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NAKE HANDLING BELIEVERS

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It must have been three years ago now that I was watching a Discovery Channel program on snakes. In the program there was a short item on a religious gathering of the so-called 'snake handling believers'. The service was held in the open air, accompanied by remarkable prodding guitar music, as minister Tim McCoy loudly sang his love for God and his fellow man into the microphone. After a while he seemed to enter into a trance. He left the microphone and danced around on the grass that acted as a dance floor for many more believers. At the same time others took venomous snakes from wooden boxes and performed acts with them that in the eyes of normal people would appear to be crazy. Holding two or three rattlesnakes or copperheads at the same time the fanatic believers danced to the still prodding guitar music, handing each other the snakes, holding them close to their faces, letting them crawl over their arms and heads, placing their fingers in front of the snakes mouths and other rather foolish acts. At the same time they cried out their love for God. Remarkably, throughout all this excitement the venomous snakes remained perfectly calm.

My first reaction was one of amazement. It immediately reminded me of the American Hopi Indians, although it is now generally accepted that the snakes used in their ceremonies were rendered harmless by removing their fangs. When I started to study the background of the 'snake handling believers', I discovered that absolutely no precautions were taken. On the contrary, temporally or permanently disabling the snakes would mean interfering with God's word.

The 'snake handling believers' base their cult on the Bible (Mark XVI: verse 17 and 18) which leaves no room for misinterpretation: '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'.

Had not the apostle Paul dealt rigorously with an adder that had bitten him on the hand when, after his travels at sea, he finally landed on Malta? 'But Paul shook the snake off into the fire without being harmed at all'. The 'snake handling believers' practice other acts from the Bible quoted from Mark. When they enter the trance, they are capable of speaking foreign languages or drinking strychnine without any harm. The laying on of hands and 'community singing' bring healing. Some of the believers bring kerosene burners to the service. When they have the faith they are confident they can withstand the ordeal of fire, they light the burners that can reach temperatures of several hundreds degrees centigrade. It has been scientifically proven that hands and toes remained unharmed after an exposure to the fire for up to 65 seconds. These acts resemble the fire tests that were performed in the European Middle Ages to prove someone's guilt or innocence. To a 'snake handling believer' who successfully completes these tests it is a sign of victory over the Devil and proof of his rock solid belief in God.

The handling of snakes started around 1908. There is no precise consensus about this since other dates are also reported. However, let us assume that around 1908 a man named George Went Hensley was inspired by the passage from Mark quoted above. He felt if his belief in God was strong enough he would be able to handle





Minnie Parker's beautiful face framed with a rattlesnake. Photograph 1947. From Burton, page 51. Courtesy Mr. J.B. Collins.



Bruce Helton, pastor from Evarts, Kentucky, at a meeting in Baxter (1983). From Burton, page 178. Courtesy Mr. Mike DuBose.

snakes unpunished. He went to White Oak Mountain in the Ooltewah region of Tennessee and prayed to God for a sign to show him the correctness of his ideas about snake handling. The sign he received was a rattlesnake that appeared which he picked up without being bitten. He took the snake to the 'Grasshopper Church of God' where others followed his example. This is how this type of snake handling originated.

Henley's followers are mostly farmers and miners from the agricultural areas of East-Kentucky, Ten-

nessee and parts of Virginia and North Carolina. They are the descendants of English and Irish immigrants and have a strict protestant background. Usually they come from large families where life mainly consists of the relentless battle for survival. They live strictly according to the Bible and deny themselves many things that make life worth living for a lot of other people: they don't go to the movies, don't smoke nor drink alcohol, coffee or tea and certainly don't use drugs. Adultery, lying or criminal behaviour are not their everyday practice (although Covington's book is about Glenn Summerford who was accused of planning to kill his wife with the rattlesnakes used for the service Covington, 1995).

Over the tens of years that this religion has been practiced, a substantial number of believers have been bitten and many have died from the consequences. They were bitten in different places: their faces, necks, hands, legs and feet. In this respect Hensley led his followers, for not less then 400 times (some speak of 446 times!) he was supposedly bitten during his snake handling. The last time was on July 24th 1955 when a 5-foot rattlesnake bit him on his right wrist. Not long after that, he left this world, spitting blood. This is one of the reasons why snake handlers find a lot of opposition from the authorities. However, they don't care about any worldly bans or orders, because in their view the word of the Bible is far above anything ordered by man. Some believers do disappear behind bars from time to time.

Believers only handle snakes during a service when they are convinced that their faith in God is strong enough to impose their will on the snake and not be bitten. If they are bitten (faith is no guarantee: 'The Lord said you shall take up snakes, he did not say they would not bite'), the victim refuses all medical help and again puts his trust in God.





Gracie McAllister, manipulating snakes in a service at the Church of Jesus Christ, Baxter (1985). Courtesy Mr. Mike DuBose.

Sometimes there are no serious consequences - as seen over 400 times with Hensley - and the victim survives to continue to handle more snakes. Many times, however such a bite is fatal. Thomas Burton (1993) gives a number of examples.

It remains a mystery why there are not more casualties during these services. Many tests have been done. Some non-scientific ones, like bringing in

tortured, aggressive snakes (treated with whiskey and black pepper!!), but also solid scientific tests whereby believers were voluntarily subjected to blood tests, both before and after the service. In addition, the snakes themselves have been the subjects of investigation. One explanation that I have not seen confirmed elsewhere is given by Saunders (1996). He mentions that some people think that the trance, which the believers are in, slows down

their circulation; their cold hands thus make the cold-blooded reptiles slow and passive.

While I believe in God myself, I detest religious fanaticism. For that reason I watched the 'snake handling believers' on the Discovery program with some skepticism. Currently, I have read many books and articles and I have some ideas about the backgrounds of these churches. Their fanaticism is still strange to me (they are the only ones in the world who know what God's intention is and how to interpret his word), but I have learned to respect their belief. Or as Scott Schwarz (1999) says in his book: 'Before you judge anyone, you must walk a mile in their shoes'.

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SUGGESTED LITERATURE

Barre, W. *They shall take up serpents. Psychology of the southern snake-handling cult.* Minneapolis 1962. The best book of those mentioned here. It not only contains a lot of information on snake handling believers but also many other interesting things on snakes. I ordered this books, like all other American books at www.amazon.com. Price ± \$16.50.

Burton, T. *Serpent-handling believers.* The University of Tennessee Press. Knoxville, 1993. Beautiful book with lots of photo's and inside information. Price ± \$20.00.

Covington, D. *Salvation on Sand Mountain. Snake handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia.* Reading, Massachusetts etc. 1995. Account of the trial of Glen Summerford. With a very 'involved' Covington who finally handles snakes himself. Price ± \$20.00.

Saunders, N. *Dier en Mens. De spirituele samenhang tussen dierenwereld en menselijke cultuur.* Utrecht/Antwerpen, 1996.

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*Translation from Dutch by René van der Vlugt
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