THEM THAT BELIEVE: THE POWER AND MEANING OF THE CHRISTIAN SERPENT-HANDLING TRADITION. By Ralph W. Hood, Jr., and W. Paul Williamson. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008. xvi + 301pp. $60.00 hardcover. $24.95 paperback. [*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (December 2009), 826-826.]

As a long-time student of Pentecostalism and a life-long practitioner of the faith, I have learned not to become too irritated when an otherwise well-educated new acquaintance assumes that I must have taken up serpents in religious ecstasy—or at least that I focus my research on those few Pentecostals who do. At first, I took a vigorous defensive posture—launching into a demographic lesson on the miniscule fraction of Holy Ghost people who bring deadly snakes to church and the stunning numerical growth of those more mundane Pentecostals who merely speak in unknown tongues and dance in the Spirit. About twenty years ago, though, I settled for a droll one-liner: “I imagine there are more students of snake handling that there are people who actually handle snakes.”

When I first employed this strategy, I knew I was exaggerating. But in light of the outpouring of careful scholarship on Appalachian serpent handling over the past two decades, my dismissive retort is beginning to appear prophetic. Rarely a year passes without the publication of an insightful new study of the practice. For the last decade no students of snake handling have been more prolific than psychologists Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and W. Paul Williamson. Their most recent collaboration, *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition*, ably introduces readers to work of earlier scholars of the phenomenon and engagingly summarizes their own extraordinary historical and field research. (This research is assessable at the Hood-Williamson Research Archives for the Holiness Serpent Handling Sects of Appalachia housed in the Lupton Library of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.)

Customary academic boundaries do not deter Hood and Williamson. Almost every chapter of *Them That Believe* employs the tools of a different discipline. In clear and confidence prose they construct causal historical narratives, engage in rhetorical and musicological analysis of sermons and songs, interpret EEGs performed on people speaking in tongues and/or handling snakes, and render sociologically-contextualized ethnographic descriptions of church services. They are equally comfortable describing the sexual-religious symbolism attached to serpents over the millennia and the minute-by-minute physiological reactions that follow their bites. In addition, Hood and Williamson do not shy away from judging the theological consistency of both their subjects and their non-handling Pentecostal critics (finding the former truer to a literal interpretation of Mark 16:17-18); nor do hold back their contempt for the legal restraints various states have placed on handling poisonous snakes in church (praising only West Virginia, the one Appalachian state that has refused to outlaw the practice).

While reading a multi-disciplinary *tour de force* like the one Hood and Williamson have given us is delightfully mind-expanding, reviewing such a book can be frightening to someone who rarely ventures beyond the friendly confines of Church History. Beyond suggesting the breadth of analysis, depth of research, and accessibility of presentation, I can applaud the authors’ advancement of the historical narrative of serpent handling. Only a few factual errors (such as repeatedly referring to southern Pentecostal pioneer Gaston B. Cashwell by the initials “C. B.”) remind this historian that he is reading history constructed by psychologists. With undeniable documentation dug out of *The Church of God Evangel*, for example, Hood and Williamson confirm what some historians of Pentecostalism have long suspected—that snake handling was not only popularized by a rogue Church of God evangelist named George Hensley, but that during the 1910s serpents were taken up by (or at least in the presence of) many influential leaders of the emerging denomination headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee. In addition, the authors’ pain-staking research has produced an annotated list of ninety deaths that resulted from religious snake handling over the last century, the latest in 2006.

While much of the history in *Them That Believe* provides convincing answers to old questions about the extent of handling in the early Church of God and the number of lives shortened by the practice, some of Hood and Williamson’s historical sections raise more questions than they answer. By giving voice to oral traditions handed down across several generations of preachers, for instance, the authors suggest that some mountain people handled serpents for religious reasons as early as the 1890s, a decade before the Pentecostal movement (which is often blamed for sparking handling around 1910) appeared in the region. This may extend the life of the current interest in serpent-handling by luring scholars back into the 19th century. Likewise, Hood and Williamson’s careful documentation of several congregational histories also holds the potential to provoke more such studies. Despite some obvious similarities in ritual behavior and social composition, these congregations demonstrate surprising differences. Some embrace divorced believers, for example, but others shun them; some are Trinitarian, but others worship “Jesus Only”; some are dwindling in numbers and aging, but others are growing larger and younger. This variety may well spark a new generation of scholars to seek out the particular paths and patterns of other congregations.

So Hood and Williamson’s impressive summary of the state of “Snake Handling Studies” will certainly not be the last word. And despite my growing concern that the number of scholars will eventually exceed the number of practitioners, I must now admit that I look forward to more work in this narrow sub-field. What I am anticipating—in addition to the unearthing of even more evidence—is a healthy revival of critical detachment to counterbalance the recent trend toward celebrating the authenticity of snake handlers’ faith in an increasingly secular society and respecting their daring defiance of death amid a death-denying culture. Hood and Williamson openly describe themselves as “participant-observers in their church services, though neither . . . has ever handled serpents.” I see them, and several other contemporary students of the movement, more as “advocate-observers.” Even as I gobble up their fascinating observations, I grow weary of the advocacy. I prefer to choose my own heroes and dole out my own respect. At least this is what I tell myself. But perhaps this participant-observer of more mainstream Pentecostalism is still just a bit too defensive.

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