

Survival Through Sacrifice: The Persistence of Serpent-Handling and the Willful Rejection of
Autonomy

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Snakes and serpents have several features that are used for both their protection and survival—venom, fangs, and rattles on the tip of their tails to name a few. With this in mind, what can be said about a people that, in their acknowledgement of these qualities, choose to take up and handle serpents as a sign and proclamation of their faith and devotion to God? *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*, written by Dennis Covington, is a memoir about the immersion of an outsider into the religious worships of a serpent-handling community located in rural Appalachia. The structure of the memoir is deeply reflective of Covington's rapid entrancement with the handlers and their religion. While initially researching Glenn Summerford—a pastor who attempted to murder his wife by holding her at gunpoint and forcing her hand into a box of rattlesnakes, resulting in two bites—the story of the trial is abandoned as Covington decides that he needs to partake in the worship services himself. This is part of what makes the memoir so alluring for readers—Covington is fulfilling the innate human drive to belong. His desire to engage and be a part of exclusive and private practices adds to the appeal of his narrative. The memoir is an example of a common popular media representation of serpent-handling sects that serves to reinforce stereotypes of primitiveness and resistance to modernity. This paper examines the representation of serpent-handling in *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, exploring how the condemnation of the practice paradoxically assists in its survival, demonstrating that the surrendering of autonomy can sustain both faith and community.

Covington originally intended for *Salvation on Sand Mountain* to focus on the murder trial of Pastor Glenn Summerford of Scottsboro, Alabama and its connections to the Church of Jesus with Signs Following.¹ His position as a journalist among a private community quickly dissipated as he became enthralled with the religion and its practitioners. Eventually, Covington

¹ Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2009).

felt called upon to practice serpent-handling alongside the congregations in Sand Mountain. He describes this urge as being one of kinship with the other handlers, in being “a poor Southern snake boy with an addiction to danger and a thirst for ecstatic religious experience.”² This particular quote encapsulates all of the characterizations Covington reiterates throughout his memoir. He enforces these stereotypes onto members of Holiness-Pentecostal churches (particularly serpent-handlers). Having started his research through the investigation of a murder trial does not go unnoticed as Covington continues to see the practitioners and members of the congregation as belonging to a group of deviant “others.” His memoir perpetuates the narrative of condemnation (a reductive portrayal) that views the members of the community as impoverished adrenaline-junkies in constant need of sensational and dangerous religious practices. The structure of serpent-handling is deeply rooted in both societal and theological realms that can be more thoughtfully embraced, by non-participants, when its historical origins are recognized.

The Church of Jesus with Signs Following falls under a specific Holiness-Pentecostal denomination that was officiated in 1907 after the Second National Assembly of the holiness congregations in Bradley County, Tennessee under the leadership of Ambrose Jessup Tomlinson.³ This denomination, The Church of God, is not to be considered as directly originating from the National Holiness Movement as it formed in complete isolation of it.⁴ Serpent-handling sects are considered to be subsets of these Pentecostal movements.⁵ With the

² Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 2009, *afterword*.

³ Robert F. Martin, "Tomlinson, Ambrose Jessup," Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/tomlinson-ambrose-jessup>. Note: The first General Assembly was held in the prior year (1906). While this first assembly was not looking to create a new denomination or sect, the second assembly inevitably did.

⁴ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), p.80.

⁵ Robyn Cossitt, "Regarding the Rites of Others: An Analysis of Responses to the Serpent-Handling Sects" (Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2021).

exclusive nature of the Church of God's emergence, belief in apocalyptic narratives are strongly held within the church's foundation. Members have a strong sense of loyalty to the ideology that they were a part of the 'true' church of God. A church that is in preparation of the Second Coming with the presumed responsibility that they must 'save' outsiders by bringing them into the religion.⁶ Exclusionism is then forged within the community; members do not believe that outsiders can be saved if they do not join the 'true' church. The Spirit/ Holy Ghost is also an integral part of this denomination through rituals of revivalism and enthusiastic preaching.⁷ Speaking in tongues—an essential aspect of revivals and preaching through the Holy Ghost—is carried into the practice of serpent-handling observed by Covington on Sand Mountain. It is a peak emotional state that occurs under the specific atmosphere harnessed by the congregation.

Serpent-handling in conjunction with glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and The Church of God denomination would come into practice in 1909 by the Church of God preacher, George Went Hensley. Hensley took a literalist approach to "Mark 16," particularly when it came to the "signs following:" handling serpents, drinking poison, healing purely by the hands of the anointed, and speaking in tongues.⁸ All of the signs are undoubtedly connected to the sacrifice of corporeal agency. In performing an act that poses the risk of ending one's life, that pushes the boundaries of vitality, serpent-handlers relinquish control over to their faith (and by part, their community). It is within the perfectly curated conditions of the church that one loses their ability

⁶ *Ibid.* Note: An interesting example from the book—"Buying life insurance was frowned upon as an indication of lack of faith in God," this is demonstrative of how far members measure their loyalty to God.

⁷ *Ibid.* Note: Revivals consist of speaking in tongues, entire sanctification (when one is able to leave rebellion or sin behind), and the New Birth (a moral and spiritual change).

⁸ Mark 16:17-20 (KJV): 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. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen; W. Paul Williamson and Howard R. Pollio, "The Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling: A Rationale and Thematic Study of Extemporaneous Sermons," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 (June 1999): 203–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1387790>, p.209-13. Note: Being moved refers to anointment or being taken over by the Holy Ghost.

to function as an autonomous agent. The minds, and therefore the bodies, of serpent-handlers are overtaken and guided by the Holy Ghost. Covington grounds his memoir in his questions surrounding the enactment of the signs and the state of being “under [the] anointing of the Holy Ghost.”⁹ The sermons Covington was exposed to emphasized the necessity of repentance for salvation. One particular sermon by Charles McGlocklin, an End-Time Evangelist, provided a testimony of how God commands that (he) one must “get [their] house in order,” as their time with God is limited—they are expecting to be left behind if they do not entirely subscribe to the faith of the church.¹⁰ The threat of physical abandonment pervades McGlocklin’s sermon. Testimonies are a powerful element of serpent-handling sects, those who preach utilize their personal encounters with God as a way of validating and explaining their actions. McGlocklin, for example, took the phrase “set your house in order” to mean that he should get rid of his marijuana and alcohol which would eventually lead to his ability to handle serpents.¹¹ In this service Covington also witnesses (and hears glossolalia) from Charles’s wife, Aline McGlocklin. He describes her sounds to be of ecstasy and adds that he would later find out that they were also sounds of pain. Covington is so enraptured by this experience that he admits to having a hard time sitting through church services when he returns home without wanting to physically demonstrate and express his passion. Covington has been left with sentiments of longing for the intimacy and mesmerizing quality of the serpent-handling community of Sand Mountain. Having given up his body once, he can no longer take it back.

Intimacy—as in being in an emotionally transcendent state—that is held within serpent-handling services can be categorized into two sections: individual and communal. Anointment connects these two levels of intimacy. The Holy Ghost guides individuals while also

⁹ Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 2009, *afterword*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

providing them with divine protection during their handling. It is seen as an entirely corporeal experience; the Holy Ghost itself is not visible as a physical entity. Practitioners, and those sitting in the pews, manifest the Holy Ghost from the intensity of their belief. To reach the state of anointment, a concentration of believers in a closed setting is required—this is why serpent-handling only occurs during worship services. This genuine and overwhelming demonstration of faith cannot happen without the consistency of the congregation's surrender of their minds and bodies. The presence of religious enthusiasts in the church as well as the charismatic preachers work together to promote a corporeal representation of the Holy Ghost and the signs listed in "Mark 16" through individual members.¹² Possession of the Holy Ghost gives way to a cyclical form of evidence for holiness people—(1) The belief of anointment is strong, (2) Mass gatherings make for an adequate atmosphere, (3) Handling occurs, ultimately reaffirming their literalist interpretation of the Bible and identity as Holiness people. Serpent-handling sects have faced persecution for their radical beliefs that has in turn strengthened this cycle and their reclusive existence.

According to Howard Dorgan in "Appalachian Regional Identity in National Media," the intrusion of eastern missionaries in the early half of the nineteenth century resulted in a severe distrust of outsiders because they deemed Appalachian religion as needing to be "re-Christianized."¹³ As serpent-handling congregations refuse to change or adapt, they become perceived as primitive and old-timey, forcing them into a frame that is detached from the more "modern" or integrated denominations. Outsiders are unable to see them as a sect existing in

¹² Notes: Being a part of a serpent-handling sect requires believers to read Scripture as the infallible Word of God—inerrancy of the Bible in other words. Modern, evolved, or adapted interpretations of Scripture would directly contradict the reading and authority that a member of the serpent-handling congregation subscribes to. Forgoing this literal hermeneutic automatically prevents a person from being able to fully comprehend and immerse themselves in the church.

¹³ Howard Dorgan, "Appalachian Regional Identity in National Media," essay, in *Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture*, ed. Claire H. Badaracco (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005), 181–91, p.183.

contemporary society—not only are they boxed into a label of the “past ways,” the location of their churches perpetuates this stereotype. Serpent-handling churches are not only located in rural areas away from cities, they are also in places that are difficult to get to. Hidden locations are the effect of negative interactions with missionaries and outsiders. Seclusion is a defense against infiltration for the purpose of scolding or “fixing” their faith. Thus, notions of radicalism become ingrained into the identity of serpent-handling congregations; their practice is stationary to their home region therefore, it becomes a place to be protected from the eyes and judgement of outsiders through the continuation of faith. Making and maintaining space through the gathering of bodies is crucial to their incessant status. The condemnation faced by serpent-handlers reached far beyond the actions of the practitioners; the appearance of the region itself is also harshly criticized. Having been stripped of natural resources (such as coal), the area has generally lost economic value and therefore, purpose. With nothing to “offer,” these places are left behind and forced to fend for themselves leading to another misconception of why serpent-handling is practiced.

Serpent-handling is constantly depicted as a tool (or an adaptation) stemming from moral and/or ethical faults of its practitioners in an attempt to analogize the physicality of the region with the practice itself.¹⁴ If the land appears to be downtrodden and “backwards,” what does that say about the people who live on it? Here, another self-reinforcing cycle occurs. (1) Serpent-handlers’s faith is chastised and condemned, (2) Missionaries attempt to re-Christianize, (3) Location of worship is sequestered, (4) Isolation leads to exclusionist beliefs, (5) Outsiders

¹⁴ See sources: W. Paul Williamson and Howard R. Pollio, “The Phenomenology of Religious Serpent Handling: A Rationale and Thematic Study of Extemporaneous Sermons,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 (1999): 203–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1387790>; Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, “The Appalachian ‘Other’: Academic Approaches to the Study of Serpent-handling Sects,” *Religion Compass* 10, no. 3 (December 31, 2016): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12193>; Dorgan, “Appalachian Regional Identity in National Media,” 181–91; Mary Lee Daugherty, “Serpent-Handling as Sacrament,” *Theology Today* 33, no. 3 (October 1976): 232–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057367603300303>.

are tempted to witness the private services. When outsiders enter the environment of serpent-handlers (rural Appalachia), they are not met with lavish and pristine infrastructures leading to conclusions of causation and correlation. Being from the south, Covington mentions this in his memoir; there are indeed discrepancies between “the South of the popular imagination and the one [they] lived and worked in every day.”¹⁵ He uses words that he has found to be ascribed to the popular image of the South, “idiosyncratic, lazy, restless, and self-absorbed,” all negative attributes.¹⁶ After sitting through a sermon or serpent-handling service, one might attempt to make sense of their extreme practices with just the context of what they have borne witness to. Seeing the land in the state that it is in along with the risky handling of serpents and drinking of poison, negative associations and explanations begin to form.

Covington engages an analogy for religion’s relationship with people coined by Karl Marx; *die religion ist das opium des volkes*, religion is the opium of the people. Essentially, Covington is supporting the notion that serpent-handling, and its faith, operates in a way that provides a numbing comfort (the forgoing of individual autonomy) that inevitably fosters cohesion and endurance. The analogy is so deeply ingrained into popular depictions of rural Appalachian Christian practices that it is implemented in his memoir not only on a metaphorical level, but also on a structural level. The memoir follows the structure of what can be understood as the process of addiction and recovery. Covington gets a brief taste of the religion through his journalistic research on Glenn Summerford and decides he should fully immerse himself into the serpent-handling practice. When he temporarily leaves the region, he finds that he is left unfulfilled by the services of his hometown, so he returns to the handlers. Covington eventually handles snakes and preaches at services—he even receives the title “Brother Dennis.”¹⁷ At the

¹⁵ Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 2009, p.88.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

end of his trip (used in both a figurative and literal sense of the word), Covington preaches to the congregation and makes an argument for women to have authority in the church—a settled topic of the denomination (women are not to hold roles of authority in the church). This signals the end of it all; his instantaneous departure from the church is parallel to quitting a drug “cold turkey.” Covington does not return (at least as stated in his book) after this service—he has indulged himself to a satisfactory extent. Not only does Covington negatively dramatize the members of the church and their beliefs, he also concludes that “it’s suicide to stay [in the church of the handlers]” and that Carl Porter (Brother Carl) “knew what he was doing in releasing [Covington] back to the wider world,” essentially cementing the narrative that serpent-handlers are unrefined, destructive, and thereby absurd.¹⁸

The memoir leaves audiences with the impression that serpent-handling sects are harmful and fatal for their members ignoring the fact that these sects have survived and persisted against attempts of “re-Christianization,” vitality and persistence are fundamental qualities of the religion and its community. The need to analogize serpent-handling in a negative way comes from the discomfort and disparaging attitudes about man's lack of agency within society. Arguments about our individuality struggle to stand against the possibility that humans are not autonomous beings. Serpent-handling greatly exemplifies this method of survival because of the refusal to “dilute” or compromise their faith when reading the Bible (the faith is rooted in its literal reading of Mark 16).¹⁹ The practice and faith are imagined to be (and are, in a sense) detached from contemporary society; it becomes easier to pinpoint how individuals sacrifice jurisdiction of their bodies as they are operating in a smaller and more concentrated setting. The preservation of their religion and faith, in its purest form, means that they refuse to become

¹⁸ Ibid., 236.

¹⁹ See: *Note* on footnote 11.

homogenized—even if that means becoming casted out and forsaken. Serpent-handling is thus a declaration and example of how imperative the intentional refusal of assimilation to other groups and surrender of autonomy are inextricably tied to the survival of a community.

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