lord's will they will be bitten and will die, otherwise they will recover as testimony to God's mercy. Through the bleakest hours, when death due to snake bite, has taken a beloved member, their faith remains unwavering. They handle snakes in obedience to Jesus' command.

Snake handlers do not revere the serpents but they believe that when handling the snakes they are manifesting God's power over the devil. Mark Brown disagrees with this interpretation as he states that a snake is simply a snake. He writes, I quote verbatim,

"there seems to be a false perception by a lot of people (especially in Christianity) that the serpent was the devil (or Satan), but the bible says the serpent was the most subtle creature on the earth and walked upright as a man, the serpent deceived eve into eating the forbidden fruit and god cursed him to crawl upon his belly and lick the dust of the earth. also he put an enmity between the serpent and man.....I guess that is why people hate snakes so much. the serpent is a snake and that's all. it is not an image of the devil nor does it have a demon spirit. the lord rained fiery serpents upon the children of

camera at the Carson Springs homecoming service. It can also lead to carelessness when handling the serpents, or the handling without the anointing (Burton 1993:175).

Israel or disobedience, but the lord to Moses to make a brazen image of a serpent and hold it up. whoever looked upon the serpent would be saved.....if the serpent was a sign of evil why would god use it as a symbol of healing???

(Brown 2001).

This difference in interpretation of the role of the serpent highlights the problem that researchers experience. Every church and every group is autonomous and enforces its own "theology". Not every church allows reporters and photographers into their services. The result is that research is conducted within the same small groups or churches with the same handlers whilst other handlers are never interviewed. This gives a certain bias to all research material. The spokesmen for these groups are also usually the same.

While I have quoted him extensively, as far as I know Mark Brown has not been quoted in other research papers. His views may not be representative of most snake handlers' beliefs. Burton experienced problems in establishing facts. Different people told him different versions of the same event. There are no written records. There is no formulated "theology". There are no definite church rules concerning services or biblical interpretations. One is dealing with a very loosely determined "theology".

Rattlesnakes have been declared an endangered species. The handlers, so far, have not been willing to buy snakes bred in zoos or homes, etc. They believe that they must catch the snakes in the wild. The law is not interested in the need for snakes for religious purposes. Snakes may not be caught, they are an endangered species and are protected. A congregation in Fort Wayne has been in trouble with the law over their use of endangered snakes. Ecological issues and animal rights are very emotive topics and many ordinary people are involved. This could mean many more problems for the handlers. One hopes that the handlers will be spared such demonstrations by the public who already dislike the handler practices.

Every handler has witnessed snakes striking their fellow believers. They have seen the permanent damage done by a bite. Many have lost family or friends to the deadly fangs of the vipers. Most preachers will, at the beginning of a service, remind their congregation that the snakes will bite. They should not handle any serpents unless they have not received the anointing. The handling of serpents is not a test of faith. It is not a challenge to God to protect them in return for their obedience. It always is simply an act of obedience, an affirmation of belief in the biblical injunction to handle the serpents.

Society and traditional institutions, including Christian churches, do not take kindly to groups of people who live outside the parameters of their perceived acceptable behaviour. It is very difficult for most people to be their own persons. People tend to be that which others expect them to be. Many believe

this is the only way to be one of the crowd, to belong and to be accepted. The handlers do not conform to this image.

Gerrard, a sociologist, worked with the handlers and he believed that the handlers' worship was linked to feelings of inferiority which result in feelings of guilt and low self-esteem. Guilt was sin and this could be overcome by extreme acts of religiosity such as handling serpents. This lifted the pressures of guilt, low self-esteem and natural disasters. Their perceived spiritual superiority as opposed to the materialism of the established churches and successful people enabled them to cope with their poverty (Burton 1993:128).

From a religious perspective are the handlers tempting or challenging God? If they are bitten is it God's responsibility and is the consequent healing his promise? Covington posited that religion and madness are only a hair's breadth apart, that Christianity without passion, danger and mystery is probably not Christianity at all (Covington 1995:177). The snake handlers do not lack such passion and hence he feels that they are the true believers. Yet Covington does not want to take up snakes again. Nor does he wish to be involved with the handlers because he finds it hard to reconcile the death of a handler by snake bite whilst obeying Jesus' command. He has a problem being a witness to suicide, especially his own. (ibid:238).

Williamson and Pollio try to interpret the psychodynamics of serpent handling in religious rituals as seen from the handler's point of view. They affirm the fact that the handlers are very aware of the life/death situation inherent in the handling. They are, nevertheless, happy to take up serpents as an act of obedience and as a sign of victory of life over death, they look death squarely in the face. God's power allows them to witness to the unbelievers. The handling occurs in a sacred place during sacred time and by sacred people. God has sanctioned them as true believers and distinguishes between them and the rest of the world. The handlers are well aware that unbelievers may also handle serpents successfully but that "is no big thing" without the anointment. Also those that handle serpents without the anointing are not empowered with special knowledge or understanding. This knowledge allows them to know themselves⁵⁶, to know that they are worthy people, and to change their way of life into the good life. The knowledge of understanding encouraged the comprehension of the truth as revealed in the real way of life. And naturally the handlers received "unspeakable joy" when experiencing God. This joy transcends any joy found in the world (Williams and Pollio 1999:203-218). The

⁵⁶ In a sermon a preacher said "Let me express something to you tonight. God never took the time to make a nobody ... you are somebody" (Williams and Pollio 1999:212).

handling of serpents and partaking in the services is almost like a drug addiction, one can never get enough of the spirit.

Serpent handlers disclaim any psychoanalytic attempts to link their taking up of serpents with phallic symbolism and repressed desires and motives. They are adamant that they are not acting out any unconscious sexual repressions. At a very basic level taking up serpents is simply an imperative, an act of obedience.

It is interesting to note that in the beginning of the movement a snake bite was seen to be punishment for lack of faith. This is now interpreted to be an act of God. God sanctioned the bite and will either heal the victim or will call him to heaven. This appears to be a rationalisation to justify the handling of serpents and even the death of a victim.

The Rev. Alfred Ball⁵⁷ stated

"They are not to test the faith of the person doing it. They're not to test whether he's a good person. Its simply to confirm the word of God. That's all God intended signs for, and the only reason we do them" (Pelton & Carden 1974:22 in Hood 1988:89).

Hood applies the psychoanalytic theory and states that the literalness of a text when practised is the return of the repressed; what is preached is practised and what is repressed is acted out. Yet serpent handling remains an isolated pocket of religious practice and so far has not spread beyond the Appalachian areas. There are small congregations in cities where the resettled handlers have set up churches.

Birckhead criticises Covington for being insensitive to the handlers and doing them harm. Yet Covington essentially details how he came from Appalachian stock and how he felt drawn to the people. He started his journey into snake handling because he, as a journalist, had been assigned to cover the trial of Buford Summerford.⁵⁸

Covington reports his experiences honestly without covering up any of his own feelings and thoughts. Only he relates how the handlers seem to have honed

⁵⁷ Birckhead who worked mainly with Alfred Ball in correspondence to me (January 2001) wrote that Alfred Ball no longer takes up serpents. He states "Alfred Ball ceased to take up serpents not so much for biblical reasons, but as a result of the intense media representation of the religion. In viewing and reviewing video tapes of the practice, he found contradictions and inconsistencies, and also realised that the 'sign' was not effective in the modern world, and that most media stories treated the religion as exotic and bizarre, rather than present it as a serious option. He says he would still take up serpents if God asked him to, but this is not likely to happen."

⁵⁸ Summerford had tried to murder his wife by forcing her at gun point to put her hand into the snake box.

their intuitive faculties to a fine art. So often the handlers tell him that they knew that this or that would happen. This too is not unusual in people who feel that they always have to defend themselves from the outside world. They become very observant. This is a defence mechanism in an attempt to correctly anticipate what the adversaries are going to do.

Covington travelled thousands of miles attending the various churches; especially their homecoming services. He made firm friends with some of the handlers and got on extremely well with others. He took an active part in the services but did not rush into any "following of signs" experiences in the churches. He waited until he felt the anointing before handling any serpents. At one stage he had even thought of actually joining the group and of travelling around the country to spread the Word. However, his strong objection to Carl Porter's and Punkin Brown's censure of Melissa ended his intimate relationship with the handlers. Mark Brown does not accept Covington's sincerity. He feels that Covington deliberately ingratiated himself with the handlers to get a story and money by writing a book on the handlers.

4.2 Conclusions

Burton writes that secularisation and materialism has already affected dress, life styles, recreation, etc. He feels that the handling churches will become more liberal due to these influences (Burton 2001). To remain relevant and contextual the church has to move with the times. It is impossible to shut out all outside influences.

Crapps highlights that many snake handlers in the Greenville church are under twenty five years. Their upbringing has justified and reinforced their perception of their religious practices. They are part of the group and enjoy full acceptance. These young people have lived with parents who have defied the authorities and have gone to jail or paid fines for the sake of their beliefs. It is feasible to believe that that these young folk will continue their tradition and will ensure the survival of the church (Crapps 1977:50). However, the influence of outside forces such as peers, modern entertainment and the ability to travel outside of the narrow confines of the group may create a powerful pull away from the church.

Very few people in the world around us, are their own persons in that they have been trained, since early childhood, to be what the family, the school, the church, and or society expect them to be. They behave and live according to societal norms. In the contemporary situation many young people in their early

adulthood do rebel against behavioural impositions forced onto them. However, when they mature they settle down "nicely".

The handling of snakes could possibly be seen as a rebellious action, as an act of defiance against those that see them as inferior people. It is like thumbing their noses at the rest of society for they have God, they are God's saints and the others are the sinners. Their special emblem, the serpent, proves that they belong to God.

The handlers are neither odd nor self-destructive. Their serpent handling ritual is out of the ordinary. The media have taken advantage of this fact and have sensationalised the issue. Journalists have publicised the ritual. The handlers have had an excess of media attention especially when there has been an accident. Journalists have often spread an inaccurate image of the handlers. Some handlers have reacted to the cameras in the hope of drawing attention to themselves. The news media have deliberately avoided reporting positive aspects of the handlers such as the strength of their faith, their often successful praying for healing, the support they give each other, etc. The positive issues are not sensational and do not help sell the papers.

Serpent handlers may not be economically strong, but they are spiritually very powerful and enjoy an abundance of the Spirit. Their sermons and behaviour is a message of defiance to their neighbours. Many handlers have improved their economic and educational statuses, many are wealthy. Many live in towns and cities and no longer struggle within the poverty trap.

During the last fifty years the socio-economic conditions of the handlers has improved. The handlers have left the harsh mountain environment and have found jobs in towns where they are bound by predetermined hours and days of employment. They earn regular salaries. The children attend regular schools and some go on to higher education. Life is no longer a constant round of work and church. Family ties cannot always be maintained due to vast distances and the new contextual circumstances in which they live. Sooner or later the handlers will be exposed to the call of secularisation and materialism.

The poverty and perceived degeneration of the hill people, their fanaticism, danger, sex and death attitudes effected the handling and the loathing that the public evinced. The world approves of conformists such as people who conform to religious, social, economic norms and to rituals and rites. Normality is determined by the majority in the group. For many people being a conformist smoothes out many of life's rough experiences. The handlers are conformists within their own group. They are decidedly non-conformist at the religious level, yet they have the courage of their convictions. To them the disapproval of society at large is simply the price that has to be paid for being a saint.

How harmful is snake handling to the handlers themselves or to the public at large and what are the ethical issues? This is a tricky question. The handlers are well aware of the dangers involved. Ministers, such as Liston Pack, make a point of warning everybody before they take up serpents to remember that the snakes may bite them. In the same way as the American courts uphold claims against cigarette manufacturers for deaths due to smoking, so the person who brings the snake may be seen to be guilty of manslaughter or murder. Not every snake bites its handler and then no "crime" has been committed. If the victim brought the snake to the service is he really guilty of committing suicide or murder?

The courts, as mentioned previously, indicted Harvey Kirk for murder. He was convicted of voluntary manslaughter. The issue is compounded by the fact that the snake handling is a religious ritual. Under the American constitution the State may not interfere with religious beliefs. On the other hand the State must also ensure the welfare of its citizens. In the Jonestown case the State did not interfere, and every member was either killed or committed suicide. In the Wacko case the State interfered and most of the cult members were killed by fire. People have died from snake bites or from the poison they ingested. The State views this as suicide or manslaughter whilst the handlers perceive it to be either God's work. Both the handlers and the State believe that their attitude is right.

When Hensley died the coroner registered death by suicide. Are mountain climbers or racing drivers any less responsible for their "suicides" if they have fatal accidents? Fatal accidents are not usually classified as suicide. Similarly, does the person who brought the snake bear responsibility for the suicide of another member or is he even guilty of murder. Children are not permitted to handle the serpents. Yet at home the snakes are stored in snake boxes which may stand in the kitchen or in any other room. Anna Prince tells how the snake boxes were stored under her and her brother's beds.

At the objective level I can accept this type of worship, but subjectively I feel that the snake is simply used as a crutch. It highlights the need that many people experience, they need something to focus their attention on the Holy. In the Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church icons are used and many other churches use the cross. As far as I know the serpent is the only *live* "crutch". To prove its viability as a crutch it must be biblically sanctioned, dangerous and life threatening. Sub-consciously this may be a challenge to God, but it certainly is a challenge to the handler. His faith stands under scrutiny by the public including his congregation. Because the snake is alive it can react of its own free will. Snake behaviour is totally unpredictable and this adds to the danger inherent in handling it.

Not much mention is made of the snakes that die when handled. Kimbrough states that he has seen many rattlers die in the hands of the believer. The handlers claim that they are so anointed that the power within them kills the snake (Kimbrough 1995 29). As the rattle snakes are now protected reptiles the reaction from the public may be more violent than anticipated.

Kimbrough states that by 1900 the Baptists in eastern Kentucky had changed their sermons from the unrehearsed emotionally charged ones to more intellectual ones. Similarly the Methodists had moved away from the old Wesleyan enthusiasm towards the more sober forms of middle-class Protestantism. Also the Home Mission personnel had visited the Appalachian people hoping to help these "unchurched" or irreligious people to adapt to the changes that industrialisation had brought with it. They had hoped to assimilate the mountain people into one homogeneous Christian nation (Kimbrough 1995:75-6). It may be assumed that a better educated congregation will demand a more challenging and intellectual service. The emotional aspect may have to be modified as people will find emotional stimulation outside of the church and each other.

The future obviously involves some sort of change. People are usually scared of change. They cling to that which is familiar, to that which gives them hope for now and the future. This gives them a sense of security. People bond together to withstand foreign influences. This holds true for religion, politics, social situations, etc. The handlers are extremely suspicious of any outsiders. They have been subjected to highly sensational and inaccurate reports and are very sensitive to such criticism. They are very sincere in their religious practice and do believe that they are "within the Word". They are the "Saints". Modern media, modern dress, modern entertainment and modern sports will take its toll. Cracks will appear in the protective structure of the handlers and the authority of the ministers and congregations will be diluted and outside influences will become stronger.

The snake handlers have coped extremely well with the adjustments required to live in the towns and villages where they work. Psychologists and researchers are adamant that that they are very well adjusted people. They are able to cope with problems such as illness, death, old age and their elders much better than other people in their area. It is possible that people who through circumstances have been forced to be self-sufficient, have had to face up to economic and social problems, to illness and death. It is part of life and through their incredible faith they accept adverse conditions because God has sent them.

Should their belief be taken from the handlers, they would be like a lost people wandering aimlessly through the wasteland. Perpetuation of the snake handling

rituals will depend on its resistance to theological and secular education. Pioneers practised "sibling exchange marriages". The handlers were so excluded from society that it was difficult to find spouses for the children (Kimbrough 1995:201). However, as the younger people mix with outsiders marriages may well occur from outside of the handler community. In some instances husbands/wives may join the handlers, in other instances the brides/grooms may join another church or they may leave the church altogether. There will be an infusion of new blood, new people and new ideas. The continued existence of the serpent handling community lies in the hands of the younger generation. Another important factor is the need for the younger people to come back to experience the anointing, the emotional highs and the absolute joy of the mystic unity with Jesus.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the handlers' unity will come from the community itself when they learn to accept the outside world at the secular level. When they accept that people are not either "saints" or "sinners", when they understand that even non-believers can be good people or "saints". Another major stumbling block will be the enormous attraction of worldly entertainment such as TV, dancing, sports, etc. The young people will sooner or later wish to use jewellery, lipstick, make-up. They will want to cut, curl, dye and perm their hair and will wish to wear clothes like their peers do. The young folk will want to go out on dates, will hold hands and will kiss⁵⁹. Satan, the tempter will emerge a powerful and dreadful enemy. Burton writes that this has already occurred in some congregations (Burton 2001).

⁵⁹ Among the handlers kissing before marriage is limited to the "holy kiss" as determined by St. Paul - when greeting, men kiss men, and women kiss women.

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