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## REL 100 - Handling Snakes in Order to Handle the Sacred

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## Handling Snakes in Order to Handle the Sacred

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### Abstract

Mircea Eliade describes mythic narratives as telling “a sacred history ... [by] disclos[ing] their [Supernatural Beings’] creative activity and reveal[ing] the sacredness of their works” (*Myth and Reality* 6). Eastern and Western traditions alike rely on mythic narratives in order for insiders to be unconsciously transported to the sacred times and places of those mythic narratives. Christianity is a tradition which is very diverse, though most all insiders are engaged in Christian prayer. The snake handling churches of the Appalachian Mountains include practices of handling snakes, drinking poison, speaking in tongues, and dealing with fire. The followers of these specific rituals of Christianity trace the origins of this practice to the words of Mark 16:18, where it reads, “They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them...” (*King James Bible*, Mark 16:18). The constant danger that the snake handlers face through practices are sacred rituals described in an origin that transports the insider into what Eliade referred to as a hierophany. The specific type of hierophany in this situation would be identified as what Eliade calls a *kratophany*, or a catastrophic and cataclysmic and has the insider experiencing the most severe trauma possible. This trauma displays the ambivalence of the sacred through the main ritual symbol of this tradition, or snakes. This paper aims to explore the danger that the snake handlers are experiencing not only as a religious activity, but also psychologically. It investigates their goal of putting themselves in danger to experience the sacred, and how their rituals and mythic narrative combine to help achieve this goal of a hierophany.

Religions seek to find different approaches in order to bring the sacred and profane together. Religions of the west are commentaries on how to heal the wound of the profane being severed from the sacred. Christianity, as an extremely diverse tradition has many ways that its followers heal this wound. Its variations range from African Villagers chanting to praise Christ, to silence in a Quaker silent worship. Though very diverse, all of the followers are engaged in Christian prayer with similar beliefs. The wide variety of Christians in the world differ through their locations. Some denominations are in extremely urban settings, while some are isolated. Many of these isolated denominations of Christianity use dangerous objects or

actions in their spiritual practices. These dangerous practices are what these believers use to heal the wound, and come closer to the sacred. What is it like to put yourself in danger in order to experience the sacred?

A regular practice, snake handling originated in the Appalachian Mountains. It includes multiple practices of speaking in tongues, handling snakes, drinking poison, and dealing with fire. These snake handlers live by the words of Mark 16:18, where it says, "They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them..." (*King James Bible*, Mark 16:18). Through these practices, the insiders bring themselves closer to healing the wound and closer to the sacred. In snake handling churches, through sacred rituals described in mythic narrative the insider is able to experience a hierophany.

The sacred, and its opposite, the profane are described by Eliade as "real and unreal" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 13). These words have very powerful meanings and are multidimensional. The profane world is the normal, mundane, and ordinary world. It is the activities that we experience on a daily basis that have no religious context and do not aim to be religious. The sacred world is harder to describe, other than saying it is the opposite of the profane. The sacred is holy, and through being inside a sacred world, the insider brings themselves closer to answering the metaphysical and existential questions as asked in their tradition. The sacred and profane take on a characteristic that Eliade describes as "*coincidentia oppositorum*." This is Latin for coincidence of opposites, which Eliade says is a "twofold revelation...in the very nature of divinity, which shows itself, by turns or even simultaneously, benevolent and terrible, creative and destructive, solar and serpentine, and so on (in other words, actual and potential) ..." (*Patterns of Comparative Religion* 419). The sacred and

profane are opposites, but can take on different characteristics of good, bad, and others.

Therefore, the sacred and profane would fall into these categories of actual and potential.

Often times, shamans of traditions have ways to mark the difference between the sacred and profane worlds. Whether that may be by speaking in a different language, or utilizing an object, it is done. We see this in snake handling churches. Many pastors believe that there is a difference between handling snakes in the sacred and profane worlds. Pastor Andrew Hamblin of the Tabernacle Church of G-d<sup>1</sup>, insists that his followers should seek medical help when they are bitten outside of the church. In this instance, he believes they are in the profane world. When hunting for snakes, Hamblin does not experience the sacred encouraging him to deal with the wild snakes, therefore he would receive help for a snake bite, as it is not worth death because he was not in the presence of the sacred. Though, when in a church service, he does not receive help for getting bit. The belief is that if G-d wanted them to die, then it is their time. When residing in close proximity to the sacred and within the unseen order which creates the sacred qualities of the snake, the holy person is passive—a lack of control, and being “grasped and held by a superior power” (James 372)—in the face of this fascinating mystery of

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<sup>1</sup> In religious studies we study traditions using an approach known as methodological agnosticism. This is a structured way of studying religions that doesn't take a position as to the truth or falsehood of religions, but instead studies culture, history, and symbol as mediated through mythic narratives, contemplative practices, pilgrimage, ritual, and visual/material objects and means. Not writing out G-d may seem hypocritical of me as a religious studies student. While I understand this, it is said in Deuteronomy 12:3-4, “and you shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their asherim with fire, cut down the graven images of their g-ds, and destroy their name from that place. You shall not do so to the Lord, your G-d.” (*Tanakh*, Deuteronomy 12:3-4). Therefore, I believe as a Jew, that I should avoid writing G-d's name so that I will never erase or destroy it, as this is part of my identity as “what it means to be a Jew.”. While I am following this commandment of my tradition, my views are still methodologically agnostic.

the sacred. These pastors give a distinct difference between when medical attention is acceptable in their religion, and when G-d will save them. This difference takes on characteristics of *coincidentia oppositorum*. In these instances, the sacred and profane take on characteristics of dangerous and safe depending on the markings given in the tradition or by the shaman. These two distinct phases of the world that you can be in are defined in snake handling churches by the pastor, they help insiders to know the difference of when they are getting closer to the sacred.

Ritual is described as meaning through participation in structured activity. Rappaport also gave it distinct characteristics of “a type of *performance*; that in it the acts are *formal* and relatively *invariant*, governed by *convention*, and carrying meanings that perhaps can only be expressed in *ritual form*” (Rappaport 24). Therefore, we can summarize that ritual is a formal, specific act that is meant as a performance that is done within a particular area. All rituals have specific guidelines as defined in mythic narratives. Through acts of rituals, the insider of the tradition is able to come closer to the sacred. As rituals bring the insider closer to the sacred, ritual symbols can help this process. Eliade wrote, “...symbolism makes it possible to move from one level to another, and one mode of existence to another...” (*Patterns of Comparative Religion* 452). Ritual symbols act as an object where the insider can indirectly interact with the sacred. Altizer analyzes Eliade’s aspect of the meanings of religious symbols, “(3) ...expressing simultaneously a number of meanings... (4) thus religious symbol allows man to discover a certain unity of the world... (6) religious symbols are always "existential" inasmuch as they aim at reality or a situation in which human existence is engaged” (Altizer 35-36). The snake causes a dislocation of the identity of the insider. In some churches the ultimate task is to handle the

snake, and you become fully immersed in the sacred when you are able to do that. It creates a unification in the insider's religious world as the pull that they had experienced makes sense, and they realize why the Lord would want them to take up the serpents. The symbol of the snake has multiple meanings. These include seduction, fertility, good and evil, guardianship, poison, and immortality. In snake handling churches the key part of ritual is the symbol that the snake takes on and the meaning that it portrays to its insiders.

In the churches the symbol that the snake most commonly takes is immortality. Part of the image of their immortality is the shedding of their skin. They shed their skin every two to four years, which takes place among a two-layer skin complex (Alibardi 178). Every time they shed their skin, their life is being renewed. "Snakes *are* the g-ds, and *are* the deathless element in each man; snakes are essential immortality...snakes do not 'die'..." (La Barre 107). These snakes, though dangerous, represents the immortality that the Lord is providing to the insiders when they perform the ritual. In Mark 16:18 the snake takes on the identity of the Devil or an object of the Devil. In order for an insider to overcome the devil and come close to G-d, the sacred, and immortality, they must take up the serpents. The ritual of taking up serpents can be described with Rudolf Otto's term, *mysterious tremendum*. This can mean the fascinating mystery. Otto describes, "it has become a mystical awe...described as the feeling of personal nothingness and submergence before the awe-inspiring object directly experienced" (Otto 17)

There is a fear in snake handling of getting bit, but that fear is overcome through the awe of wanting to experience a hierophany. This also portrays the ambivalence of the sacred to the reader, or the attraction and simultaneous repulsion of the sacred. Though the object being experienced may be dangerous, there is a pull to it. This pull can be related to how James Pratt

describes the relationship between religion and the subconscious. He analyzes that the content of the subconscious is natural, yet it influences the mind of the individual and makes itself feel mysterious and of a supernatural power (Pratt 64). The subconscious as related to religion in a way magnetically attracts the insider to the sacred whether dangerous or not, in this case it pulls this insider to the snakes and experiencing hierophany through handling them.

Ritual sacralizes time and place, such that the time and place becomes that of the mythic narrative. When describing mythic narrative, we simply call it true fiction. This oxymoron means that mythic narrative is a story that narrates a sacred history, where if they did not happen it doesn't subtract from the significance of it, but if it did happen, it adds to the significance. Eliade defines mythic narratives as telling "a sacred history ... [by] disclos[ing] their [Supernatural Beings'] creative activity and reveal[ing] the sacredness of their works" (*Myth and Reality* 6). When an insider takes part in the rituals described in the mythic narrative there are unconsciously transported to the sacred time and place as described in that mythic narrative. Pratt states "it seems most probable that certain brain events are so correlated with certain mind events that the former are regularly followed or accompanied by the latter" (Pratt 53). This would mean that through experiencing a phenomena consciously, we would subconsciously be experiencing the event that is told of in the mythic narrative. Through the reading of mythic narratives, the insider is immersed in an unseen order in which their tradition takes place. They are able to practice the rituals spoken in these specific mythic narratives and become closer to the sacred through reactualizing the gestures and thus sacralizing their world.

The mythic narrative that the snake handling churches practice by is from Mark 16:18. Many scholarly sources say that the Gospel of Mark ends with 16:8, but the longer ending is a

dominant reading for the snake handlers. They believe that Mark 16:18 is the “authentic gospel” and provides a testimony for why they snake handle and how it obeys the Lord (Street 78). “...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...” (*King James Bible*, Mark 16:17-18). By reactualizing these rituals as defined by Jesus to the Eleven in the Bible, the snake handlers find themselves obeying the laws of the Lord. This is from being in direct contact with danger and being saved through G-d. While there is no evidence of any snake handling during the time that Mark was written (Street 83), it does not take away from the significance of snake handling. The sacred rituals as discussed in the mythic narrative may be dangerous, but the snake handlers believe that through their actions they are coming closer to the sacred, which allows them to experience the mythic narrative the way they believe they should.

Through the performance of the rituals based on mythic narratives the insider is able to experience a hierophany. Hierophany is described as an act of manifestation whereby the sacred reveals itself to the insider. There are many varieties of hierophanies. One variety is the kratophany. This is a hierophany where the act of manifestation displays the ambivalence of the sacred. It is catastrophic and cataclysmic and has the insider experiencing the most severe trauma possible. This form of hierophany dislocates the identity of the insiders and can cause them to question their identity. Kratophany displays what Eliade describes as the ambivalence of the sacred, “...not only in the psychological order (in that it attracts or repel, but also in the order of values; the sacred is at once ‘sacred’ and ‘defiled’” (*Patterns of Comparative Religion*



14-15). There is more of the subconscious pull that Pratt described. Though the snakes may cause them to suffer, when experiencing the hierophany in full form the costs of handling the snake are outweighed by the potential encounter with the sacred.

Snake handlers experience hierophany as they begin to handle the serpents. The handlers describe how they can feel when G-d wants them to handle a certain serpent. When they hear that, they know they will not be harmed. Though, when they do not experience the hierophany, they do not handle the serpent due to the probability of getting injured. The serpent takes the form of a kratophany and displays the ambivalence of the sacred to the insider. To many the power of feeling the Lord attracts them, yet the danger of the snake repels them. A single snake bite from most of the venomous snakes used in the rituals is enough to kill a man. The venom is found to consist of hemotoxins and neurotoxins. A variety of symptoms can be experienced when bit such as difficulty breathing, swelling, nausea, and even death (Lewitus 545-546). The insiders describe that the only way to keep themselves safe from the danger of the serpent is to handle them when they experience the hierophany. When they feel or hear the word of G-d subconsciously they know that they will be protected by the Lord.

What is it like for a snake handler to put themselves in danger in order to experience the sacred? Snake handlers have many religious ways to keep themselves safe, whether waiting to experience the hierophany, establishing the markings between the sacred and profane, and more, they make it so they are cautious when coming in contact with the sacred. The kratophany of the snake causes an extreme dislocation of the identity of the insider, yet when handling the true identity of the insider is found yet again. The insider of this practice of Christianity experiences a wave of subconscious thoughts and pulls in order to get closer to the

sacred. This is all the ambivalence of the sacred. The sacred in this particular practice causes the insider to experience something dangerous in order to prove its divine power. Though Pratt cannot answer if there are any supernatural powers influencing the subconscious that the insider is experiencing (Pratt 63), the act of taking up the serpent proves this to other insiders. When they experience their peers and families taking up serpents, they believe the the Lord is at work. Through the sacred rituals described in mythic narrative the insider is able to experience a hierophany. The insider subconsciously performs the rituals in spite of the danger, and consciously experiences the sacred. The ultimate goal is to come closer to the sacred, and through snake handling and its ambivalence the insider is able to achieve that goal.

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