CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN SERPENT HANDLERS
AND THE NEW PARADIGM FOR THE
PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

The widely acknowledged call for a new multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm for the psychology of religion is illustrated by a survey of our research on the contemporary Christian serpent handlers of Appalachia. Over a fifteen year period, we have employed a variety of methodologies and levels of analysis to explore the history of this tradition. They included archival documentation of the early endorsement of the Church of God for this ritual as well as the role of the Gospel of Mark within Pentecostal denominations that eventually rejected this ritual. We collected oral histories of this tradition and explored the meaning that handling has for believers using phenomenological interviews and hermeneutical methods of exploring the thematic structure of not only handling, but also of the anointing, and of near-death experiences from serpent bites. We also have developed an empirically based formula for probability of bites based upon video taped documentations of handling that we have archived. In addition, we explored the legal history of laws against handling as well the reasoning that judges gave for upholding bans against serpent handling on appeals to state supreme courts. In quasi experimental studies we explored both rational rejection of this practice and the influence of personal and cultural prejudice against it. We also empirically demonstrated that attitudes toward both handlers and laws banning the practice could be changed based upon exposure to handlers’ own justification for their beliefs and practices. Finally, we explored the symbolic and sign value of the serpent indicating how their confluence produces an intense emotional response that is viewed as holy by this tradition.

KEY WORDS: serpent handling, Pentecostal, phenomenology, hermeneutics, new paradigm

Evaluations of the contemporary psychology of religion range from Wulff’s (2003) claim that it is “a field in crisis” to Emmons and Paloutzian’s (2003) enthusiasm for a “new multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm” (p. 395, emphasis in original) to replace the older measurement paradigm identified by Gorsuch (1984). In our view, these different evaluations are not really at odds if one simply accepts that at least part of the “crisis” in

* Author Note: This paper is based upon an invited address by the first author to the Annual Mid-Year Conference of Division 36 of the APA, Loyola University, Maryland, March 2–3, 2007. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Department #2803, 350 Holt Hall, 615 McCallie Avenue, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 37403–2598.

Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, Volume 19
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the contemporary psychology of religion is its commitment to survey, experimental, and quasi-experimental methodologies as the gold standard by which all research is evaluated. We have provided criticisms of such a commitment elsewhere (Belzen & Hood, 2006). Likewise others have persuasively argued for methodological pluralism (Roth, 1987) which necessarily raises issues that Koch and Leary (1985, pp. 935–950) suggested are an emerging consensus in general psychology; hopefully, these same issues will find their way into the psychology of religion from those who heed the call for a new paradigm. Included are the limited applicability of experimental methods and an increasing awareness of the philosophical presuppositions contained within research methods. In this article we wish to champion the idea of a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm and to demonstrate what we think is a good exemplar of what this paradigm might look like. In so doing, we assume not only the notions of multiple levels of analysis, but also interdisciplinary in the sense that psychologists might utilize a variety of methods often linked with other disciplines that are required for a fuller psychological treatment of a phenomenon. Perhaps more to the point, the very notion of disciplines has perhaps outlived its usefulness. Historians of necessity utilize implicit or explicit psychology; psychologists of necessity make historical claims. Thus, our survey of over fifteen years of research on the contemporary Christian serpent handlers of Appalachia is a methodological overview of what the “new” multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm might look like.

Creating the Frame: A New Model of Fundamentalism

All research is guided implicitly or otherwise by assumptions and intuitions about the object being studied. For a long time we had the sense that psychologists and other social scientists who studied fundamentalism had it wrong. The research seemed more like methodologically-biased studies confirming stereotypes held by those who claimed to be objectively studying fundamentalism (Hood, 1983). In a recent book (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005), we not only documented these stereotypes, but also developed an explicit model of religious fundamentalism that had guided much of our research on serpent handlers. The key concept in our model is intratextuality, which connotes the fact that fundamentalists interpret all reality in light of their absolutely authoritative text. The tautology of the fundamentalist world view is not a vicious one,