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Handling Authenticity: A Discourse Analysis of Interviews with Signs-following Preachers

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Liberal Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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by

Chelsie Marie Dubay

December 2014

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Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Appalachia, Serpent Handling, Althusser, Foucault

## ABSTRACT

Handling Authenticity: A Discourse Analysis of Interviews with Signs-following Preachers

by

Chelsie Dubay

The National Geographic Channel's miniseries "Snake Salvation" resurrected a vested interest with the heavily documented practices of signs-following believers in central Appalachia. The current body of scholarship surrounding these congregations focuses mostly on oral history narratives and explanations of religious fundamentalism; a critical analysis of the discourse shared by these congregation members is noticeably absent.

This thesis explores selected interviews with George Hensley, Andrew Hamblin, Jamie Coots, and Alfred Ball through the interdisciplinary application of discourse analysis paired with social disclosure theory to unveil the underlying struggles with power and personal beliefs expressed by each pastor. The research performed throughout this study spans interviews collected and published from the 1940s to 2014. Through a discourse analysis performed on these interviews coupled with support from sociological and communicative theoretical frameworks, this study looks to highlight struggles with power and authenticity present for signs-following pastors.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Deidra.

"For there is no friend like a sister  
In calm or stormy weather;  
To cheer one on the tedious way,  
To fetch one if one goes astray,  
To lift one if one totters down,  
To strengthen whilst one stands."

-An excerpt from "Goblin Market" by Christina Rossetti

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To my family, thank you for supporting and enduring. To my husband, thank you for coping with the nightly symphony of typing and coffee makers. To my sister, thank you for forcing me to persevere. It is because of you and only you that I ever completed this project. To my father, thank you for making me laugh when all I wanted to do was cry. To my mom, thank you for being my traveling partner, my fellow ethnographer, and my friend. To my step-father, thank you for the late-night editing sessions and lively theological debates.

## PREFACE

This thesis is a study of four men who belong to a particular sect of Christian fundamentalism, signs-following believers. The approach of this study is not historical nor is it a deep-dive into the psychology of religious fundamentalism, although a historical context and a short presentation of the belief system are included for contextual purposes. Instead, what this study examines are the personal motivations of four ministering members of this faith. Specifically, this thesis observes how these ministers handling publicity as well as how they measure authenticity within their congregations. This study is unique in that it is one of the first extrapolations of interviews with members of these congregations. The intention of this study is not to cast generalizations across an entire religious community but instead to examine the information presented by these four ministers in hopes of creating a better understanding of their negotiations with commodification, infiltrations of mass media, and authenticity. By investigating the information conveyed in these interviews more closely, this thesis will yield a better understanding of the cultural, spiritual, and psychological negotiations taking place within the larger religious picture. To quote Elaine Lawless in her work God's Peculiar People, "there is no single thing that *all* Pentecostals do."<sup>1</sup> The same is true for signs-following believers. Examining the interview responses of these four men reveals how they grapple with the complex issues within their congregations and, in turn, help the reader gain a better understanding signs-following community's ideologies.

Initially, this study began as something different altogether. It originally set out to prove that through social networking sites a particular, marginalized, stigmatized population was now

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Lawless, *God's Peculiar People: Women's Voices & Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), x.

afforded the opportunity to reclaim the power taken from them by mass media exploitation. The initial hypothesis was that these marginalized communities refuted the caricatures of signs-following believers created by mass media outlets. For some, that was true; for others, their own personal representations of themselves only perpetuated these exaggerated exemplifications. During this same time span, National Geographic started recording segments for the upcoming reality series “Snake Salvation,” which featured the same congregations being profiled in this initial study. Their relationship with the television program generated a lot of attention; some was welcomed while other attention, including this study, was rebuffed. To complicate issues, research regulations surrounding the collection of primary source data from social media websites struggled with the consensual nature of the data being harvested. Because of the complications with data collection and a lack of cooperation by the intended study subjects, the project shifted. What follows is discourse analysis of published interviews and press conferences with four signs-following preachers.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On September 10, 2013, the National Geographic Channel aired the first episode of “Snake Salvation.” This reality miniseries followed two signs-following congregations over the course of two years on their quest to preserve and disseminate the century-old tradition of following the five signs mentioned in the book of Mark, “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.”<sup>2</sup> Due to the nature of the channel, “Snake Salvation’s” central focus was on the dramatic act of snake hunting and harvesting. To add a personal connection, the show’s secondary focus was on the congregations’ two preachers, Jamie Coots and Andrew Hamblin. Throughout the season Coots and Hamblin struggle with the law, with their families, but most of all with the burden of a scornful society.<sup>3</sup>

“Snake Salvation” spurred the attention of news outlets, curious spectators, and county and state government officials. In the midst of the short-lived reality show, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) seized over fifty of Pastor Hamblin’s snakes. Citing the deplorable conditions in which the snakes barely survived, the TWRA confronted Hamblin at his church and demanded the release of the ailing serpents. Following the seizure, Hamblin and his congregation embarked on an emotionally charged campaign demanding that the state agency stop attacking their religious freedom. Hamblin claimed that the confiscation was an

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:17-18 (KJV).

<sup>3</sup> National Geographic Channel, “Snake Salvation,” National Geographic, <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/snake-salvation/> (accessed January 25, 2014).

infringement of his first amendment rights.<sup>4</sup> With Pastor Coots by his side, Hamblin agreed to countless interviews and press releases that gave him a podium from which to denounce the authorities' right encroach on his religion. The trial escalated to the Grand Jury, and ultimately, the Grand Jury dismissed the indictment on January 9, 2014. However, the Campbell County authorities rejected Hamblin's request to return the snakes.<sup>5</sup> Even though his request to have the snakes returned was rejected, Hamblin interpreted this dismissal as a victory in the name of religious freedom. In a phone interview with Bob Smietana of the Religion News Service, Hamblin is quoted as saying, "I'm ecstatic...all the headlines should read 'Snake handlers have religious rights in Tennessee.'"<sup>6</sup>

Tragically, only one month after the Grand Jury dropped Hamblin's indictment, Pastor Coots died from complications of a snake bite. Coots was bitten during a church service at his home church in Middlesboro, Kentucky, on February 15, 2014. Respecting his wishes, Coots's family refused medical care, turning down an ambulance service by signing a refusal form. Coots passed away in his home surrounded by his family.<sup>7</sup>

Signs-following believers are no stranger to media attention. Since its inception, signs-following believers have endured the waxes and wanes of public interest. Each injury or death caused by a snake bite attracts a swarm of media attention to this community. The practice of signs-following, and more precisely the practice of serpent handling, displaces these congregations from more mainstream Christian communities. The Psychology of Religious

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<sup>4</sup> "Andrew Hamblin Initial Appearance," Youtube, Flash Video File, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJN66kyBS8A>, (accessed August 23, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> "Grand Jury Decides Not to Indict Snake-handling Pastor," WBIR, <http://scott.wbir.com/news/news/634102-grand-jury-decides-not-indict-snake-handling-pastor> (accessed August 9, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Bob Smietana, "'Snake Salvation' pastor won't be charged with violating Tenn. Law," Religion News, <http://www.religionnews.com/2014/01/08/snake-salvation-pastor-wont-charged-violating-tenn-law/> (accessed October 29, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Bill Estep. "Snakebite Death of Middlesboro Pastor Was Quick, Son Says; Medical Treatment Refused," Kentucky.com, [http://www.kentucky.com/2014/02/16/3092068\\_jamie-coots-well-known-snake-handling.html?rh=1](http://www.kentucky.com/2014/02/16/3092068_jamie-coots-well-known-snake-handling.html?rh=1) (accessed February 20, 2014).

Fundamentalism briefly describes the serpent handling tradition's separation from the Church of God: "finally divorcing itself from the practice, and even from its own serpent-handling history, the COG forced adherents outside its membership – where they ultimately came to exist and continue as small, independent, autonomous sects."<sup>8</sup> Because of this rejection, signs-following believers continue to be scrutinized by the Christian community as well as by the general public. The signs-following community attracts attention from a variety of outlets, mostly because of this reputation and because their church services contain an element of fascination and entertainment for onlookers outside of this belief. The tension between the signs followers and other Christian denominations has caused a palpable division among the signs-following community in terms of their openness to the public. Thomas Burton speaks to this division in the Appendix of his book Serpent Handling Believers. Burton describes the openness and willingness for congregations to welcome publicity as greatly varied. He cites triangulation of this topic: a reserved openness, where congregations will welcome in the media with the caveat that these reporters be fair in their reports; complete openness, including the encouragement of the visitors to testify and participate in the service; and rejection, where congregations prohibit any outside media.<sup>9</sup> Ten years after Burton's publication, this ideological division holds true. Throughout the course of this study, the two most distinctive philosophies, openness to outsiders and the media and a more closed, conservation fashion were both present. During observational visits to gain contextual understanding for this project, two of the three congregations visited exhibited an openness and engagement with nonmembers when compared to the third congregation. This more conservative congregation, whose members are not explicitly

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph W. Hood Jr. et.al, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (The Guilford Press, 2005), Kindle, location 1618 of 3451.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 175.

mentioned in this particular study, was extremely wary of nonmembers who attended services for the purposes of scholarship or media coverage.

Despite the hundreds of newspaper articles, published books, and recorded documentaries, there are some uncharted waters in the study of serpent handling. After each major media event, some members of this tradition agree to appear in recorded interviews. These interviews are used for the superficial construction of sensationalistic news articles or for academic purposes. To date, a search for discourse analyses performed on these interviews yields no results. While these interviews do relay factual information about the sect's belief system and the experience of the anointment, what scholars have not yet examined is the expanded context of these interviews. A discourse analysis of these interviews would include contextual information and theoretical frameworks in an effort to extrapolate information which is not plainly conveyed in the stand-alone interviews. This uncharted territory demands an interdisciplinary examination. By weaving together the interdisciplinary lenses of critical discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, and religious studies, this thesis unveils the sometimes overlooked implications of these interviews. Because these congregations rely so heavily on their own literal interpretation of the Bible, this thesis will turn the tables and extend that literalistic approach to the pastors' interviews themselves. A critical analysis of interviews with four signs-following pastors, Andrew Hamblin, Jamie Coots, Alfred Ball, and George Hensley, reveals that even members of the patriarchy of this belief system foster notions of doubt regarding the legitimacy of the enactment of the signs. Furthermore, some of these deconstructed interviews and excerpts expose an infatuation with showmanship and notoriety.

The work opens with a population profile that describes the central Appalachian area's unique geography and cultural heritage. This opening chapter focuses on the work previously

compiled on Appalachian culture and the invaluable importance it places on the oral tradition. Also included in this chapter is a brief history of the origins of signs-following as a religious tradition and an explanation of the state laws related to this practice. The third chapter of this thesis includes an explanation of the methodology employed within this work. This chapter draws primarily from the philosophies of Michele Foucault, Louis Althusser, and discourse analyst James Paul Gee to showcase the importance of defining and deconstructing text in order to illuminate additional information expressed by a person's dialogue. The chapters that follow provide an opportunity to employ the methodology described in chapter three in order to critique interviews with four signs-following preachers. The marriage of these frameworks will assist in uncovering the evidence needed to support the hypothesis that each of the four preachers falls into one of two classifications: a manifestation of the spectacle as a means of understanding or a representation of the struggles with authenticity when being observed by mass media outlets.

## CHAPTER 2

### PROFILE OF APPALACHIA

The Appalachian Regional Commission defines the Appalachian region as a 205,000-square-mile area which flows through portions of 12 states from New York to Mississippi and includes the entire state of West Virginia.<sup>10</sup> Of this expansive area, 42 percent is rural, a label that can bring to mind stigmatized images of poverty. Lack of a dependable, sustainable economic backbone is mostly to blame. The coalfields continue to wither away; the once lucrative agricultural market is almost stagnant; and the steady decline of other traditional industries plays a part in the region's continuous uphill battle to survive. The ARC website explains, "Central Appalachia in particular still battles economic distress, with concentrated areas of high poverty, unemployment, poor health, and severe educational disparities. And recent economic data show that the Region has fared far worse in the current recession than the rest of the nation."<sup>11</sup> While the recent addition of manufacturing plants and other industrial advancements has helped the region attempt to improve dismal economic conditions, some communities – like those in Central Appalachia – continue to struggle.

Issues with educational attainment also continue to persist. An overview of the central Appalachian community published by the Housing Assistance Council claims that, while educational attainment is on the rise, the number of people without a high school diploma is still staggering when compared to the rest of the nation.<sup>12</sup> Failing to graduate from high school seriously limits one's professional and hence economic opportunities. Coupled with the isolation

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<sup>10</sup> "The Appalachian Region," Appalachian Regional Commission, [http://www.arc.gov/appalachian\\_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp](http://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp) (accessed January 25, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "Central Appalachian Overview," Housing Assistance Council, Handout, <http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/appalov.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2014).

of the region, one's lack of a high school diploma significantly affects the likelihood of entering into a professional workplace and earning livable wages. Hard manual labor jobs at low wages and minimal hours may be the only thing available to a high school dropout. Additionally, the unfavorable pay available to those who do not hold a high school diploma generates social and economic tension within the community.

One of the more notable initiatives declared by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 set forth to aid in the economic revival of Appalachia was the War on Poverty. In his article, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia: Oral History from the 'Top down' and 'Bottom up,'" John Glen discusses the impact the War on Poverty had on the people of central Appalachia. Glen notes that the lingering effects of the War on Poverty can be seen in the oral histories collected by sociologists and anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>13</sup> This series of initiatives, some of which are still active today, sought to improve the quality of life of people living below national economic standards. The termination of the program, however, often left communities disheveled and divided. The Nixon administration begrudgingly dispersed the surviving federally-funded programs to various federal and civil organizations. In the end, the central Appalachian region and its people remained somewhat impoverished but forever changed. Dr. James Werth attributes this initiative's "failure" to a serious flaw in motivation. In his article, entitled "How the War on Poverty Became the War on the Poor: Central Appalachia as a Case Example," Werth argues that a flawed system and the lackluster effects of federally funded programs and community partnerships traumatized the psychology of impoverished

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<sup>13</sup> J.M. Glen, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia: Oral History from the 'Top Down' and the 'Bottom Up,'" *Oral History Review* 22, no. 1 (1995): 67-70, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4495357> (accessed February 10, 2014).

Appalachians and crippled any chance of success or improvement.<sup>14</sup> Statistically, the growth and improvement of the economic pattern in the central Appalachian region is underwhelming. The region's natural resources are dwindling at a rapid rate. Coal towns that were once hubs of economic and social prosperity are now ghost towns littered with the empty, dilapidated buildings and worn signs that now advertise what once was. Ronald Eller's work Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945 chronicles the creation, implementation, and failure of the War on Poverty initiative. Eller notes that policy makers simply ignored the "equity of politics and economic relationships within the region" and classified Appalachia as a failed outlier in the culture of American economics.<sup>15</sup> This refusal to acknowledge the underlying issues of poverty in the Appalachia area only complicated matters. Echoing Werth's case of diminished motivations, Eller uses Oscar Lewis's model on poverty to perpetuate the idea of an absent motivation as a cultural characteristic. Underserved areas like Appalachia foster a different type of community building, according to Lewis, which fosters a "culture of poverty," in which members of these communities lack the "cultural intervention" required to break away from poverty.<sup>16</sup> Eller cites Lewis's suggestions for breaking the cycle of poverty, mentioning specifically the creation of new jobs as well as job training. But, for a region so invested in its history and traditions, changing that cultural mainframe is sometimes not an option.

The Appalachian people are, if nothing else, resilient. Natives of the central Appalachians embrace their rural way of life. These people have a vested interest in the perpetuation and celebration of a simpler way of life. Agricultural techniques, community festivals, and musical

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<sup>14</sup> James Werth, "How the War on Poverty Became the War on the Poor: Central Appalachia as a Case Example," American Psychological Association, <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2014/01/war-poverty.aspx> (accessed September 29, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2008), eBook, 88-89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 100-101.



traditions are all used as preservation mechanisms to elongate the life of a past time. Oral histories containing philosophies and teaching saturated with cultural idiosyncrasies pass along from one generation to the next. The cultural traditions encapsulated in this region are as diverse as its mountainous terrain. Despite Johnson's War on poverty, mass media stereotyping and exploitation, and the continual hardships faced by the majority of its inhabitants, Appalachia endures.

## CHAPTER 3

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SERPENT HANDLING

While several factors contribute to Appalachia's ability to thrive, none is more integral than the role of religion in Appalachian society. Nestled comfortably below the "Bible Belt," Central Appalachia plays home to a broad spectrum of religious denominations. Placed unsuspectingly along the highways and back roads of central Appalachia are a group of believers who are constantly battling the law and mainstream society. Answering to many different names and classifications, this group obeys a unique, fundamental interpretation of religious doctrine that promotes the handling of venomous snakes as a testament of faith and holiness. Despite both the potential health risks and the legal ramifications, these congregations continue to practice serpent handling under the assumption that their obedience to and anointing from God will protect them from harm. The serpent handling tradition is both a blessing and a curse for those who continue to observe the ritual. While these signs followers remain passionate about their belief system, outsiders are quick to cast harsh judgment of these congregations and their beliefs.

Populations outside of the central Appalachian area tend to be completely unfamiliar with the tradition and see serpent handling as an oddity, a primarily rural-religious phenomenon. Over the last half-century, this enigmatic group has battled demeaning media representations, public persecution, and legal investigations. In an effort to help combat, and possibly transform, these negative representations, documentarians and filmmakers flood the signs-following communities in hopes of articulating and rationalizing the beliefs of these congregations to the public. Oral histories, books, and various audio and video recordings seek to capture practitioners in their natural habitat in an effort to humanize the ritual and to give a voice to these signs-following

members. Yet, even these supposedly unbiased, scholarly accounts run the risk of creating a caricature of this group and advancing their notoriety and stigma.

Religious fundamentalists believe that they derive their meaning and purpose through direct communication and communion with God and “God’s intention and design.”<sup>17</sup> While not every Christian fundamentalist congregation is open to the idea of handling serpents, those congregations that do observe this practice view serpent handling as an intimate connection with the Holy Spirit. Led into the practice through a trance-like state, believers handle venomous snakes both to illustrate the power of the Word of God and to measure their commitment to God in hope of gaining eternal salvation.

The first documentation of serpent handling as a religious display was in Tennessee at the turn of the twentieth century. While no official records exist regarding the true birthplace of the ritual, the majority of accounts recognize George Hensley as its charismatic but troubled founding father.

Hensley, a renowned storyteller in his own right, circulated his personal account of his first serpent handling experience. Thomas Burton, a respected Appalachian scholar who has published several books on Appalachian Mountain religion, provides an in-depth narrative regarding Hensley’s presumed initial interactions with a venomous snake. According to Burton, Hensley went to the top of White Oak Mountain to pray and meditate on the scripture in the book of Mark. During his vigil, Hensley claims that a serpent appeared at his feet. Taken over by the power and grace of God, an inspired, entranced Hensley then picked up the snake. A feeling of invincibility filled his human body and he was moved to descend from the mountain and enter the Grasshopper Church of God. Once he was inside the church, members, moved by Hensley’s

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph W. Hood et al., *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 413 of 3451.

bravery and dedication to the scripture, joined in the serpent handling ritual.<sup>18</sup> While Hensley's personal life was in utter turmoil, he always returned to religion and followed signs as a source of solace and power. Led by Hensley's conviction and charisma, the practice spread throughout much of the central Appalachians. This display of holiness started to gain popularity with some of the Appalachian congregations, most notably those nondenominational, rural congregations loosely affiliated with Pentecostal-Holiness and Church of God traditions. When compelled by the Holy Ghost, these congregation still members handle poisonous serpents, a tangible testament of their faith and holiness.

Howard Dorgan's definition of "folk religion" articulates the distinctions between these sub-denominations and mainstream religious affiliation. In the introductory chapter of his book, The Airwaves of Zion: Radio and Religion in Appalachia, Dorgan defines "folk religion" as a subgroup whose members articulate "their passions through a regional vernacular that is often foreign to mainline denominations, and they hold doctrines strongly rooted in oral traditions, employing stylized sermonic techniques that in many cases are distinctly Appalachian...their audiences are generally below the national average in educational and other socioeconomic measures."<sup>19</sup> The serpent handling sects observed in this study meet Dorgan's criteria. Typically speaking, the preachers who lead these services are typically not formally educated ministers. The service itself is loosely structured, with no articulated schedule of events or program. Congregation members act on emotionalist and cathartic tendencies throughout the service. These tendencies are a result of a feeling or connection with the Holy Ghost. Musically oriented, the services are lively in nature, consisting of several compilations and medleys of old-time hymns. Members are typically from the mid-to-lower socioeconomic class, with the majority of

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<sup>18</sup> Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Dorgan, *The Airwaves of Zion: Radio and Religion in Appalachia* (Knoxville: Univ Tennessee Press, 1993), 21.

the members possessing a limited formal education. Today, many members of signs-following are starting to break out in society, graduating from high school and even attending college.<sup>20</sup> Their folk religion classification, however, continues to separate their belief system from mainstream religious doctrine.

The practice of serpent handling does not come without inherent physical risks. Serpent bites can lead to permanent damage, like a loss of fingers and limbs, and even fatalities.<sup>21</sup> Some believers of this faith choose not to seek medical attention, relying on the measure of their holiness and the prayers of their community to help ameliorate the injury. Within the past ten years, several members of signs-following congregations have met their fate by way of serpent bite. One such incident occurred in Lee County, Virginia in 2004. According to the Kingsport Times News, the Reverend Dwayne Long of the Rose Hill community was bitten by a snake during an Easter service. He did not seek medical treatment and passed away the following day.<sup>22</sup> In 2012, Pastor Mack Wolford died from complications of a snake bite during an outdoor service in Panther, West Virginia. Jamie Coots, as mentioned in the introduction to this study, passed away on February 15, 2014, after being bitten by a venomous snake during a service at his church, the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name, and then refusing treatment.<sup>23</sup> An ambulance service was called, but sources cannot determine if the call was made before Coots died.<sup>24</sup> Among these three deaths is one chord of commonality: the refusal of medical treatment

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<sup>20</sup> Ralph W. Hood, Jr, et. all, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 1648 of 3451.

<sup>21</sup> David McNamee, "Tackling venomous snake bites worldwide," *Lancet* 357, no. 9269 (May 26, 2001): 1680, OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed October 29, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> "Snakebite kills preacher: Should snake handlers be subject to prosecution?," Sullivan County – Kingsport Times News, 23 April 2012, [http://www.sullivan-county.com/nf0/ep/snake\\_bite.htm](http://www.sullivan-county.com/nf0/ep/snake_bite.htm) (accessed October 29, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> "Reality show snake-handling preacher dies -- of snakebite," CNN Wire, 16 Feb. 2014. Infotrac Newsstand., [http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA358762126&v=2.1&u=tel\\_a\\_etsul&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&asid=2bc7e21eeba581fa0216a00aa8a39b50](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA358762126&v=2.1&u=tel_a_etsul&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&asid=2bc7e21eeba581fa0216a00aa8a39b50) (accessed October 29, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> "perilous practice comes back to bite snake-handling pentecostal pastor," *Virginian Pilot* 1 June 2012: A3. Infotrac Newsstand.

at the time of the bite. In his book Taking up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky, David Kimbrough cites several interview responses where serpent handlers explain the reasoning behind the rejection of medical care. Some handlers embrace the belief that the divine will of God is unaffected by modern medicine.<sup>25</sup> Kimbrough goes on to note that early serpent handlers believed that bites were a display of a lack of faith or a lack of cleanliness and holiness in a person. Today, however, that notion is refuted and most serpent handlers now respect that a snake has the ability to bite anyone, regardless of their faith.<sup>26</sup>

The practice of serpent handling as a religious display intrigues the media and other onlookers, but the deaths associated with serpent bites attracts legal attention. Wording and format of the laws banning the practice of handling venomous snakes differ from state to state. The first state to pass a bill into law regarding this topic was Kentucky in 1940. Kentucky further revised its law in 1942 to state, “Any person who displays, handles or uses any kind of reptile in connection with any religious service or gathering shall be fined not less than fifty dollars (\$50) nor more than one hundred dollars (\$100).”<sup>27</sup> Currently, Kentucky’s state code is the only one which includes explicit mention of snake handling as a religious practice.<sup>28</sup> The remaining state laws ban the handling of dangerous reptiles, but these laws contain no references to religious services. North Carolina enacted laws banning the handling of venomous reptiles in 1949. Since that time, the state has added several addenda to the code for the purposes of clarifying the different scenarios in which the handling of reptiles is to be permitted or banned.

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[http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA291646029&v=2.1&u=tel\\_a\\_etsul&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&asid=1b9564a405923c7c51349598d70b247c](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA291646029&v=2.1&u=tel_a_etsul&it=r&p=STND&sw=w&asid=1b9564a405923c7c51349598d70b247c) (accessed October 29, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Serpent Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Durham, University of North Carolina Press: 1995), 35.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Kentucky Revised Statutes, 437.060.

<sup>28</sup> Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 81.

North Carolina's state code is, by far, the most in-depth, situation-specific in existence.<sup>29</sup>

Alabama once observed a law against the handling of reptiles in 1950, but has since overturned that law and does not include any mention of handling reptiles as a violation of the law.<sup>30</sup>

Virginia enacted a law banning the handling of reptiles in 1950 but the state code fails to mention the act as part of a religion doctrine: "It shall be unlawful for any person, or persons, to display, exhibit, handle or use any poisonous or dangerous snake or reptile in such a manner as to endanger the life or health of any person."<sup>31</sup> Tennessee's Code, revised in 1989, states that "It is an offense for a person to display, exhibit, handle, or use a poisonous or dangerous snake or reptile in a manner that endangers the life or health of any person."<sup>32</sup> Regardless of the legal implications that continue to haunt these congregations, several churches in southeastern Kentucky and northeast Tennessee continue to practice this faith. These rural Appalachians who live at this intersection of the Cumberland Gap is the population profiled throughout this study.

In the early 1900s, a fascination with George Hensley's rapidly growing congregation prompted news reporters to attend and chronicle these passionate and highly engaging services. Kimbrough suggests that the attention Hensley generated was born primarily of a fascination with watching him follow the signs.<sup>33</sup> Soon, newspapers like *The Chattanooga Daily Times* began running articles which criticized and ostracized Hensley and his followers. Soon, Kimbrough reports, congregations became muddied with "unbelievers and hecklers," Hensley's marriage crumbled, and he fled the area.<sup>34</sup> The negative attention generated by these initial commentaries placed a stigma on this population. Cursed with a sensationalized image of their

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<sup>29</sup> North Carolina State Codes, 14-416-418, 421-422.

<sup>30</sup> Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Virginia State Code, 18.2-313.

<sup>32</sup> Tennessee State Code, 39-17-101.

<sup>33</sup> Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 43-48.

intimate religious practices and beliefs, congregation members found it difficult to participate successfully in mainstream Christian congregations.

Ethnographers have attempted to capture the true essence of this religion and its followers by collecting and transcribing oral histories as well as by documenting church services. In the foreword of Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald's narrative collection The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith, Ralph Hood, Jr., notes that collections of stories passed down through the oral tradition and narrative histories are of the utmost importance when studying the followers of this faith. Hood states that "It is no wonder, then, that serpent handlers generally shun publicity. Seldom are they given a real voice. Others usually speak *for* them, interpreting their behavior to reflect preconceived story lines"<sup>35</sup> These oral histories, like Brown and McDonald's collection as well as Jimmy Morrow's narrative, Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus Name Tradition, are excellent representations of a branch of fundamental religious history and the people who believe and follow its doctrine. Within the scholarship suggested by Hood is where this study intends to situate itself.

The personal narratives harvested by serpent handling experts like Hood, Williamson, Brown, McDonald, and Burton create their own canon of religious scholarship. The opportunity to share their own personal stories in their own words creates social cues that would not be available to these religious fundamentalists otherwise. In an article titled "Positive Stigma: Examining Resilience and Empowerment in Overcoming Stigma," Margaret Shih argues that stigmatized populations are often neglected, receiving fewer social opportunities ... when

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<sup>35</sup> Ralph Hood, Foreword to *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith*, by Fred W. Brown and Jeanne McDonald (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 2000), xi.



compared to members of a general population.”<sup>36</sup> Signs-following believers are members of a stigmatized population because of several factors. First, signs-following congregations are not affiliated with a mainstream Christian denomination. While they share a religious history with the Church of God and closely mirror the practices of traditional Pentecostalism, signs-following congregations are considered standalone, independent churches which follow no shared doctrine. Secondly, the religious tenets of signs-following are “folk” in nature. Signs-following congregations observe practices and rituals that are unfamiliar to most mainstream Christian denominations. As stated previously, signs-following members are often members of a lower economic class and receive less formal education when compared to members of mainstream denominations. Finally, these signs-following congregations observe an illegal practice inside of their religious doctrine. All of these reasons, in addition to the caricatured depictions of these believers in the media, contribute to the stigmatization of the signs-following community. The academic attention directed towards this religious community constructs an additional opportunity for serpent handlers to have a voice. This study situates itself as an additional opportunity for this marginalized community to combat the stigma placed on them and their beliefs.

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<sup>36</sup> Margaret Shih, “Positive Stigma: Examining Resilience and Empowerment in Overcoming Stigma,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591(2004): 175.

## CHAPTER 4

### DEFINING AND EMPLOYING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The methodology employed in this study answers to many different names and variations. Discourse analysis is the study of text in the context of the cultural and material knowledge surrounding it. Also known as applied linguistics or sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis is the act of deconstructing sentences into individual parts with the intention of reconstructing the sentence to consider the cultural and material influences it references. While discourse analysis does consider the structure of sentences, it is not solely concerned with mechanics. Instead, discourse analysis looks beyond the physical text to unveil a situated meaning of the passage, conversation, or in this study, interview transcriptions. In his 1929 article entitled “The Status of Linguistics as a Science” Edward Sapir notes the importance of language as a study of culture when he states, “language is a guide to ‘social reality’.”<sup>37</sup> When we, as students and scholars, transcribe spoken language into text, we are afforded the opportunity to critique that text in order to gain further knowledge and insight into expanded meanings implicitly conveyed by the speaker. Sapir’s notion of social reality as a product of language is significant for this study because of the importance serpent handlers place on interpretation. Sapir explains that “language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation”<sup>38</sup> and it is because of these interpretive choices that people, in this case serpent handling pastors, are able to communicate extended contextual meaning with language. A thorough discourse analysis requires the conglomeration of four spheres: grammar; intentional language choices by the speaker or writer; the cultural meanings represented by the discourse;

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<sup>37</sup>Edward Sapir, “The Status of Linguistics as a Science,” *Language* 5, no. 4 (1929): 207-14, Website, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/sapir1.html> (accessed February 8, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

and the contextual information that constructs a material framework in which these spheres combine to produce a nuanced meaning.

For notable theorists like Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, discourse analysis is the consideration and critical investigation of text within the sociocultural context in order to derive a deeper, extended meaning. It is important to note that one of the primary responsibilities of discourse analysis is to consider the multimodal nature of meaning within text. In his signature work, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser opens with a reference to Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. Althusser notes that Marx first created the idea of "The state," the original theory that the establishment of power originates from within a public domain. For Marx, the state – police, laws, prisons, etc. – is enacted upon via the State Apparatus.<sup>39</sup> The upper class establishes the rules and regulations by which the lower classes are governed. Mostly a conversation about power, Marxian thought looks to the exchange of power within language. Althusser considered Marx's notion of the "(Repressive)" State Apparatus to function by violence. On the contrary, Althusser constructed a secondary State Apparatus, named the "Ideological State Apparatus," which, he stated, functions by ideology.<sup>40</sup> The similarity between the two terms can be somewhat confusing to a reader unfamiliar with this school of thought. To clarify, the Repressive State Apparatus (SA) functions on the larger, more public scale. The rules and regulations are created to control society. This control is enacted through violence and punishment. The Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) is the SA's cultural counterpart. The ISA functions mostly in the private domain, meaning that within private sectors,

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<sup>39</sup>Louis Althusser and Ben Brewster, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, Website <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm> (accessed February 8, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

the leaders of these sectors establish a secondary set of regulations and “norms.”<sup>41</sup> In a broad example, the communications ISA (that is, the press, radio, television, etc.), construct societal norms by which we measure ourselves. The mass media does not enforce their regulations on us; we see the societal examples depicted in shows (like “Snake Salvation”) and then judge our actions by those we watch on television.

There is more to this idea of the creation of a societal norm through the operation of the ISA. One must also consider what is simultaneously being rejected. In his lecture “Orders of Discourse,” Foucault explains that at the same time these ideological constructions are built, a similar force is also working to reject or prohibit the ideas in order to contest these norms.<sup>42</sup> The tension between right and wrong or true and false is a constant point of contention for serpent handlers, for example. Foucault’s theory that the “will to truth” arrives at a conclusion through the rejection of all things that oppose the manifestation of truth is easily applied to the serpent handling community.<sup>43</sup> As evidenced in the case studies to follow, serpent handlers combat the norms that attempt to dismantle their belief system and that govern the ways they are represented in the media. It is not uncommon for religious fundamentalists to reject modern notions and ideologies. Hood et. al.’s work on the psychology of fundamentalism illustrates this continuum:

Understanding fundamentalism from an intertextual perspective requires us to consider the manner in which fundamentalists come to their sacred text and interpret absolute truths – unwavering certainties that together construct a worldview filled with meaning and purpose in life. Based on this concern, the principle of intertextuality allows us to examine fundamentalism not only among the more obvious groups, but also among those that have been marginalized by the host culture and ignored too often by fundamentalist scholars. Yet we would suggest that these atypical groups are precisely the ones that... protest most

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, “Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text: A Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Rutledge, 1981), 52-53.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

strongly against modernity in seeking to maintain certain text-based absolutes that provide them with uniqueness and identity.<sup>44</sup>

Here, Hood and his colleagues describe the construction of a duality of ISAs inside of religious fundamentalism. First, they assert that fundamentalists construct their own absolutes by establishing their version of literal interpretation of a sacred text. But, even this construction is a communal social action. Second, the same group protests against modernity, which can be interpreted as a threat to their absolute truth. The fact that fundamentalists, especially serpent handling believers, use a text to construct and defend a religious doctrine creates the case for their own words to be interpreted in order to extrapolate an absolute meaning or identity. The conflict becomes, then, a tension between the desire for an absolute truth and the opportunity for alternate interpretations of the same text made imperative by the recognition of this ISA.

In extending the function of discourse analysis, this study will take transcriptions of publicly and privately reordered interviews with four serpent handling preachers. Within each of those interviews, the study will focus on the extended information shared by the preachers. To borrow from sociolinguistic scholar James Paul Gee, this thesis will analyze each interview by observing the following six concepts: semiotic building, world building, activity building, socioculturally-situated identity and relationships, political building, and connection building.<sup>45</sup> Semiotic building analyzes the signs and systems used by the speaker to construct situated meaning; world building relates to how the speaker constructs reality; activity building is the depiction of activity and actions through those situated meanings; the socioculturally-situated identity looks to the ways in which the speaker conveys the ways of feeling, knowing, and

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<sup>44</sup> Hood, Ralph W. et al., *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 1588 of 3451.

<sup>45</sup> James Paul Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis Theory and Method*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 85-6.

believing; political power displays the speaker's interpretation of "social goods" or power; and finally, connection building is the speaker's way of connecting the past and the present.<sup>46</sup>

By marrying together Gee's pillars of analysis and the frameworks provided by Foucault and Althusser, this study is able to create connections between serpent handling pastors and their own constructions of the absolute truth as commanded by their religious doctrine. Gee's focus on building within each of the six pillars of analysis speaks to the assembly of Foucault's "will to truth." To clarify, a speaker establishes, or builds, his own definition and defense of the ideologies and truths he assumes through the construction of his discourse. But, before one can construct a truth or a dogmatic absolute, there must be some establishment of understanding. Identifying how each of the four pastors analyzed in this study grapples with modes of understanding will help to articulate the ideological constructions being erected by this marginalized fundamentalist apparatus. Hood et al. argue that "the reality and meaning of their worldview dictate that they continue as obedient followers of their Lord. To do this, they must continue to study the text. And as they do so, their worldview of serpent handling is not only maintained, but also is enlarged with the incorporation of other related trust that serve to enhance meaning."<sup>47</sup> The idea of "truth" continuously acknowledged throughout this excerpt relates directly to what these believers consider a "literal" interpretation of biblical scripture. In this sense, their "literal interpretation" is a shared reading of a particular collection of passages contained in a specific version of the Holy Bible. Signs followers agree on a shared interpretation and understanding of truth and meaning. They have created, in essence, a culture of language meaning as a community. Signs-following believers use a communal mode of understanding to seek out the truth and to practice a specific display of obedience to their higher power.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ralph Hood et. al., *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 1666 of 3451.

## CHAPTER 5

### GEORGE HENSLEY

George Hensley is the self-titled father of modern-day serpent handling. While evidence of serpents and their association with religion existed long before Hensley handled one, most published work regarding the signs-following tradition credits Hensley as the first Trinitarian signs-follower to take up a serpent in the name of Mark Chapter Sixteen.<sup>48</sup> While no fully transcribed interviews or recorded videotapes of interviews conducted with Hensley are accessible, several newspaper articles do quote the preacher directly. This study will look to the articles where reporters quote Hensley directly to provide the primary source material for this discourse analysis. Additionally, this thesis will use Thomas Burton's chapter "George Hensley" in his book Serpent-Handling Believers as context for Hensley's background. The notion of embracing spectacle as a mode of understanding seems to permeate throughout Hensley's quotations. The conclusions drawn throughout this chapter reveal an individual who embraces and perpetuates the spectacle all for the sake of spreading the signs-following doctrine across the Appalachian region.

Before diving into the news articles that name Hensley specifically and identify him as part of the signs-following congregation, the research must first address the issues encountered when using primary source material of this type of analysis. Newspaper articles tend to sensationalize the practice of signs-following, especially the practice of serpent handling, because it offers an element of entertainment and shock to its readers. Thomas Burton describes newspaper commentary, "the papers hear about what is going on and eat it up – the best show in

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<sup>48</sup> Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 7.

town.”<sup>49</sup> Ralph Hood explains that “newspapers typically report on the deaths or bites of handlers but seldom on the actual faith, simply because deaths under unusual circumstances sell more copies than the straightforward explanation of religious beliefs.”<sup>50</sup> Hood and Williamson reveal that “most historians and scholars have relied on media documentation of serpent handling, and this has largely followed from reporting on charismatic preachers... or, as the practice [of serpent handling] became more common, on bites and death.”<sup>51</sup> Even Jimmy Morrow’s narrative speaks to the sensationalism of the religion in print, “In a 1940 issue of *Life Magazine* “there was a picture of an old woman handling a serpent, just a picture with no name... [Ms. Fig] told me how *Life Magazine* had said such hurtful things about the serpent handlers.”<sup>52</sup> Each of these sources speaks to the bias presentation of information regarding serpent handlers and their faith. One can postulate that the ulterior motive behind these news articles valued entertainment over professional objectivity. While this bias does tinge these primary sources, a study of this subject without mention George Hensley would be incomplete. There is merit in the effort to extrapolate meaning from sensationalized articles like the ones referenced in this study. Because so little was recorded of George Hensley’s personal thoughts and feelings, oral histories, like the one mentioned in Burton’s Serpent Handling Believers, and news articles are our only remaining artifacts of the life of such a charismatic figure who continues to be credited for the dissemination of this belief system throughout the Appalachian corridor. As a result, the primary source analysis performed throughout this chapter will maintain

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Ralph Hood, “Foreword,” in *The Serpent handlers: Three Families and Their Belief*, xi.

<sup>51</sup> Ralph Hood and W. Paul Williamson, *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent Handling Tradition* (Univ. of California Press, 2008), Kindle, 579 of 4225.

<sup>52</sup> Jimmy Morrow and Ralph Hood, Jr, *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus' Name Tradition* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2005), 9.



an awareness that even the direct quotations were at the discretion of the reports and that it is possible for relevant contextual information to not be included within the article.

The first article of note, “Preacher Juggles Snake Again, Says it Bit Him,” published in 1938, includes several instances where Hensley speaks more of showmanship and spectacle than actual scripture. The newspaper article covers a church meeting just outside of Tampa, Florida, one week after a previous meeting. Unlike the past service, congregation members claim that this time Hensley suffered a snake bite while handling a cannery snake. While one must recognize that the direct quotations included in this article were at the total discretion of the article’s unnamed author, the content and context of the marked direct quotations display evidence that Hensley’s first obligation was that of entertainment, not salvation. The first direct quotation shares some historical information about the practice of serpent handling. Hensley claims, “I’ve been handling serpents for 23 years” he said, “and I’ll handle half a dozen at a time. I’ll handle as many as they catch.”<sup>53</sup> According to the quotation, Hensley shares that his serpent handling experience began twenty-three years ago. To relate this analysis back to Glee’s six pillars of discourse analysis, Hensley’s primary mode of communicating information is via the activity building action. He mentions the explicit act of handling serpents twice in a relatively short period of time, assuming that the quotation mentioned in the article did not eliminate any additional information. His explicit mention of “a half a dozen”<sup>54</sup> snakes implies that, in this particular excerpt, Hensley’s intention is to establish power over the congregation through a display of serpent handling. With the sociocultural assumption that the greater majority of the population, and especially those in attendance at this particular service, are leery or cautious of snakes and the inherent dangers they bring, noting that he would, without hesitation, handle at

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<sup>53</sup> “Preacher Juggles Snake Again, Says It Bit Him,” Tampa Morning Tribune, March 9, 1936, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

least six deadly serpents establishes power and control over the congregation. He uses his political building power to establish the handling of snakes as his “social good.” But, the creation of this social good, for Hensley, is not completely his own construction.

Hood and his colleagues describe the four primary tenets that serpent handlers use to support their actions: a mandate to handle, the power to handle, the danger involved in handling, and the confirmation of blessing on the believers.<sup>55</sup> These pillars speak directly to Althusser’s concept of the Ideological State Apparatus. For serpent handling believers, the act of handling a venomous serpent is both a cultural and a religious apparatus. Signs-following believers adhere to a strict, fundamentalist regiment of lifestyle and communal truths. Passed down by both family and charismatic leaders like Hensley, the tenants of this belief system – following the signs and living a religiously defined “holy” life - foster an institution separated from those of other fundamentalist congregations, such as the Pentecostal Holiness. In Hensley’s case, this display of serpent handling does not cultivate repression; instead, he enforces this power as a showcase of his successfully operating under this religious apparatus. His handling of serpents is an exhibit of how the apparatus manifested in cultural and religion steer both his own ideologies as well as his physical actions. The question then becomes, does this serpentine apparatus truly allow for Hensley’s power.

Hensley’s own claims of experience and bravery further solidify the power-building within the statement. He attempts to establish himself as the elder of a religious practice as well as the officiating and unyielding leader. His use of the pronoun “they” separates himself from the rest of the congregation. Instead of taking the initiative to gather the serpents he wants to use during his services, Hensley charges the congregation with the hunting and gathering of these serpents.

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<sup>55</sup> Hood et. al., *Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 1692 of 345.1

The tone of the excerpt nods, once more, to the socioculturally-situated identity and relationship that he has with his congregation. The ending sentence, “I’ll handle as many as they catch” dismisses the preconception that handlers must but under the anointing before handling a serpent. The clause “as many as they catch” alludes to the fact that he is not threatened by the multiplication of serpents. What is not mentioned in this quotation, however, is any evidence that he must be under the anointing before handling any number of snakes. Hensley fails to include any mention of the handler’s requirement to receive the anointing before taking up a serpent. This clear omission does not speak favorably to his respect for the institution. Kane, as cited in Hood and Williams’ Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent Handling Sect describes the anointing as “the belief that the Holy Ghost moves upon the believer and take possession of his faculties, imparting to him supernatural gifts, which qualify him for serve to the Lord.”<sup>56</sup> Hensley’s quotation does not lead the reader to believe that the anointment is the gift, as described by Kane. The lack of spiritual intervention needed, for Hensley at least, attacks the serpent handling apparatus. Instead, his actions convey a will to create a spectacle rather than a perpetuation of the apparatus in motion. This attack is problematic in that it displaces the power mandated by the apparatus because it counteracts the conventional institution of serpent handling and the purpose of signs-following. Hensley’s insistency supports the operation within this highly charged doctrine without the guidance of the religious and cultural apparatuses. In contrast, the objective of the apparatus of signs-following, and specifically serpent handling, is to facilitate a demonstration of a tangible holiness. Hensley’s dismal of the apparatus while in a position of power in the congregation introduces the reader to the notion of patriarchal power as a counter-apparatus.

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<sup>56</sup> Kane Cited in Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 1554 of 4225.

The second direct quotation mentioned in the “Preacher Juggles” article does cite requirements for handling serpents but then immediately contradicts this prerequisite. Hensley is quoted as declaring, “‘This is a deadly viper,’ he said, ‘and you have to have a holiness that makes your bones shake to handle him. Get your hand in that box and it will show you how close you are to glory.’”<sup>57</sup> This quotation includes two completely contradictory messages. The first message, “‘This is a deadly viper and you have to have a holiness that makes your bones shake to handle him,’” is a description of the anointment. The anointment is sometimes described as an embodied reality, often akin to trance.<sup>58</sup> Hood and Williamson devote a large section of Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent Handling Sect to the description of the anointing. The sociologists use Goodman’s definition of trance as a separation from reality marked by stages.<sup>59</sup> William Wood compares the anointing to automatism, a set of brief unconscious behaviors.<sup>60</sup> In the signs-following tradition, and especially in the serpent-handling tradition, believers must be directed by God to act on any of the five signs. This anointment, described by Byron Crawford in Burton’s Serpent Handling Believers, protects the believers from harm and thus proves to the believer, the congregation, and to God that the signs followers are living right in the belief.<sup>61</sup> The description “holiness that makes your bones shake” relates directly to the power that the anointing has over one’s body. The political building blocks of this excerpt introduce the notion of the anointing of the Holy Ghost as the “social good” that believers should seek. Yet, directly after Hensley’s demand that one must be under the power of the anointment, he discards that precursor and orders a dare to the congregation. His statement

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<sup>57</sup> --, “Preacher Juggles Snake Again, Says It Bit Him,” Tampa Morning Tribune, March 9, 1936, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 2227 of 4225.

<sup>59</sup> Goodman Cited in Hood and Williamson, *Them That Believe*, 1458 of 4225.

<sup>60</sup> William Wood, *Culture and Personality Aspects of the Pentecostal Holiness Religion* (Walter de Grueter, 1995), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 28.

“Get your hand in that box and it will show you how close you are to glory” completely renounces his prior statement regarding the anointment. Clearly, he symbolically challenges his congregation members to measure their faith and holiness by physically placing their hands in a box containing a venomous snake. His use of the word “Get” demonstrates that this statement is a command intended to force congregation members to perform the act of serpent-handling. To reiterate, modern-day serpent handlers cling steadfast to the notion that one should never – under any circumstance – attempt to handle a dangerous serpent unless the person is under the full and uninterrupted anointment of God. Hensley’s commandment encourages attendees to test their faith, which completely contradicts the need for the anointment. Here, he attempts to construct an activity in his own image. He intentionally sets himself apart from the congregation. When compared to the aforementioned narrative, Hensley does not require himself to be under the anointment before handling serpents; he perpetuates that notion by directing congregation members to handle serpents outside of the anointing. Again, Hensley’s direct quotation speaks more to showmanship and spectacle than to a religious doctrine. He is truly an exhibitionist who renounces the need for scriptural support, nor does he require his patronage to be directed by a supreme power when enacting the signs. To reconnect with Foucault’s *Order of Discourse* and Althusser’s ISA construction, what Hensley exhibits here is a reversal of the locus of control. Foucault describes the tension between reason and madness in an effort to showcase how society displaces power through rejection and dismissal. Ironically, what is seen here is that Hensley acts as his own sociocultural apparatus that establishes his own power of faith as a supreme force. This conflicting nature of Hensley’s command operates as an apparatus of rejection. More clearly stated, Hensley observes the religious apparatus of serpent handling and its requirement of the anointment to maintain some level of safety and objectivity in the practice. Within that

same religious apparatus, however, Hensley attempts to construct his own sub-apparatus in which his commands trump the necessity of anointment. Like the madman in Foucault's analogy, Hensley's own words and actions carry no currency because his apparatus fails. This failure is displayed by this particular congregation's dismissal of Hensley's sermon. The reporter identifies no other instances of congregation members handling serpents. Hensley's effort to encourage members to handle serpents ultimately fails.

Hensley's third direct quotation cited in the newspaper article features an ironic adverbial clause which signals the need for a special feeling Hensley encourages, "any time you feel ready now, grandma" he said to a woman kneeling at his side, "get the serpent from the box."<sup>62</sup> The quotation opens with the qualification "any time you feel ready now." Here, Hensley respects the power of the anointment and directs the lady to observe her own spiritual instinct before attempting to handle a serpent. The second section of the passage, "get the serpent from the box," when compared, is similar to the demand in the previous quotation. In this instance, Hensley's quotation acts as a proviso, a contract between himself and the elder member of the church. The agreement in the second portion of this excerpt displays Hensley's first set of direct instructions to a particular congregation member. For a second time in this interview, Hensley's use of the imperative "get" commands the recipient, in this case "grandma," to, upon the receipt of the anointing, delve into the box. In this instance, he establishes himself as her spiritual guide by using the word "grandma" to create a familial connection. While grandparents are typically the wiser, more experienced members of a family, Hensley's use of the term is an inversion of the normal relationship constructed by society. Instead, he pulls on the connotation that a grandmother is a member of an older generation, one requiring assistance and direction. Hensley's displacement of the elders in attendance is directly pointed at discrediting their

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

experiences. In a congregation so founded on the leadership of its older members, Hensley seeks a way to reverse this hierarchy. Hensley feeds off of the pre-established power structure within this religious community. Hensley's pedagogical methods are repressive in the sense that he imposes an age-defined cast system on his congregation. He might not be the oldest member of this congregation, so he is compelled to establish his dominance through both an exhibition of handling serpents as well as a command to others to do the same.

The "Preacher Juggles" article closes with a direction quotation which places Hensley outside of the ritualistic belief of serpent handling altogether. Hensley describes, "I don't say much about it and not many people know about it" he said. "I keep it quiet because in some places they want to charge me a license for running a snake show. When they do that I just move outside the city limits." This quotation demonstrates Hensley's separation between himself and the signs-following belief. Instead of using this interview as a retort against those state and local officials who claim that he practices this ritual as a form of entertainment, Hensley offers no retort. The relationship Hensley creates between the local officials and himself is one of a continuous game of cat-and-mouse. Each time officials confront Hensley's actions and mandate that he pay for a wildlife license, Hensley flees. In this instance Hensley's confession shows the reader that, while his charisma and imperative commands may work on the impressionable congregation, he is powerless against the law. Completely contradicting the strong conviction exhibited in his serpent-handling displays, Hensley confesses that, instead of fighting to defend his beliefs, he runs. More importantly, Hensley never refutes the claim that his services are merely "snake shows." The lack of retort in this quotation solidifies for the reader Hensley's apparently acknowledgment that his representation and respect for the religious apparatus is flawed. His acknowledgement of the (repressive) State Apparatus carried out by law

enforcement does showcase his ability to identify apparatuses outside of his own cultural and self-constructed ones. Hensley constructs a passive-aggressive response by moving “outside the city limits” to show his complete disinterest in promoting or defending this religious practice. In no way does this quotation showcase evidence that Hensley disagrees with the classification of his services as a snake show. One can extrapolate that Hensley’s passion is for entertaining the masses and not for spreading the Gospel.

In a final demonstration of the separation from his congregation, George Hensley’s final words articulate the power of fear in serpent handling. In Burton’s chapter on Hensley, Reporter Don Kimsey of the Atlanta Journal witnessed the church services where Hensley met his fate. In a dramatic quotation which cites Hensley’s last words, Kimsey described the last moments of Hensley’s life: “He fought off death for several hours, in great agony and constantly belching blood. Just before he writhed, twisted and gasped his last breath, Hensley groaned to me: ‘The snake would not have struck – if fear had not come over someone here.’”<sup>63</sup> As witnessed in the passages cited earlier, Hensley constructs his own apparatus wherein he dictates his own ideologies. The relationship building characteristics of his final words create an immovable space between himself and his belief. To revisit a direct quotation of Hensley’s from earlier, Hensley loosely stated the requirements for “safely” handling serpents when he noted that one must “have a holiness that makes your bones shake to handle him ... it will show you how close you are to glory.” Unfortunately for Hensley, his holiness was not able to overcome the deadly venom surging through his body. Instead, he passed away with the displacement of blame fresh off his tongue. Instead of holding himself to the same standards as he held his congregation, Hensley glorified himself, placing himself above others. Yet, with his final breath, he

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<sup>63</sup> Kimsey Cited in Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 57.



acknowledges that the power from within his congregations was enough to determine his own fate.

The charismatic nature with which George Hensley encourages his followers to enact the signs mentioned in Mark Sixteen creates a spectacle. Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle notes several pillars that help to define and identify occurrences of spectacle. In the chapter entitled "The Commodity as Spectacle," Debord articulates its characteristics. In particular, Stanza 18 speaks to the very nature that George Hensley exhibits:

Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to *make one see* the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for the other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But, the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Where there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself.<sup>64</sup>

Hensley's showcase of serpent-handling runs outside the realm of religious ritual, thus creating a spectacle. As Debord points out, simple images set forth to "make one see" through multiple senses is the foundation of a spectacle. In this specific instance Hensley does not set out to persuade believers to join in his faith. Instead, he cares more about showmanship and competition. His attempts to command the congregation echo this community's literal interpretations of the Book of Mark. For example, the KJV Bible uses the auxiliary verb "shall," which signs-following believers translate as "will." Hensley, especially in the direct quotations cited above, emphasizes the luster of invisibility. He feels as though he cannot be harmed by the venom expelled through the snakes he handles. Not so much a religious victory, Hensley places more emphasis on the commands themselves. By analyzing Hensley's actions alongside

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<sup>64</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, excerpted in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, Ed Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Blackwell, 2006), 120-1.

Debord's description of the spectacle, one is able to deduce that Hensley extends Debord's use of touch to create images which produce a spectacle. The sight and touch of handling a venomous serpent is something one must witness first hand in order to fully capture the full effects of the dramatics. Thus, Hensley's tent and camp meetings serve as the breeding ground for the spectacle.

Serpent handling congregations cultivate a community of reading that produces a shared interpretation of biblical scripture. For this community, their discursive apparatus supports their The discourse analysis of George Hensley's direct quotations featured in the newspaper articles of the early 1900s speaks in opposition of the serpent handlers' religious apparatus. While he makes sure to announce his role as the creator of this belief system, Hensley uses only commands to direct his congregation. The relationship between Hensley and the media beckons a comparison to Debord's model of the spectacle. While current mass media efforts commodify and exploit signs-following believers, Hensley reverses the order and uses the media to advance his own apparatus. In each of the articles consulted here, Hensley exploits the opportunity to broadcast his own brand of narrowly focused serpent handling doctrine. The interview responses credited to Hensley only facilitate the media's efforts of providing a sensationalist representation of this fundamentalist community. Hensley evangelized throughout the Appalachian region for most of his adult life. As chronicled by Burton, Hensley was troubled by his own demons.<sup>65</sup> He suffered through several failed relationships and a tarnished reputation. He hopped from one town to the next preaching a passionate gospel that even he himself could not sustain. Hensley's charisma, as acknowledged in Morrow's narrative as well as the collection of oral histories compiled by Burton, showcase a man who had a zest for life and an insatiable urge to showcase the power he harnessed from the scripture. Operating under his own religious apparatus where he

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<sup>65</sup> Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers* 55-58.

cultivated new signs-following believers to continue his doctrine, Hensley attempts to disseminate his belief system through exhibition. Through the responses found within these interviews lies a man who attracted his own disciples. Sadly, Hensley's parting words facilitated their own spectacle, where he blames the congregation he cultivated for his untimely death.

## CHAPTER 6

### ANDREW HAMBLIN

Andrew Hamblin is the youngest pastor analyzed in this study. Born on March 29, 1991, Hamblin's background is not like most conservative serpent handlers. Hamblin was not raised in a serpent-handling church. His childhood church was Free Will Baptist; they did observe the practice of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Hamblin became a professional, decorated bluegrass banjo musician by the time he was thirteen. He became a father at the age of fifteen. He yearned for a more structured, conservative lifestyle and converted to the holiness faith soon after the birth of his first son.<sup>66</sup> Intrigued by the signs-following ritual after watching a documentary about serpent-handling, Hamblin sought to experience the phenomenon first-hand.<sup>67</sup> The first serpent handling church Hamblin attended in 2009 was ministered by Jamie Coots, who will be profiled later in this study. Hamblin founded his first church, the Tabernacle Church of God, in 2011, only two short years after picking up his first serpent. His church is host to a congregation of reformed young people who observe a more lenient code of holiness than other more conservative congregations.<sup>68</sup> Hamblin gained his initial notoriety when he preached the funeral of fellow serpent handler Mack Wolford, who died of a snake bite in May of 2012.<sup>69</sup> Leading a young congregation, Hamblin uses to social media sites and news outlets to help publicize their services and spread the gospel to younger generations.<sup>70</sup> The methodology employed by Hamblin to reach out to the community and welcome outsiders into what was once

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<sup>66</sup> Lauren Pond, "A Pastor's Legacy," <http://www.fotovisura.com/user/LaurenPondPhoto/view/a-pastor-s-legacy> (accessed October 28, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Lauren Hansen, "Meet the Millennial Who Is a Serpent-handling Pastor," *The Week*, July 7, 2014, <http://theweek.com/article/index/264311/meet-the-millennial-who-is-a-serpent-handling-pastor>. (accessed August 30, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Pond, "A Pastor's Legacy."

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

regarded as a private, intimate service is in strict opposition to more conservative congregations. Previous generations exhibited a shyness about their practices because of exploitation from the media's exaggeration and stereotyping of the practice of serpent handling and its framing of their congregations as uneducated and cultish. Newspaper reporters and journalists came only during emotional peaks, when a congregation member died from a snake bite or a congregation member was arrested for violating laws against handling or housing venomous snakes. Hamblin looks to reverse the conservative nature of the signs-following congregation by opening its doors to outsiders so that curious spectators can witness the services for themselves. Hamblin's objective is to spread the gospel and make a positive change in people's lives.

In the analysis that follows, Hamblin's responses to questions regarding his openness to allowing visitors and camera crews inside of his church services raise questions about the legitimacy of his faith. Hensley and Hamblin share in a persuasive evangelical charisma. Both preachers rescued themselves from lives of sin, Hensley from moonshining and promiscuity<sup>71</sup> and Hamblin from drugs.<sup>72</sup> Hamblin uses personal anecdotes coupled with stories of his congregation members' tainted past as proof of how the gospel can change one's life. While no juried academic research exists on Hamblin and his congregation, several news reporters and anthropologists have had the opportunity to interview the young pastor and witness his services first-hand. These news articles, blogs, and video clips serve as primary source material that includes direct quotations from Hamblin that help the reader gain insight into his own personal doctrine. Discursive analysis of Hamblin's interview responses reveals a modern representation of a Web-based evangelism. He, too, uses the notion of a society of the spectacle in order to promote both his television efforts and his church services.

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<sup>71</sup> Burton, *Serpent-Handling Believers*, 44.

<sup>72</sup> Hansen, np.

The two interviews this study will dissect were published within four short months of one another. The first interview analyzed in this study is a press conference style interview held outside of the Campbell County, Tennessee, Courthouse shortly after Hamblin entered a plea of not guilty on charges of violating the state ban on possessing venomous reptiles. This press-conference-style interview includes Hamblin's retort against the notion that he is a "publicity hound." Hamblin, like Hensley, manipulates the attention of the media in order to generate interest in his congregation and in signs-following doctrine as a whole. In each of his responses to the myriad of reporters throwing questions at the 23-year-old, Hamblin continuously deflects any blame or wrong-doing away from himself. He also charges others to aid in his fight. Through comparisons of his church with those more mainstream congregations, Hamblin's responses showcase the similarities between signs-following churches and other mainstream denominations. The second interview, filmed one-on-one outside of Jamie Coots's church soon after Coots's death, serves as Hamblin's final soliloquy expressing his personal thoughts on his own signs-following belief.

Readers of this study may be unfamiliar with the historical events which transpired to bring Hamblin in front of a swarm of news reporters. For context, the reader must understand that the events leading up to this media interview were intentional actions carried out by Andrew Hamblin and his congregation. First, Hamblin and Jamie Coots agreed to star in a reality series about their religious beliefs and the day-to-day obligations required of them both as pastors. Secondly, and possibly because of the actions displayed during the reality show, TWRA officials confronted Hamblin and seized over fifty venomous snakes from the basement of his church. Thirdly, and up until this interview, Hamblin vehemently denounced the authority of the TWRA to enter into his church. Hamblin spins the seizure of the snakes into an infringement of his

freedom to practice his religion. Having been provided the contextual information surrounding the situation, the audience can now recognize that Hamblin is reshaping the reporter's question to, once again, place him in the limelight.

Dressed in a suit and tie and displaying an American flag pin on his lapel, Andrew Hamblin clutches a tattered Bible as he fields questions regarding the lingering effects of media attention on his family and church members. The clip opens with a reporter questioning Hamblin about his current relationship with the National Geographic Channel. Hamblin responds, "I mean as far as a planned season two – no, there's not. But, as you know, it would not surprise me one bit what, after all that has happened in this state, that the show didn't pick back up and if it does, it's not going to be centered around hunting snakes."<sup>73</sup> Hamblin's response to the reporter's question demonstrates his desire to be in control. First, Hamblin shares with the audience his own acknowledgement that, in terms of the National Geographic Channel's decision not to host "Snake Salvation" for a second season, he has no influence over the decision whether or not to extend the reality series's lifecycle. Hamblin's use of the declarative "no, there's not" leaves no room for debate. His statement begins and ends with negative reinforcement. "No" and "not" serve as the bookends holding the truth that the likelihood of a second season of "Snake Salvation" is nonexistent. Following this dismal phrase, Hamblin interjects with the discourse marker "but" to signal to the audience that his following remark will be in complete opposition to its predecessor. His phrase "would not surprise me one bit" reveals to the audience his desire for the show to continue. His hope seems to be that this court case, which places him and his constituents in the spotlight, will generate enough interest to justify a second season. Commonly, if a reality series lasts only through its pilot season, the cancellation is a direct result of lack of public interest.

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<sup>73</sup> "Andrew Hamblin Initial Appearance."

A presentation of the mass media ISA is no more obvious than within the episodes of “Snake Salvation.” Hamblin acknowledges his participation within the National Geographic’s apparatus with his reply. He asserts, “And if it does, it’s not going to be centered around hunting snakes.”<sup>74</sup> The first section of this declaration, “and if it does,” merely qualifies the command that follows. This qualifier serves as the final reminder to Hamblin that he ultimately does not hold the power in the relationship between himself and the television network. The sociocultural identity constructed by Hamblin is in direct opposition to the image portrayed on “Snake Salvation.” The pastor sees himself as a modern-day steward of serpent handling and the television channel creates the image of an Appalachian snake chaser. National Geographic’s construction of this media apparatus creates an off-kilter view of snake harvesting as a primary component of the serpent handling faith. The construction of each episode speaks to the sensationalized view of signs-following believers as motivated snake worshippers. Hamblin recognizes an opportunity to reclaim the power in this tumultuous relationship as he denounces National Geographic’s direction of the show. He emphasizes, “It’s not going to be centered on hunting snakes because that’s not what I’m about.” Straddling between the classifications of declaration and exclamation, Hamblin’s closing sentence is his final discursive attempt to control the network’s decisions about the reality series as well as the construction of his image as portrayed on the show itself. He denounces the caricature of “Andrew Hamblin – Snake Hunter” and demands that the station reincarnate his public image. A look back at “Snake Salvation’s” inaugural season illustrates evidence that the reality series was more animal-driven than doctrine-driven. Each of the sixteen episodes contained some element of snake hunting. In addition, National Geographic chose to include exchanges where other people featured on the show display some signs of doubt. In a segment of the episode “Lethal Poison” Andrew and a

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<sup>74</sup> “Andrew Hamblin Initial Appearance.”



companion are out hunting for snakes. They happen upon a large den and are able to capture eight snakes. Hamblin and his friend attempt, unsuccessfully, to contain all eight snakes in a small wooden box. As the snakes try to escape, Hamblin reaches down and grabs one of the escapees by the tail explaining “that’s what the Lord told Moses to do.” And his friend retorts, “That’s Moses. You ain’t Moses are you?”<sup>75</sup>

In a separate episode, Hamblin expresses the justification for the openness he and his congregation foster. The inclusion of this segment within the “Snake Salvation” episode and definitely within the media apparatus of this network, pushes the limits of the ideologies and framework the television network imposes on their depiction of this particular congregation. Hamblin states, “I do believe that, you know, God put me on this earth to teach people that there’s five signs, nine gifts....all different sorts of things that’s administrations of the spirit. It is a fine line between wanting to welcome people and being cautious. And, that’s the reason a lot of churches will not welcome outsiders because they never know who it is that’s coming in. And me, I take that risk, I welcome people.”<sup>76</sup> Hamblin casts himself as a modern-day internet-evangelist preaching the gospel. He wants to use the spectacle of a reality show to communicate to sinners in the public sphere who are seeking a savior. The oppressive, limiting nature of the network’s harshly constructed ISA acts more like a repressive state apparatus than an ideological apparatus. The network fails to consider the opinions and considerations of the population it profiles. This failure to acknowledge the wishes of its subject is repressive in nature. But Hamblin fights against this apparatus in a discursive manner. He pursues every opportunity he

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<sup>75</sup> “Copperheads! Copperheads! Everywhere!” Youtube, Flash Video File, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r52LEAgmIyQ&list=PLivjPDlt6ApS1QeDCKx67gZTRB\\_Cl2\\_Sj&index=20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r52LEAgmIyQ&list=PLivjPDlt6ApS1QeDCKx67gZTRB_Cl2_Sj&index=20) (accessed Oct 28, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> “A Curious Spectator,” Youtube, Flash Video File, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV2lw4aXdHk&list=PLivjPDlt6ApS1QeDCKx67gZTRB\\_Cl2\\_Sj&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV2lw4aXdHk&list=PLivjPDlt6ApS1QeDCKx67gZTRB_Cl2_Sj&index=3) (accessed Oct 28, 2014).

has to evangelize. Hamblin understands that the reality show's editing trims down these less adventurous clips. So, with each opportunity that presents itself, Hamblin is quick to reiterate his own religious ideological apparatus that constructs a common understanding and interpretation of the Bible as well as a communal effort to follow a fundamentalist lifestyle that allows for some leniency for its membership. Because of Hamblin's young age, he is able to identify the new apparatuses afforded within this ever-changing technical era. The social media apparatus has, over the past seven years, evolved to become a major figure in today's communication patterns Hamblin takes advantage of society's voyeuristic nature and displays his beliefs and his congregation to the public in an effort to reach out to the public. He feels as though he is commanded to do so, as he stated in the "A Curious Spectator" clip. Instead of being completely exploited by this media outlet, Hamblin translates that exploitation into his own publicity campaign.

In the same response, Hamblin shifts his focus from a power struggle between him and the National Geographic Channel to the battle cry of the freedoms afforded to American citizens. Hamblin sympathizes, "we are in this country, the greatest country on earth, United States of America. I've got veterans here to support me that fought for my right to be able to worship this way."<sup>77</sup> One is able to deduce that Hamblin recognizes the presence of reporters as an opportunity to solicit support through connecting his campaign with patriotism. Much like a speech written for an elected official, Hamblin feels compelled to create this political bridge connecting his intentions and the American people. He specifically mentions the support of veterans and that the U.S. is the "greatest county on earth." Measuring the authenticity and genuineness of Hamblin's statement is difficult. More straightforwardly, though, Hamblin's intention was to create connections with the audience members present during the interview as

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<sup>77</sup> "Andrew Hamblin Initial Appearance."

well as those extended audience members who would later hear Hamblin's message via Youtube. Hamblin wants the audience to recognize his legitimacy as a person worthy of support. He demonstrates his value by mentioning the support he has from former servicemen. Hamblin perhaps assumes that by building up the reputation of our country and by mentioning veteran support, he will encourage audience members to rally behind him in his quest to overturn Tennessee state laws. Hamblin plays to the nationalistic arena where the appreciation of veterans, a love of country, and freedom of religion generates the power needed to rise above his oppressors. Here, Hamblin solicits support by creating a connection the abolishment of the wildlife law prohibiting his possession of serpents and the freedoms afforded to Americans. Because of his charismatic leadership role within this congregation, Hamblin is able to shift the entire focus of the press conference and generate a loud, supportive applause. This rally of support forces the reporters to try to regain control of the question-answer structure of the press conference.

The celebratory break initiated by Hamblin's followers allows reporters to redirect the focus of the interview to Hamblin and his role in this self-initiated religious movement. An unidentified reporter silences the crowd by asking whether Hamblin anticipated "becoming this figure." Without hesitation, Hamblin immediately responds, "I did not foresee myself as being some kind of figure in a religious rights movement but apparently that was God's plan and here I am today."<sup>78</sup> The most obvious item to note, in this excerpt, is Hamblin's interpretation of the reporter's question. The reporter never directly describes the media attention placed on Hamblin as a "religious rights movement." Instead, it is Hamblin's own construction that renames him as a religious rights figure.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

Hamblin's purposeful misinterpretation of the question echoes the actions of George Hensley. Reporters cited Hensley as naming, several times, the number of serpents he had handled and the number of venomous attacks he endured. For Hamblin, he chooses to embrace the title bestowed on him by the reporter. He then credits his higher power by acknowledging "but apparently that was God's plan and here I am today." He tags this ending clause onto his response in order to recreate the bridge that connected Hamblin is articulate and persuasive. He knows how to construct an applause-worthy response. His reinterpretation of the reporter's question and the answer that followed signals that mastery.

While the two excerpts analyzed above display evidence of Andrew Hamblin's cunning ability to deliver his interview responses in a way that gives him both power and attention, they pale in comparison to the artfully constructed distinction he creates between himself and vague references to modern-day televangelists. In his reply to a reporter who asked what he has to say to those people who call him a "publicity hound" and suggest that his action "cheapens what [he's] pushing for" Hamblin remarks:

Well, I look at it this way... if people out there have their TV shows. They can have their TV stations and they're about money, and you see them – like I mentioned before – had I been a preacher caught up in a prostitution ring or laundering money this would be different. That's not what I'm caught up in. I'm caught up in standing for something I so firmly believe in. So, as far as some people saying I'm a publicity hound- they can say what they want to. If an ungodly person can get on TV and preach to people and say sew a seed of a thousand dollars, you'll be blessed financially, I believe I can get on TV and say 'hey Jesus Christ is still the way, the truth, and the light.'<sup>79</sup>

This quotation is Hamblin's attempt to use the tool of comparison in order to prove that his objectives are more worthy of public broadcast than other televangelist programming. Hamblin is correct in the sense that the charges brought forth against him relate directly to his religious rites. Compared to other ministers involved in adulterous actions and immoral money handling,

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Hamblin's intentions do seem admirable. While he does not explicitly mention names of the specific people he references, one is able to postulate that Hamblin is most likely referring to the scandal surrounding Jim Bakker.

Infamous for his religious television network (PTL), religious-themed amusement park, and suspicious money handling, Jim Bakker succumbed to controversy and scandal in the late 1980s. Bakker was a prominent figure of the televangelist movement. He helped construct a new medium through which to deliver passionate sermons to the masses –television shows. In its most basic form, televangelism is the intersection of television and religion. Evangelists use television to reach the masses in hopes of disseminating the Word of God via a mass media broadcast. Jay Newman's book Religion vs. Television: Competitors in Cultural Context contends that one of the main criticisms of televangelism is the absence of the "religious experience."<sup>80</sup> Newman explains that critics label the triangulation created between the viewer, the televangelist, and the message as completely superficial. Newman notes that televangelism cannot foster a belief community. Without the opportunity to fellowship, the true value of belonging to a church is lost. Instead, the message delivered by the speaker lacks depth and guidance. Viewers who tune into the programming receive little to no actual substance. These televangelists replace sermons with entertaining yet superficial parables and speech acts commanding viewers to donate money in hopes of receiving holy blessings.<sup>81</sup>

The brief introduction and summary of Jim Bakker and the PTL scandal as well as the concise definition of televangelism creates a new framework which changes the analysis of Hamblin's interview responses. In the next several passages, and by measuring Hamblin's use of persuasive language and speech acts, this thesis will seek out the ways in which Hamblin himself

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<sup>80</sup> Jay Newman, *Religion vs. Television Competitors in Cultural Context* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 84.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

embodies the principles of televangelism within his interview responses. At the conclusion of this chapter, the reader will be able to distinguish between Hamblin's power plays and his attempts encourage the public to seek out religious connections.

Hamblin persuades the audience by creating connections to scripture. In an expanded response to the question of whether or not elected county officials have chosen to sign his petition to abolish the current wildlife laws surrounding venomous reptiles, Hamblin constructs the following philosophy:

Yes, I had police officers, I had a... uh... Elected commissioners. I've had different ones sign this say, 'hey, you know, we don't believe this way; we don't... we'll never be there at your church, we'll never whatever. But that's not the question. But, they say you still have your right to do it. Taking up serpents has been going on, children. And, and my ideal, Jesus wouldn't tell me to do something that he didn't do. So, I guess if people ask me, I do believe Christ took up serpents. You can plainly read in his word that there were many other signs and wonders he done and the book could not contain. This book could not contain everything Christ done but, as far as Appalachia, as far as historians go, taking up serpents has been going on in this area for hundreds of years. So, why stop it now?'<sup>82</sup>

Several problems exists within this excerpt. To begin, the reporter simply asked about the presence of support from elected officials. Hamblin stumbled out of the gate, as indicated by his fragmented opening. Granted, Hamblin does stutter in earlier parts of the interview as well, but not as surprisingly as in this excerpt. This speaking blunder raises questions about the authenticity of Hamblin's answer. Regardless of whether or not Hamblin is lying about the signatures and support of elected officials, his disjointed response plants seeds of doubt and distrust in the minds of his audience. Recognizing his mistake, Hamblin immediately changes the subject and dives into his televangelistic dialogue about the reasons why he feels the law should not impose itself his religious beliefs and practices. He focuses on the historical prevalence of serpent-handling as he states, "Taking up serpents has been going on, children." The role of this

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<sup>82</sup> "Andrew Hamblin Initial Appearance."

statement is two-fold. First, Hamblin justifies the legitimacy of the belief of serpent handling by confirming its seniority with the verb phrase “has been going on.” This phrase illustrates how serpent-handling is not a modern fad spurred by danger and voyeurism. Secondly, he establishes his role as the leader and the person of power. The term “children” is commonly used in the establishment of Christian belief to mean “children of God.” In Hamblin’s response, his use of the word children respects that classification but goes further by separating himself from the audience and his congregation. For Hamblin, he is the natural leader of his pack, the alpha male in his congregation. He commands their respect and obedience. The ironic juxtaposition in this specific scenario is that Hamblin is completely reversing the sociocultural standard. Hamblin’s age, he was in his early twenties at this time of this clip, is a deviation from the Christian fundamentalist leadership structure. Hamblin is young and because he had no prior experiences with serpent handling before discovering the belief on television, he must work to establish credibility within his congregation during public appearances like the one examined here.

Hamblin’s televangelistic tendencies manifest in his inability to construct a well-supported argument defending his belief that Christ handled serpents. Hamblin fails to cite any direct evidence or justification for his belief. He speaks in generalities, which further dilutes his argument’s effectiveness. In the sentences that follow, Hamblin acknowledges that he does believe that Christ handled serpents but that mention of this act was excluded from the testament because the book simply “could not contain” every single act Christ performed. Hamblin fails to offer any substantial support for this theory. He does not quote any scriptures directly, and even goes as far as to ascertain that the Bible is incapable of including every miracle performed by Jesus Christ. While this notion is definitely truthful, the reasoning for this admission is unclear. Hamblin confronts this theological conundrum head-on. He acknowledges the incompleteness of

the Holy Bible all while vaguely referencing the numerous other acts performed by Christ. This observation is in stark contrast to the foundation of the fundamentalist belief Hamblin perpetuates. Signs-following adhere closely to what they deem as a direct and literal interpretation of the Bible. Meaning, these congregations follow implicitly the direction they infer from the scripture. Just as Newman observes of televangelist programming, Hamblin's response lacks substance. The absence of quoted scripture and the inadvertent admission that the Bible fails to mention Christ's own display of handling serpents are two examples of how Hamblin's responses mirror those of empty televangelical messages. Hamblin offers no conclusive guidance for his audience.

Hamblin's justification for the perpetuation of the serpent-handling belief is somewhat unfounded. Pastor Hamblin's argument provides no concrete reasoning for the continuation of the religious tradition as he closes, "as far as Appalachia, as far as historians go, taking up serpents has been going on in this area for hundreds of years. So, why stop it now?"<sup>83</sup> Hamblin identifies a specific audience. He directs his justification towards the Appalachian people and historians. He offers no reasoning for this direction but tries to contextualize his justification by providing a brief and inaccurate historical factoid on the origins of serpent handling. While academe loosely credits George Hensley with the founding of serpent-handling as a religious interpretation, Hamblin claims that the tradition "has been going on for hundreds of years." Hensley's first loosely documented act of serpent handling was in the early 1900s. But, according to Hamblin, the tradition is much older. Hamblin's calculation of "hundreds of years" can be traced back to his previous statement that he acknowledges the practice of handling serpents elsewhere. If Hamblin is, in fact, correct in his assumption, then yes, serpent-handling is hundreds of years old. Contradicting Hamblin, Appalachian religious scholars date the first

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<sup>83</sup> "Andrew Hamblin Initial Appearance."



known act of religious serpent handling as the early 1900s. This discrepancy wreaks havoc on his closing statement. The pastor attests, “So why stop it now?”<sup>84</sup> Hamblin’s reasoning for the justification and continuation of the practice of serpent handling is a mere reconstruction of the popular idiom “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Instead of constructing a defense for his own belief system, Hamblin nonchalantly dismisses the need for any justification. Hamblin’s obvious lack about concern of the dangers of the act as well as the legal ramifications connected to the practice is irreverent. Arrests, injuries, and death are all very serious and very real implications of the practice. Hamblin’s haphazard carbon dating fails as a defense for the prolongation of this belief practice. Again, Hamblin’s comments lack depth and scriptural evidence. His failure to acknowledge scripture – especially the issues of authenticity surrounding the Gospel of Mark as a whole<sup>85</sup> – speaks volumes to his lack of historical knowledge of the very belief he observes.

Hood and his colleagues note:

Contrary to popular belief, most serpent handlers are aware of the argument that the later portion of Mark 16 in the King James Version is not an authentic rendering of the original manuscript. They typically have two responses to this criticism. First, the truth of serpent handling is not contained exclusively in Mark 16; other passages also support the practice. Second, however the course of argument may go, the passage in Mark 16 is ultimately believed to be inspired because of divine providence; God simply moved someone at a later date to include it according this divine will. Hence the principle of intratextuality allows the mandate of serpent handling to emerge as an objective reality infused with meaning for contemporary believers.”<sup>86</sup>

Hamblin chose to abandon both defenses articulated by Hood and his colleagues. His failure to provide a sound justification for the continuation of serpent handling and for the abolishment of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> In the footnotes of his work *An Introduction to the New Testament* Edgar J. Goodspeed clearly articulates the positioning of the oldest manuscripts of the Holy Bible: “Mark 16:9-20 is absent from the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts of the fourth century; from the Old Latin Bobiensis, fifth or sixth century; the Old Syriac Sinaitic manuscript, fourth or fifth century, and from some Georgian, Armenian, and Ethiopic codices. The Codex Regius, eighth century, follows Mark 16:8 with the Short Conclusion, preceded with the words *jerete pou kai tauta* — ‘This also is in some cases present.’ After the Short Conclusion it proceeds, ‘This also is current after ‘For they were afraid,’ and gives the Long Conclusion, 16:9-20.”

<sup>86</sup> Hood et. al, *The Psychology of religious Fundamentalism*, 1729 of 3451.

the wildlife laws that prohibit the housing and handling of venomous reptiles weakens his argument further. Fundamentalists like Hamblin respect what they define as biblical literalism. This shared interpretation operates as the framework that supports the act of signs-following, especially the act of serpent handling. It is not a simple case of Hamblin's lack of passion or biblical knowledge. Instead, his reasoning is a pointed discursive choice that withholds crucial evidence that would support Hamblin's case to overthrow the practice of serpent handling.

In a much shorter interview, reporter Bill Estep gives Hamblin the opportunity to explain the signs-following tradition. Filmed less than one week after Jamie Coots's death, the purpose of this interview is for Hamblin to explain the reasoning behind using snakes as a part of a worship ceremony as well as to provide justification for that use. Deaths and other injuries from snake bites often attract news and media outlets to the hills to find a good story line to sell to the masses. Estep prompts Hamblin to justify the belief system he follows in the wake of losing one of Hamblin's closest father figures. This interview is not a press conference; there is no audience; there is no podium. The video clip includes only one question and a single answer. The triangulation shared between Hamblin, Estep, and a video camera casts a different light on the "publicity hound" preacher from the interview critiqued earlier in the chapter. In this instance, Hamblin's response is a lesson in semiotics and structuralism. He weaves together idioms, biblical parables, and signs in an attempt to illustrate to his audience the power of God. The role of semiotics, or the use of signs and symbols to convey meaning, serves as the infrastructure of serpent handling belief. As mentioned in Chapter 2, signs-following believers confirm their belief through the literal interpretation of Mark 16:17-20 of the Kings James Bible. Within the verses referenced, the precursory statement even includes the word "signs:" "And these signs

shall follow them that believe.”<sup>87</sup> In several instances throughout his response, Hamblin calls attention to the signs described in the Book of Mark, but he also extends his scriptural knowledge to include references to biblical parables. Hamblin sets the tone for his response in the opening line: “I would tell people, you know, if you don’t understand it, don’t knock it.”<sup>88</sup> This opening remark contains the idiom “don’t knock it,” which, when translated into plain text, means do not criticize it. Unlike the remarks made in the press conference interview, Hamblin’s opening remark in this clip is not a demand; it is a plea. Hamblin is asking the audience to resist the urge to cast criticism on subjects in which they have lack proficiency. A far cry from the modern-day internet evangelist, the entire tone of Hamblin’s response is markedly different. The use of an idiom signals to the audience the importance of structure, not only within biblical scripture but in Hamblin’s response, too. Hamblin follows the idiom with an invitation, “You know, if you want to understand it come and try.”<sup>89</sup> The discourse marker “you know” establishes solidarity between Hamblin and the audience. The invitation that follows, “if you want to understand it come and try,” is not a command like those evident in Hensley’s quotations. Instead, Hamblin attempts to create a sense of community where visitors are welcome to come and try to understand the belief enacted by these signs-following congregation members. This indirect invitation is in stark contrast to Hamblin’s previous commanding invitations. The major difference between Hamblin’s response noted here and the previous passages is tonal. Hamblin exercises a more energetic, compelling tone when speaking to large groups of people. While information regarding who was in attendance during this interview is unknown, one may ascertain that the audience for this interview is substantially smaller.

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<sup>87</sup> Mark 16:17, KJV.

<sup>88</sup> “Prominent Pastor on Why Snakes are Ok in Worship,” Lexington Herald-Leader, YouTube, Flash Video File, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNRCl3cYY5A> (accessed August 1, 2014).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Hamblin presents himself in stark opposition to the lively, articulate character filmed at the press conference interview analyzed previously.

Hamblin makes an interesting structural decision when crafting the following section of his solitary response. His use of contradiction creates an enthralling juxtaposition between literal interpretations adhered to by signs-following believers and the use of parable to demonstrate the power and protective nature of God. According to Hamblin, signs-following believers “adhere to the literal interpretation of the gospel. [Signs-followers] wanna see people saved and [they] believe those signs is signs to non-believers of God’s power that can still move through mankind.”<sup>90</sup> Hamblin delivers a straightforward mission statement of the signs-following believers. Identifying a single translation of the Bible, the King James Version, and by extrapolating direction and command from Mark 16:17-20, signs followers derive and defend their faith. Aside from the translation and versioning discrepancies summarized in chapter three of this work, the ambiguity of the word “shall” creates the tension within the verse itself. These signs-following believers interpret “shall” to mean “will.” Granted, the action behind both verbs are the same, expressing obligation. But, if one were to replace “shall” with “will,” the tone of the verses would change completely. Instead of a more indirect command, *shall take up serpents*, the verse would read more direct, *they will take up serpents*. Even still, the nature of the modals “shall” and “will” remain obscure. After establishing the mission and the justification of his congregation’s belief system, Hamblin paraphrases the signs mentioned in Mark 16:18-20, ending with the observation, “you never know, you know, what God might want you to do.”<sup>91</sup> Hamblin relinquishes his control with this statement. In several responses throughout the press conference, Hamblin battles for power and supremacy over his people. But, in this except, he

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

surrenders completely. The pastor acknowledges, in this instance, that he cannot gain control over his spiritual director, nor does he attempt such a feat. One explanation of this drastic switch in personality is that the opportunity for spectacle is absent. As previously stated, it is unknown whether or not others are in attendance during this interview. This apparently intimate scenario does not lend itself to the pomp and circumstance that the press conference afforded. Thus, Hamblin is not encouraged to act more charismatically.

Following the invitation to a signs-following service and a brief explanation of the signs-following belief system, Hamblin reverses the notion of literal interpretation by showcasing evidence of God's power and ability to protect through parable. Hamblin cites three parables in his attempt to construct, for the listener, examples of God's power and protection. In Interpreting the Parables author Craig L. Bloomberg provides an explanation of the role of the parable. The author argues that the function of the "parables as metaphors [is] *performative* rather than *propositional* – utterances which do not convey information but perform an action, such as promising, warning, giving a gift, or making a demand."<sup>92</sup> This performative nature is evident in all three parables Hamblin cites. Borrowing from Bloomberg's classification, the parables, for the most part, observe the "promising" function. In the analysis included below, the reader is able to see that Hamblin references three specific parables to demonstrate God's promise of protection. Additionally, the parables illustrate the ill-fated faith of those who fail to recognize and submit to God. This actionable nature of the parable would be classified as a warning, too. Hamblin recounts, "we serve a God that is so powerful that he caused a fire to fall from heaven, you know, let a man sleep with lions, let three little boys stand in, you know, a fiery furnace and

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<sup>92</sup> Craig L. Bloomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*. 2nd Ed., Rev. and Expanded ed (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 155.

not even have the smell of smoke”<sup>93</sup> The first parable, “fire to fall from Heaven” recounts the parable found in 2 Kings 1:10. According to scripture, God made fire fall from the Heavens to identify Elijah as a messenger of God.<sup>94</sup> The Bible cites several uses of fire. In this particular instance, the fire is a primarily a showcase of God’s power. Hamblin wants to articulate to the audience that God is all-powerful. The second parable cited by Hamblin is the story of Daniel and the Lions. In this parable, Daniel, a well-respected and modest man of God, was thrown into a lions’ den after he was caught praying to God. In Daniel’s defense, God sent an angel to tie shut the mouths of the lions. When the king came to check on Daniel the next morning, he saw that no harm had come to him because Daniel was a good, modest person and obedient to God.<sup>95</sup> Hamblin cites this story, presumably, to showcase the power and willingness of God to protect those who worship Him. Additionally, the scripture describes Daniel several times as “modest.” Signs-following believers adhere to an extremely strict dress and moral code. The mention of this parable affirms the testament to modesty for these believers and shows that the reward for servitude is ultimate protection from harm.

The third and final reference to biblical parable is actually the second of Hamblin’s fire citations. Hamblin alludes to the parable found in Daniel 3:23-27. In yet another act of punishment, Nebuchadnezzar cast three men -- Hamblin describes them as “boys”—into a furnace because of their refusal to worship his golden statue. The Son of God appears to the three men and helps them escape, completely unharmed.<sup>96</sup> Another example of power and protection, the furnace parable is the only one of the three parable references that mentions the direct intervention of Jesus Christ. In both the “Fire from Heaven” parable and the “Daniel and the

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<sup>93</sup> *Prominent Pastor on Why Snakes are Ok in Worship.*

<sup>94</sup> 2 Kings 1, (KJV).

<sup>95</sup> Daniel 6:16-23, (KJV).

<sup>96</sup> Daniel 3:23-27, (KJV).

Lions” parable, protection comes in the form of an angel sent directly from God. In the furnace parable, Jesus rescues them himself. While each of these three parables illustrate the expansive power God has and his willingness to protect his devoted followers, an additional reason for their inclusion in Hamblin’s response is to further illustrate the invincibility of his congregation. Granted, the members are not immortal; but they are devoted followers of God and inside of the holiness lifestyle tenets of modesty and submission. Hamblin uses these parables to extend the notion that God is the ultimate protector. The above discussion regarding the commanding fortitude between the verb modals “shall” and “will” becomes less important when one first accepts that God will protect one from harm. Hamblin’s reiteration of the power of God gives him and his practitioners the confidence they need when following the signs listed in Mark 16 by enacting the commands set forth in the scripture.

When comparing the two Hamblin interviews, the marked difference between the separate interactions is the negotiation of power within his discourse. In the first appearance, a self-hosted press conference in front of the Campbell County Courthouse, Hamblin’s discourse displays a constant struggle for power. Within his responses, he displays the fight for supremacy over the National Geographic Channel. He also tries to attain power by acting as the leader of a religious rights movement. The language he employs articulates to the audience that Hamblin focuses primarily on notoriety and control. He speaks of his desire to take control of the programming of “Snake Salvation” in hopes of proving to the show’s following that he is more than just a rural snake hunter with a devoted congregation of fundamentalist signs-following members. The televangelistic delivery of his announcements stigmatizes the authenticity of his content. He deflects each reporter’s questions in an attempt to create speaking points of his own. Instead of simply answering the questions asked of him, Hamblin embellishes the questions,

reshaping the context of the initial inquiry. The results of this restructuring are purely an opportunity to witness to the audience about his beliefs on a grand stage. His responses are superficial, citing no biblical references to scripture. Furthermore, he fails to reject the accusations which call him a “publicity hound” who seeks out media opportunities. Instead, he embraces the title and continues to present unrelated notions regarding his religious freedom, completely dismissing the actual wildlife issues at hand.

Hamblin’s second appearance introduces a complete reinvention of himself as a pastor and mouthpiece of his fundamental religious beliefs. No trace of arrogance or quest for power is found within his soliloquy. On the contrary, Hamblin chooses to speak about the tradition of signs following in his own version of semiotics – biblical parable. He recognizes God as all-powerful and does not refute or combat that principle. Compared to the previous interview, Hamblin appears to be more subtle and humbled. His remarks are substantive, containing citations of scripture which help to convey his message that God protects those who are faithful and modest in their devotion. The few times Hamblin does explicitly mention the act of serpent handling are quickly qualified by the statement’s admitting that the literal practice itself is not the gateway to heaven and that a respect and devotion to God are the ways of salvation. In both interviews, Hamblin charges the audience to understand the belief before casting judgment on this doctrine and the people who follow it.

Since these interviews, Hamblin and his congregation have found themselves displaced once again. Due to issues surrounding the rental agreement between Hamblin and the church



house landlord, the congregation no longer has a central place of worship.<sup>97</sup> Hamblin's current whereabouts and any details of the remnants of his congregation are unknown.

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<sup>97</sup> "Building Owner Evicts Snake-Handling LaFollette Pastor," WBIR, <http://www.wbir.com/story/news/local/2014/06/19/building-owner-evicts-snake-handling-lafollette-pastor/11000287/> (accessed Oct 28, 2014).

## CHAPTER 7

### JAMIE COOTS

In stark contrast to Hensley and Hamblin, the discourse patterns and content found within interviews with pastors Alfred Ball and Jamie Coots showcase a solid foundation in the tradition of signs following, a genuine interest in the legitimacy of their congregations, and a stern response to the stereotypes created through the media's exploitation of their beliefs. Like Hensley and Hamblin, both Coots and Ball welcomed visitors and the media into their church services. But, what sets Ball and Coots apart from Hensley and Hamblin is how they reject the media's interference. Jamie Coots pastored the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name located in Middlesboro, Kentucky. The church was founded by Coots's family in 1978.<sup>98</sup> Coots was raised in the serpent handling tradition but did not always strictly adhere to the tenants of the faith.<sup>99</sup> The first interview, recorded by John Ward on February 8, 2013, at a preliminary hearing for Coots's traffic and wildlife violations, records Coots's recollection of the events that transpired on January 31, 2013. The second interview, the Lemons interview, centers on Coots's religious background, the history of his congregation, and Coots's internal battle to encourage his congregation to accept the anointment of the Holy Ghost. The thoughts shared by Coots in this interview relate directly to the struggle with authenticity of anointment. The two interviews will both highlight Coots's genuine passion for his religious tradition and depict the hardships of fulfilling his pastoral duties.

The first interview, filmed outside the Knox County courthouse in 2013, describes the context of an interaction between the pastor and Knox County officials. The interview opens

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<sup>98</sup> Brown and McDonald, *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith*, 133.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 157.

with Coots's description of the suspicious means in which TWRA confiscated eight snakes. Coots describes the incident as a typical traffic stop due to window tinting. During the stop the officer questions Coots about the snakes and ultimately releases Coots with a warning. Some twenty miles later, law enforcement officers initiate another traffic stop, this time with the addition of wildlife officers present. The video clip is a collection of interview fragments filmed and compiled by John Ward. The disjointed nature of the film is not orchestrated by Coots but by the cinematographic efforts of Ward. In the description of the video, Ward titles himself as an "adventure junkie" who "enjoys creating videos. Ward goes on to note that he included several different clips of Coots's street interview along with audio and video clips documenting Coots's worship services. One possible explanation of the video compilation efforts is to construct a short collection of video clips and songs that capture Coots in his natural habitat to then juxtapose that image with Coots's legal battles. Ward admits that "anything off, strange, or different" interests him. This video is a product of that fascination. After describing his first interaction with a Knox County sheriff who pulled over Coots's vehicle for speeding, the pastor respectfully insinuates that the actions taken by the county officers are suspicious in nature.

Coots recites:

You see, the city officer was sitting on the side of the road. As soon as we passed, he pulls out. Well he says, you know, he cites us for uhh, tinted windows and the tint on my uhh tag. After the TWRA shows up, writes us up, takes the snakes, writes us up, he says ' well I'm not going to write you up for the window tint cuz if I do, you being out of state, they'll probably just throw it out anyways'. You know, I just kindly felt like it was somehow set up. I can't say that...<sup>100</sup>

Coots's response suggests to the audience that the actions of the police and the wildlife officials were deliberate. The short window of time between the initial verbal warning issued for speeding by the first state police officer and the second traffic stop for tinting violations triggers a feeling

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<sup>100</sup> John Ward, "Video of Serpent Handling Pastor Jamie Coots," Youtube, Flash Video File, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uweu6u-44U0> (accessed August 1, 2014).

of distrust for Coots. Instead of outwardly accusing the officials of premeditating the second stop, the pastor politely and passively suggests that the second traffic stop was intentional. The sentence “You know, I just kindly felt like it was somehow set up. I can’t say that...” includes both a discourse marker to establish a relationship between Coots and the listener as well as the adverb “kindly,” commonly in Appalachian speech to mean “kind of,” which articulates that, while he respects the officers for performing their duties, he also feels as though they acted out of spite. This particular excerpt denotes Coots’s passive attempt to accuse the officials of conspiring against him and his party. He has no concrete evidence to support his claim; his accusation is supported solely by his own intuition. He does, however, remain calm and deliver his thoughts in a respectful, mature way. Coots’s opinions do not cause a scene. Unlike Hamblin, Coots does not need a podium or an audience. Instead, he presents linear details about his back-to-back interactions with law enforcement and state officials and respectfully assumes that the actions of the second traffic stop were premeditated.

Coots does not use interviews as a kick starter campaign for religious rights and political activism. In the clips compiled by Ward, Coots never classifies the traffic stop as an attack on his religious freedom. The pastor recounts the events that transpired during the second traffic stop:

He goes back to his truck and uhh comes back up and uhh asked me, at one point, did I have any anti-venom for the snakes. I said no; we use them for religious purposes in Kentucky. So he says ok and then he goes back to his truck again and he gets behind his vehicle talking to his uh, well, at that time there was two officers there – the first one and another one showed up. They were all back there talking and when he comes back up front he tells me that he has to take possession of the animals and take my boxes And he says, uhh, he’s gonna write us up for possession of a class 1 wildlife. And so I say, you know, well ok whatever you have to do. So he takes me back to his truck first and asks me where we’d went, where we bought em. <sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Coots does not feel compelled to rouse the attention of his congregation. While he is obviously upset with the officers' ultimate decision to confiscate the snakes, Coots makes a pointed effort to not scornfully cast out the authority of law enforcement. Furthermore, he avoids, altogether, connecting the seizure of his property to his religious freedom. Instead of demanding a restoration of his freedom of religion, Coots complies with the officers' demands without a fight. Throughout the entire interaction with the TWRA and law enforcement officers, Coots mentions his religious practice only once. The officers ask about the safety precautions Coots had taken in terms of transporting and protection against the venomous reptiles. Because the signs-following religious tradition rejects the aid of professional medical care, Coots answers honestly that he does not have antivenom and that his intentions are to use the snakes for religious purposes. And, with that statement, Coots purposefully does not mention, at least in the duration of this video clip, freedom of religion nor does he preach to his audience about the tenants of his belief system. Granted, Andrew Hamblin was also compliant at the time TWRA officials confiscated over fifty venomous snakes from his possession. The major difference here – especially when looking at the discourse patterns of each pastor's interviews – is that it can be interpreted that Hamblin uses the interview as a platform, speaking out against the infringement of his rights and the wrongdoing acted upon him by county and state officials. Conversely, Coots uses his interview time to answer the questions asked of him in a straightforward manner. To draw again from Guy Debord's *Society of Spectacle*, Debord describes the chemical makeup of a spectacle, "The concept of "the spectacle" interrelates and explains a wide range of seemingly unconnected phenomena."<sup>102</sup> Coots rejects the spectacle by refusing draw connections where there likely are none. While Hamblin's actions can be seen an opportunistic, Coots does not make that same connection. Instead, in opposition to the spectacle, he never mentions freedom of religion nor

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<sup>102</sup> Guy Deboard, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 121.

does he make any discursive connections between the traffic stop and serpent handling. Coots recognized a change in the first officer's demeanor after the officer spotted the snakes in Coots's car. Coots interacts with the officer maturely and, in addition, does not immediately jump to conclusions that substantiate the idea that Coots's serpent handling affiliation was the cause of the initial and subsequent traffic stops. He identifies the distinction between freedom of religion and wildlife concerns. He tells the TWRA officials to do "whatever you have to do" in order to honor their specific job duties. Granted, though Coots does openly admit that he feels his back-to-back traffic stop and TWRA intervention were completely unwarranted, and while he may not agree with the officers' actions, he peacefully complies with the officers.

The last question included in Ward's video clip serves as Coots's last opportunity to act as a mouthpiece for the dissemination and acceptance of serpent-handling. The reporter asks, "How long have you been doing this?" Which Coots replies, "actually started going to church when I was 20....19. Which was in 1989-90. Got into church and actually took pastor in 1994. So I've been pastor now 18, July will be 19 years. Raised in a serpent handling all my life, you know."<sup>103</sup> The reporter does not clearly identify the antecedent of the word "this." The audience is able to deduce from contextual evidence that the reporter is most likely asking about Coots's serpent-handling background. Coots, instead, constructs a response that deflects the attention from serpent-handling and repositions it towards being a member of a church. He shares personal information about his history with the church before the mention of snakes. This purposeful construction signals to the audience that Coots's priority rests on the church and the position he holds, and not on the religious rite of serpent-handling. Only after he establishes this church-first relationship does he reintroduce serpent-handling. Coots closes with a reflection: "Used to it [housing snakes] wouldn't no big deal, you could have em, go get em. Now they're cracking

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<sup>103</sup> "Video of Serpent Handling Pastor Jamie Coots"

down ... why, I don't know.”<sup>104</sup> Coots identifies the sociocultural shift taking place around the trade and ownership of reptiles. Hood and Williamson blames this shift in legal ideological on the misrepresentation and bias reporting by news media outlets. They cite examples of misinformation documented by the *New York Times* as an example of how fanatical journalism helped initiate the ostracism of the serpent handling community which persuaded law makers to take action against the handling in venomous reptiles.<sup>105</sup> Coots's intentional failure to relate owning snakes directly to the practice of serpent-handling provides the evidence needed to confirm that he, while a devoted Christian fundamentalist and serpent-handler, is completely uninterested in using his interview as a platform to speak out again any infringement of rights acted upon him. This lack of action aligns perfectly with the personality Coots perpetuated. By nature, Coots is a mild-mannered, humble man of God. His quiet nature off the pulpit is endearing. His sermons are passionate, as evidenced by the clips included in Ward's compilation, but outside of his church services, Coots commands respect by exhibiting that respect to others.

The second interview analyzed in this study is a personal interview with Coots conducted by professor Steve Lemons. The purpose of this interview was to collect historical information about the origins of Coots's congregation as well as to gather data about the practice of signs-following and the effects it has on his congregation.<sup>106</sup> Coots's level of self-disclosure rises significantly throughout this interview. The intimate setting of the interview encourages Coots to expound on ideals and practices that he was not comfortable disclosing in the more public setting of the previous interview. Lemons first asks Coots to recount the history of his church, noting the familiar ties that bind together the church's tradition. Coots answers with a detailed account of

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Hood and Williams, *Them that Believe*, 2954 of 4225.

<sup>106</sup> Steve Lemons, "Steve Lemons and Pastor Jamie Coots Interview Pt1," YouTube, Flash Video File, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmtfb3jS51Y> (accessed August 28, 2014).

his grandfather's spiritual evolution into a signs-following believer and pastor. He notes that his grandfather's congregation deserted him after he accepted the belief of the "oneness," the belief that there is but one God who manifests in three forms: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Coots continues to divulge personal information about the acquisition of land that his church is built upon and his father's encouragement of Coots to assume the role of pastor. Coots reveals to Lemons:

So in July of 1994 we were up here getting ready for homecoming, doing something in church. We walked out on the porch and he said I got something I wanted me to pray about. Instantly I knew what it was. I mean, god just had showed me. And I said "I don't want it" and he said, "well you're the only one who can take it". I said I don't know about that, let's pray. So we prayed. {??} the lord and something had come to pass. So I took pastor in 1994.<sup>107</sup>

Coots's open admission that he initially rejected the call to be pastor illustrates his heightened level of self-disclosure. Generally speaking, devout fundamentalists respect the inward spiritual urgency to act on a feeling or desire. Coots lacked the confidence to follow this direction, most likely because of his lack of experience in the faith. Coots confesses: "I didn't get in church until December of '90 when I got married."<sup>108</sup> Coots admits that while he was brought up in the tradition of serpent-handling and has family ties to the rite that trace back to the 1960s, he only started following the faith a short four years prior to accepting the role of pastor.

The role of pastor carries daunting responsibilities, especially for fundamentalist congregations. The pastor is often charged with defending and disseminating the beliefs of the congregation within the congregation as well as to the public. Typically speaking, the elders play a large role in steering the direction of the church. Later in the interview with Lemons, Coots describes his first year as pastor as "rough" when he recaps, "The following year [1995] we had a woman get bit – homecoming on Sunday. Died at the house on Tuesday. So it was a rough first

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



year. And I was 23 years old, trying to take care of a church. I had people here three times my age that didn't wanna hear what I had to say. But God worked it out for me. Next July will be 20 years – I'm hanging in there.”<sup>109</sup> Coots's willingness to disclose his personal feelings about his first year as pastor relates directly to the open relationship fostered between Coots and his interviewer, Prof. Lemons. In his work on interpersonal interactions, author Owen Hargie identifies four levels of self-disclosure in interpersonal communications: observations, sharing general comments about physical surroundings; thoughts, sharing more detailed comments and contextual information on a topic; feelings, sharing the personal effects of an event or topic; and needs, expressing the intimate desire or longing one must satisfy.<sup>110</sup> Hargie argues that we as communicators are constantly negotiating the transparency of information we share with others. This framework purposes itself as a methodology Lemons employs in order to encourage Coots to be more forthcoming and transparent about his thoughts toward his congregation and their belief system. One can easily classify Coots's level of disclosure as that of expressing feelings. He “felt” that his first year of pastorship was “rough,” not to the touch, but both physically and mentally challenging. Dealing with the adversity that comes with perpetuating a fundamentalist belief system is rehabilitating. Coots chose to share these personal feelings with Lemons, which signals to the audience Coots's comfortable interpersonal relationship with his interviewer. Lemons's act of sharing his own private thoughts about his congregation and their belief systems encourages Coots to do the same.

Coots's self-disclosure increases as he talks about his congregation and his encouragement for congregation members to receive the anointing of God. When asked about the liveliness of his church services, Coots divulges that he never wants people to feel that attending

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 241.

his service was a waste of time. In fact, he encourages his congregation members to “push” themselves. He admits:

But I do tell my people, you know, let’s try to stay prayed up. I have drove to Georgia, West Virginia, Alabama, you know, 4-7 hour trips to be at a service and get there and nobody wanna do nothing. And you’re thinking ‘I wasted my gas’ and I said I don’t ever want anybody to come here and feel like they wasted their gas coming ‘cause nobody wants to get in. you know. If they come ready to want to get in and they see nobody in this church moving, it’s not likely they’re gonna get up and do something. And I’m very appreciative of my people that they press, they try to get in.<sup>111</sup>

Coots shares with Lemons his inherent need for his congregation members to “receive the spirit.” The act of Coots’s sharing his *need* for congregation members to seek spiritual oneness with God increases his level of self-disclosure. By communicating a need, Coots creates an interpersonal environment where he feels comfort in sharing his most personal and intimate thoughts with the interviewer. Coots’s heightened self-disclosure rejects the social disclosure theory of reciprocity by continuing to share with Lemons, even though Lemons is not sharing similar information with him. Granted, the extenuating circumstance is the structure of the interview itself. But, regardless, Coots continues to share more detailed and intimate information with Lemons as the interview progresses.

In the same passage, Coots’s response raises questions about the authenticity of receiving the anointment. Coots consistently refers to the sensation of the anointing as “get[ting] in.” As stated in an earlier chapter, the anointing is the sensation of communicating or being directed by a higher power. Outsiders are critical of the legitimacy of this power. As depicted in documentaries like Peter Adair’s *Holy Ghost People*, the embodiment of the anointing is trance-like, related to an out-of-body experience. The believer’s body is directed by a spiritual force to carry out acts such a handling serpents or fire. But, contrary to the genuine nature of Coots in

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<sup>111</sup> “Steve Lemons and Pastor Jamie Coots Interview Pt1”

the earlier section of this interview, his insinuation that his congregation members “press” and “push” to receive the anointing begs the question of his and the congregation’s intentions. A purely textual analysis of this encouragement would reveal that the congregation members, supported by their pastors, attempt to advance – by force – the “spiritual embodiment” of God. The words Coots chooses to describe the actions of the congregation members to encourage their own anointing is problematic. One can assume that a spiritual gift such as the anointing is typically bestowed on a person as a gift or reward of faithful servitude. By “pushing” or forcing to receive that same gift, the authenticity of the gift is, then, compromised. Coots goes on to describe some congregation members persistence: “But, I mean, there’s some that will try to push and get in, give it everything they’ve got. If the first song don’t do it and the second song don’t do it, they’ll sing three or four and sometimes they’ll give up. But then there’s times that they’ll sing enough that people will try to get in. And that, to me, is what it should be about.”<sup>112</sup> Coots’s expanded description of the process of “pressing in” generates further questions as to the authenticity of an action that is forced to happen. This narrative shatters the notion that the receipt of the anointing is a serendipitous gift bestowed on those who are faithful servants and obey the word of God. Realizing that his description of how his own son instigates the anointing suggests a lack of authenticity, Coots reiterates, “But, then there’s times that he’ll say, you know, it’s alright to take up a serpent, it’s alright to handle fire, it’s alright to drink a deadly thing. And then, of course, I’ll pray a minute or two longer just to make sure it’s not just me wanting to do it.”<sup>113</sup> The realization that his disclosure may have a negative, lasting impact on the impressions of his belief and the actions of his congregation prompts Coots to reinforce the act of confirming the anointing with God before acting out “in the spirit.” The phrase “to make sure it’s not just me

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

wanting to do it” is Coots’s speech act to try to combat the notion he created in the previous passage. The infinitive “to make sure” can also mean to confirm. So, Coots claims that before he acts out the signs received under the anointing, he confirms that he is doing God’s will and not man’s will. This act of selflessness speaks volumes about Coots’s character. While he may not be able to support the same claim about his congregation members, Coots himself respects the legitimacy and the authenticity of receiving the anointing. While his interview response does disclose facts about his congregation that introduces questions about their own authenticity, for Coots, he stands firm as a man of God who listens to and carries out the commands he receives.

The information presented by Coots in these two samples demonstrates how Coots continues to grapple with issues with his religious belief. But, he does not let that tension influence his public identity. Both Hensley and Hamblin exhibit a willingness to engage with the media about serpent handling and about their role in the belief system. Coots, on the other hand, rejects this attention. True, Coots does welcome visitors into his church services. Also, Coots costarred on the reality show “Snake Salvation.” But neither of these actions permeates through his interpersonal and discursive interactions with his interviews. Also unlike Hamblin and Hensley, Coots, within these two sample clips, has no audience. Coots concerns himself with his congregation and his role as a teacher and leader in the faith. While Hamblin and Hensley also maintain that same affiliation, it is Coots who demonstrates a founded humbleness about his position in the church and a respect for man’s law that goes beyond the others. He does not agree with or understand the Tennessee state code regarding the handling of serpents. But he stops short of exploiting this difference of ideology. Gathered from his interviews, Coots’s ideology centers around a respect for and cultivation of his religious beliefs as well as those of his congregation members. Coots is not alone in this philosophy. The final preacher analyzed in this

study, Alfred Ball of the Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name, located in Carson Springs, Tennessee. Coots's philosophies and the similar ways in which Ball and Coots manages the interrogation of the mass media echoes through the Ball interviews.

## CHAPTER 8

### ALFRED BALL

In an interview with Thomas Burton, Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name co-pastor Alfred Ball describes the negative implications following Burton's documentary and then elaborates on the repercussions of the decision to allow public news outlets and other visitors to record and report on the serpent-handling services taking place inside the church. The Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name first attracted the attention of the media when two members died from complications of ingesting deadly poisons and a third member suffered a snake bite in early 1973. Two leaders of this congregation, Liston Pack and Alfred Ball, were arrested for disturbing the peace.<sup>114</sup> In the months to follow, newspaper reporters, anthropologists, and even television crews swarmed the congregation as they endured the legal saga that ensued. Ten years later, Thomas Burton revisited the same congregation to study the implications of all of the publicity generated from the trial. In an extended interview, Burton asks Alfred Ball specific questions regarding the effects media had on him, the congregation, and the belief system as a whole. Ball is very open about his feelings towards the events that transpired. He articulates his thoughts with poignant clarity. As Ball recounts the events that transpired, he weaves together a secondary story which unveils his true concern for the authenticity and sincerity of his congregation members and their enactment of the biblical signs. From his opening response, Ball's tone elucidates his distaste for the negative implications of what he calls "having publicity," Ball confesses, "This eventually created some very serious problems. Human nature being what it is. In one aspect we had people that, on one hand, were opposed to it and on the other hand seemed to want to be right in the very forefront of pictures in the paper and that type of thing. Of course

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<sup>114</sup> Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 75.

that doesn't, by any means, say that everybody was doing that. But, it did create a problem.”<sup>115</sup>

Within this short excerpt, Ball feels the need to reiterate that welcoming visitors and the media into his services did cause problems. Additionally, Ball introduces his conjecture that some members of his congregation overacted on behalf of these visitors. The theme of insincerity runs rampant through Ball's interview. Choosing to mention this postulation at the opening of the interview sets the tone for the entirety of this exchange.

Aside from the insinuation that the media attention influenced the action of some congregation members, Ball is also quick to note the inconsistencies of the law enforcement in Tennessee. Ball briefly mentions the “several times” he and his other so-pastors were summoned to the courthouse. He questions the reasons why Tennessee law enforcement chose to indict him and his co-pastors but allowed for “side shows” to exist without penalty. Ball complains:

It seemed rather strange to us that these people that run side shows that use snakes, they'll park out on the shopping center parking lots out here and climb into a cage with a bunch of rattlesnakes and copperheads and cobras and everything else and walk around down there and do everything with them and it's not against the law. But if people that go to church and believe Mark 16:18 and the word of God which says they shall take up serpents which was one of the five signs that follow the believers. When we did it it's against the law. But when these people who were just running a side show did it wasn't against the law. When, actually, the law states that it – as a matter of fact, the very wording of the Tennessee law about taking serpents states that it shall be considered a misdemeanor for any person to display, to handle, or display a poisonous reptile in such a way as to endanger the life of any person. They enforced the law on us and didn't enforce it on the side shows and we were doing something entirely different.<sup>116</sup>

This excerpt houses several points of contention. First, Ball makes clear the distinction between the reasoning behind his congregation's practice of handling serpents versus the reasons side show acts choose to use snakes in their displays. Ball references the verbiage used in the Tennessee State Law's ban on handling venomous reptiles. To be expected, Ball chooses to

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<sup>115</sup> Alfred Ball Interview, Series 1: Carson Springs: A Decade Later, 1983, 1985, Thomas G. Burton and Thomas F. Headley Tapes, 1973, 1983-1987 and undated, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, Videotape 11.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

defend his belief with scripture while he equates the side shows' use as low-quality entertainment. Unfortunately for Ball, his reference to Tennessee State Law has an adverse effect. If one assumes that Ball's paraphrase of the Tennessee code is accurate, than *both* the congregation *and* the side shows are in violation. While Ball's scriptural defense is enough to justify the actions taken by his congregation, that defense is inadequate for a court of law. Ironically, although Ball tries to take a literal interpretation of the Tennessee State Law and make a case for his congregation's innocence. What transpires instead is the acknowledgement that both Ball's congregation and the side shows are both performing the same act – handling venomous reptiles. But, Ball is correct that local law enforcement acted in bias. What should have happened is that both groups were indicted on counts from violating the ban on the handling of venomous reptiles. It is unknown without performing further research the statistics surrounding the number of indictments of serpent-handlers versus the number of indictments of side show acts. But, according to Ball, the number would be seriously skewed.

Another “problem” Ball elaborates on is the media's untimely interjections during an anointing. In the signs-following faith, the anointing gives believers the power to enact the signs mentioned in the scripture. This anointment demands the full attention of the believers. A reoccurring problem for Ball was the visiting media's constant interruptions during displays of signs following: “one feller walked up and tapped me on the shoulder when I had serpents in my hand and asked me to turn around so he could take a picture of me. Which endangered both me and him because I needed to have my mind on God. I needed to have my mind on what I was doing and not some feller that was trying to take a picture – and I wouldn't caring whether he got my picture or not. That type of thing was dangerous.”<sup>117</sup> In this particular situation, Ball is not placing the reporter in a dangerous position. The reporter situates himself in a position where

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid



both he and Ball could have been injured. Ball is extremely passionate about the prerequisite handlers must meet in order to handle serpents under the anointing. He emphatically asserts that the handler must focus on his connection with God and the reporter compromises the situation. The reporter's complete disrespect for Ball's actions is a test in its own rite. Being the devoted, passionate man that he is, Ball chooses to focus on the display of power under the anointment instead of the reporter's concern for a good image. Ball's actions were genuine in the sense that he did not exaggerate his faith for the sake of the news media. Instead, he ignores the tap on the shoulder, proving to the audience that he holds the power in the relationship between himself and the reporter but that God holds the power over his anointing.

Ball and his co-pastors make the decision shortly after the death of two of their brethren to close down their worship services to the media. The pastor explains:

They disrupted the worship service so bad that we finally just had to close down the service and tell everybody to leave and tell those people to pack up their gear and go away with it. We were there to worship God and trying to have a church service – not to try to put on a show for the world. You know, it's rather difficult to try to be Christian-like and treat people with kindness when they only thing they're interested in is selling a newspaper story or a television show and they don't care who gets hurt and, as a matter of fact, they were really hoping for that.<sup>118</sup>

Ball completely rejects the notion of creating a spectacle. Unlike Hensley and Hamblin, Pastor Ball has no interest in the performance aspect of the church service. While these fundamentalist signs followers are known for lively worship, it is Ball who denounces the media's ideological definition of what is worthy of capturing. In this particular instance, Ball's religious ideological standards trump those of the media's. Ball rescinds the media's invitation to the religious services for the protection of his congregation. This dismissal serves as Ball's rejection of the mass media's agenda. The ISA constructed and upheld by the mass media operates by creating

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

images that support stereotyping. Especially in the case of serpent handlers, representations of the congregations are narrowly focused. The media covers, in great details, the physical act of handling serpents but often leaves out the passion, dedication, and indoctrination of the believers. Without the context of their fundamentalist belief structure, the images offer only a shallow depiction of the practice while excluding the intimate details of the people. In the case of Ball's dismissal of the media's invitation to observe his congregation's worship services, the media overstep their boundaries significantly by disrupting the flow of the event being captured. Ball stands steadfast in his attempt to protect himself, his congregation, and even the media without perpetuating the media's objective of capturing the "next big thing."

Ball then turns his attention to the articles that did get published and the shortcomings within them. In a polite manner that echoes the way in which Jamie Coots accused law enforcement of setting him up, Ball illustrates how new reporters manufactured a completely different story than what Ball and his congregation had expected:

This seemed to be – I hesitate to say such a thing – but it seemed to be that no freelance writer or newspaper writer ever printed what he was told. I guess it wasn't ... I guess it wasn't hairy enough I guess, to sell the newspaper so they would add to it, twist it around; change it from what they were told and they had everything imaginable going on in the church and they made it look like we were bunch of nuts, fanatics, fools – they used these words – that just gathered together in a building and handled snakes all night long. Which was as far from the truth as it could be.<sup>119</sup>

Here, Ball accuses newspaper reporters of constructing lies about the goings-on at his church. He blatantly reproaches these reporters for embellishing and romanticizing the worship services conducted by the congregation members. He qualifies the accusation with the statement "I hesitate to say such a thing" but does not actually hesitate at all. Instead, he steamrolls, at an accelerated pace, through the list of derogatory terms used to describe or rename himself and his

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

congregation. Granted, Ball's frustration with the newspaper's falsehoods is the central theme of this excerpt. One could argue an additional point of contention. The struggle between Ball and the news media woven throughout this quotation showcases the volley of power plays between the two forces. First, Ball states that the reporters never "printed what [they] were told. The irony in this statement comes when Ball assumes that he has control of the reporter's pen, when in fact, the power lies within the reporter. Although Ball denounces the value of the articles printed, his rejection does not change the fact that the articles were disseminated, in some cases, nationwide. One can postulate that aside from wanting to maintain the sanctity of his worship services, another reason for Ball's dismissal of the news reporters was to regain the power he realized he had lost.

Careful not to be seen as a power-hungry minister with a strangulating hold on his congregation, Ball makes an effort to explain his reasoning for abolishing the opportunity for the media to continue to scrutinize and embellish the worship practices of this particular religious community. When asked to describe the television programming that resulted from the media's infiltration of his church, Ball expounds his dissatisfaction with one show's decision to include a psychologist to explain the beliefs of the signs-following community. He clarifies:

Actually, the only objection that I had to what they did was they had a psychologist that was sitting in – they dubbed it into the picture – he was explaining to the world why that we do such things that we do. And, in my opinion, no psychologist knows why we do what we're doing. They don't know why we do it because they're not acquainted with the spirit of god and regardless of what they think. God's spirit is real and there is something that's greater than just somebody's desire to make a show out of something. And we – I resent – and as does all of the people that's in our faith; we resent being taken apart by a psychologist who is trying to explain something that he doesn't understand. And I don't believe that anybody that does not understand a thing is qualified to explain it to somebody else. I mean, how can you explain to me how to be a ... surgeon for instance if you're not one? You don't know about it. And regardless of what you're education or background may be, If I'm experienced at that job and you're

not, then I think that it's going to be rather hard for you to explain to me how to do it, or explain to anybody else how I do it.<sup>120</sup>

Within his defense, Ball cites several examples of how the analysis of an outsider is unable to comprehend the justification or explanation behind the motivation to follow the signs. The psychologist, for instance, is not a member of the signs-following congregation and thus has no real-world experience with acting in the signs. Ball boldly articulates his resentment toward the psychologist and the results of the analysis. The pastor's case does have some merit. For context, a manager would never hire someone with no experience to fill a specialist's role. Instead, the manager would seek out subject-matter-experts in the particular field and recruit the candidates who meet the minimum qualifications for the position. In the case of the psychologist evaluating Ball's congregation, his expertise is confirmed through the completion of medical school and the awarding of his license. He is qualified to evaluate the reasons why Ball's congregation lives and abides the way they do. Ball has no evidence to support his insinuation that the psychologist is "not acquainted with the word of God." Granted, a psychologist does not meet the typical profile of a religious fundamentalist. But the accusation that the psychologist lacks a relationship with God is bold.

Another interesting linguistic mechanism employed by Ball is the structural act of disassociating himself from his congregation. When describing his feelings towards the psychological analysis performed on the *What's Up America* program, Ball declares, "And we – I resent – and as does all of the people that's in our faith; we resent being taken apart by a psychologist who is trying to explain something that he doesn't understand."<sup>121</sup> Ball and his congregation are not two separate entities but a team working together operating under a shared religious apparatus. He then immediately backpedals and separates himself from the

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

congregation. Ball reiterates that he is speaking on behalf of the entire signs-following community. The audience is able to extrapolate that Ball's use of the collective "we" includes both himself and the signs-following believers. Actually, one can extend the "we" to include all fundamentalists.

At any rate, Ball makes the structural decision to jolt the audience by pausing abruptly and then reversing the structure of his declaration. This pause, one can postulate, is purposeful. It draws attention to the fact that Ball is truly upset with how the psychologist portrays him and his people. Using the collective "we" did not carry enough emphasis. So, Ball halted his expression and restated his assertion to clarify and emphasize that he was extremely insulted, as are all signs-following believers.

Ball's stern eloquence shines through once again in his closing arguments regarding the psychologist: "its funny, in a sense of the word, if it wasn't for the fact that it's a tragic misunderstanding, of course. I guess if I studied psychology and looked at things the way they do, I may say the same thing – except I know better. I know what it's all about."<sup>122</sup> Here, Ball describes the results of the psychological analysis as a "tragic misunderstanding." When deconstructed, this phrase translates to mean a regrettably sad failure to understand. Ball is insinuating that the psychologist does not have the spiritual context necessary to understand the belief structure of a Christian fundamentalist. Ironically, the leader of a congregation of biblical literalism uses artfully constructed phrases in his description of the psychologist's separation from a religious reality. Ball's vernacular contains sophisticated literary elements. While speaking in and about parables is not far removed from the language of a pastor, as evidenced by Hamblin's citation of three biblical parables, Ball's flowery speech maintains a much different, captivating quality. But, what is most important about this quotation is the element of rejection.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Ball discards the psychologist's analysis and justification because, Ball claims, the psychologist is too far removed from the religion to understand the motives behind their practices. The reverse of the situation is also true. Ball, most likely, is not well versed in the field of psychology. His complete dismissal of the psychologist's hypotheses is not far removed from the psychologist's own claims. In this situation, both parties claim victory in the explanation and justification of the signs-following believers. Ball's expertise lies within experience and practice and the psychologist boasts academic credentials.

Ball's final response to Burton illuminates the overwhelming sensation that the insincerity of the visitors and news reporters has a disappointing impact on his congregation members. For Ball, the influence of the media compromised the authenticity of some of the members' work in the signs. The following excerpt speaks to the quality of showmanship and a person's inability to resist the urge to "act out" when others are present. Ball confesses:

But, with human nature being what it is, and people that are not always in the spirit of god, and some that probably never have been in it maybe, you have a tendency for some showmanship type of thing to get started. And that of course would create a problem. And it did create some problems for different people and there were things happened that I feel would not have happened had there not been outsiders in there trying to take pictures of what we were doing and all of the different things that they did do. I would not want to go into the specific made a mistake and have done their utmost to correct what they did.<sup>123</sup>

Ball highlights two major issues that arise when dealing with the media: showmanship and sincerity. The pastor recognizes that "human nature" is tragically flawed by lucrative temptation. His confession articulates feelings of doubt surrounding the genuineness of some of his congregation members' actions. Ball blames the infiltration of the media for this parade of sign following, but social role theory lends a more precise explanation. In their article titled

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<sup>123</sup> Alfred Ball Interview, Series 1: Carson Springs: A Decade Later, 1983, 1985, Thomas G. Burton and Thomas F. Headley Tapes, 1973, 1983-1987 and undated, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, Videotape 12-13.

“Evidence for the Social Role Theory of Stereotype Content: Observations of Groups’ Role Shape Stereotypes,” Koenig and Eagly define social role theory as the “social perceivers’ beliefs about social groups in their society derive from their experiences with group members in their typical social roles.”<sup>124</sup> The application of this framework suggests that Ball’s congregation members satisfied the actions desired by the media. The clergy educated the congregation members about when and why representatives from the media would be in attendance. Signs followers recognize the caricatures the media creates of this belief system. The media attends these church services to see serpents handling; some of the congregation members, as Ball suggests, act accordingly, even if those actions are outside of the anointing. While documenting church service is significant, Ball is also correct with his statement that these news reporters were looking for something “hairy.” The congregation recognizes the reasons why media outlets want so badly to attend these signs-following church services. A simple internet keyword search for signs-following churches yields impactful photographs documenting dramatic displays of serpent-handling. News reporters and media photographers want to obtain that same notoriety, and in all fairness, the same can be said for some signs-following congregation members. Believers like Hamblin and Hensley, for example, yearn for the spotlight. They desire to be associated with this belief system; but, for Ball, this desire is unacceptable. He rejects the premise of social role theory; he does not want his congregation members following the signs out of context and most definitely not outside of an anointing. Alfred Ball’s closing remark, that congregation members have attempted to correct their mistakes, suggests that, after the dust settled and the media outlets left the church, the congregation members who acted out of context

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<sup>124</sup> Anne M. Koenig and Alice H. Eagly, " Evidence for the Social Role Theory of Stereotype Content: Observations of Groups’ Roles Shape Stereotypes," *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology* 107, no. 3 (September 2014): 375. PsycARTICLES, EBSCOhost (accessed October 1, 2014).

have since confessed to their false reenactment and are continuing to observe and respect the holiness lifestyle to which the signs-following believers adhere.



## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

An evaluation of interviews with George Hensley, Andrew Hamblin, Jamie Coots, and Alfred Ball unveils a distinct dichotomy within the leadership of the signs-following faith. The first version, represented by Hensley and Hamblin, focuses on the creation of notoriety through social movements. These two pastors both exhibit linguistic mechanics that highlight their continuous struggle for power. First, the analysis of Hensley's direct quotations revealed discern for the law. Instead of obtaining a wildlife permit, Hensley openly admits to eluding the law. He refuses to accept the repressive social apparatus constructed by the Tennessee lawmakers and chooses to live his life as a fugitive of the law. In terms of power, Hensley constructs his own religious reality in which he can live above the laws of man and beast. His continuous boasting about the sheer number of snakes he has handled and the number of snake bites he's survived relates directly to his superficial need to be admired. He is adamant in his assertion that he created the serpent-handling religious tradition, citing this fact in several articles. The content of his responses is purely superficial. His level of self-disclosure stays comfortably within the first level, providing high-level commentary on his physical. With his last breath, Hensley refuses to identify any of his spiritual shortcomings. Instead, he elevates himself above his congregation and suggests that the deadly bite is a result of someone else's fear and not his own. He tries to create a Christ-like scenario where he succumbs to the snake bite for the salvation of all serpent-handlers to follow. The audience walks away with the impression that Hensley's thirst for power and notoriety was unquenchable. Hensley is one personification of the spectacle.

Similar to Hensley, Andrew Hamblin's interview discourse revealed evidence of his own struggles with power. In an attempt to rally support behind his self-constructed religious rights movement, Hamblin hosts his own press conference to give reporters a chance to ask him questions. The sheer context of this press conference interview is unlike any of the other interviews evaluated in this study. Hamblin is opportunistic. He's a young, vibrant internet sensation who wants to shout the gospel from the rooftops. Hamblin is met with great resistance by other signs-following congregations as well as the public. In an act of full self-disclosure, Hamblin agrees to appear on a nationally televised reality series which chronicles his congregation alongside his friend and mentor Jamie Coots and Coots's congregation. While the show was short lived, the negative implications of sharing one's life with the masses existed long after the last episode ended, as evidenced on social media outlets and within the public commenting areas hosted by the National Geographic Channel's website as well as newspaper websites. Like Hensley, Hamblin attempts to raise himself above his oppressors. First, he attacks the National Geographic Channel and accuses the network of false representation, stating that, given a second season, he will see to it that the show reevaluates his characterization. Then, he attempts to construct his own religious rights movement by manipulating a wildlife sanction to appear as an infringement of his freedom of religion. Hamblin's levels of self-disclosure, much like Hensley's level, remain low throughout the two interviews analyzed. He reveals very little personal information about himself. And, on the rare occasion that he does disclose something more substantive, he immediately retracts the statement and replaces it with biblical parable and other references to scripture. He, too, wants a stage.

In contrast, interviews with Jamie Coots and Alfred Ball uncover a completely different set of religious philosophies and substantially higher levels of self-disclosure. Coots exhibits a

kind, mild-mannered personality that is not consumed with public attention. Coots was raised in the serpent-handling tradition. He maintains close ties with his family and fosters relationships through his disclosures of personal information. He has a genuine interest in his church members and a respect for his faith. Coots's interview responses held evidence of a love for the Lord and a desire to lift up people's spirits. He never speaks harshly about the opposition he faces. He does not require a press conference to broadcast his opinions about law enforcement, TWRA, and signs following. Instead, he is content in his one-room church house.

Alfred Ball's well-spoken nature and genuine concerns about the authenticity of his congregation's membership echoes those of Jamie Coots. He sternly articulates his reasoning for revoking the visiting media's invitation to his services. He does not desire to be a mouthpiece for the tradition of serpent-handling, but he does not want anyone to speak on his behalf either. Ball's self-disclosure reaches the highest, most intimate levels. He shares intimate feelings about the practice of serpent handling and his firm opposition to the idea of following the signs outside the anointing. He reprimands his congregation for falsifying their anointing to satisfy the visual needs of news reporters and photographers. Ball does exhibit some signs of power. He extinguishes any signs of corruption or disruption within his church. But, his authority is not stifling.

As stated in the preface of this work, the intention of this thesis is not to cast a scornful eye on the preachers of this fundamentalist belief. Instead, what this study captures is the struggle of four men who must grapple with the powerful media ISA all while fighting to preserve their own religious tradition. The results of this study conclude that each of the four men identify the significance and power of the media ISA and how that apparatus steers the opinions of those outside of this belief system.

Two primary responses resonate from this study. First, Hensley and Hamblin embrace the spectacle. While the classification of Hamblin and Hensley for that matter, as a publicity hound is a bit far-fetched, the classification does hold some truth. In an effort to maintain scholarly objectivity, this study concludes that Hamblin and Hensley are not seeking publicity – the publicity comes to them. Their negotiations are purely opportunistic. Hensley’s serpent handling displays and Hamblin’s social media success are not possible without an audience. The voyeuristic nature of audiences who follow the lead of the media ISA present men like Hamblin and Hensley with the opportunity to broadcast. One cannot simply be a “publicity hound” on one’s own. Instead, an audience must follow. And the audience, especially in the case of serpent handling, then becomes the hound. Hensley and Hamblin are not forceful men. They are charismatic to a fault and they both exhibit a passion that attracts onlookers and prospective members. Without this type of personality, the practice would not have survived as long as it has. While membership continues to decline, young churches open and close with great rapidity, and public interest fades until the next media spectacle, these men will continue to perpetuate an unmatched zest in their own quest to disseminate this belief. And, in Hensley’s case, even after his death, the energy he channeled continues to be analyzed and the influence of his preaching lives on. Hamblin, on the other hand, must learn to grapple with the every-changing ISA of media, and now, social media.

Secondly, as evidenced with Coots and Ball, this study captures the struggles of pastors to help their congregation maintain autonomy and authenticity. For these two men, it is necessary to champion the ISA of religious fundamentalism. Coots and Ball help to foster understanding both inside and outside of their congregations. While their methodologies of dissemination differ somewhat from the philosophies of Hensley and Hamblin, Coots and Ball do encourage the

recognition of a particular interpretation of biblical scripture shared within a religious community. Both pastors exhibit a worried concern when members act in the signs without the protection of the anointing. While this study does not look to the theological aspects of their scared texts, it does introduce the notion of interpretative meaning as a product of the community.

While this study extends the interdisciplinary nature of discourse analysis, future studies should look towards the analysis of personal discourse to gather more intimate nature about the motivations of pastors in the signs-following tradition. The prevalence of social media in today's society is growing at a rapid rate. This infiltration of social media creates discourse across a variety of mediums. Although grey areas surround the academic arena of social media, an analysis of the social media discourse created by signs followed would significantly contribute to the academic conversation.

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