The Differential Evaluation of Religious Risk Rituals Involving Serpents in Two Cultures

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Abstract

While serpent symbolism is common in many religious traditions, few traditions have including the actual handling of serpents that can maim and kill in their rituals. Two exceptions are various Manasa sects common in India and the serpent handlers of Appalachia in America. We presented brief descriptions of each of these traditions along with videos of the handling of serpents in each tradition under three degrees of risk, video with no serpents, video with serpents but no bites, video with serpents and bites. Under a fourth condition only for the Appalachian handlers, the video showed a handler dying from a bite. American, largely Christian participants rated assessed each condition for ritual quality and perceived legitimacy. As predicted, serpent handling in America was perceived as less legitimate than serpent handling in India. No differences were found between perceived legitimacy and level of risk except in the condition where a handler was seen dying from a bite.

Key words: Serpent Handling Sects of Appalachia, Manasa Sect of Hinduism, Religious Risk Rituals, Perception, Behavior Evaluation, Psychology of Religion

Słowa kluczowe: wspólnoty praktykujące poskramianie węży z regionu Appalachów, hinduistyczny kult bogini Manasa, rytuały religijne związane z ryzykiem, percepcja, ewaluacja zachowania, psychologia religii

The role of traditionalism in religious ritual has long been noted1. While traditionalism adds legitimacy to ritual, the actual emergence of what becomes ritual is often associated with a controversial history. Furthermore, if the ritual that struggles to merge challenges other norms of the host culture, the performative aspect of ritual2 may be-

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2 Ibidem, p. 159–164.
come problematic. For instance, in the United States while religious belief is protected by the Constitution, religious practice is not\(^3\). Thus, while one may be free to believe in handling serpents, most affected states have passed laws the actual handling of serpents, presumably to protect believers from the risk of harming themselves or others.

Our interest in this paper is to explore reactions to religious rituals that entail risk. Given the long history documenting the centrality of serpents in many religious traditions\(^4\) we choose to focus upon two cultural traditions in which the serpent is actually handled in a ritual that can main and kill those who perform it. The two traditions are separated by time, culture, and belief, but each shares the practice of actually handling a poisonous serpent and either allowing it to bite (as in the case of the Mansa sect of India) or risking a bite (as in the case of the contemporary Appalachian handlers of the United States). We will briefly present necessary background information for each of these traditions before presenting data regarding the differential evaluation of the handling of serpents based upon culture.

**Christian Serpent Handling in Appalachia**

Serpent handling as a religious ritual appeared within the first ten years of the twentieth century. The practice appeared in east Tennessee and spread to other parts of the Southern Appalachian Mountain region of the United States. Serpent handling sects are historically linked to three forms of American Protestantism: holiness, fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism\(^5\). Many serpent handlers simply identify themselves as holiness people insisting that their outward behavior is sufficient evidence to testify to an inward spiritual transformation that both empowers them to handle deadly serpents and to speak in tongues (glossolalia). Furthermore, both these phenomena are justified by specific Bible texts, especially but not only Mark 16:17–18\(^6\).

The fundamentalists influence among serpent handlers is in their acceptance of a plain reading of the Bible when it is appropriate\(^7\). The Pentecostal influence among serpent handlers is in their belief that at the day of Pentecost the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. Many modern Pentecostal groups trace their origins back to the day of Pentecost and belief that Holy Ghost baptism is essential for salvation and that the initial evidence of Holy Ghost baptism is glossolalia\(^8\).

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\(^7\) R.W. Hood Jr., P.C. Hill, and W.P. Williamson, *op.cit*.