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## Them That Believe

### A postmodern exploration of the contemporary Christian serpent-handlers of Appalachia

Evaluations of the contemporary psychology of religion range from D. Wulff's (2003) claim that it is 'a field in crisis' to R. A. Emmons and R. F. Paloutzian's (2003) enthusiasm for a 'new *multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm*' (p. 395, emphasis in original) to replace the older measurement paradigm identified by R. L. Gorsuch (1984). In my view, these different evaluations are not really at odds if one simply accepts the postmodern suspicion of any claim to a grand or totalizing narrative. Multiple perspectives need not be problematic. Neither is one methodology privileged. I have provided criticisms of the assumption that psychology of religion must commit itself to essentially positivist assumptions and the search for singular and objective truths ('empirical facts') (Belzen & Hood 2006). Others have likewise persuasively argued for methodological pluralism (Roth 1987) which necessarily raises issues that S. Koch and D. E. Leary (1985: 935–50) suggested reveal an emerging consensus in general psychology: included are the limited applicability of experimental methods and an increasing awareness of the philosophical presuppositions contained within research methods. In this article I wish to champion the idea of a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm and to demonstrate what I think is a good exemplar of what this paradigm might look like. In so doing, I assume not only the notions of multiple levels of analysis, but also *interdisciplinarity* in the sense that psychologists might utilize a variety of methods often linked with other disciplines that are required for a fuller psychological treatment of a phenomenon. In this sense I acknowledge postmodernist abandonment of a single, grand, authoritative narrative. The diversity of the methods I use illuminate different aspects of this tradition that need not be summarized in a single narrative that would only serve to mask the complexity of a tradition, whose obituary has often been anticipated but is, I think, unlikely to ever be written.

## Serpent-handling and the confluence of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism

Postmodern researchers accept that all research is guided implicitly or otherwise by assumptions and intuitions about the object being studied. My position is that serpent-handling emerged in recent history as a confluence of two related religious traditions: fundamentalism and Pentecostalism.

### *Fundamentalism*

For a long time I had the sense that psychologists and other social scientists who studied fundamentalism had it wrong. The research seemed more like methodologically-biased studies confirming stereotypes held by those who claimed to be objectively studying fundamentalism (Hood 1983). In a recent book (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005), I not only documented these stereotypes, but also developed an explicit model of religious fundamentalism that had guided much of my research on serpent-handlers. The key concept in my model is *intratextuality*, which connotes the fact that fundamentalists interpret all reality in light of their absolutely authoritative text. The tautology of the fundamentalist world view is not a vicious one, for the text simply demands that the world can be meaningfully comprehended by the sacred text alone and need not be pieced together by knowledge scattered across many texts, none of which is absolutely authoritative (an alternative view we term *intertextuality*). This is not the place to describe my model fully (see Hood *et al.* 2005: Ch. 1), but it will be helpful to correct one common error: fundamentalists are not categorical literalists. The irony in claiming fundamentalists to be literalists is that their sacred text, the King James Bible in the case of Christian fundamentalists, indicates when the text is to be literal and when it is not. For instance, the parables of Jesus have never been taken literally: fundamentalists do not pluck out their eyes, nor do they try to push camels through the eye of a needle. However, they do handle serpents. Why? My answer is to appeal to the principle of intratextuality that characterizes not only fundamentalism but is integral to Pentecostalism as well.

### *Pentecostalism*

Serpent-handlers are not simply fundamentalists (and few would apply this term to themselves. Most serpent-handlers simply refer to themselves as holiness people. However, some would accept the term Pentecostal. I have documented the history of Pentecostals in their search for biblical evidence of legitimate emotional expressions and how tongues-speaking became widely

accepted by Pentecostals as the biblically sanctioned evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit (Williamson & Hood 2004). However, where you have biblical sanction for tongues-speaking, you also have biblical sanction for handling serpents (Hood 1998, 2003).

If there is a foundational text for serpent-handlers, it is Mark 16:17–18. In the King James Bible (the only acceptable Bible to handlers), it reads:

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

Contemporary handlers take the plain meaning of this text to heart. While one sign is conditional (*‘if’*), the other four are perceived as mandates believers must follow.<sup>1</sup> This is an *intratextual* view, and it informed the early Pentecostal movement and led to diverse discussions as what do to with this aspect of the Gospel of Mark. Intratextuality does not require agreement since even if one accepts a sacred text as infallible, the text is read and understood by fallible minds. So, as researcher, I needed to explore another level of why only some Pentecostals handle. This task was historical.

## Historical considerations

There were multiple levels to my historical work. One was tracing the oral history of this tradition by a preacher steeped in the tradition and whose family can be traced back hundreds of years within the Appalachian region. I also documented the actual history of reactions to serpent-handling by Pentecostal denominations as well as documenting reasons for the longer gospel of Mark within the history of Christianity.

### *Early Pentecostal attitudes toward serpent-handling*

Early on I noted that few historians concerned with the rise of Pentecostalism paid much attention to the role of serpent-handling in the early portion of the movement, which one well known authority ends at 1925 (Wacker 2003). Jimmy Morrow’s own oral history of handling alerted me to the central role

1 My focus in this paper is only upon serpent-handling. In other studies I have explored poison drinking (Hood & Williamson 2008b).

serpent-handling played in the Appalachian Mountains prior to the rise of what was to become a major Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God (Hood 2005). This contrasts with authoritative histories of Pentecostal denominations that once endorsed the practice of serpent-handling but have tried to minimize its role in their early history. For instance, C. W. Conn (1955, 1977, 1996), whose *Like a Mighty Army* has gone through several editions, began his first edition (Conn 1955) by relegating serpent-handling to but a single footnote. In the third and 'definitive' edition of his history of the Church of God, Conn (1996) reluctantly devotes a bit more to the role of serpent-handling in the Church of God, but still minimizes its influence and effect. However, I carefully documented both the Church of God's and the Church of God of Prophecy's (the splinter sister church) early endorsement of serpent-handling using archival documents integral to their traditions (Hood *et al.* 2005: Ch. 5; Williamson & Hood 2004). Both these churches were headed by Tomlinson, and both early on illustrated what Conn in an interview with Deborah McCauley characterized as 'Appalachia for export' (McCauley 1995: 278).

In addition to using archival records, I personally documented the demolition of the old structure that once housed the Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following at Dolly Pond, a group once widely known for its serpent-handling in the 1940s, by the more recent Church of God of Prophecy owners, who did not want the church property recognized for its infamy. It was obvious to me that the Church of God of Prophecy pastor was trying to minimize its support and endorsement of serpent-handling in its formative years. Why this reversal? Before I could answer this question, I needed to explore another historical issue: the challenge to the Gospel of Mark.

### *Historical and hermeneutical challenges to the Gospel of Mark*

It is widely accepted by critical scholars that there are several 'added' or latter endings to the Gospel of Mark. Here I need not explore the various endings, but simply note that the best authorities suggest that the second, unknown author of the latter Mark was inspired to write a coherent narrative in defence of the Christian faith (Thomas & Alexander 2003; Kelhoffer 2000; Wall 2003). He wove the Gospel of Mark as a single narrative. While there is good evidence as to why this unknown author specified the handling of serpents, there is no historical evidence that early Christians ever handled serpents prior to the addition of Mark 16:17–18 (likely written in the early second century some seventy years after the early Mark), nor that they handled in subsequent years until near the end of the nineteenth century (Hood 2005; Kelhoffer 2000). So

why was this inspired author of the latter Mark convinced that Jesus had told his followers to take up serpents?

J. A. Kelhoffer (2000) has documented the pressure of the early Christians to compete for a 'market share' (as the rational choice sociologists would have it) among competing religious sects. Not simply Gnostics, but Roman and Greek sects as well. Within the Greco-Roman culture there was wide artistic representation of humans interacting with serpents, and there were non-Christian sects that handled serpents. Thus, the author of the latter Gospel of Mark appealed to Christians with the assurance that, like others, Christians could do 'signs and wonders', one of which is to handle serpents. So they did, but why only 1800 years later?<sup>2</sup> Here is where fieldwork was required.

## **The renegade churches of God**

Serpent-handling churches have a variety of fascinating names; most are scattered throughout Appalachia in isolated regions. However, most have some version of 'Church of God' in their name (Hood 2003). Examples are the 'Church of God in Jesus' Name' at Del-Rio, Tennessee, or 'Highway Holiness Church of God' in Fort Wayne, Indiana. They are small, and like most religious sects, as J. B. Holt (1940) long ago noted and as McCauley (1995) recently reminded us, are under studied. This is even more the case with sects who have minimal, if any, written records—as is common with Appalachian mountain religion (McCauley 1995; Hood 2005). The mainstream denominational Church of God refuses to recognize these churches, paralleling the Mormon's refusal to recognize their renegade sisters that still endorse and practice polygamy (Williamson & Hood 2004).

I have travelled thousand of miles interviewing handlers; collecting their oral histories and tracing the origin of handling in modern times (see Hood 2005). Further illumination of 'why handle?' comes from the historical studies noted above but also from movement into the twentieth century: Early Pentecostals sought to practice signs and wonders, including the astounding ability to handle serpents, or deadly vipers, without being bitten, or if bitten, without being maimed or killed—or so it seems.

2 I accept the historical claim that early Christians prior to Mark 16:17–18 did not handle serpents. However, I have good reason to explore the historical likelihood that they did handle serpents after Mark 16:17–18. The task is for me to provide the historical evidence, and I am a psychologist 'on the hunt'.

## Sundén's role theory

I have argued elsewhere that it is unlikely that serpent-handling originated with one person (Hood 2005; Hood & Williamson 2008b). All that is required for the practice to emerge is an environment in which serpents are plentiful and a community of believers who accept and believe the plain meaning of Mark 16:18. G. Wacker (2003) has documented what I have also confirmed: the practice of handling emerged most strongly in geographical areas where non-religious handling of serpents was a common folk practice.

However, it is also true that one man, George Went Hensley, is as close to the 'St Paul' of serpent handling as one can find. His influence was immense, modelling the practice of handling serpents as he preached across the Appalachian Mountains until his death by a serpent bite in a religious service in Florida in 1955. He was the 35th person to die from a serpent bite, and, to date, 53 other believers have since followed. However, these are only documented deaths, and, likely, there have been others (Hood & Williamson 2008b: 239–44).

Hjalmar Sundén's role theory has been proven useful in understanding Pentecostalism (Holm 1995). Here I use it to illuminate how George Went Hensley modelled the practice of handling from the King James Bible. As George was later to tell his story to a reporter from the *Chattanooga News Free Press*, he was atop White Oak Mountain, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, when he was confronted by a rattlesnake. He was on the mountain seeking solace and meditating on the Gospel of Mark (Collins 1947). Here the text and a fortuitous presence of a serpent met in the mind of George. Without much forethought, Hensley impulsively grabbed the rattlesnake and to his amazement was unharmed. In terms of Sundén's role theory, Hensley felt the power of the Holy Spirit in a behavioural response to Jesus' imperative in Mark 16:18. Hensley descended the mountain to launch by example a religious practice that would hold tremendous meaning for those who believed the plain meaning of Mark 16:18.

As Hensley's serpent-handling gained recognition, leaders in the Church of God applauded the practice. In addition, newspapers began to chronicle the rapidly spreading doctrine of serpent-handling, largely by following the career of Hensley. However, this is all the chronology of Hensley's growing success with handling and his influence upon the early support of the Church of God that I need to present here. For what is now crucial is the last sentence of A. J. Tomlinson's (1914) description that I deliberately omitted in the above quote: 'Some were bitten, but with no damage to them' (p. 3).

## When the serpent maims and kills

Another level of explanation enters the picture when I began to explore the nature of serpent striking behaviour. There is virtually no experimental work exploring venomous serpent striking behaviour in the context of humans freely handling serpents. The irony is that, from both the secular and religious sides, the assumption is that there must be an explanation for why handlers are so seldom bitten. Likewise, if they are bitten, often they are not hurt. Why?

### *Field observations*

The early explanation from within the Church of God was that God protected the handler by placing a hedge around him or her so that no harm could come.<sup>3</sup> Scoffers and outsiders, then and now, were more likely to claim fraud with stories that handlers ‘tame’ their serpents, or that they ‘freeze’ them before the service, etc. On several occasions, I have taken herpetologists to services, and all have been amazed that copperheads, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, cobras, and a variety of other vipers can be handled (and even trod upon) with impunity.<sup>4</sup>

Hood (2003) proposed an elegantly simple explanation based upon behavioural observations of frequency of handling, of bites, and of deaths. Based upon hundreds of hours of documented handling it is obvious that the single best predictor is that on any given handling a serpent will *not* strike. However, the probability of the serpent biting (B) is a function of three things: (1) the species of serpent (S); (2) unknown factors (X) that herpetologists have yet to identify; and (3) the frequency of handling (H).<sup>5</sup> Here is the best description:

$$p(B) = S + X + f(H)$$

From this equation we can make and test a simple prediction: among individuals who handle frequently, the probability of bites increases. Among groups that have many handlers, the probability of bites increases. Thus, we

3 From Ecclesiastes 10:8, the King James Bible says, ‘He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.’

4 From Luke 10:19, the King James Bible says, ‘Behold I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemies: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.’

5 Striking behaviour is poorly understood. It remains the case that, even among experienced handlers, serpent strikes are unpredictable.

can expect that as the practice became routinised within the early Pentecostal movement, more and more individuals began to get bitten simply because more individuals handled and believing individuals who began to handle more frequently increased the probability that they would be bitten. That is precisely what happened (Williamson & Hood 2004). The question now is: Why do some not get hurt?

### *The physiology of bites*

Before considering the problem this created, I need but briefly explore another level of analysis, human physiological response to serpent bites which I have documented in detail elsewhere (Hood & Williamson 2008a). Basically I need mention three factors. First, part of the harm done by a serpent bite is dependent on the amount of venom injected by the serpent. Serpents can give 'dry bites', expelling no venom. Here is a simple secular response to Tomlinson's (1914) comment above, 'but with no damage to them' (p. 3). Second, the nature of venom varies with different species, some producing dangerous neurotoxins (rattlesnakes), and some producing toxins that destroy the flesh (copperheads). Third, it is the decision of the victim whether to seek medical care for the bite. Many argue that it is up to God, and seek no care—I have documented on film individuals dying untreated from serpent bites. If medical care is sought, death may still not be prevented, but often critical medical care can prevent maiming from serpent bites.

Given my simple formula above, and this quick caveat into physiological damage that can occur, the reader can anticipate the next move. It also is another level of analysis, this time into church/sect theory, most prominent in the sociology of religion.

## **Church/sect theory and the growth of Pentecostalism**

I need not document the rapid growth of Pentecostalism, first in America and then worldwide, here. However, I do want to briefly explore the abandonment of serpent-handling by what were to become two mainstream Pentecostal denominations, The Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. Basic to my analysis is that, within church/sect theory, sectarian groups are those that have high tension with their host culture. They also are less likely to manage large numbers of adherents if the particular form of tension with the host culture is radical. What is more radical than a religious ritual that maims and kills? Thus, it is easy to predict that, as publicity surrounding bites that



maimed and killed believers increased, the churches would abandon the practice. As noted above, that is what the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy did. Even more, they are in denial regarding the powerful role handling played in their early history (Williamson & Hood 2004).

However, church/sect theory also allows that sectarian groups who have great tension with their host cultures can produce committed members who, by the very fact they make sacrifices to be in sects, avoid what has been called the 'free rider' issue. The contemporary renegade churches of God exemplify this admirably. They are small, primarily scattered throughout Appalachia, and have developed a theology to understand why it is that they handle successfully most of the time, and why it is, at other times, that they are bitten, maimed, and killed.

Remember that, given my simple formula, individuals who handle frequently will have increased probabilities of bites. This also means some will be dry bites, some serious and likely to maim, others likely to kill. Handlers know this. Likewise churches realize that, as more members handle, bites are more likely. It is not unreasonable that bites occur more frequently during homecomings, when several churches join together to celebrate in worship over several days: more people, more handling, more bites.

Handlers have developed two basic arguments for handling. One is to handle by faith. This means that, simply because handlers believe the plain meaning of Mark 16:18, they will take up the serpent. If they are bitten, maimed, or even killed, it is simply God's will. They are assured of their salvation if they have been obedient to God, and only faith itself propels an obedience that includes handling serpents.

Others handle by anointing, not in opposition to faith, but by a bodily sensation of the power of the Holy Ghost that protects them during handling. Many handlers will not handle unless they feel this anointing. If one is bitten when 'anointed' the explanation is more likely to be that the anointing was misjudged or was for doing some sign other than handling.

The appeal to church/sect theory allowed me two things: (1) to predict the abandonment by groups that moved toward denominationalism ('churches'); and (2) to predict firm commitment by the renegade churches that maintain to this day the practice of handling serpents despite laws that have been passed in most states where handling occurs. However, the fact that in most states handling is illegal simply drives the practice underground (Kimbrough & Hood 1995).

## Phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to experienced meaning

Detailed phenomenological descriptions of what it is like to handle a serpent, to be anointed, and to be near death from a serpent bite would be crucial for outsiders to have some minimal empathic understanding of this tradition. In addition, I could use a hermeneutical method (described below) to derive the thematic structure of meaning of these experiences. I will first only briefly describe the particular phenomenological/hermeneutical method I employed and then briefly address its application to each of the three areas noted above.

### *Hermeneutical interpretation of phenomenological interviews*

Postmodern perspectives seek the meaning of experience from the experimenter's perspective and not from the researcher's prior theoretical commitment. Meaning is an inherently human phenomenon and the question of final interpretation is ever open-ended and negotiable (Belzen & Hood 2006; Pollio, Henley & Thompson 1997). There is an irony in that this method echoes the challenge of those within the fundamentalist tradition to interpretations of the Bible: 'Do you have Bible for that?' Before any interpretation is accepted, it must meet the approval of all group members. It is always possible that dissenting opinions or reservations reveal some glimpse of the participant's experience yet unclear to the group. This method parallels serpent-handling churches which cluster together based upon shared understandings of scripture. Those who cannot agree simply move on to form their own church with their shared understanding of scripture.

### *Handling serpents*

First, with respect to serpent-handling, interviews with 17 handlers covering 105 handling events revealed a powerful and meaningful thematic structure (Williamson, Pollio & Hood 2000). Four themes emerged: (1) 'Wanting to do', (2) 'Death', (3) 'Connection with God', and (4) 'Fear'/'Victory'. While I cannot do justice to the richness of the meanings here, I can briefly note each.

'Wanting to do' is the desire and sense that Mark 16:18 is not only a belief, but also a call to obedience. Handlers reflexively are aware of both text and desire as they are inclined by faith and, for some, by anointing, to move to either take a serpent from another or to go to the box and retrieve one for themselves.

Accompanying this sense of desire is the recognition that, in a common phrase, 'there is death in that box'. The notion that one needs an explanation of how handlers 'master' or 'manipulate' serpents into harmful handling not only is unnecessary, given my above discussion of the probability of bites, but blatantly false as each handler is keenly aware that in the very act of handling he or she could at any moment die (Hood 1998; Hood & Williamson 2006).

The recognition (not fear) of possible death is balanced by the sense of connecting with God. The faithful, as well as the anointed, handle by belief that God demands this of them. Thus, regardless of the outcome, handlers note, 'The Word is still the Word.'

Finally, each act of handling that is done with impunity arouses both a sense of fear and of victory. Rudolf Otto's sense of the response to the Holy is echoed in the actual reality of handlers who take up serpents in trepidation and often are able to put them down with not simply a fascination, but a sense of victory. Literally in each case when a serpent is successfully handled there is victory over death (Hood & Williamson 2008a, 2008b).

### *The anointing*

I have also applied my hermeneutical method to the experience of the anointing (Williamson, Pollio & Hood 2000). From the 17 interviewees described above I selected 11 who had described handling by the anointing. I sought the thematic structure of the meaning of the experience, which can be briefly described as follows:

The experience of anointing begins primarily with feeling the moving of God upon the person. This is felt in terms of various body sensations, but always includes a sense that God is taking control of the person. The sense of control often includes the hearing of God's directive voice. With this experience, there is a profound sense of empowerment that infuses a feeling of protection from all harm, combined with a feeling of being sufficiently empowered to do the will of God at the present moment, which is to handle the serpent. This experience is such that the person feels drawn away in varying degrees and no longer feels fully present to the immediate surroundings, date, or time; yet the person feels a flow that radiates through contact with others as they come into awareness. Indescribably good feelings—variously approximated as a high, joy, peace, love, and victory—are felt from the onset of the anointing and continue to linger after the experience lifts.

This experience is close to what some have argued is a trance state, common both to glossolalia and serpent-handling. However, handlers themselves do not use such language, and my approach avoids asking whether or not the anointing is a trance state in favour of the recognition that how one narrates this experience is integral to its understanding (Smith 2003). Thus, the anointing is narrated here, as for all handlers, in a distinctive religious context from which it derives its meaning.

*Near-death experiences from serpent bites*

Finally, with respect to handling in general and by anointing in particular, I am never far from themes associated with death. In my final interview study I identified 13 individuals who had suffered severe serpent bites and had anticipated their impending death (Hood & Williamson 2006). My interest was in part how near-death experiences, encountered from a religious ritual known to cause death, would be structured with meaning. Again, I cannot present the richness of the data here, but only summarize the thematic structure of meaning that emerged from the interpretation of my interviews.

I identified four themes that form the thematic structure of near-death experience as a result of being bitten during this ritual. As a description:

This structure involves first and foremost a feeling of being ‘hit’ by the serpent in such a way that the strike is experienced as extremely serious, likely to maim or kill. This is followed by an experience of overcoming fear with ‘victory’—felt first as a sense of losing life in the face of doubt, and later as a confidence that, whatever the outcome, it is God’s will. In all cases, there is severe physical suffering in terms of pain, swelling, blurred or lost vision, breathing difficulties, and loss of consciousness in varying degrees. Next, anticipating death, the stricken believer backtracks over his life, contemplating both the reason for and the finality of his bite. Fear of the anticipation of death may be relieved by visions of luminous places in which the believer is contented to remain. Ultimate victory is experienced in the eventual acceptance of both the serpent bite and its outcome as God’s will for the obedient believer, whether it means full recovery, maiming, or death.

It is only with methods such as I have employed in these three studies that the meaningfulness of serpent-handling to its believers can be uncovered. Neither ‘bizarre’ nor pathologically driven, neither a function of an impoverished people nor of ignorance, handling, by anointing or not, is a powerful

experience whose meaning matches the intensity of the practice in the face of real risk of maiming and death.

*The music of serpent-handling churches*

In the Pentecostal tradition in general, and in the serpent-handling tradition in particular, music plays an integral role. Music helps facilitate religious experience. Also within the serpent-handling tradition the lyrics of songs often parallel the messages that preachers deliver as their sermons. However, given the number and range of songs sung, the hermeneutical method used in the qualitative studies above seemed strained. Again, accepting methodological pluralism and a postmodern perspective I used a variety of qualitative methods to explore the role of music in serpent-handling services (Hood & Williamson 2008b: 185–207). Here I focus upon three simple examples of part of my qualitative study of the music of serpent-handlers.

Almost all of the videotapes of church services housed in the Hood–Williamson Research Archives for the Serpent-Handling Holiness Sects, Lupton Library, at The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga contain music, often instrumental solos as well as individual and collective singing. I selected 88 different services from a collection of videotapes that spanned seven years.

The videos included meetings of individual congregations who had gathered for local worship and multiple congregations who had gathered for homecomings. Homecomings are events at which several congregations come together to support a single church, usually over three days, beginning with a Friday night service and ending with a shared meal after a late Sunday morning service. My attendance at these services involved multiple visits to six different congregations in four southern states: three churches in north Georgia; one in north Alabama; one in eastern Kentucky; and one in West Virginia. Among homecoming services used in this analysis, crowds ranged anywhere from 30 to 120 believers. Multiple visits, diversity of locations, and different types of service contributed to a large database of songs with rich variety of form and content. Here I simply wish to report some descriptive data, present a mini-idiographic analysis and then summarize the meaning of music in the language of the handlers themselves.

A descriptive analysis of the recorded music data from these 88 services found a total of 1,114 songs (this number reflects the omission of instrumentals—that is, the performance of a musical selection without singing). The average number of songs per service was 12.66, and most services (about 68%) included a number that ranged from 8.34 to 16.98 songs ( $SD = 4.32$ ).

The largest number of songs in a single service was 24, whereas the least number was 4. There was no service that lacked music. Often the number of songs is simply a function of the length of the service.

To gain a sense of the temporal importance of music in a typical service, an individual church service was selected and analyzed as an idiographic exemplar. Here I will note some objective indices of the amount of time devoted to singing. The service was attended by 19 people (most of whom were children) and lasted 3 hours and 14 minutes from beginning to end. Congregants sung 16 songs. These songs were accompanied by as many as 3 guitarists (all males) at different times. The songs totalled 53 minutes and accounted for over 27 per cent of the time spent in service. Among the singers were 3 adult males who sang a total of 8 songs, and 5 females (2 of them children) who also sang 8 songs. The congregation often would join in with the person(s) when singing. The average time per song was 3 minutes and 20 seconds, whereas the range of time for songs was from 40 seconds to 5 minutes and 45 seconds. The duration of songs is typically longer at homecoming services than at individual church services such as this. For example, it is not uncommon for a song at homecomings to last 10 minutes; one of the most popular songs among serpent-handling churches is 'Little David, Play on Your Harp'. It was sung at one homecoming for 25 minutes. At well-attended homecomings (over a hundred people), more singers are present, and believers tend to sing a greater number of songs for longer periods of time in anticipation of a highly emotional collective worship.

When believers describe the meaning of music they often do so in perceptive ways. One woman noted, 'Music in church is a way of beginning a service, and getting your mind focused on God so we can praise and worship him as he wants us to'. Music provides a way for believers to connect with their God. And as stated by another believer, 'The song's text is the word of God' (Schwartz 1999: 41), which makes the theme of the song important in that connection. Given this, it seems that a categorization based on themes to songs is useful for understanding something about the role of music in that connection without being reductive, as some (Moore 1986; Young 1926) have been. Among the 10 categories that emerged from my analysis, nearly 70 per cent of the songs in my sample were represented in three groups: Comfort/Mercy/Deliverance, Heaven, and Witnessing/Evangelization. The way in which believers experience their lives and the nature of their particular situation at the moment seem relative to the music (Van Hoorebeke 1980). As believers experience the need for comfort, mercy, or deliverance, words of songs that relate to these needs afford connection with God in such a way that comfort,

mercy, or deliverance is experienced. If need for becoming more focused on heaven and its rewards is present, music with that type meaning allows a connection with God such that eternity becomes experienced as a present reality. Since serpent-handling churches do little in terms of organized evangelism outside the church, they oftentimes sing ballad-type songs that include words that resonate with their own past experiences of being woefully lost as sinners and delivered by God's love and grace; such heartfelt singing bears witness of God's presence in the service and invites conviction upon the lost who may be present. As one believer put it, 'The music fits your mood,' and by doing so, provides a doorway through which a spiritual connection with God can be experienced as a reality.

### **A final interpretative exploration: psychoanalysis and evolutionary psychology**

A commitment to methodological pluralism cannot refrain from exploring the immense influence of a variety of psychoanalytic and object relations theories that have been so culturally influential in bringing a particular version of social sciences across disciplines and to the general public. For some time the most influential book on serpent-handling was W. La Barre's (1962), *They Shall Take Up Serpents*. La Barre was an anthropologist, heavily influenced by classical Freudian (Oedipal) theory. It was La Barre who asked the obvious rhetorical question, the emphasis being his: 'When is the serpent *not* a phallus?' (La Barre 1962: 74).

I was intrigued by this question and explored applying Freudian theory to the serpent-handling tradition (Hood & Kimbrough 1995). Accepting a symbolic significance to the serpent, it was obvious from folk tales and other cultural sources that, in the cultural imagination, body symbolism is associated not only with the phallic nature of serpents, but also with the vaginal (menstruation attributed to a serpent bite) and, most crucial, with death and resurrection (circumcision indicative of immortality as the penis is modified to mimic the shedding of the skin of the serpent, depicting its mortality). This latter point—of death and resurrection—gave me a clue to the power of the central ritual of serpent-handling churches within a Christian context.

There is considerable evidence that if both primates and humans are not 'hard wired' to fear serpents, they can easily be conditioned to fear them (Joslin, Fletcher & Emlen 1964; Mineka *et al.* 1984; Mundkur 1983). This obviously has survival value within an evolutionary psychology perspective.

Thus, not only does the serpent *symbolize* immortality in the context of what can be argued is the central message of Christianity—death and resurrection—but the serpent also is an explicit sign of the probability of death as I have documented in my qualitative studies above. Thus, the power of the ritual of handling is understandable: the sign value and the symbolic value of the serpent meet in a ritual that not only symbolizes death and resurrection, but, each time it is performed successfully, death has in fact been overcome. Outsiders fail to appreciate the central awareness of the power of the serpent to maim and kill that is on the mind of all who handle. With respect to the serpent, I think that the merger of sign and symbol also accounts for the close parallel that can be drawn between Otto's notion of fear and fascination as a response to the numinous and the fear and attraction that serpents hold both for those who do and for those who do not handle them. However, for those who do handle, this high-risk ritual is, as I have argued above, integral to a tradition that seeks not endangerment and death, but eternal life, as promised to 'them that believe' and empowerment to follow the signs, including the imperative to take up serpents. No better statement summarizes the richness of this tradition than a comment made by the matriarch of a powerful church in Jolo, West Virginia: 'The difference between your faith and mine, she said, is that when I go to church I do not know if I will come out alive.' But then, death in obedience to God is for them that believe assurance of eternal life.

### **Overview and summary of the new paradigm as a postmodern methodology**

The call for a new paradigm is loud and clear and consistent with postmodern methods. They are no gold standard to be applied to all investigations; no master narrative to be defended. Interdisciplinary, as I have tried to demonstrate, can mean not only cooperation among disciplines, but also the use of a variety of often discipline-favoured methods by a single investigator or a team of investigators whose location within a particular 'discipline' is both historically contingent and likely dated in terms of its usefulness. Likewise, the use of multilevel considerations means that the diversity of methods and approaches at various levels of abstraction are necessary to begin any study of religious phenomena in their immense complexity. My study of serpent handlers involved me in more research methods than are presented in this paper. Here I have focused upon archival research; hermeneutical explorations of textual criticism of the Bible; ethnography linked to videotapes that helped



document part of my database and are archived for other scholars to use;<sup>6</sup> phenomenological interviews analyzed in terms of a hermeneutical method that reveals the meaningfulness of handling serpents, being anointed, and the experience of near death from serpent bites. Committed as I am to methods that explore the meaning of serpent-handling from personal and cultural perspectives, I did not ignore the value of psychoanalytic and evolutionary psychological theories to link the symbolic and sign value of serpents that further does justice to the power of the serpent to elicit genuine religious experiences and to serve as an apologetic for a tradition that has been maligned and misunderstood by lay persons and scholars alike (Birckhead 1993; Hood & Williamson 2008b). Elsewhere I have also discussed the study of court rulings that upheld (and continue to uphold) bans on handling; and the extension of phenomenological and hermeneutical techniques to the analysis of extemporaneous sermons. Likewise, refusing to apply one qualitative technique blindly, I have explored the role of music in serpent-handling churches using both simply descriptive data, an idiographic study of one service, and the exploration of believers' own description of the role and meaning of music in their tradition. In addition I have done quasi-experimental studies to reveal prejudicial views involved even in the reasoned rejection of serpent-handling and to demonstrate that attitudes can be changed such that even those who do not believe in serpent-handling can come to respect the sincerity of those who do and their right to practice what they believe. Thus, the call for a new paradigm is welcomed by me as are the conceptual achievements of postmodernism. Postmodernism has no single definition, nor need it have. Likewise the call for a new paradigm may not be exactly a 'paradigm' in the philosophical sense. However, both postmodernism and the call for a new paradigm is taken by me to mean being open to levels of interpretation and to a variety of methodologies, some of which I have illustrated in this paper. In the spirit of postmodernism I have not sought a grand narrative, but have let participants speak for themselves. Where I have imposed theories upon my data, I have been explicit and believe they add some clarification without distorting the beliefs of my participants or denigrating their tradition. I have presented only a few of the methods employed in our ongoing study of this

6 The Hood-Williamson Research Archives for the Serpent Handling Holiness Sects, Lupton Library, at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA contains almost 200 videos, converted to DVD. Included are all the interviews referred to in this paper.

tradition. Additional methods are explored more fully in Hood & Williamson 2008a and 2008b.

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