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Religious Studies

Masters by Course Work

Masters Dissertation: Supervisor. Dr. D. Chidester

THE SOUTHERN SNAKE-HANDLING CULT OF THE U.S.A.

The Gospel of Mark: Chapter 16 verses 17 & 18

"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 in no wise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover."

University of Cape Town

September 1988

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DESCRIPTIVE ABSTRACTMASTERS DISSERTATION. RELIGIOUS STUDIESUNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWNTHE SOUTHERN SNAKE-HANDLING CULT OF THE U.S.ATHE GOSPEL OF ST. MARK CHAPTER 16 VERSES 17 & 18.

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They shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it shall in no wise hurt them, they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover."

The cult in question bases its belief on the above verses, interpreting them literally, handling venomous snakes and occasionally drinking posion during religious services. The snake-handlers consist of approximately thirty-six fundamentalist Christian congregations scattered across the rural areas of the Southeastern U.S.A.

It began in 1909 when the founder, George Went Hensley of Grasshopper Valley, Tennessee, was pondering the gospel of Mark. It occurred to him that these verses were instructing him to take up serpents. Accordingly, he captured a large

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rattlesnake, handled it without incident and later demonstrated this 'Confirmation of the word' to his congregation. From these small beginnings the cult spread, throughout twelve states and it still flourishes today, despite legislation prohibiting snake-handling.

Comparatively little has been written about the cult. Sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists have studied the cultists, asking 'why' these people should indulge in such life-threatening practices. By and large they have pinpointed socio-economic factors as the root cause - the need for danger and a sense of the miraculous in the often poverty-stricken lives of the individual members.

The ability of the cultists to carelessly handle venomous snakes, sustaining a relatively low mortality rate has puzzled writers on the subject, some of whom regard the snake-handlers as possibly having supernatural powers.

Scientists however are scornful of the cult and have paid little attention to it. This has been my major area of concern. How do they get away with it? Those researchers who have studied the cult have largely lumped the snakes into the category of "Rattlesnake", and as such "deadly". This is not accurate. To attempt a solution, I interviewed various noted herpetologists and consulted numerous zoological textbooks. It seems to me that the snakes themselves are of

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paramount importance, and the species used, behaviour and condition are therefore vital.

Mythology is integral to a study of this kind. The first three chapters are devoted to the influence the snake has had on man's thinking throughout the ages. The fourth chapter places the cult within the framework of the genesis myth - seeing the snake as symbolic of evil. The fifth chapter examines possible reasons for the low mortality rate, and this chapter, incorporating the views of noted experts in the field of herpetology, forms the basis for my conclusion that, as far as handling snakes, the cultists do not have paranormal abilities.

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the Century, in the rural areas of the deep south, a small group of fundamentalists adopted the practice of confirming their faith by handling venomous snakes. Today the cult has spread to at least twelve different States, despite the fact that since 1947 snake-handling has been prohibited by law in all states except one. The cult-members however, regard the legislation as being a violation of their fundamental right to worship as they please. Fatalities occur, the leaders spend time in prison, but still the cult flourishes, with various congregations quite openly flouting the law. In addition to handling snakes, the cultists also drink poison and handle fire, according to their interpretation of the Bible.

Despite the sensational newspaper reports and magazine articles which usually follow a death, comparatively little has been written on the cult. Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists occasionally mention it in passing, usually questioning the motives behind it. They are primarily interested in "why" these groups should indulge in such life-threatening rituals.

Weston La Barre, an anthropologist from Duke University, has written an authoritative book on the subject: "They Shall Take up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult". He too questioned the motives and studied the behaviour

patterns of the members. In searching for answers he examined the role of the snake in myth, and certainly myth is integral to this research. But in discussing mythology La Barre employs distinctly Freudian methods, reducing all snake-myths to a heap of phallic symbols. While phallic symbolism is a very important factor, I would nevertheless take issue with him on this, since myth is far too complex a subject to be dismissed in such a manner. Similarly, in reaching conclusions about the behaviour of the cult members, La Barre uses a Freudian framework which I feel is one-sided and not entirely valid. I have therefore used La Barre as a starting point on which to base my own arguments and research, on both the cult members and the vast area of mythology.

At this point one fact must be emphasised. I am neither inclined nor qualified to attempt a psychological analysis of either snake-myths or the subconscious motives for the behaviour of the cultists. It is my intention to take issue only with those ideas that I personally find alien, irrelevant or simplistic. La Barre's book however, will nevertheless be used as a reference point throughout the discussion on the cult and the religious ceremonies.

Most importantly, there is another area which I feel requires investigation. Scientists have largely ignored the snake-handling cult, while the snakes themselves have been left out of discussion undertaken by sociologists. Thus there is a gap here. It is crucial that the snake be recognised as a

separate entity, entitled to respect. Therefore, instead of asking "why", I would like to ask "how". The motives have been established to some extent, but the role of the snakes as living creatures as opposed to mere symbols, has to a great extent been left alone. Indeed, this aspect is the major purpose of this paper. The snake is, after all, the "other half" in a dual relationship with its handlers, and its reactions are important, especially in view of the fact that there is a surprisingly low mortality rate. If the snake is considered symbolic of the devil, then how gentle are the cult-members with their living incarnations of evil? This is a subject that bears investigation, and certain facts about snakes will have to be reviewed in the light of zoological data.

CHAPTER I

Throughout the ages the snake has played a major role in the religions of man. Complex myths dating from the earliest times bear testimony to the diverse nature of the snake as perceived by various cultures. Divinity or devil, god or guardian, servant of the gods or a selfish creature grabbing the immortality meant for man; still the serpent inspires fear, respect, reverence, awe, and in our own Western culture, a deep and abiding hatred.

A tool of suicide and even murder, it cannot be disputed that the snake is potentially deadly. But this alone is not sufficient to have evoked such ancient and widespread fascination. The beauty of this animal combined with the

lethal qualities possessed by certain species is paradoxical. Thus the role of the serpent in myth is equally paradoxical. It is life-threatening and yet, linked to rain and fertility as it often is, it is also viewed as a life-giver. In Western terms the snake is much maligned and universally feared. And yet it appears frequently in romantic poetry: Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats all use serpent imagery.¹ Shakespeare depicts the asp as a welcome friend to Cleopatra, a creature which will save her from that which she most fears.² In contemporary poetry we have, among others, D.H. Lawrence who brilliantly expresses the conflict between the hatred he should feel and the welcome he does feel for the snake he finds at his drinking trough.

"I despised myself and the voices of my accursed
human education

and I thought of the albatross

... and so, I missed my chance with one of the Lords
of life..."³

This modern ambivalence reflects the reluctantly admiring tone of ancient myths, where the snake proves superior. The Epic of Gilgamesh, an early Sumerian myth from which the Biblical story of Noah appears to have been taken, tells the story of a prince seeking immortality.⁴ From the immortal Utnapishtim (Noah) Gilgamesh learns about the deluge and is also told where to find the herb of immortality which he seeks. A serpent robs him of this herb and Gilgamesh is defeated in his quest. He has no choice but to live out his natural life-span as best he can, with no hope of anything beyond.⁵

This myth is vital to the development of Biblical oral tradition, and gives us a glimpse into the origins of the "cunning serpent" idea which was to blossom into the nucleus of the Genesis myth of the Garden of Eden. The Genesis myth in turn plays a pivotal role in the doctrine of the snake-handling cult.

The Southern Snake-Handling cults of the U.S.A., are often referred to as "Holiness Churches". (Institutionally however, they are unrelated to various other congregations which are also termed "Holiness Churches".) Their history is well documented: As Weston La Barre tells it, they began in 1909 when the founder, George Went Hensley of Grasshopper Valley Tennessee, was pondering the gospel of Mark. It seemed to him that he should confirm his faith by carrying out the 'instructions' contained in chapter 16 verses 17 & 18. According to this text a true believer should be able to handle serpents and even drink poison. "They shall Take up Serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it shall in no wise hurt them..." Having found, captured and handled a large rattlesnake without incident, Hensley decided to demonstrate this test of faith to his congregation. In the space of a few years he had attracted a fairly large following, and the practice had spread into neighbouring states. Today it still flourishes, despite the fatalities which occur from time to time. Findlay E. Russell gives an approximate figure of 40 deaths between 1910 and 1977.⁴ This accounts for the fatalities alone, quite apart from the bites which "numbered

in the hundreds, if not thousands".⁷ Weston La Barre quotes Hensley as saying that he had "been bitten four hundred times 'till I'm speckled all over like a guinea hen".⁸ Ironically in July 1955 Hensley himself succumbed to the bite of an eastern diamondback rattlesnake at a meeting in Altha, Florida. He was seventy years of age.

The cult continued to spread however and attracted followers in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, Alabama, Indiana and West Virginia as well as Florida and Tennessee. There have even been two isolated incidents in California, although it is not known if these were in any way connected to the southern practices. In the words of J.A. Womeldorf, a journalist who reported on the cult in the 40's at the height of its notoriety "The strange doctrine of the snake-handlers have been published "unto the uttermost parts of the earth" and have stirred up trouble from Michigan to Florida".⁹

Laws were passed prohibiting snake-handling in all states with the exception of West Virginia. But the legislation, combined with the sensational treatment meted out by the press, only fuelled the fanaticism of the cult-members. Apparently they began to see themselves as martyrs, persecuted for their faith. At the same time they played to public interest in order to spread the gospel as they interpreted it. As Womeldorf rightly says "People who have nothing but horror for snakes will nevertheless go a long way to see them fondled and caressed. The circus and carnival

discovered that long ago, and the snake-handlers have become aware of it too. The Shrine of Divine Healing drew 2 000 people a week for ten weeks in 1945, with a bumper crowd of 5 000 at the "National snake-handling demonstration" in July".¹⁰

Although membership appears to have dwindled in the last decade, and the churches are more scattered, the belief is still very much alive, but figures are somewhat contradictory. One recent estimate has the number of churches at about thirty-six,¹¹ while another fixes individual membership at about one thousand.¹² On the other hand, the Christian Century estimated "several hundred thousand" in 1947 ¹³ and if these figures are accurate the decline in membership is substantial. However, a September 1987 report in the New York Times verified that the belief remains unchanged: Two men were reported as 'recovering' after being bitten by rattlesnakes during a service at Fort Wayne, Indiana.¹⁴

In Newport, Tennessee, where the handling of snakes is illegal, the "Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name" demonstrates both the desire for public interest and the defiance of the law. A 1971 New York Times article describes the church and the situation: "There used to be a time ... when more people took up serpents. But as modern times encroached ... some people gave up the practice because of ridicule, others because of change in faith...now there

are just a few snake-handling churches...Most of their members fear arrest and wouldn't tell a stranger where or when they meet. But the people of the Holiness Church, even the ones who spent the night in jail last year have no secrets...But big crowd or small, visitors will be met at the door by Brother Liston Pack who is so secure in his faith that he welcomes correspondence from strangers. "Tell them my address is Rural Route number 2, Del Rio, Tennessee 37727" says Brother Pack..."¹⁵

Weston La Barre's book is generally considered to be the definitive work on the snake-handling cult. It was first published in 1962 and is heavily influenced by Freud. His commentary on myth is almost entirely Freudian and as such becomes too simplistic. In La Barre's view all snake-myths are merely phallic in origin, not excepting the Genesis myth. The cult-members therefore are, in his view, simply acting out repressed sexuality. There is no doubt however that La Barre completely accepts their sincerity. He gives several examples of their fanatical fundamentalism in areas outside of church meetings including the fact that "The men wear open-necked shirts (for no bible-text can be discovered which says Jesus or the Apostles ever wore a neck-tie)."¹⁶ He also tells us that at one point "a coco-cola schism threatened when one Deacon said that he had drunk a coke one hot spell but had detected no lessening of his snake-handling powers...some of the brethren challenged the Deacon to find a text in the Bible where it is said that Coca-Cola drinking is

permitted to the elect".¹⁷ These two examples illustrate the extent to which the cult members rely on the Bible as being the only and absolute truth. Why then is it so surprising (and psychologically significant) that they should take the verses in Mark chapter 16 so literally?

Before we examine La Barre's analysis of snake-myths it is worth examining what he, and other writers on the subject, have pin-pointed as the necessary 'ingredients' of a cult-member. Firstly, an unquestioning belief in the Bible is mandatory. Secondly, all sources agree that the cult is confined to people with little or no education, poverty-stricken, and living in culturally backward areas. Nathan L. Gerrard claims that "The serpent-handlers come from the non-mobile working class" in an area where "current unemployment rates often equal those of the depression".¹⁸ As regards the younger members of the cult, Gerrard maintains that "with their poor education and poor hopes of finding sound jobs, the promise of holiness is one of the few meaningful goals in a future dominated by the apparent inevitability of lifelong poverty and idleness". Although this article was written in 1968, other, more recent sources agree on this socio-economic picture, and it is given an added dimension by Catherine Albanese who maintains that the cultists handle snakes and drink poison to gain a sense of power over both nature and death. By means of these rituals, the cultists are bringing supernatural reality into their otherwise simple and ordinary lives.¹⁹ John Wilson suggests that the rituals of the snake-

cult act as a cohesive force, bolstering a sense of community. He too comments on the need to introduce a sense of power: "The occasional death from snake bite or strychnine poisoning only add to the power and awesomeness of the ritual."²⁰

Nathan Gerrard makes another point which appears to be at odds with La Barre's interpretations. In a comparative study of snake-handlers and conventional church-goers in the same area, Gerrard found the snake-handlers to be better adjusted than their orthodox counterparts and surprisingly lacking in the neurotic tendencies which La Barre describes.²¹ Indeed, most researchers seem to agree only in part with La Barre, putting forward other arguments, all of which have to do with the standard of living. Bryan Wilson agrees with La Barre conditionally. "The snake represents the devil, but at an unconscious level it probably symbolises a capacity to dominate dangerous sexual desire among these ecstatic puritans. The idea of the snake as a primeval phallic symbol...is probably quite unknown to snake-handlers. These often semi-literate people...are concerned only with the manifestation of miraculous power."²²

One other fact emerges as being relevant: eye-witness accounts agree that the meetings can last for at least four hours, while approximately only ten minutes to half-an-hour of that time is devoted to handling serpents. This could indicate that handling serpents, although the high point

of the service, is only one facet of the faith. Spiritual healing, speaking in tongues and conversion-testimony all play their part in the rituals of these congregations. Indeed, it would perhaps be fair to say that it is only the dramatic aspect of serpent-handling and poison-drinking which has made the cult unique and notorious. It is pointless but interesting to wonder what the Freudian analysis would have been if the cultists had found a biblical injunction to handle any other creature! As it is La Barre does not spend much time on the strychnine aspect of the religion, and it is this which invariably proves fatal. Interestingly, the courts have allowed the drinking of strychnine to continue despite the fatalities which continue to occur.²³

Regarding the psychology of the cultists, La Barre has this to say "...there is much discernible phallic symbolism in the present snake-handling cult. That the meanings are unconscious, or at best preconscious, in no way militates against their reality or demonstrability."²⁴ He proceeds to use portions of a sermon delivered by one particular preacher, using this man's imagery as representative of the views of the cultists as a whole. He then goes on to build up a full psychological profile of this one man. The man he describes however, appears to be quite unusual amongst cult members in general - coming from an upwardly mobile family living in Florida. The man concerned certainly emerges as having a personality disorder, as described by La Barre. But it is still not easy to see how this can be related to

understanding the underlying motives of all members - especially since the man himself does not appear to be typical of cult-members in general. This is not to say that Weston La Barre is wrong, just that he appears to have over simplified the psychology of the cult.

Mythology and the role that the snake has played throughout the ages is vital to a paper of this kind. As previously mentioned, La Barre summarises myth and comes up with interesting, if somewhat reductionistic conclusions. He uses examples from the Middle East (especially Egypt), Africa and America. The myths of Greece, Rome and the Bible are also analysed and it is striking that he can find such psychological equality amongst such diverse and conflicting myths. Egypt and Greece are particularly significant since snake-myths from both these areas are suggestive of complex origin, and they are often the least phallic in symbolism.

In my opinion it is with Egyptian myth that La Barre appears most misguided, and I would like to examine his hypothesis in depth. He states categorically that "...in Egypt, phallus and serpent were symbolically equated in religion so explicitly as not to be denied."²³ He goes on to say that this symbolism spread into other parts of Africa via Egypt, thus linking the whole of Africa to similar thought patterns. He gives the Pharoah the phallic status of "Chief African divine King".²⁴ I consider this to be totally inaccurate. In Egypt the dominant role of the snake was that

of guardian and protector. A rain-god in Egypt, Pharoah or otherwise, is manifestly absurd. Egypt had virtually no rainfall, and more to the point, did not need it because of the regular flooding of the Nile. It therefore becomes clear that to associate the snake with rain in the land of Egypt is invalid. In African mythology the snake is indeed linked to rain, but ancient Egyptian myth is as unique as the civilization itself and cannot be regarded as merely the precursor of African myth as La Barre suggests. Anubis the Jackal-god is the guardian of the Dead in the Osiris myth. Anubis, as protector of the Tomb and the necropolis is sometimes depicted as a snake, which is also the symbol of royalty. George Hart suggests that it is Anubis as "Jackal" and not as "snake" that represents fertility since Anubis is responsible for embalming and therefore restoring the dead.²⁷ But most importantly, Egypt's pantheon of gods mutated amongst themselves, and manifested themselves in various ways, representing different aspects for different roles. Ultimately they were all connected to a solar theology and the most blatantly phallic (which would include Khnum the ram-headed god, Apis the bull or Atum, the self-creator) actually have no relationship to a snake, and are seldom manifested in snake-form.

Wadjet was the cobra-goddess of the North, depicted on the royal Uraeus. As such she symbolised protection for the Pharoah against the forces of chaos and evil. "Wadjet - preserver of royal authority in Northern Egypt...is represented as a cobra rearing up to strike with lethal

force any enemy of the king. She can also appear as a lioness in her role as 'eye of Re.'²⁸ So entrenched was Wadjet in this role that even Akhenaten the 'Arch-Monothelist', retained her as a symbol of his royalty. The cobra is similarly depicted elsewhere in Egypt. In the pyramid texts of Unas, Nehebkau is clearly represented as a serpent-god who acts as guardian to Re.²⁹ Nehebkau can also be identified with Renenutet who provides the invincible flame to ward off enemies.³⁰

In Egypt there are undoubtedly many fertility gods and phallic symbols. Surprisingly the snake is not among them. This is even more surprising when one considers the speed with which one god becomes another to fulfil a different role. Yet none of these manifestations portray a snake as phallic.

As regards the Pharaoh's role of producing water as "rain-king", the closest one comes to this was the Pharaoh's duty to maintain order by regulating the flood. "Canal-Digger"³¹ is a very early title for the Pharaoh, but this is hardly substance enough to equate the Pharaoh with the rain and fertility rituals that took place elsewhere. Immortality is certainly part of the Egyptian snake-myth, but immortality is a divine attribute not bestowed only on the snake.

The ability of the snake to shed its skin is almost universally linked to the idea of immortality. In Egypt this idea takes the form of a multitude of gods reaching the end

of one life-cycle and renewing themselves to begin again. La Barre however, speculates that the snake's ability to shed its skin was linked to a serpent-cult, which in turn led to the practice of circumcision in Egypt. This is an interesting theory, but one which cannot be substantiated. Ange-Pierre Luca, a French pathologist, has combined Egyptology with medicine. He has also examined numerous mummies, both human and animal, and he reached no such conclusions about such a cult. Indeed, among the mummified remains of animals, snakes appear to be far less numerous than bulls or cats.³² The ancient Egyptians depicted the lives and rituals of the gods in great detail, but the reason for the custom of circumcision is not known and cannot therefore be linked to the snake.

Weston La Barre offers the Mosaic Books as evidence of the Egyptian's pre-occupation with serpents. "Both Elohist and Jahwist versions in Exodus mention the famous magician's trick of the rod and the serpent."³³ Unfortunately, alleged biblical history cannot be used to prove claims regarding Egypt. Biblical scholars and archaeologists have not found any concrete evidence of the captivity or the Exodus in either Egypt or Israel. Modern scholars, primarily Norman Gottwald, have even suggested that these events may never have taken place.³⁴ Exodus therefore is more likely to reflect the writer's preoccupation with serpents rather than any preoccupation the ancient Egyptians may have had.

From the analysis of Egyptian myth it seems to me that Weston La Barre has treated the subject in a biased and simplistic manner. His treatment of snake-myths in other cultures is just as arbitrary. In Greek myth, as we shall see later, he ignores the healing properties attributed to the snake except in so far as it supports his theory of regeneration which is necessarily phallic in his view. He ignores the naturistic instincts of the American cultures, maintaining once again that the snake/rain - dances performed by the Hopi Indians are purely phallic in origin and substance.

To briefly summarise La Barre's reasoning, he suggests that the shape of the snake is phallic, while the role of the serpent as mediator for rain is linked to urine and semen.³⁵ In both African and American contexts, he interprets the feathers and hair of mythical serpents as being pubic hair,³⁶ while every "tall-story" ever told about a snake he sees in Freudian terms, including those common to our own belief which are generally regarded as "old wives tales". Certainly phallic symbols abound in all cultures, but the myths exist on several planes. The link between rattlesnake and lightning is just as important as the link between snake and rain. The rattle suggests the hiss of rain while the Z shape of the striking adder is suggestive of forked lightning. Phallic overtones there certainly are, but other elements are just as vital to the way in which the myth functions.

Considering La Barre's treatment of myth it is plausible to suggest that he has over-indulged in Freudian symbolism, possibly at the expense of the members of the Holiness Churches. It is this possibility which makes it necessary to emphasise that, despite their dependence on the obviously sexual genesis myth, the cultists are probably ignorant of any of these overtones. Edmund Leach in his essay "Genesis as Myth" seems to consider the role of the serpent secondary to the sexuality and 'incest' between Adam and Eve.³⁷ Even here we do not have the serpent as a clear-cut phallic symbol, but rather as the 'cunning serpent' who steals immortality from man and leads the primal pair to their doom. Can it then be stated categorically that phallic-symbolism is present in the cult? It is important to remember that the psychological profile described by La Barre may not be typical of other preachers in this widely scattered cult. I prefer the sociological arguments put forward by Albanese and Wilson.

At this point it might be useful to look at a critique of Freud's conjectures about religion by D.W.D. Shaw. "Perhaps the first thing that should arouse caution against accepting Freud's account of religion uncritically is the fact that so many of Freud's claims and conclusions are no longer accepted without a great deal of qualification by those in his own fields of psychology and psychiatry...but the fact is that he is not entitled to be sheltered from the criticisms of those who disagree with him under the umbrella of science... Neither is it to say that his conclusions about

religion on those grounds were necessarily wrong. It simply means that they were not necessarily right."³⁰

I would extend Shaw's critique of Freud's theories to La Barre's treatment of myth: While he is not necessarily wrong, he is not necessarily right - there must be room for an alternative explanation. The purpose of this paper however, is not to psychoanalyse. It is rather to examine the relationship between snake and handler with the emphasis on the snake. With this in mind, I have chosen to present snake myths of the world in as straightforward a manner as possible. This discussion of myth will form the background to the last two chapters which constitute the major area of my research.

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CHAPTER IISnake-myth in Egypt, India and GreeceIntroduction to Myth

In April 1982, The Science Digest published an article on Ophidiophobia (intense fear of snakes). The author, Rachel Wilder quoted the opinion of Linnaeus, the 18th Century botanist, to emphasise the negative image of the snake. "Foul and loathsome animals...abhorrent because of their cold body, fierce aspect, calculating eye, harsh voice and terrible venom".¹ Most Westerners would agree wholeheartedly with this description, believing earnestly that all snakes are dangerous and therefore the only good snake is a dead one. This attitude can manifest itself in such barbaric practices as the notorious "rattlesnake round-ups" of North America, where rattlers are hunted down and either slaughtered or tortured for no other purpose than to have fun while deliberately decimating the population.² Wilder suggests that such fear and hatred could be inherited genetically. "Why has this beast appeared consistently in the myths and legends of so many cultures throughout history?... it is rooted in our very genes, in a dim biological memory of the threat these reptiles once posed to our mammalian ancestors". E.O. Wilson, a socio-biologist quoted in the article, finds it significant that phobias usually entail ancient dangers - snakes, spiders, rats, heights and closed spaces - rather than modern artifacts such as knives, guns or electrical outlets.³ He explains these phobias as being part of the survival instinct. "In early human history phobias might have provided the extra

margin needed to ensure survival".⁴ This theory could certainly go a long way to explaining the illogical fear that snakes inspire, as well as the fact that snake-myths abounds even where there are no snakes.

Douglas Hill comments that "St. Patrick may have driven the snakes out of Ireland, but he could not cleanse the isle of snake-legends, including his own".⁵ Hill also points to the presence of snake-myths "among the Eskimo of the far north, perhaps recalling long past days in warmer regions".⁶

In many of the ancient myths, the snake is not evil. Instead it is portrayed as wise and is very often considered lucky. There is one common demoninator though - it consistently appears as a chthonic being - earth-bound and primitive. Tony Phelps has a simple but logical suggestion regarding the snake's fearful reputation. "Early man could appreciate the lethal danger of the large carnivores...but such a terrifying death from such a relatively small creature as a venomous snake must have appeared quite mysterious and sinister".⁷

Whatever the reasons, the snake certainly commanded respect amongst the ancient civilizations. Always immortal, they were often accorded the status of gods. With this in mind we turn to Egypt.

Part IThe Snake in Ancient Egyptian Myth

To understand Egyptian myth we need to examine the background from which it developed. Egyptian myth is a mass of contradiction. No god or divinity remains constant, one deity becomes identified with a different one while each myth contradicts another. As the civilization of Egypt matured, various new myths evolved, often featuring ancient gods as their main protagonists. One feature of Egyptian myth is the obvious optimism which prevails. Even the gods of evil aspect, such as Seth who represents chaos and anarchy, have their positive sides. Conversely the same is true of the benign deities such as Hathor, the cow-goddess of fertility who occasionally turns savage. But overall the impression is that of a cheerful and positive pantheon. There is also a playfulness evident in certain myths which suggests a keen sense of humour, even in the face of adversity, and confidence that order will triumph over chaos.

To discuss Egyptian mythology we need to take a brief look at the land, and the factors which influenced Egyptian thought. It is generally agreed that the geographical and climatic conditions were responsible for the prevailing optimism and sense of order. The country itself, especially in Old Kingdom times, was secured by seemingly impenetrable barriers. The desert flanked the east and west, the Mediterranean lay in the north, and the cataracts secured the

borders of the south. A sense of isolation gave the Egyptians the feeling that they were the centre of the universe, and that they alone were "people". Others were "foreigners" unless they decided to become Egyptians and adopt the clothes and the language.

The Egyptian's world was extremely ordered and nature appeared benign and predictable. Each year in mid-summer the Nile would flood and when the waters receded they left a rich deposit of black, life-giving, fertile soil. Because of the natural symmetry of the land and the direction of the Nile, the sun rose on the east bank of the river and, having travelled overhead, sank beyond the western horizon. Accordingly, this sense of order was personified by a goddess named Ma'at.

Thus the sun, the Nile and Ma'at became the focus for Egyptian belief and mythology. The Pharaoh, as divine ruler, became Lord of Ma'at. He was responsible for the preservation of natural symmetry, and in this role he undertook the public waterworks mentioned in the previous chapter. If Ma'at was to be preserved, the desert which represented chaos must be kept at bay. As Lord of Ma'at the Pharaoh was both indispensable and indestructible. The idea of divine kingship also played a pivotal role in the evolution of the Osiris myth in which Seth represents evil, darkness, desert, and chaos, while Horus/Osiris represents eternal life and immortality.

The unification of the two lands, north and south, which took place in 3100 B.C.E. had a tremendous impact on Egyptian religion and was forever afterwards commemorated in the double crown of royalty. The Cobra-goddess Wadjet makes her appearance as the royal Uraeus in this setting. She is guardian to the Pharaoh and is tutelary goddess of the north. As goddess of Buto in lower Egypt, she is harmonious with her southern counterpart, Nekhbet, the vulture-goddess of upper Egypt. Hart says she was awarded to the Pharaoh by Geb as a symbol of true sovereignty.² The Uraeus is also worn by the sun god Re whose solar disc is enclosed in her coils. Again she is cast in the role of protectress against the evil forces and hostile snakes of the underworld. One of these is the snake-god Apophis who is the antithesis of Wadjet. Cheerful and optimistic as Egyptian thought was, there were still obstacles to be overcome. One of these was the hazardous journey undertaken by the deceased through the underworld. Re, one of the major sun gods, later identified with Osiris, sails through the netherworld in his night-boat accompanied by the dead king who navigates the barge. They run the risk of being swallowed up by Apophis, and it is the Uraeus worn both by Re and by the King which protects them from the demons of the underworld. Apophis has lethal powers symbolising primeval forces of chaos. As enemy of the sun god Apophis represents the "non existence which the Egyptians feared so greatly".³ Apophis is the closest we come to the idea of the snake as evil in Egyptian mythology. The opposite roles played by Wadjet and Apophis have no real

significance except perhaps to underline that, good or bad, the snake has power over death. Even Wadjet is lethal when confronted by enemies of the king.

The role of guardian is reinforced by the snake deities mentioned earlier; Renenutet and Nehebkau. Renenutet coalesces with the Uraeus and like Wadjet she spits flame at any threat to the king. She also has a gaze which vanquishes all enemies. The "flame" could be a suggestion of the venom of the Cobra while the "gaze" could be associated with a belief in the mesmerising ability of snakes (this belief is still widely held in modern times although there is no truth in it). Further proof of the snake as guardian is provided by the tomb of Montu-Hir-Kopesh-Ef in the Valley of Kings, which has a row of spitting cobras painted on the door frame to ward off intruders.¹⁰

The serpent makes its appearance in the earliest Pyramid Text, in the Pyramid of Unas, last King of the 5th Dynasty. "Announce this Unas to Nehebkau" (utterance 263)¹¹ In this context Nehebkau must be alerted to the arrival of the deceased Unas, since Nehebkau is a serpent-deity who travels with and protects Re. Thus the Pharaoh is protected by Wadjet/Renenutet, and Re is protected by Nehebkau. In yet another text we have mentions of serpents as servants to the king, "The forces of Unas are behind him His helpers are under his feet His gods on his head, his serpents on his brow ...It is Serpent-Raised-Head who guards, who holds them for him. (Utterance 273-274)¹²

There are numerous other reference to snakes in tomb inscriptions, including some obscure ones that feature Seth, symbol of chaos, as a snake. In one particular myth it is Seth who averts the danger for Re by changing into a snake and spearing Apophis himself.¹³ This image of one démon prevailing over another is somewhat confusing, but it is interesting that Seth takes the form of another snake in order to do battle with Apophis and thus save Re. Another manifestation of Seth comes from the Middle Kingdom in which Seth is depicted as a creature called the "Hiu"¹⁴ - a snake with an ass's head.

The powerful god Amun rose to prominence in the New Kingdom, but he was an ancient deity. As a snake-deity his name can be translated as "he who has completed his moment".¹⁵ In this role he typifies the cyclical nature of Egyptian religious belief - ending one life and renewing himself in another cycle.

Egyptian myth is a study in paradox. As mentioned earlier, Anubis was the god of embalming, and as such he too protected the dead and prevented decay, thereby guaranteeing eternal life. His coat however is depicted as black, possibly symbolising the colour of the corpse once it was embalmed with Natron.¹⁶ Also, the colour black always symbolised fertility to the Egyptians because of the black fertile soil of the Nile Valley. It is paradoxical that Anubis, a Jackal, should have been chosen as guardian of the

dead, since jackals, as scavengers, would ordinarily have posed a threat to the dead. It is possible therefore that some form of magic was implied in employing a wild-dog to protect against his own kind. It is as guardian of the dead that Anubis appears as a snake during the Pyramid age to refresh and purify the monarch.¹⁷

In the same vein, there are two scorpion goddesses who protect against venomous bites. One is Ta-Bitjet who plays a quasi-medical role, the other is Serket who is specifically shown as a serpent in underworld scenes.¹⁸ Strangely, Ta-Bitjet is given general authority over poisonous bites while Serket is apparently excluded from healing the bites of scorpions despite her usual manifestation as a scorpion.¹⁹ The same magic employed in the Anubis myth seems to be at work here - a scorpion/snake-goddess protecting against venomous bites. It is likely that Ta-Bitjet and Serket were popular among the ordinary people for their healing properties.

Having examined the major snake-myths of Egypt, one fact clearly emerges: the snake was revered and worshipped as protector of both monarch and sun-god. As the Old Kingdom drew to a close, others beside the king could take part in the cult of the dead, and they too could call upon the powers of the snake-deities.

Apophis certainly approaches the concept of evil, but not in the sense of the "cunning serpent" which we find in the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Genesis myth. Apophis could be seen as representing the forces of chaos, thereby attempting to overthrow Ma'at. It is significant that Apophis is always conquered by Re, unlike the "cunning serpent" who succeeds in his mission and steals immortality from man. Even the idea of Apophis therefore is a message of victory for the snake-guardians of Re and the king. The sense of order thus prevails and we are left with the distinct impression of the snake's value in the scheme of things.

Finally, D.H. Lawrence called his snake "one of the Lords of Life". Hart points out that a mummified snake called 'Lord of Life' is now in the Berlin Museum.²⁰ - supreme evidence of the reverence with which the ancient Egyptians regarded these creatures.

Part Two

The Snake in India and the East

Similarities between the snake-myths of Egypt and India are sometimes apparent, despite such vast differences between the two cultures. In India too we find the serpent acting as guardian and healer, although the universal image of the snake as an underworld creature is perhaps the most obvious symbol. In India, as in Egypt, the Serpent plays both demon and god - commanding respect in either role. The Nagas of Hindu mythology are semi-divine beings with the bodies of

snakes. They are believed to have played an important part in the mythology of the ancient Dravidian culture, later being absorbed by the Aryans.

There is no doubt that snake-worship is still practiced in Asia. In 1986 International Wildlife published an article on an annual event which takes place in Burma. This account demonstrates the veneration of cobras and the precautions that are taken to ensure the monsoon rains for which the snake is responsible. A priestess who has been blessed by the local Buddhist Abbott, approaches the home of a king cobra. After apologising for disturbing its rest, the woman kneels before the cobra and touches her head to the ground three times. The snake raises a hood and rears up in defiance, eventually lunging forward to strike. The priestess jumps back just in time, and the fangs sink into her robe. This is repeated over and over again until the snake is drained of both energy and venom. "The time has come for the climax of the ritual. Approaching the cobra, whose head is still reared three feet off the ground, the woman bends down and kisses it three times on the top of its head. Then she bows low, murmuring her thanks to the Serpent King, and slowly backs away like a commoner taking leave of a royal ruler."²¹ This is certainly a courageous test of devotion! Similar status is granted to the snake, especially the cobra, throughout the East, from India to the Phillipines, not only in Hinduism but also in Buddhism. The Buddha is often shown seated on the coils of a cobra, "its seven hoods rearing over the Buddha like a protective umbrella".²²

In Hindu terms, the cobra is often seen as a manifestation of Shiva, one of the most powerful and influential gods in the entire pantheon. Thus the snakes are encouraged to live in the temples. The word Naga is Sanskrit for serpent and the majority of Nagas were demons, although some were considered nothing less than divine. Despite the fact that the myths were Hindu in origin, they blended very well into Buddhism as well, thereby ensuring extensive snake-worship throughout Asia. It is possible that here too a certain magic was implied in guarding against and curing snake-bite, similar to that pattern found in Egypt. "Shiva is said to have told the people to worship cobras in order to make them safe",²³ according to Veronica Ions.

Indian mythology is as complicated as that of Egypt, especially because it reflected the social order which was constantly changing. The Aryan invasion changed the face of Hindu mythology altogether by adopting many facets of the native Dravidian religion. While the Aryans were superior in the military sense, the Dravidians had a more advanced culture. Thus the synthesis of the two strands took hold and formed the roots for Hinduism and, later, Buddhism.

Like many other mythologies, Indian belief equates the serpent with water and thereby with fertility - both human and agricultural. One creation myth has "The whole world supported by the hood of the great serpent Shesha".²⁴ Shesha, sometimes known as Ananta, is said to be the brother

of Manasa, the snake-goddess believed to be the highest ranking nagini (female naga). Manasa is given the ability to cure diseases, protect against serpent bite and renew life. She is capable of great destruction however, insisting that her devotees honour only herself. Those who prefer other deities are savagely punished.²⁵ Manasa is also supposed to be daughter to Shiva, who is himself both god of fertility and death. In modern times, Bengal remains a major centre of Manasa worship.²⁶

Manasa epitomises the role of the serpent in fertility and healing cults, but other snakes were seen as guardians and even jailers. In one myth, Kadru, the mother of serpents, imprisoned Vinata whose son was Garuda, king of the birds. Vinata was guarded by serpents at all times and, when Garuda attempted to free his mother, the snakes demanded the ambrosia of the gods in exchange. Garuda flew to the Celestial Mountain to procure the ambrosia and there he suffered various terrifying experiences, including two guardians in the form of flame-spitting snakes. Having succeeded in obtaining the ambrosia, Garuda returned to the place of serpents. His mother was duly released, but before the serpents could drink the liquid, Indra swooped down and snatched the cup away, spilling a few drops on the grass. The snakes licked the drops and so became immortal, but the strength of the divine fluid gave them forked tongues.²⁷

The serpent, in the form of Shesha, is considered to be the foundation of the universe. This is reminiscent of the

Uraeus enclosing the solar disc of Re within her coils. Other themes such as immortality and guardianship are familiar, but the snake fills other symbolic roles too. Jyoti Sahi claims that "the serpent represents Maya, the energy of matter, that is to say its gravity. It naturally pulls the earth-mother downwards."²⁶ This is entirely in character with the underworld nature of the serpent. In reality the snake frequently lives underground, in holes or burrows, or unseen in hidden and dark places in trees. Mythology reflects this aspect of nature (making even Apophis easily identifiable). Sahi also refers to the battle between Garuda and serpent as representing cosmic forces - fire against water.²⁷

Another myth relates the story of a Brahmin who accidentally killed the offspring of a snake while ploughing on the day of the Nagapanctmi festival. The enraged snake mother took revenge by killing the Brahmin and all his family except one daughter who had shown due respect by making all the necessary preparations for serpent worship. This daughter was, therefore, forgiven for her father's crime and she persuaded the snake to give her an antidote to the venom so that she could revive her family. From then on, no ploughing is done on the festival day.²⁸ Sahi tells us that many village folk avoid killing snakes, especially near their homes. This brings to mind the age-old belief that to kill a snake risks incurring the wrath of its mate, who will seek out the guilty party to exact revenge.

Nagas as demons appear frequently in Indian mythology, especially Kaliya who was eventually conquered when the boy, Krishna, danced on his head.³¹ Female nagas have the reputation of being able to resemble nymphs in order to lure mortals to their doom. The divinity of such serpents as Shesha and Manasa only underline the ambivalence felt towards snakes in India.

The Bhagavad Gita, a great Hindu scripture, makes several mentions of snake-deities, demonstrating the popularity of these myths. In the tenth discourse, Krishna reveals his various manifestations to Arjuna:

"Among serpents, I am Vasuki"³² (10-28).

A different translation has the same line somewhat differently expressed:

"...among serpents, the serpent of eternity".³³

Text 29 of the same discourse also deals with serpents:

"Of the Celestial Naga snakes I am Ananta; of the aquatic duties, I am Varuna" (10-29).

This is translated as meaning that both Ananta and Varuna are the greatest of snakes, and they both represent Krishna.³⁴

A parable concerning the serpent is contained in the Wisdom literature of Zen Buddhism: "The Dragon bitten by a Snake" is a symbolic question as to how a perfect monk can be affected by worldly causes. The answer is that even if the "dragon", (symbolic of the monk), is enlightened, it (he) is not delivered from pain or suffering, (symbolised by the snake for worldly causes.)³⁵

J. McNeely describes how Buddhism adopted the widespread practice of serpent-worship rather than alienate its followers. The nagas were incorporated into Buddhist mythology, being present to assist at the birth of the Buddha in one story and saving him from drowning in another. A third tale involves the naga king's sojourn in a monastery; according to this story the naga king was so impressed with the Master's philosophy that, in human form, he was ordained into the monkhood. But one day, while he was asleep, the naga-monk turned back into a snake and was seen by the other monks. The Buddha then had to explain to the pious naga that only humans could become monks. The serpent agreed and relinquished his monkhood but requested that his name be given to neophyte monks in recognition that a naga had once been a monk. From then on all neophytes are required to wear white robes and be called 'naga' for two days.³⁶

In addition to the role of Shesha, the cosmic water serpent as foundation of the world, the snake in Asia can also be regarded as a possible threat. McNeely relates how, in 1972, Cambodian troops guarding Phnom Penh went into a frenzy of activity, injuring eighty-five bystanders and killing two of their own men. A lunar eclipse had caused the Cambodians to believe that an evil naga had swallowed the moon.³⁷

The Indian mythological framework underlines for us that no creature, including the snake, is consistently portrayed as either good or evil. Despite its negative manifestations the

snake is worshipped and honoured. Its roles are more diverse than the snake-myths of Egypt, sometimes overtly phallic and directly linked to fertility. It is often demonic, but in other instances it can be relatively benign. But the ultimate characterisation of the snake as an underworld creature is similar to Egypt, as are the features of guardianship and healing. It is paradoxical that an animal so linked with healing as the snake was in ancient times, should be so reviled today. It is with the idea of healing that we now turn to Greece.

Part III

The Ancient Greeks and the god of healing

Greek mythology is exceptionally rich in snake myths. Serpents weave in and out of temple wall reliefs, usually symbolising divinity and frequently associated with healing. It is generally recognised that the Greek culture greatly influenced the western schools of thought. This influence is not much in evidence as regards snakes, but nonetheless it exists. The Caduceus, symbol of the medical profession, is a product of ancient Greece, bequeathed by Asklepios, god of healing. The familiar serpent-staff of Asklepios constitutes a paradox in western terms. The snake is thoroughly disliked and feared for its death-dealing abilities and yet, for us, it symbolises the power and skill to heal.

The myth of Asklepios is the one that best epitomises the regard the Greeks had for the snake. But before we examine this myth it is important to mention another fact. Jane Ellen Harrison comments that "Zeus is one of the few Greek gods who never appears attended by a snake. Asklepios, Hermes, Apollo, even Demeter and Athene, have their snakes, Zeus never".³⁸ She goes on to say "...with Asklepios the snake he once was remains coiled about his staff or attendant at his throne".³⁹ This is borne out by numerous wall reliefs in which a snake is depicted life-size as an object of adoration. Harrison points out that since many of these snakes are bearded, the intention is to depict a human snake, often a vehicle for the ghost of a dead hero or, perhaps, as an incarnation of the ghost.⁴⁰ Harrison claims that all over Greece "the dead hero was worshipped in snake-form".⁴¹ In this context, despite its divinity, the snake is once again viewed as a chthonic being, a creature of the underworld. In Harrison's view, the role of snake and dead-hero are inextricably linked,⁴² as is the idea of dead-hero with divinity. Asklepios himself, therefore, is both a snake-god and a dead hero - a subject which apparently is still under discussion as we shall see.

There are several versions of the Asklepios myth, but all agree that Apollo was the father of Asklepios. C. Kerényi maintains that Apollo himself was a healer whose art "only failed on those whom he had slain".⁴³ Apollo healed the immortal while Asklepios healed mortals, even bringing the

dead back to life. Kerényi remarks that Asklepios was even called 'Zeus' although legend has it that it was Zeus who killed him.⁴⁴ H.J.Rose describes the controversy which rages over the nature of Asklepios - whether he was originally a god or a hero.⁴⁵ Certainly he was worshipped as a god whatever his origins. In addition to the healing abilities of Asklepios, Rose mentions the children of Asklepios amongst whom we have his daughters Iaso, Hygieia and Panakeia.⁴⁶ Although these daughters have no legends of any account, they are given great significance by John Sanford, a Jungian analyst, who pays great attention to the myth of Asklepios. He points out that Hygieia translates to 'hygiene' and Panakeia to 'panacea' or cure-all.⁴⁷ Sanford's view provides a fascinating insight into the myth.

Coronis, Apollo's mortal lover, was the mother of Asklepios but she was unfaithful to Apollo; for this crime she was slain and burned upon a funeral pyre. At the last moment Apollo snatched the unborn Asklepios from his mother's womb. Asklepios was then given to Chiron, the centaur physician, who taught Asklepios the art of healing. In addition to the knowledge he gained from Chiron, Asklepios was aided by the blood of the gorgon, Medusa, who had had snakes for hair. The blood which flowed from the left side of the gorgon brought death, while the blood from the right side had the power to heal.⁴⁸ With this aid, Asklepios became the greatest of healers, even able to revive the dead. His power angered Zeus however and Zeus killed Asklepios with

a thunderbolt. Apollo was then left to avenge the death of his son, and so successful was he that Asklepios was raised from the dead and placed among the immortals.

In this story, Sanford sees enormous psychological significance; "snatched from death" as he was, Asklepios is the essence of a healer, someone who lives and works close to death.⁴⁹ Asklepios brought healing through dreams which were believed to be a direct revelation from the god himself. The patient, having been purified by the priest, would lie down to sleep in a temple sacred to Asklepios and await a dream. In Sanford's words "The widespread institution of Asklepios and its many temples gives evidence ... to the efficacy of Asklepios' healing powers".⁵⁰ Sanford sees Asklepios as the archetypal 'wounded healer' who has been to the very brink of the underworld and therefore understands the mysteries of illness and death, healing and life. In addition, as Sanford sees it, the gift of the gorgon's blood represents the ambivalent powers of bestowing either life or death.

While Sanford's Jungian view is perhaps as oversimplified as Weston La Barre's Freudian treatment of the myth, it is interesting to see two such diametrically opposed interpretations. Sanford sees the snake as a life-force, a symbol of energy which is essential to healing. He draws comparisons between the Asklepios cult and Christian healing.⁵¹ La Barre, on the other hand, simply identifies

Asklepios with Hermes whom he describes as 'godhead and immortality in essence'. He adds that Hermes" is the phallus and he is the snake ... his symbol was the phallic head on a square shaft, still surviving in the acorn-headed posts of the New England fence".⁵² It is significant that Sanford also interprets the myth in psychological detail and yet he finds none of the parallels drawn by La Barre. It is also worth mentioning here that Harrison, Kerényi and Rose make no reference to any subconscious meanings within the Asklepios myth. They are only concerned with the origin of the cult, its spread and its following, but they do not psychoanalyse in any way. This merely demonstrates that myth is abstract and, as such, is open to varied interpretations, none of which can be stated as absolute fact.

R.M.Isemonger, a snake collector, has no such reservations about the origin and meaning of Greek snake-cults as a means of healing. Having narrated the case-history of a man who was healed by a snake, he reminds us that, in many cultures, eating a snake was considered necessary in order to gain medical skill. In this connection he wonders what our modern-day medical students would have to say about it if "the piece de résistance on the special end-of-term dinner menu comprised puff-adder patties or rattlesnake ribs".⁵³ Such a humorous and down-to-earth approach is refreshing indeed!

In contrast to both Sanford and La Barre, Dimitrios Papastamou has this to say regarding the Asklepios cult:
 "Cures of barrenness cannot in any way be related with C.G.Jung and S.Freud's erotic psychoanalytic symbol referred to as the 'libido'".⁵⁴

Other snakes made their appearance in Greece. Some are shadowy and little is known about them. This is the case with the snake-goddess of Knossos. She is believed to have been a fertility goddess, the goddess-mother worshipped by the Minoans in Crete. The exact role she played is not known, although she may later have become identified with Demeter.⁵⁵ She is known only from two statues which may, or may not, depict a mother and daughter; a third figurine is too damaged to be of any help in deciding the identity of the goddess. The statues which are intact, depict a female figure holding a snake in each hand and a snake curled around her body.⁵⁶

In doing research on the southern snake-handling cult, I stumbled onto a fascinating article which turned out to be totally unrelated to the U.S.A. but very relevant to modern-day Greece. Titled "The Snakes who Came to Church", it deals with an influx of snakes which supposedly occurs every August in the villages of Argenia and Marcopolou on the Greek island of Cephalonia. These snakes are allegedly seen only once a year when they slither from their rock crevices and into the churches where they stay for ten days. Their visit

coincides with a festival devoted to the Virgin Mary and, for the duration of their stay, they apparently allow themselves to be handled indiscriminately. The journalist interviewed various church members, all of whom fervently believed that the appearance of the snakes is a miracle. This 'miracle' is apparently the result of extreme bravery on the part of twenty-four nuns who lived in Cephalonia "long ago" Legend has it that these nuns were harrassed by pirates until eventually the Mother Superior prayed to the Virgin Mary that they be turned into snakes. When the pirates next returned they found only twenty-four snakes. An Eastern Orthodox priest, Father Denis Georgatos, told the journalist that the snakes cannot be found at other times of the year. This was vouched for by the others, all of whom deny trickery. The locals believe that these particular snakes have healing powers and they handle them for that reason. One Mrs. Galiatsatou said she has trouble with her nerves. "She picked up one of the snakes which slithered up her arm and wound itself around her head. It always settles where the trouble is" said Mrs. Galiatsatou.". The snakes have never harmed anybody, and no one seems to know exactly what species of snake it is. "To add to the peoples' awe of the miracle the snakes closely resemble a poisonous Cephalonian snake; the only visible difference is that the snakes of the Virgin Mary have a tiny Byzantine cross emblazoned on their heads".⁵⁷

Unfortunately, I have not come across any natural historians who were familiar with this occurrence, or could even guess as to the species of snake. The article was appropriately listed under the sub-section of 'the unexplained' in the magazine. While no explanation is yet forthcoming, such an incident, real or contrived, demonstrates a certain clinging to ancient beliefs; there is more than a trace of Asklepios in this Christian event.

In the examination of ancient civilisations, certain patterns of snake-belief emerge. In Egypt and India, serpents were clearly linked with the idea of guardianship and, to a lesser extent, with healing. In Greece, the function of healing is paramount. In all three cultures the snake is divine, although in Egypt and, especially in India, it has a demonic aspect. But the image of the snake as an underworld creature remains constant - it is primal and as related to death as it is to life. It is also important to note that in all three cultures the serpent is an ancient symbol which was adopted by later trends of thought. In traditional religion, the mythical framework changes slightly, but certain basic patterns remain. Now we turn to snake-mythology within the traditional religions.

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CHAPTER III

Traditional Religions

Although the major part of this section will be spent on the religions of the North American Indian, some time will be spent on examining certain facets of Australian and African beliefs. This will be useful in gaining some perspective on traditional religions with a view to providing a means for comparison with regard to the symbolism of snakes in relation to rain and ancestor worship.

Part I

Australia

The snake myths of the Australian aborigines are almost exclusively connected to rain or water and, as such, can generally be viewed as fertility symbols representing renewal of life. This is a pattern which occurs frequently in both African and North American belief.

R.N. Bellah considers the Australian religious patterns to be typical of what he terms "a primitive stage of religion".¹ Basing his argument on the work of Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Levy Bruhl and Stanner, Bellah places Australian myth firmly within primitive boundaries. His comments are worth reviewing briefly as a background to the structure of Australian myth.

"The primitive symbol system at the primitive level is characterised by Levy Bruhl as "La Monde Mythique", and Stanner directly translates the

Australian's own word for it as "The Dreaming". The Dreaming is a time out of time or, in Stanner's words, "everywhen" inhabited by ancestral figures, some human, some animal....".²

The term "Dreaming" is indicative of the fluid structure of myth and Bellah considers this word to be deliberate and not merely metaphorical since "men do actually have a propensity to dream during the periods of cult performance ... the fluidity then helps account for the hovering closeness of the world of myth to the actual world ...".³

Tony Swain has a further comment to make regarding the Dreaming: "... the Dreaming recognises the temporal departure of the present upon the past ... The Dreaming as a universal is filled with every ritual, every particular dreaming, symbol and situation, and yet each fragment is filled with the same essential whole.". ⁴

Possibly the best known snake-myth in Australia is that of the rainbow serpent which varies according to different regions. In its various forms the myth demonstrates the fluidity of Australian symbolism. No version contradicts another, and each example of the myth underlines the harmony between the real world and the world of myth, as well as the 'essential whole' described by Swain.

The rainbow serpent, as its name implies, is associated with rain and, thus, with the creation of life. Chris Mattison outlines one version of the myth: "The 'ungod', a rainbow serpent, lives in water holes which it guards and prevents from drying up. In return for these services, ceremonies involving the restoration of its image on cave walls must be performed at the beginning of each rainy season. In Central Australia a similar creature is known as "Yurapi", a serpent of enormous proportions, whose tail always rests in an important water hole."⁵

In its association with rain, the rainbow serpent is also seen as a creator-spirit and yet is not necessarily always viewed as symbolising a life-force. It is also associated with floods and drought and is therefore equally capable of representing chaos or death. Obviously this is a spirit which must be placated through ritual.

The rainbow serpent is visualised as the rainbow itself - the body of the snake stretched across the sky in a rainbow arch. It is also supposed to have "traversed the plains, forming river-beds, and punished those who broke tribal law, often in the form of snake bite".⁶ John Cann goes on to tell us that "in 1886, G. Taplin recorded that the Narringeri people of the lower Murray River believed that the ill-effects of snake bites resulted from spirits' sorcery...". From this information it becomes clear that the snake also had magical properties apart from rain making. Its bite was seen

as both punishment and sorcery which could be equated with justice or malice. These strands of thought appear in the Old Testament as we shall later see.

Pregnancy and childbirth are sometimes linked to the serpent, further emphasising the aspect of fertility. In the myth of the Wawalog sisters, we have Yurlingger (a regional version of the rainbow serpent) so offended by these sisters that he causes a flood. Both sisters had entered into incestuous relationships and one of them was pregnant. This could suggest that the flood was punishment inflicted by the snake for breaking tribal taboos. Tony Swain remarks that in this myth the serpent represents the ritually pure (i.e. initiated) and superior male. The sisters on the other hand represent the entire group of 'unclean', which is made up of women and uninitiated males. At the same time, Swain says that the serpent represents water, while the sisters, inferior as they are, represent drought. By means of a certain prescribed ritual, the whole group can be purified and drought can be averted.⁷

In Northern Australia, members of the Anula tribe invoke the rain-gods by means of an elaborate ritual. Isemonger says that a snake must be caught and held alive under water for a time, then, after killing it, the snake must be laid down beside the creek. An artificial rainbow must be constructed from grass stalks and arched over the snake. Once this is done, a song is sung over the snake and rain can

be expected to fall. Isemonger claims that this ritual can be traced to the mythical serpent who is supposed to live in the pool and who causes rain by spitting into the sky until clouds and a rainbow appear. ⁶

In Western Australia a controversy rages over the construction of a pipeline bringing natural gas to Perth. The proposed pipeline runs under Bennett Brook, the resting place of Wagyl, the great rainbow snake. This creature has multiple legs and a horse's mane. Legend has it that in ancient times, before the surface of the earth was formed, Wagyl slithered across the plains, thereby carving out the hills and valleys of Western Australia. The planned pipeline has infuriated the Aborigines, who warn that the river will dry up, the water will turn bad and there will be sickness and death among their people. As a result the Aborigines favour building the pipeline over the brook, while the authorities consider that to be an unsafe option. The Aborigines won an injunction to halt construction until a compromise is reached. An Aborigine interviewed by Time magazine said "It's no good white society saying Wagyl is dead. People could say that about Jesus Christ. We are not dealing with beliefs of 200 years or 2 000 years ago. We are dealing with beliefs from the beginning of time." ⁷

Myths of Australia have much in common with those of Africa. Both cultures have a symbol-system which consists not only of myth, but also as a guide to certain behaviour

patterns and customs. We encounter similar links between snake and water, as well as the serpent as a tool of sorcery. The ambivalence towards the snake as symbolising both life and death is reflected in African myth as it was reflected in both the ancient myths and the myths of Australia.

Part II

Africa

The Bushman myth of Kouteign Koorou is particularly reminiscent of the Australian belief concerning Wagyl. Kouteign Koorou is believed to have been the serpent which carved out the landscape of the Fish River canyon. Pursued by hunters, Kouteign Koorou retreated into the desert leaving behind great gouges in the earth's surface.¹⁰

In Africa the snake is usually connected to rainfall directly or indirectly. It can also be associated with drought, and it is drought which the Bushmen believe to be responsible for the snake having no legs. Legend has it that all the animals and birds were warned of an impending drought and they all moved off to safer places. The snake, however, being naturally lazy, decided to remain until he, too, was finally forced to move. By that time it was too late and his legs and feet kept sinking into the hot desert sand. In despair, the snake pleaded with the moon to save him from the sun. Accordingly, the four legs of the snake vanished and the creature was able to glide easily across the sand and out of the desert to safety.¹¹ Although we are not told, it is

possible that, within the framework of this myth, the snake remains nocturnal, guided by moon rather than by sun.

The idea of a drought resulting from maltreatment of a snake is common to many tribes throughout Central and Southern Africa. The python is particularly venerated. In Zimbabwe and parts of South Africa a python which has been accidentally killed must be burned. Failure to do so will mean a long drought. Once the snake has been duly burned, heavy rains will result.¹²

This is not to say, however, that the killing of any species of snake is encouraged. In many areas there is extreme reluctance to kill any snake, especially those found nearby. This is partly because of the risk of drought and; sometimes, because the snake is seen as the spirit of an ancestor. There is a Venda belief concerning a python- a god of fertility who married two human wives. Neither wife realized the identity of her husband since he always visited them under the cover of darkness. The younger of the wives became intensely curious and contrived to sneak a look at her husband. On realizing that he was a python, she screamed; the python disappeared into the water never to return. A drought fell upon the land and was only brought to an end when the young wife confessed what she had done and made amends by going into the river bearing a calabash of beer. Thus the fertility-god was placated and the good harvests returned. ¹³

In Central Africa, in the vicinity of Lake Victoria, an elaborate ritual takes place when a snake is accidentally killed by a woman hoeing in the fields. The priest is called in to appease the angry spirit and work in the fields is suspended. The snake is buried, while purification ceremonies are carried out; each house being cleansed, beginning with the house of the woman who killed the snake. The hoes are also individually purified and only once these rituals have been completed, is it safe to assume that the spirit of the snake is appeased. ¹⁴ One is reminded here of the Nagapanmi festival of India.

Both Isemonger ¹⁵ and Mattison ¹⁶ assert that killing a python is, in certain regions throughout Central Africa, a serious crime sometimes punishable by death. Although the python is the focus of many widespread beliefs and practices, other snakes also have major significance. Dr. D.G. Broadley, Curator of Herpetology at the Bulawayo Museum in Zimbabwe, told me that the harmless file snake is greatly feared as a forecaster of doom. He also said that the vine snake (also known as the bird or twig snake) has special powers bestowed on it because of its almost magical camouflage. The black mamba, too, is revered because of its supposed ability to travel at lightning speeds. As Dr. Broadley pointed out, in Africa the snake has an almost Jekyll and Hyde quality. Mr. Vivian Wilson, Director of Chipangali Wildlife Sanctuary in Bulawayo, related another myth about the black mamba. According to this myth the mamba has a crest on its head

rather like that of a crested bird. This snake is believed to have the ability to utter bird calls with which it lures its victims to their death. Interestingly this myth is rooted in fact: sometimes an older specimen sheds its skin incompletely leaving a tuft of skin at the back of the head. The idea of a crested mamba demonstrates how observant nature myths are. Another myth concerning the python reflects this attention to detail. Mr. Wilson told me that the vestigial hind limbs of a python are commonly believed to be used for suffocating the victim by blocking each nostril with one of these rudimentary 'legs'.

In Shona belief, ancestors frequently reveal themselves to their descendants in the form of a harmless bluish-green snake called 'Shihundje'. To kill or harm such a snake wherever it is found is obviously taboo.¹⁷ In the same vein, a snake found near a waterhole must not be killed since it is believed to be the spirit of a former resident from a nearby kraal paying a visit. To kill it would not only be a grave breach of hospitality but would also cause the water to dry up. On the other hand, a venomous snake entering a hut is an entirely different matter. In this instance, it is viewed as the messenger of an enemy and can therefore be destroyed. There is an interesting prohibition however; a man whose wife is pregnant must not kill any snake or the baby will be born blind.¹⁸

Geraldine Eliot, an author from Malawi, published a collection of African myths and folk-tales in four volumes.¹⁹ Most of the stories deal with the animals encountered by the Ngoni tribe and the character that each animal is supposed to have. The snake is consistently imbued with knowledge and wisdom. One story, "The Famine and the Fruit Tree", has the tortoise asking "Wise Old Python" his advice about the edible properties of a fruit. Having received an answer, the tortoise makes the journey home but on the way he is saved from an unwise decision by another snake who gives him more good advice. Thanks to the kindly offices of both python and the second snake, the tortoise managed to rescue all the animals during the course of a severe drought.²⁰

Phyllis Savory did something similar, recording folk tales which have been passed down from one generation to another. Here again the snake appears benign and wise. One Zulu myth tells the story of Monya, python guardian of the river, giving immortality to Nomkhosi and granting her the status of River Maiden.²¹ Another Zulu tale explains why snakes dwell in holes and trees and have no social order.²² This collection includes a story from Lesotho which has Khanjapa, the python river guardian, rescue a party of boys from cannibals by parting the water to allow them to cross. Khanjapa then closes the water again, drowning the cannibals.

The African beliefs of ancestors returning as a snake is typical of the chthonic character we observed in the religions of ancient civilisations. Another similarity lies in the supposed healing power of the snake. Throughout Africa, medicine-men carry potions containing pieces of snake, both to ward off sickness and prevent snake bite. In both Australia and Africa the snake is directly associated with rainfall on one hand and drought on the other. There are similarities to Manasa of India, although the malignant aspect appears to be less pronounced. In its association with rain the snake, especially the python, is given guardianship of the river and, as such, is respected and venerated. Many of these symbols carry over into the New World where we examine the mythology of the American Indian.

Part III

The American Indian

In America, snake-symbolism is both ancient and widespread. Although little is known about the beliefs of the American Indians in pre-Columbian times, it is evident from the art and monuments of that period that the snake was an extremely important symbol. In later times, beliefs concerning snakes are more easily documented, but even here there is a problem. Klauber, the authority on rattlesnakes, questions the accuracy of the reports of Indian-rattlesnake relationships. "Without doubt the reports of the early explorers and colonists on the Indian attitudes towards rattlers were deficient and erroneous for

the same reasons that their accounts of the rattlesnakes themselves were inaccurate: they were credulous and passed on, as firsthand observation, stories based on hearsay and the deliberate exaggeration of the campfire." 24

As Klauber points out, while the modern ethnologist attempts to remedy this situation they, too, are handicapped. "For by the time he was able to study the Eastern tribe, they had already been torn from their ancient haunts and their ways of life were changed by white contacts and association. In the west, the Indians adhered longer to the customs of primitive days; but even here the investigator had often to deal with dwindling or almost extinct groups, where only a few aged informants still retained hazy memories of the older ways and ceremonies." 25

In discussing the beliefs of the American Indian we encounter a further difficulty in the diversity of social groups and the fundamental differences between tribes and customs. Ake Hultkrantz illustrates this point: "Furthermore, Indian religions form such a changing mosaic that it is difficult to discern a common background. We must never forget that America is a spacious double continent and that it once housed hundreds of languages and thousands of ethnic groups whose religious peculiarities varied as much as European religions before the introduction of Christianity ... even among tribal religions of the same type, the nature of conceptions and rites has varied." 26

This particular problem is unlike any we have encountered in previous cultures where each religion can be regarded as being at least loosely cohesive. Nevertheless, similarities in snake-symbolism are present between the Old World and the New. Indeed, there is speculation that the Indians of pre-Colombian times were influenced by the Old World, particularly the Buddhist and Hindu art-forms,²⁷ and that these influences spread throughout the continent changing and absorbing as the region and social structure demanded.

Hultkrantz differentiates between the religions of the tribal Indians and those he calls the "High Religions" which denote the ancient civilizations of the Incas, the Mayas and the Aztecs. The reason for this separation, Hultkrantz assures us, is purely technical, deriving from the fact that "our knowledge of the religions of the high cultures rests on a set of data totally different from that of the religions of tribal people. The latter have, to a great extent, lived well into modern times and have been accessible to research ... our sources for the high religions, however, consist of ancient Indian manuscripts (sometimes drawn up in an ideographic writing difficult to decipher) archaeological monuments, and the memoranda of the Conquistadores from early colonial times."²⁸ The high religions, along with the culture, vanished after the destruction wreaked by the Spanish in Mexico and Peru.

In the American context, it is the rattlesnake with which we are primarily concerned, mainly because, with one relatively minor exception (that being the coral snake) the various species of rattlesnake are the only venomous snakes found. It is also the snake used by the Southern cultists to prove their faith. The fame of the rattler has spread beyond America and many of the common beliefs within white folklore can be traced back to Indian beliefs and to the European settlers who absorbed a number of these beliefs.

There is a fine line between snake-worship and serpent imagery. This is particularly true of the tribal Indians who appear to show reverence and respect for the rattlesnake - a desire to placate and propitiate but not necessarily to worship. The high religions, however, certainly incorporated the snake into diverse rites and forms of worship. During this period the snake was definitely among the more important gods. The gods of the high religions usually demanded prodigious human sacrifice, although these practices were by no means restricted to those deities symbolised by snakes. Hultkrantz stresses that human sacrifice reached staggering proportions - an estimated 50 000 annually lost their lives as victims of sacrifice to one or other god. ²⁹

Hultkrantz ascribes this to "alarm and anxiety about the continuance of the cosmos." ³⁰

Throughout America gods were worshipped in animal form. In many cases the snake, along with a jaguar or other feline creature, played a pivotal role in the worship of important gods. The best known of these deities is probably Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec feathered snake (or plumed serpent). Quetzalcoatl, god of the priests, also occurs in almost identical form in the Toltec symbolism of the Mayas. It is interesting, considering the snakes lethal reputation, that Quetzalcoatl appeared to demand less sacrifice than various other vegetation and war-gods whose snake symbolism appears to have been minimal. Quetzalcoatl is believed to have been associated with the wind and the sky, intangible and omnipresent, thus taking on certain aspects of what could be considered a 'supreme being' or 'great spirit', although these qualities were shared by other deities. Hultkrantz portrays Quetzalcoatl as symbolising purity and light - an identification with the day-sky rather than the night-sky.³¹ Although Quetzalcoatl is generally regarded as a snake-god, he had other attributes and manifestations, most importantly the jaguar who may have symbolised rain. A phallic connotation here is not obvious, despite the feathers and hair so frequently mentioned in connection with Quetzalcoatl.

At this point it is worth examining Quetzalcoatl in the snake form with which he is most often identified. His connections to the elements gave him the status of a supreme being as far as the concept existed. While snake images are associated frequently with other gods, Quetzalcoatl is

probably the purest snake symbol. In this context, identified with purity and light, it becomes obvious that even in this somewhat macabre setting, the snake was not evil but rather a deity essential to preserve the cosmos. As we have noted, this preservation of the cosmos required considerable sacrifice and yet the very idea of preservation is the antithesis of the Genesis myth. It is also relevant to discuss the feathers and hair attributed to this snake-god. Hultkrantz maintains that the beard denoted age and wisdom, while the feathers, or plumes, which adorned the images of Quetzalcoatl could have been attributed to the eagle, another creature which Quetzalcoatl incorporates as sky-god.³² Significantly, even as sky-god, Quetzalcoatl retains the character of an earth-bound creature in his manifestation as a serpent, despite the eagle feathers with which he is adorned. It is also paradoxical that Tlaloc 'he who calls forth vegetation'³³ is the god associated with cloud and yet is not symbolised by a snake. It is Tlaloc who was responsible for what Hultkrantz considers the most cruel and blood thirsty sacrifice of all - the massacre of thousands of children.³⁴

Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake, acquired the status of a great spirit and yet manifested other attributes with no connections to the snake. The links between these manifestations remain complicated, but they do bear out that within the high religions the serpent was far from being merely a fertility god. Indeed, other deities such as

Chicomecoatl, a corn-goddess, appear to have been more overtly linked to fertility.

Above all, it is obvious that in the high cultures, the snake was indeed worshipped along with the eagle which formed part of the deity. It may be said that the feathered serpent was a hybrid between bird and reptile, one facet merging into another. Perhaps it is no coincidence that astrology divides the sun sign Scorpio into either 'eagle' or 'grey lizard'.

It is also interesting to note that birds are believed to have evolved from reptiles, thus lending logic to the amalgamation of such apparently diverse creatures.

The high cultures have an astonishing profusion of deities and, as such, I have felt it safe to single out Quetzalcoatl. Having said that, it is also important to realize that the serpent played numerous other roles in these cultures, but usually as gods rather than demons. This aspect changes with regard to the tribal Indians of North America, although many links have been retained; the snake could almost be regarded as having been demoted - important in the scheme of things and certainly respected, but not necessarily an object of worship.

Karl Lucket theorises that the serpent cults spread southwards as the early American Indians encountered the reptiles more frequently. "Snakes became more numerous as the people travelled south. The further south they came, the

greater was the variety, the more impressive the sizes and the more fascinating the colors of these reptiles."³⁶

Lucket connects the serpent to maize which he terms 'the serpent's plant manifestation'.³⁷ Certainly, the rain-dance of the Hopi Indians of Arizona seem to bear this out. In this famous ceremony many of the ancient symbols previously discussed are brought together in a beautiful and benign manner.

The snake-dance is based on a Hopi emergence-myth and entails sending snakes as 'messengers' to the gods to ask for rain. Earle Forrest wrote a book on this ceremony which he first witnessed in 1906. The following summary is taken from his account.³⁸ Members of the snake society (related to, but not necessarily identical with the snake clan) collect as many snakes as they can find over a period of four days, which symbolise the four cardinal points. Each day is devoted to the direction in which the search will be carried out, usually north first, followed by west, south and east.

The captured snakes are stored in the kiva (usually a sacred underground chamber) of the snake priest where they are carefully washed and purified. Most of the snakes are rattlers, although there are some non-venomous species included amongst those captured. The Antelopes, a closely related society, also play a major part in the ritual; they too have a kiva in which they build an altar decorated to symbolise rain, lightning and clouds. Each kiva is

appropriately marked to warn would-be intruders that secret rites are in progress. On the eighth day of the festival, a kisi is built in the centre of the plaza where the dance is held; The kisi is a tepee made of cottonwood branches. In front of the entrance to the kisi a hole is dug which is then covered with a board; this symbolises Sipapu, the entrance to the underworld. The Antelopes also hold a dramatisation of the myth on which the ritual is based, along with imitation thunder and lightning. Also on the eighth day, the Antelope race is held; it is a public ceremony with the young men from surrounding villages competing for prizes of sacred corn. Early on the morning of the ninth day, the snake-race, similar to the Antelope race, takes place. At sundown on the ninth and final day the snake dance is held - the culmination of the ritual. The captured snakes are transferred to the kisi once they have been finally washed and blessed. The Antelope priests emerge from their kiva, scattering sacred corn meal on the Sipapu board as they circle the plaza four times. As they pass the kisi they stamp on the board to signify to the underworld that the ceremonies have begun. The snake priests are the next to appear; they too circle the plaza four times, eventually breaking up into groups of three. Each group consists of a gatherer, a hugger and a carrier. The carrier goes into the kisi where he is handed a snake from a priest within. Holding the snake in his mouth he circles the plaza one-and-a-half times. The hugger moves next to him holding a snake-whip which consists of a wooden shaft to which is attached a

pair of eagle feathers. This whip is used to distract the snake and presumably to safeguard the carrier to some extent. Having carried the snake around the plaza, the carrier puts it down and goes back to the kisi where he collects another; the gatherer follows, picking up each discarded snake. Once all the snakes have been carried around, the gatherers throw them into a heap within a circle of sacred corn meal. More meal is scattered over them before the snake priests rush in, grab up as many snakes as they can hold and run off to release the snakes; in this way the snakes are sent on their way to convey to the gods a plea for rain.

The myth on which the dance is based deals with a young Hopi boy named Tiyo, who attempted to find out the source of all water by following the Colorado river to its source. He is befriended by the spider-woman who shields him from great danger. Eventually, he meets the Great Snake who controls the waters of the world from within his own kiva. Tom Bahti writes that it was the spider woman who gave Tiyo the power to bring rain and instructed him to teach the Hopi people the wisdom of the snake society of which group Tiyo had himself become an initiated member. Tiyo married a snake maiden and returned to his own people. However, when his wife gave birth to rattlesnakes they were banished from the tribe. The gods were offended and drought fell upon the land. It was then necessary to summon Tiyo and to fetch back to the village all the snakes that could be found so that the Hopis might repent of their treatment of Tiyo. The drought was

thus averted, but the Hopis must continue to placate the gods of the underworld.³⁹

The parallels between Aztec and Hopi belief are distinct enough to persuade Luckett that the snake dance is a remnant of the ancient Olmec religion.⁴⁰ The identification between snake and corn is quite clear and it is significant that the snake whip is made up of eagle feathers. Eagles prey on snakes so on the one hand it is a logical choice. On the other hand we noted earlier that Quetzalcoatl had an eagle manifestation, as well as the snake and jaguar. Besides, eagles are not the only birds which feed on snakes. It is possible, therefore, that this ceremony goes back further than the Hopis themselves realize. Earle Forrest stresses the similarities between Mayan carvings and Hopi ritual. "Most astonishing of all there are at the Maya ruins of Copan, Honduras, two carved heads of priests each holding a snake in his mouth exactly as a Hopi dancer is seen today. In fact, they could easily pass for Hopi snake dancers; and yet this is 2 000 miles from the Hopi country."⁴¹

Luckett makes an interesting comment on the Hopi dance: "At the same time I readily grant that these Hopi snake men are a good deal closer to being in harmony with their snake kinfolk than are the pale-face snake handlers in Appalachia who confront serpents as manifestations of the devil."⁴²

It is relevant to note here that the rain dance attracts crowds of tourists and sightseers who are fascinated by the handling of live snakes; this can only lead to misconceptions. Reports of bites are rare, although Bahti says that they do occur. On the other hand, Bahti also says that "Hopis have a snake medicine which they rub on the wound that protects them against the effects of the poison."⁴³ This is not possible since only orthodox treatment and the use of anti-venom could cure a poisonous bite, and only through immunisation could they be protected. Whatever remedies the Hopis have, none are effective against snake venom. Klauber stresses this in his section on snake bite treatment in which he outlines the various herbal remedies "... the statement must be made here that none of the Indian vegetable remedies for snake bite has ever been shown by scientific test to be effective."⁴⁴ This view is shared by all other authors whose works I consulted.

Findlay Russell ⁴⁵ and Klauber ⁴⁶ do however shed some light on the absence of bites amongst the Hopi snake dancers. According to both sources, a Dr. Bogert attended the ritual and, by following a snake priest while he released rattlesnakes, Bogert managed to recapture one of the snakes which had been used in the ceremony. The snake had been de-fanged and even the replacement fangs had been removed. Klauber cites additional evidence to the effect that the snakes are doctored before the dance, possibly accounting for much of the secrecy. He ends his discussion of the Hopi

ceremonies by saying "But all the evidence now points either to fang extraction, venom extrusion, or both, as the explanation of the Hopis freedom from serious snake poisoning in their famous snake dance."⁴⁷

Despite the similarities between symbolism of the high cultures and tribal Indians, it is inaccurate to say that tribal Indians participate in snake worship. Reciprocal respect and reverence would be closer to the truth. The Hopi snake dance is a case in point: the snakes are (theoretically at least) gently handled and then released as messengers to the gods. The snakes themselves are not worshipped. In addition, the rattlesnake has certain attributes that are particularly reminiscent of rain. Klauber describes the train of ideas: "Rain = lightning = sinuous shape = snake; or rain = lightning = death-dealing stroke = snake."⁴⁸ The Z shape of the rattlesnake in a coiled position, ready to strike, could also be seen as lightning shaped, while the hiss of the rattle could suggest the fall of raindrops.⁴⁹

In Indian terms, rattlesnakes, under normal circumstances, are left alone. The widespread belief exists that if someone kills a snake they will themselves be bitten.⁵⁰ Similarly, as in Australia, breaking tribal taboos are believed to be punished by snake-bite.⁵¹ Certain tribes apparently believe in transmigration of souls; "The Navaho, like the Apache, believed ... that the spirit of

an essentially mean Indian would find lodging in a rattlesnake."⁵² This negative attitude is not typical, however, and Russell gives an account of the Tuscarora Indians refusing to allow a white man to kill a rattlesnake. Instead they addressed it as "grandfather" and requested its blessing on their travels.⁵³ According to Russell they also believed that the white men were bitten because they insisted on killing snakes wherever they found them. There is more than poetic justice in this - it is logical since after all if one is close enough to kill a snake, the chances are that one is also close enough to get bitten.

American Indian belief abounds with myths and legends concerning snakes. One of the most delightful beliefs is related by Russell. "The passing of time apparently has not changed the Indian's respect for the rattlesnake. Even in the 1940's, the Creeks still retained their awe of rattlers. If one wandered onto the baseball diamond during a ball game, he was sure to bring success to the team at bat, once he was lured from the field."⁵⁴

From the examination of traditional religious beliefs it is evident that there are many common denominators. These similarities can often be extended to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece and India. The serpent is always seen as a creature of the underworld, often regarded as a vehicle for transmigration in some form or other, usually connected to rainfall and regeneration, and even as a healer

and a guardian. Phallic symbolism is frequently present, directly or indirectly, but the mythological framework is too complex to be reduced to any single level. Many thought processes are at work, often accompanied by sound common sense. But one fact becomes abundantly clear; despite the "Jekyll and Hyde" character of the snake, all the cultures so far described have held the snake in great esteem - either as an ancestor or god, or merely as a fellow-creature. The ambivalence itself has a certain logic attached to it. As we noted earlier, the beauty of the snake is belied by its venom. Similarly, within myth, it is recognised as having power over both life and death. As Phelps observed, the terrifying death caused by a relatively small creature certainly would ensure respect.

The Genesis myth did not treat the snake as kindly as did the other ancients, and it is the Genesis myth to which we now turn, along with the snake-handlers who interpret that myth and the entire biblical narrative in such a frighteningly literal way.

NotesChapter III

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2. Ibid Pg 269
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CHAPTER IVThe Southern Snake Handling Cult and its Biblical Background

The Genesis myth portrays the serpent in a manner quite unlike any of those we have previously studied. The Epic of Gilgamesh bears the closest resemblance since only in this myth is the serpent responsible for the irrevocable mortality of man. As we noted in the first chapter, the Epic of Gilgamesh is almost certainly the prototype for the Genesis myth of Noah. In addition, it is important to note that the 'fall' of Adam and Eve and their subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden, is one of two 'fall' stories; the second being the story of Noah. In Genesis, Chapter 3, we have the serpent tempting Eve to disobedience, resulting in the expulsion of the primal pair from paradise. Similarly, in Chapter 6, the Lord repented of having created man and resolved to destroy him: hence we have the myth of Noah. The Epic of Gilgamesh forms a link between these two myths. For the first time we come across the snake presented in a totally negative light (the cunning-serpent who robs mankind of immortality) and, at the same time, we meet Utnapishtim/Noah who is destined, in the Genesis narrative, to save the earth from devastation. Thus, although the Epic of Gilgamesh forms the original Noah myth, the serpent links it to the Garden of Eden.

In Genesis, Chapter 3 : 15, we have a description of the relationship between human and snake that has endured for centuries.

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel."

This view has permeated western culture in direct contrast to parts of the east where snakes are still worshipped, or Africa where prohibition on killing snakes still exists. Isolated areas in Europe retain links with ancient snake beliefs as we saw in Greece, but generally the snake is hated and feared. To say that western attitudes towards snakes are largely controlled by the Genesis myth may seem implausible, but the evidence suggests that it is at least partly true. Social conditioning and unreasoning fear play their part in a society in which the mythical structure totally rejects the snake, even though the myth is not generally considered as historical. As Edmund Leach says, "All human societies have myths in this sense, and normally the myths to which the greatest importance is attached are those which are the least probable."⁴ As we discussed in the third chapter, the mythical structure influences behaviour patterns and lays down social mores even when we are not aware of it.

John Hick goes one step further. "But the time has long been with us when christians can not only see, but must frankly say, that the Genesis story is not history but myth ... it is no longer possible to combine biblical literalism with a responsible attitude to scientifically acquired

knowledge. Only a drastic compartmentalization of the mind could enable one to believe today in a literal historical fall of man." ² And yet it is indisputable that there are countless fundamentalists who are able to compartmentalize their minds in just such a way. The snake-handlers of the south are examples of this, although admittedly in their case it is possible - even probable - that they have not had the education to enable them to question on a scientific basis. Be that as it may, certainly the cultists accept every word of the Bible as Divine Truth. If it were not for this literalism, the cult would not exist at all.

Hick raises another interesting point regarding Genesis. "Whereas in the theologically edited myth the serpent has become identified with Satan, the arch-enemy of God and man, there is no suggestion of this in the Genesis text. On the contrary, there the serpent is a part of the animal creation, singled out only as being more subtle than the other beasts ... Indeed he is not properly described as a tempter at all in the sense of one who deliberately solicits evil ... the urge which he embodies is ethically neutral even though it leads to evil consequences." ³ As Hick says, the later interpretation of the myth casts a different light on the actual text of Genesis 3. "There man's first condition is one of primitive simplicity; he is not set in a heavenly or paradisaal state, but in an earthly garden which he must tend; the snake is a snake and not a fallen angel..." ⁴

Bernhard W. Anderson sums up the changed status of the snake: "In the religion and mythology of the ancient Near East the serpent-god was worshipped as a representation of the power of fertility and death. In the biblical story, however, the serpent has been stripped of mythical associations and is merely one of the animals made by Yahweh, distinguished by its uncanny wisdom and craft."⁵

The biblical narrative itself gives us clues regarding attitudes towards snakes. It is relevant to examine some of these references; in Psalms 58 :4/5 we are told -

"Their poison is like the poison of a serpent
They are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear
Which hearkeneth not to the voice of charmers."

This statement makes it quite clear that the Hebrews had sound knowledge of the snakes inability to hear. Snakes are, indeed, deaf in the accepted sense. "As snakes lack an external ear and ear-drum, they cannot hear in the normal way. They are, however, very sensitive to vibrations, especially through the ground, and it is considered highly probable that 'hearing' is by vibration."⁶

It is quite evident, therefore, that the snake as a physical creature held few mysteries for the Jews, despite the aura of mysticism which is bestowed upon the serpent in the biblical narrative. A typical example of this mysticism is reflected in Exodus, chapter 4 : 2-4 -

"And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand?
And he said A rod ... it became a serpent and Moses fled
from before it.

And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand and
take it by the tail"

We also have the 'competition' between the serpent-rods of
the Israelites and those of Pharoah's magicians and
sorcerers-

"...Aaron cast down his rod before Pharoah and before his
servants, and it became a serpent.

The Pharoah also called for the wise men and sorcerers
... but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.". Exodus 7
: 9-12.

These extracts are quite ironic since, in Genesis, the serpent
causes the fall of man. In Exodus on the other hand, it is
the serpent-rod which helps to deliver the Israelites
from Egypt by demonstrating the power of Yahweh.

Equally ironic, considering the image of the snake in
Genesis, is this account from Numbers 21 : 4-6 -

"... and the people spake against Moses. Wherefore have
ye brought us up out of Egypt ... and the Lord sent
fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the
people; and much people of Israel died."

The people were punished by means of snakebite for speaking against God. Here, in direct contrast to Genesis, the snake is used as a symbol of divine retribution. The snake, as a means of punishment, has emerged before in both ancient and traditional cultures. The common denominator, however, appears to me to be the acknowledgement of the snake's power over death. In Genesis because of the serpent, man sins and consequently has to die. In Numbers the snake again causes death - this time to those who speak against the Lord. It seems too that there is a certain degree of wisdom bestowed upon the snake. In Genesis this is indisputable. In Numbers this wisdom takes the form of an implied weapon of God, to enforce his will upon his recalcitrant people. The continuation of this text in Numbers is significant for a different reason. The serpent takes on the aspect of a healer.

"And the people came to Moses and said. We have sinned because we have spoken against the Lord and against thee; pray unto the Lord that he take away the serpents from us and Moses prayed for the people.

And the Lord said unto Moses "Make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a standard, and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall live.

And Moses made a serpent of brass and set it upon the standard; and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass he lived.". Numbers 21 : 6-9.

These extracts from Exodus and Numbers do not agree with the negative image of the snake in Genesis. The punishment and healing aspects are more in line with other snake-myths. It is possible that the ancient Near-Eastern snake worship mentioned by Anderson was not dropped completely but was instead reserved for those situations which demanded a powerful symbol.

The southern snake-handlers place their emphasis on the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark, which they take literally. Without Genesis, however, Mark's gospel would have no meaning, taking into consideration the cultists identification of the serpent as the devil incarnate. Weston La Barre maintains that other texts, both Old and New Testament, seem to take the opposite view of serpent handling and condemn the practice. 7 It is worth examining these texts. Ecclesiastes 10 : 11 says -

"Surely the serpent will bite where there is no enchantment, and the slanderer is no better."

La Barre interprets this as an argument against both snake handling and speaking in tongues. The problem here, however, is that the word 'slanderer' is ambiguous since it is alternatively translated as 'master of the tongue'. La Barre has this word as 'babbling' which makes it still more complicated. In my view, this text cannot be seen as clearly discouraging either snake-handling or speaking in tongues. The first part seems to be simply a statement of fact, while the ambiguity of the word in the next phrase leaves the field open for speculation.

La Barre also points to the reference in Paul I, Corinthians 10 : 9 as being significant in relation to the snake handling cult:

"Neither let us tempt the Lord as some of them tempted and perished by the serpent."

This text certainly could be interpreted as discouraging serpent-handling, but the problem is that the text in its entirety refers to the troubles suffered by the Israelites in the wilderness. The word 'tempting' therefore could equally well be translated into an injunction against a repetition of the sin which necessitated the punishment by snakebite previously discussed. This is an important point since it calls into question the very essence of the way in which the cultists perceive the snake. As La Barre interprets it, they are tempting God by serpent-handling,

playing a kind of Russian roulette using the gospel of Mark as the authority. But if the 'tempting' mentioned in Corinthians is taken within the whole text it would suggest that the cultists are actually using the snake as a means of judging their faith and their freedom from guilt. They certainly accept the Genesis myth as historical fact; therefore, they also perceive the snake as the cause of the fall. Interestingly, they appear to accept the later interpretation of Genesis rather than the mere events related in Genesis, chapter 3.

Lisa Alther, a journalist from the New York Times, did an extensive interview with various members of the cult. One conversation in particular is illuminating -

Question The snake represents the devil?

Lester Raines It's the devil incarnated in the flesh.
Nothing can overcome him but God.

Question And if you can pick him up, then you're a
channel for God's power over the devil?

Raines That's right.®

This extract is very reminiscent of John Hick's remarks regarding the snake merely being subtle and not the arch enemy of God. In identifying the snake with Satan, the cultists have ironically already moved away from Genesis as it stands without the later interpretation.

Alther questioned another cultist, Rev. Liston Pack, about the controversial quotation from Paul I, Corinthians. She asked him if in fact their practices do not constitute tempting God: his reply was emphatic:

Pack If you had told a child to go bring a load of stove wood, that child couldn't tempt you by doing what you asked it to do. Neither can we tempt Christ. Christ cannot be tempted ... It is not tempting him to do what he says to do. People have asked me "Would you go to the top of the temple and jump off? Certainly I would if the bible said I could, but it don't say that I can. It says "They shall take up serpents", but it never said to go jump off the Empire State Building."

Quite clearly, Mark chapter 16 : 17-18 is seen as an explicit instruction that has to be obeyed if the devil is to be overcome.

A standard reply to any question regarding the dangers involved, goes like this: "How are you going to overcome a devil if you can't overcome a little snake?"

The cultists find other verses to substantiate their belief. Luke 10 : 19 is essentially the same as Mark 16 : 17 and 18:

"Behold I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy : and nothing shall in any wise hurt you."

These verses, however, lack the seemingly specific instructions contained in Mark. Equally in Jeremiah 18 : 17 we have :

"For behold, I will send serpents, basilisks among you which will not be charmed and they shall bite you, saith the Lord."

The problem here is that this verse casts the snake in the punishment mould rather than as purely evil, or as a channel for the power of God. The cultists, therefore, use Mark as their main authority only using the other verses as back-up when necessary.

Another interesting point emerged from Alther's interview with the snake handlers. She refers to the mystery of the ending of St. Mark's gospel.

Question I've read that that verse in Mark is a later addition to the bible. Have you ever heard that?

Pack

Yeah, they's one translation of the bible that doesn't have it in it, but all the others do. The reason I know it belongs there is because I've did it and it works. I more than believe it. I know it. You can believe something, but if you know it, that's more than belief."

10

William Barclay ¹¹ and D.E.Nineham ¹² among many others, regard Mark, chapter 16, verse 8, as the conclusion of the original gospel. Verses 9 - 20 therefore are considered to be later additions to the gospel. Nineham says that everything following 16 : 8 "can confidently be declared non-marcan on grounds of attestation, style and content."¹³ Barclay agrees: "Mark 16 : 9 -20 is almost certainly not a part of the original gospel of Mark."¹⁴ A.M.Hunter theorises that Mark did not actually end at verse 8 but at that "the likeliest view is that the gospel was accidentally mutilated through the end of the papyrus roll being torn off."¹⁵ As a theologian, Hunter does not believe that Mark could end on the negative note presented in 16 : 8, but even he does not argue that verses 9 -20 are the work of Mark. "Verses 9 - 20 known as "The Longer Ending" are the work of a later hand, not of Mark...Their contents are demonstrably a patchwork, mostly drawn from Luke and Acts."¹⁶ As we noted, Luke 10 : 19 does not contain specific instructions to take up serpents and, therefore, could not provide sufficient grounds on which to base the serpent-handlers' belief. It is ironic that the

core of their belief happens to be one which is recognised as not being authentic. Without Mark, the cult could not exist and yet Mark is open to question on the very verses with which we are concerned. Nevertheless, members of the Holiness Churches are not swayed by such arguments, as Liston Pack's reply to Alther's question illustrates. It would in fact be entirely uncharacteristic if they were to accept it, since their fundamentalism precludes any such questioning. It is this fundamentalism which also places the cult (with the emphasis on snake = Satan) firmly within the framework of the Genesis myth.

Karen W. Carden and Robert W. Pelton, apologists for the sect and authors of two books on the subject, are quite clear as to how they view the gospel of Mark. "Some authorities claim that the (above) verses should not even be in the bible ... Whatever one's approach to the authenticity of these verses, the point is clear that the power and authority of Jesus Christ is supreme."¹⁷ The problem with this argument is that "the power of Jesus Christ" need not necessarily be demonstrated by handling serpents, any more than by 'jumping off the Empire State Building' to use Liston Pack's analogy. Carden and Pelton claim to "simply present the truth and the facts regarding the Holiness serpent-handlers of the southeast."¹⁸ But they too remove the cultists from their mythical framework, preferring instead to present them as miracle workers. This view is equally as unsettling as La Barre's psychoanalysis.

One statement made by Carden and Pelton is particularly significant because of the questions it raises. "Serpent-handling is not a test of their faith. It is not proof of their godliness. It's one and only purpose is to confirm the word."¹⁹ This is not altogether in agreement with the cultists' own perceptions about their beliefs. Ulysses G. Prince, a cultist interviewed by Tom Madden of the Los Angeles Times, says "If you have talked about your brother, you had better stay out of the serpent box. If you have been lying, you had better stay out of the serpent box. If you have any sins, you had better stay out of the serpent box ... You have got to come willing to die. If you can't trust God after the snake bites you - you had better stay out of the serpent box."²⁰ In this speech it seems plain that Prince is more than 'confirming the word'. It suggests martyrdom as well as overtones of the 'punishment by snake-bite' aspect in the Old Testament and, as such, is certainly a test of godliness. Guilt and serpent-handling are not compatible! Yet, when a member of the cult dies as a result of either snake bite or the drinking of poison, it is usually considered that dying for one's faith constitutes a supreme test of faith. In one case, a man died of strychnine poisoning during a Holiness service. At his graveside, his wife lamented "Ernest just had too much faith."²¹

The question of fatalities opens up a broad spectrum of opinion. It is often stated, especially by the press, that being bitten, even dying, is ascribed to a lack of

faith. But it is not quite as simple as that. One frequently used explanation is the very opposite of lack of faith: many cultists believe that fatalities can be God's way of convincing any 'sinners' who might be present that the snakes actually are dangerous and not tampered with in any way.

Lisa Alther questioned Clyde Ricker, Lester Raines and Liston Pack about this belief.

Ricker A lot of times people say "Well, you've got their teeth pulled ..."

Question: You say that sometimes people having doubts about whether or not the snakes are really poisonous will cause the Lord to have them bite you to prove that they are?

Ricker To prove that they have their teeth and their poison. Right!

Liston Pack then enlarged, and his views are worth quoting in full since they demonstrate such a wide variety of themes.

"Now I might get bit and hurt next week, I'm not gonna say. But if I knew that snake was going to bite me and hurt me, I'd never take it out. Now I've been guilty of handling them on a portion of faith and I've got by with

it, but I try to wait on a perfect victory from God. We have people in the Appalachians who even pray "When I die I want to be serpent bit dead.". But that's not my request... because it doesn't edify nothing to get serpent bit and die. Now if Paul in the 28th chapter of Acts, when that viper latched onto him, had got sick and swelled up and died, he wouldn't have convinced those barbarians of nothing about the gospel. But he just shook it off. If that serpent bites you, you're just proving that your faith was weak, or God had a reason, or it was time for you to go home."²²

From Pack's lengthy speech it is quite evident that handling serpents is as much a test of faith as it is confirmation of the Word. He even claims to have handled snakes on a 'portion' of faith, which certainly emphasises that he considers it a test of faith, especially if, by being bitten, the victim is 'proving' lack of faith. On the other hand, Pack offers two other possible explanations: "God's reason", or simply "time to go home". Both of these explanations are marvellously elastic, leaving the field wide open for any possibility. There is also room for the Old Testament punishment aspect. In suffering a bite, a believer could be suffering as a result of their own guilt or, alternatively, as a result of lack of belief on someone else's part. Once again we are reminded of the snake's role in Numbers - punishing those who spoke against the Lord.

Several accounts of fatalities include snake-handling at the graveside, usually endeavouring to handle the snake which delivered the fatal bite. Occasionally, there is something reminiscent of sacrifice or perhaps vengeance, about this ritual. Time Magazine ran an article on the death of Lewis Francis Ford and the funeral that followed. "As soon as he had died, his wife requested snake-handling at the funeral. Almost 3 000 people came to watch ... The Rev. Raymond Hayes of Grasshopper put the serpent that had bitten Brother Ford into the coffin. It coiled up quietly on Brother Ford's chest."²³

The rattlesnake was certainly responsible for Brother Ford's death. But it is equally certain that the snake had been provoked and reacted accordingly. To bury the creature alive with its victim smacks strongly of revenge. The bite itself could have been explained in any terms from lack of faith to God's will, but due punishment was nevertheless exacted upon the serpent.

Here it must be mentioned that it was the death of Lewis Ford which catapulted the cult to notoriety. It was also to be the first case of its kind to be heard in court when Ford's widow, Ressie S. Ford, was refused double indemnity by accident from the insurance company, Judge Hamilton S. Burnett, of the Tennessee Court of Appeals, ruled that "The insured's death was caused by being bitten by a rattlesnake in a religious service. One voluntarily handling

a poisonous serpent is not accidentally injured when bitten by the snake. If you were picking blackberries in a field and received the bite, then that might be different..²⁴

It was also the Ford death that triggered the prohibition of handling serpents. "Handling serpents so as to endanger life - Penalty - 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."²⁵ This, in turn, triggered similar prohibitions in other states thereby causing the cultists to view themselves as persecuted Christians. Not surprisingly, the end result was a full-blown media affair with the cultists defying the law wherever possible.

When questioned about the results of a snakebite, the vast majority of cultists said that they would refuse to allow medical treatment of any kind. Floyd McCall, pastor of the Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name, Greenville, South Carolina, expressed strong feelings on the subject: "If I were to pick up a serpent and get bitten and die, I've proved that my faith is in God - I'd just accept it and keep my faith in Him until the end."²⁶ Similar sentiments were expressed by the other members of the various congregations, most of them saying that God must have had a reason and, therefore, God's work must take its natural course. In 1961, a twenty-three year old girl died after a snake bite

received during a religious meeting in Jolo, West Virginia. In her case medical help was refused on two occasions.²⁷ In August 1974, the Los Angeles Times reported the death of Talmadge Adkins who was "still thanking and praising the Lord" just before he died - several days after the bite which was inflicted on the wrist.²⁸ There are numerous other victims who refused medical treatment, often taking days to die. In one case, a Mrs. Hall was bitten and refused medical treatment. Three days later her daughter took her to the hospital where she died a few minutes after her arrival.²⁹ It is possible that by that stage Mrs. Hall was in no state to protest at her daughter's actions. It is quite obvious therefore that the members of the Holiness Churches have a frightening intensity of faith. Mrs. Elkins, the mother of the twenty-three year old girl who had been fatally bitten, remarked less than two weeks after her daughter's death "I'm letting God fight my battle. You think I'm going to let some of these little judges and lawyers back up on my salvation? No!"³⁰

According to Mark's gospel, certain cultists believe they can drink poison with the same apparent impunity with which they handle snakes. Carden and Pelton claim that in churches in Ohio and West Virginia, strychnine is consumed on an almost weekly basis. They claim to have watched "at least ten people drinking it before a service was over" and provide numerous examples of believers who have at one time or another participated in poison drinking.³¹ Poison, however,

does not seem to be as clear-cut as the handling of serpents. One cult member described his feelings: "I believe Mark 16 : 18 says 'If' they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them.". That's a big if there. The way I see it is if somebody slipped me something with poison in it I'd be alright ... but the if in that scripture doesn't mean you should just drink poison." ³². Others agree that the word 'if' stops short of a command, but a controversy exists within the congregation on this point. The claims of members drinking quantities of poison remain open since there are many questions left unanswered regarding dosages and individual tolerance of various chemicals. But without doubt the strychnine swallows have had their fatalities. In 1973, two members of the Carson Springs congregation died of strychnine poisoning. One of the victims was Buford Pack, brother of Liston Pack. Those present had no doubt about the reason for the death of the two believers. "I believe God was finished with those boys. They had preached all that God wanted them to preach. They had done the work God gave them to do. It was just their time to go." ³³ Rev. Lester Ball, a cultist who was present the night they died, claims that until that point he had been backsliding. As a result of the deaths, however, he was converted and ordained." ³⁴

Such episodes as the one described above are more than enough to convince us that the members of the Holiness Churches are in deadly earnest. Their faith is unshakeable and quite obviously the principles to which they adhere

give absolute meaning to their lives. It is necessary, however, to see these fundamentalists in the correct perspective. Weston La Barre interpreted the cult within what he perceived to be a purely phallic symbol-structure. I strongly feel that this aspect is over-emphasised. It sometimes becomes difficult to see just what is so complicated about the motives of the believers. Blind faith and absolute belief in sacred scriptures are common the world over, as is religious fanaticism. I fail to see why the faith of the Holiness Churches should not be accepted more or less at face value. However misguided their interpretation appears to be, it seems simple enough that their beliefs are based upon what they perceive to be The Divine Word. Within the mythical framework of Genesis and their interpretation of the biblical narrative as a whole, it could be argued that the cultists behave consistently and even logically. They are, after all, not that far removed from many other fundamentalist congregations, the major difference being their dramatic acts of faith. Remove the need for danger in their lives and we are left with a simple group of people who cling tenaciously to what they believe.

On the other hand, Carden and Pelton present an equally unbalanced view. They present the cultists as latter-day miracle workers. They neglect the mythical foundation entirely, viewing the believers out of context. Their prime concern is to portray the cultists as a persecuted group of innocents who happen to have almost supernatural abilities;

such a presentation could only be distorted.

Appropriately perhaps, the Science News Letter sums up the cult in simple and believable terms. "Snake-handling religious cultists of Georgia are 'all of a piece' with followers of other cults who go to unusual lengths to show their faith or their access to supernatural powers ... such goings on only surprise us when they appear in the midst of our own culture.". The article points out that the activities of the Georgia group would not be "news" in Haiti!³⁵ Dr. Winifred Overholser maintains in the article that "The development of these strange cults rests on the credulity that characterises groups of people living at a low cultural level. Such people are ready to believe what a leader tells them because they lack the knowledge or means of learning whether or not he is right."³⁶ Looking back to the history of the cult, George Went Hensley certainly had no trouble converting his followers to the fascinating 'truth' he had discovered. The Old Testament presents the snake as the cause of the fall. Later, Christian-thought associates this subtle creature with Satan, and the serpent emerges as a symbol of evil. Hensley's 'proof' of Mark's gospel could not fail to be impressive under such circumstances.

Despite the fanaticism and credulity of the believers, the thought processes can be regarded as having a single minded logic. What is not easily explained, however, is the relatively low mortality rate. In other words, how do they

get away with it? In order to get a clearer picture of this we need to examine scientific sources and zoological data. It is necessary to see the snakes as separate entities and not mere symbols. They are the living, breathing creatures upon which everything depends, and the cultists' attitude towards them outside of the church is important. So we turn to Chapter V to examine hypnosis within the religious services and the rattlesnakes themselves.

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CHAPTER VThe Believer and the Snake

There is one aspect of the cult upon which everyone agrees. This is the trance like state of the believers while they are actually handling the snakes. The cultists themselves recognise this state and, while it is usually considered to be a state of self-induced hypnosis or ecstasy, the believers themselves refer to it as the 'anointing' or the 'power'; Carden and Pelton go into great detail in describing what they term "The anointing power of God".

"By definition, the word 'anoint' means to put on, to apply, to consecrate with. The narratives of Sister Lida, Sister Mary and Brother Ralph are neither uncommon nor typical. They are their anointings. Every one of these dedicated followers of the faith receives his or her anointing differently ... some feel an irresistible compelling force. Others are quietly spoken to."¹

Many cultists say that they experience a numbness in their hands, or a tingling sensation which, for them is the signal that the Spirit is upon them. Others report a sensation similar to a mild electric shock. All, however, agree that physical signs accompany the mental state. Rev. Wille Sizemore spoke about the difference between one's own anointing and handling serpents "off someone else's anointing."² By this he means those believers who handle serpents on faith alone, without the physical signs of the anointing. He himself does this regularly. Another

member, Pastor Robert Grooms, disagrees violently with taking up the serpents on faith. "You'd be surprised at the number of people who handle serpents when they aren't anointed ... They're just handling those serpents off someone else's anointing. Now I'm not going to handle them on faith alone ... That's why people get into trouble ... you can't handle them and get away with it."³

The views quoted above are extremely enlightening. The discussion concerning 'faith' versus 'anointing' describes what previously seemed to be merely hinted at. Despite the theory of confirming the Word, members do handle serpents on faith. In addition, Robert Grooms sounds as if he could be saying that snakebite victims are those who have lacked what is generally called the anointing, but have gone ahead anyway. It is the first time that supernatural explanations such as God's desire to convert a sinner have been bypassed in favour of a more rational explanation. While the idea of getting bitten simply because the victim is not in a trance may not be scientifically sound, it is closer than the other explanations so far considered.

In the same way, recovery from a bite is sometimes attributed to the 'power'. La Barre says "The accident of being bitten itself was of little theological moment, if only the 'power' in them was demonstrated by their not subsequently dying from the bite."⁴ In effect, this means that the power or anointing should safeguard against a bite.

If a bite is nevertheless inflicted, the power is the key to recovery. But we know that on those occasions when a fatality occurs, the explanations are varied but generally the victim is viewed as having died for their faith. La Barre also says that several members boast about how many times they have been bitten. Ironically this factor could be the very method by which these individual members avoid death, but that possibility will be discussed later in this chapter. Suffice it to say that in the Holiness view, recovery from a bite is proof of faith.

Observers of the cult recognise and acknowledge that the state of mind is altered. No sceptic however, would call it the anointing or the power in the sense in which the cultists intend. William Sargent views this trance-like state as little more than hysteria disguised as 'Divine Possession'. He regards the snake handlers as being in the same category as voodoo cults in Haiti. "A voodoo priest increases excitement and suggestibility by altering the loudness and rhythm of the drums just as in a religious snake handling cult which I observed myself in the United States; the preacher used the tempo and volume of singing and handclapping to intensify the religious enthusiasm, and emotional disruption was finally induced by thrusting live, poisonous snakes into their hands. After a terminal collapse into stupor, both groups of participants may awake with a sense of spiritual rebirth."⁵

Several cultists volunteered the information that under normal circumstances they are afraid of snakes. George Vecsey of the New York Times was told by Mrs. Ball that she was 'scared to death' of snakes except under the anointing.⁶ Robert Groom's statements regarding not taking up serpents on faith alone indicate a sizeable degree of caution, while Lida Davis told Carden and Pelton that she does not ordinarily like snakes. But she goes on to describe the change in her feelings once the anointing is upon her. "I just feel a love. I don't feel any hate for the serpents. I don't feel any anger against the snakes. I just feel a strong overpowering love for them. I don't want to hurt them. I feel a leading from God to take them up."⁷ The content of these statements are echoed by many other cultists, often using the same words. Findlay Russell quotes one observer as saying that "several members of the sect have informed me that all snakes are dangerous since they were all cast out of the Garden of Eden."⁸ These people fear and revile even non-venomous snakes outside of religious meetings and yet can handle venomous species within the context of a church service. Whatever sexual overtones may be present here, one solid fact emerges - each and every cultist agrees that under the anointing they can handle the snakes without fear or dislike.

At this point I would like to change the emphasis from the humans to the snakes. La Barre describes the beginning of

spirit begins to move some members and they may jump up and down, caper about and occasionally kick, in passing the wooden box in which the snakes have been brought."⁹ This illustrates that the snakes have been provoked right from the start. In describing the progression of the meeting, La Barre comments that the snakes 'may drop heavily to the floor, where they are possibly more dangerous since there they can gather themselves to strike.'¹⁰ It seems equally possible that such a fall could injure them. Snakes, like any animal, are actually very fragile.! As Phelps puts it 'even the most docile snake often strongly resents being manhandled and will show this by sometimes violent convulsions of the body.'¹¹ Another relevant comment by Phelps concerns snakebite. "Most people are of the opinion that a venomous snake's first line of defence is to bite. In fact, most venomous snakes will only strike as a last resort. It should be remembered that the poison fang is primarily a means of securing prey and not for inflicting mortal wounds on every Homo Sapiens that happens to wander by."¹² This is well worth remembering when we read that John Wilson quotes Stephen Kane as saying that "a woman pokes her feet at a large yellow rattler she has placed on the floor. The serpent coils, raises its tail and rattles menacingly but does not strike."¹³

From the above descriptions it is obvious that the snakes are provoked and generally treated badly. Any gentleness that occurs takes place under the 'power', when 'love' has

replaced fear and hatred. It is also acknowledged that the cultists would never 'doctor' their snakes by de-fanging them, or milking them before the meeting. Indeed, the venomous bites, both fatal and otherwise, bear testimony to this. It is puzzling then that more deaths do not occur. This has been investigated by the Duke Medical School and also by 'several people from Dr. J.B.Rhine's laboratory of parapsychology.'. The conclusion was reached that 'the handling of snakes with impunity is obviously a potential instance of the P.K.Phenomenon (i.e. psycho-kinesis or the power of 'mind over matter')'.¹⁴

So far, however, a solution has not been reached. Herpetologists are generally scornful of the cult and it has been largely ignored in natural history circles. Findlay Russell puts forward the "possibility that snakes can detect fright in a person, either by proprioception or by olfaction. If this were possible, one might speculate that snakes could detect changes associated with fear or fright or, conversely, in people who were handling them."¹⁵ This suggestion seems plausible, especially since Phelps maintains that "many people do have a rapport with snakes and their skills are to be admired.". ¹⁶ Leaving aside the fact that the snake-handlers have no skills as such, both Russell and Phelps seem to be in agreement that snakes do have a degree of awareness. If this were the case, they certainly would sense the change between before the handling began (while they were still regarded as Satan) and afterwards when the fear and dislike had dissipated.

Other possible solutions include 'tamed snakes': i.e. snakes which have been in captivity for a long enough period to settle down. Obviously a freshly caught snake is more aggressive than one which has been handled over a certain period of time. Weston La Barre, using Klauber as a reference, investigated this possibility: "Klauber considers that some species of rattler may be 'tamed' in the sense of becoming accustomed to gentle handling.". La Barre's problem here is that "sudden fright still makes them dangerous". He also says that the cultists replace their snakes frequently, not giving them a chance to be 'trained'.¹⁷

Minton and Minton quote the opinion of Berthold Schwarz a psychiatrist, who has observed the ceremonies. Schwarz believes that "some of the cultists can induce a state of cataplexy in the snakes."¹⁸ Other sources do not agree with this: Russell says firmly "Hypnotism, neurogenic reflexes and catalepsy are among the things mentioned by various writers as contributing to the ease of handling snakes during rituals. However, I feel their importance is minimal."¹⁹ It is relevant to note here that "cataplexy" and "catalepsy" are interchangeable terms for the same state of altered consciousness.

Another explanation advanced by La Barre concerns "disturbed reflexes". He suggests that as the snakes are handled and passed around, dangling down from their middles,

their reflexes are disturbed.²⁰ He states quite simply that although the 'disturbed reflex' appears to be the most plausible: "I regard the question of why more snake handlers are not bitten as being unsolved and still open."²¹

Other questions also remain open: the general condition of the snake, various species used (temperaments vary) and injuries to the snakes, as well as climatic conditions. All these are possibilities that remain uninvestigated; it is probable that in a case such as this, there are various contributing factors.

Weston La Barre gives an account of one particular woman who has the ability to 'shock' her snakes. "The cultists explain that some of their members are filled with a strong power 'like electricity' and that snakes are shocked to death ...when Mrs. Harder takes up a snake it immediately ceases to struggle and becomes limp as a necktie."²² Injury or over-handling immediately spring to mind in a case like this. With constant handling snakes become confused and frightened, sometimes losing the will to live. It is also possible that the snakes are in poor condition - lethargic and listless. All these factors will be considered in the next section which includes interviews with herpetologists and professional snake handlers from South Africa, South West Africa, Zimbabwe, the U.S.A. and Australia.

It is unfortunate that scientific journals and text books pay so little attention to this cult. I regard the question of the low mortality rate as one which has not

been sufficiently investigated by the experts in the herpetological field. In the search for information I wrote to Dr. Dale Marcellini, Curator of Herpetology at the Smithsonian Institute. His reply was brief and to the point: "I am not an expert in snake handling cults and know very little about these odd rituals.". He did, however, refer me to Findlay E. Russells' book "Snake Venom Poisoning", which has a section dealing with the subject. Those books that do offer a solution, base their opinions on second-hand eye witness reports. The species of rattlesnake used at any one meeting is vital to research since temperaments vary, as does the toxicity. Certain species are very aggressive and easily provoked, while others are timid or docile and more easily handled. Nowhere could I find information that was authoritative on both the cultists and their snakes. Sociologists tend to lump the snakes together under the label of 'rattler' and, as such, 'deadly'.

In fact, 'deadly' is seldom strictly accurate. The very fact that the Holiness congregations use adders and vipers and not elapids is a point in their favour. Despite the highly sophisticated venom apparatus of the erectile-fanged adders, adder venom is generally cytotoxic, or cell-destroying, as opposed to elapid venom which is usually neurotoxic or nerve-destroying. Elapids are front-fanged snakes which include such dangerous species as cobras and mambas within their ranks. La Barre takes this into account. He cites Klauber on the venom of the eastern

diamondback, and states that Klauber regards the eastern diamondback as "the most poisonous United States rattler in that it produces the highest percentage of deaths, because of its size and high venom delivery, though the venom is not a strong one (the venom of elapine snakes in Asia, Africa and Australia is more dangerous.)".²³ All sources consulted on this point agreed that elapid poisoning advances more rapidly. John Visser remarks that during a study of snakebite victims "most of the serious front-fanged bites had, in fact, presented (for treatment) within three hours, a measure of not only the rapidity of onset of front-fanged symptoms, but one which can also be attributed to the fact that the dramatic will stimulate action."²⁴ In the same study the overall results were as follows: "For the front-fanged group the incidence of severe morbidity was about 63%, with an overall mortality of 25%, and where the black mamba was identified, 100% mortality. For all adder bites, the morbidity was about 11% and the mortality 2%, figures which are comparable to those for vipers in other areas of the world."²⁵ Both Broadley²⁶ and Phelps²⁷ discuss the question of which snakes are most deadly to man, based on size, temperament and toxicity. Both rated various elapids as the top three.

The above discussion was necessary to demonstrate that, quite by chance, the cultists use members of the adder/viper family, thereby reducing the chance of mortality to a considerable degree. Only one species of elapid occurs in

North America, this being the dangerous coral snake. There is, however, no record of this snake ever being used, although they do occur in parts of the area with which we are concerned. All other dangerous snakes in the United States belong to the rattlesnake family, including the so-called moccasins (the cottonmouths and the copperheads). ²⁸

Carden and Pelton describe one particular occasion in 1973 when the cultists 'borrowed' an Indian cobra and handled it under the anointing. ²⁹ Photographs of the event, however, testify that the cobra was by no means handled carelessly, as are the rattlesnakes. It was gently handled on its own and not with handfuls of rattlers. In addition, it was a snake belonging to a professional snake exhibitor and, therefore, was a long term captive. Carden and Pelton regard this event with awe, especially as Clyde Ricker apparently kissed the snake on the mouth. ³⁰ Phelps, however, includes a photograph of George Williams, an experienced professional, kissing a king cobra on the top of the head. ³¹ The king cobra ranks alongside the black mamba as being a particularly dangerous species, and yet even this snake allowed itself to be treated in this singular manner. Such stories are legion amongst professional snake handlers. Russell states categorically that 'anyone associated with herpetologists has among his colleagues, persons who have handled crotalids or elapids without being bitten ... my good friend, Dr. Timothy Brown, a competent herpetologist, had a pet copperhead that he handled (skilfully) for more than 12

years without being bitten.³² To complicate matters still further, the term 'Indian cobra' could refer to any one of ten sub-species. This was pointed out by Mr. Fred Sterzel, one of the professionals interviewed, who has himself handled Indian cobras without incident.

I discussed the cult with various noted experts in the herpetological field. In an effort to uncover any facts previously overlooked, I concentrated primarily on questions which have not arisen to any great extent in the literature. These include any possible trickery on the part of the cultists, as well as certain precautions they might take - perhaps without being aware of it. I was also interested in the experts' views on any possible affinity or rapport between human and snake, as well as to what degree snakes are aware of 'vibes' - fear, dislike, etc. The species and temperament of individual snakes were discussed, paying particular attention to the possibility of the snakes being over-handled and mistreated. Temperature and weather conditions could play an important part, as could the geographical areas where the various congregations are situated. The possibility of induced cataplexy was discussed, as well as Weston La Barre's theory of 'disturbed reflexes'. The question of immunity to snake bite was considered, along with the cultist's reaction in the case of a bite.

My panel of experts included :

Dr. W. Branch, Curator of Herpetology, Port Elizabeth Museum.

Dr. D.G. Broadley, Curator of Herpetology, Bulawayo Museum, Zimbabwe.

Mr. Mike Griffin, an American from California, currently working with Nature Conservation in Windhoek.

Mr. Steve Gear, Assistant Curator of the Queensland Reptile Park, Brisbane, Australia.

Mr. David Morgan, Assistant Curator, Transvaal Snake Park.

Dr. J. McLaughlin, Curator of Herpetology, Cape Town Museum.

Mr. Fred Sterzel, Owner of Strandfontein Reptile Park, Cape Town.

Mr. Vivian Wilson, Director of Chipangali Wildlife Sanctuary, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

It is easiest to begin with those theories which were unanimously rejected. All those interviewed dismissed the idea of the cultists being able to induce a state of cataplexy in their snakes. They also agreed that however Mrs. Harden's snakes die, it is not from the so-called electrical power with which she allegedly 'shocks them to death'.³³ This type of 'psychic shock', however, is distinct from sheer terror which is a very real possibility for the snakes in this situation. While it is unlikely that a snake would die of fright alone, it could well die from stress-related causes, in addition to injuries sustained during handling. Dr. Branch mentioned that confusion and bewilderment could result in the snake appearing cataplectic to an observer untrained in snake behaviour. The snake ceases to struggle and just gives up - apparently losing the will to live. Mr. Wilson agreed with this, adding that fear can make a snake less aggressive, preferring to avoid a confrontation.

This leads on to the aspect of the condition of the snake. It goes without saying that a healthy snake will be more resistant than one which is in a weakened condition. Mr. Morgan stated that, even within the confines of a well run snake park, it is quite usual to see snakes that are listless and lethargic from over-handling and over-demonstrating. If this is the case in a scientific environment, the chances of the cultists' snakes being in good condition are slim. By all accounts they are more handled in one meeting than the resident of a snake park

would be in a month. The rattlesnakes are passed around from one person to another, draped around shoulders and heads, not to mention being dropped heavily onto the floor. There are even photographs supplied by Carden and Pelton, of members walking on the snakes. ³⁴ When the cultists are 'under the power' they are no longer hostile to the snakes, but rough treatment continues nevertheless. Mr. Gear suggested that, in addition to the handling, the cultists are probably not very knowledgeable about how to treat captive snakes. In his opinion, they are not likely to worry about temperature control in the cages and they possibly lack the knowledge necessary for feeding the snakes adequately. Mr. Sterzel insists that snakes in general do not enjoy any form of handling and that handling of this type would lead to rapid deterioration, especially in the more timid and docile species.

The next question involved the use of fraud or trickery on the part of the cultists. Dr. McLaughlin suggested that they would be unlikely to use such obvious methods as defanging or milking, but he felt that lowering temperatures to produce inertia was a possibility. The weather would also have an effect on the snakes and thus on their potential victims. If the snakes were handled during the winter months, the risk of snake bite would obviously be diminished. Others in the group felt that fraud could not be entirely ruled out, but the general consensus of opinion was that any fraud which takes place is limited to a select

group, and unknown to the congregation as a whole. It was also suggested that the best and most subtle method of avoiding serious bites would be to use the less aggressive species. Dr. Broadley said that, as a general rule, rattlesnakes do not settle in captivity - they pine and become lethargic. This is perhaps a factor which is recognised by those in charge of the snakes. Mr. Griffin pointed out that the cultists are country-folk, living close to, and observing nature. He finds it extremely suspect that there are no recorded instances of the cult using the coral snake in those areas where it occurs. He also gives the example of the cottonmouth which is noted for being particularly aggressive. The literature seldom refers to this snake, while the more docile copperhead is used extensively. It is relevant here to mention that cottonmouths and copperheads are usually mentioned by name where they are used, while the other snakes are usually simply referred to as 'rattlers'. This helps to give some idea of the use of cottonmouths and copperheads as opposed to the other group.

The sole dissenter on the question of trickery was Mr. Wilson, who felt that folk-lore and religion is too important to rural people, and that these fundamentalists would not jeopardise their integrity. The literature tends to support this view and it seems to me that any safety factors are coincidental and unintentional. Overall on this question, however, all those questioned felt strongly that

the cultists are deluding themselves by interpreting facts of nature in terms of the miraculous.

The question of humans having affinity or rapport with snakes proved to be fascinating. Opinions varied: Fred Sterzel was adamant that snakes are totally "brainless" and have no awareness whatsoever. He maintained that, while they experience discomfort and pain, they are oblivious to human reactions of either fear or admiration. He says they merely react to what they are feeling at any one given time. David Morgan had exactly the opposite opinion. He related the story of a particular occasion when he was called out to a farm outside of Johannesburg. An eight-month old baby was sitting in the play-pen in the garden, playing with a large Egyptian cobra. The cobra was making repeated attempts to escape, but every time it made any progress, the baby yanked it back. By the time Mr Morgan arrived to capture the snake, the 'game' had been in progress quite a while. He said that he was struck by the fact that at no time did the cobra spread a hood or give any indication that it was annoyed. Yet it was obvious to him that the cobra was most uncomfortable with the situation. He distracted the snake while the baby was picked up and removed. He went on to say that he found it strange that as soon as the cobra became aware of his presence it raised a hood and lunged defensively at him - behaving exactly as it should have been doing with the child. He said to me that this convinced him that the

cobra realised that the baby was no threat, while it found the prospect of being captured extremely infuriating.

Other opinions varied somewhere between these two points of view. Dr. Broadley pointed out that bees are triggered by a scent or a secretion and he suggested that fear in a human could perhaps be transmitted to the snake in much the same way. This is similar to the theory put forward by Findlay Russell in the previous section. "...either by proprioception or by olfaction...one might speculate that snakes could detect changes associated with fear or fright".³⁵ Vivian Wilson agreed that snakes are receptive to either fear or confidence on the part of the handler. Dr. McLaughlin was doubtful about the idea of affinity, while Dr. Branch accepted it in part, but not as unequivocally as Mr Morgan. Mike Griffin summed up the overall view (except Mr Sterzel's) when he said that he could accept snakes knowing the difference between fear or confidence but not allowing liberties to be taken. Snakes are untameable in the accepted sense, although they can, and do, become accustomed to handling. Slow, gentle movements are always necessary and yet we have isolated cases, such as the baby in the play-pen, where the movements are anything but slow and gentle. In the opinion of majority therefore, lack of fear under the anointing could play a part, especially taking into consideration the possibility that the snakes are already lethargic and almost certainly terrified.

Weston La Barre's theory of disturbed reflexes is the next subject to be tackled. It was generally agreed that this could be an additional factor. Dr. Branch pointed out that adders are usually bulky and heavy-bodied snakes, and therefore not as agile as a slender-bodied snake would be. Held at mid-body it is possible that the rattlesnake might find it difficult to position itself in order to inflict a bite. Mike Griffin agreed with this, adding that since they are terrestrial they are obviously most at home on the ground where they would have the confidence that they lack when they are held in mid-air. This approaches Weston La Barre's theory except that Mr Griffin suggests it is their attitude rather than their reflexes which are altered. Once again we are faced with the possibility of the snakes being too confused and frightened to attempt a bite, even when they are on the ground.

Mr Griffin also considered the possibility that the lack of fatal bites were due to the snakes 'venom-computer' being disturbed. He pointed out that the amount of venom injected (from a potentially lethal species) is crucial. It is believed that, when immobilising its prey, the snake will use just enough venom and no more. But when biting in self-defence the envenomation can be unpredictable, since the snake is only "programmed" to tackle its preferred prey. Since humans obviously do not fit into this category, Mr Griffin postulates that the resultant unpredictable venom-delivery could have something to do with the

less serious bites inflicted upon cultists. In addition he stressed that fang-penetration is vital to a poisonous bite and in certain cases the snakes could deliver "dry bites". In various unnatural positions the snake may succeed only in sinking the fang-tip (below the poison-duct) into the offending limb. The literature on snake bite certainly bears this out. Johan Marais differentiates between "poisonous snake bite and snake bite poisoning. The former refers to a bite inflicted by a poisonous snake, whether or not venom was injected."³⁴ Visser states that "for a variety of reasons, poisoning may not occur after a bite by a dangerously venomous snake..."³⁷

All those interviewed were of the opinion that individual species are crucial to the question of mortality. They were, without exception, emphatic that such a cult could not possibly get away with it if they were to use dangerous elapids rather than dangerous adders. Australia is unique in that 75% of its snakes are elapids and therefore potentially dangerous. Although only about 30% of these elapids constitute a real danger to man, those that do are often large in size, extremely agile, very widespread and highly toxic. These facts prompted Steve Gear to say that if the cultists ever attempted to handle these species the way they handle rattlesnakes, "they'd die like flies" - especially in the absence of medical treatment. Mike Griffin was of the opinion that if an arboreal snake, such as a mamba, was used, it

would adapt remarkably well to being held aloft and would have no difficulty in delivering a swift and lethal bite.

However, we know that, with the single exception of the captive cobra, believers do not handle elapids. Therefore their own species of rattlesnakes are responsible for the fatalities which do occur. Dr. Branch said that it seemed highly likely that many of the fatalities that have occurred were as a result of the eastern diamondback. It was certainly this snake that was responsible for the death of George Went Hensley, the founder of the cult. Unfortunately however, most other victims are simply reported as having been bitten by a rattlesnake - the particular species of which is not often mentioned. In addition, the eastern diamondback has a very limited range in the areas with which we are concerned. Roger Conant describes it as occurring in the "Coastal lowlands from S. North Carolina to extreme east Louisiana. All of Florida, including the keys".³⁰ It was in fact in Florida where Hensley was fatally bitten. No mention is made of whether or not the cultists "import" rattlesnakes from other areas. If they don't, they would obviously have to rely on those caught locally. This means that the diamondback is absent from West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee to mention but a few of the areas where the cult is centred. Mike Griffin however is of the opinion that even though the eastern diamondback is probably responsible for a high percentage of the fatal bites in the areas where it occurs, there is an advantage to using this snake. He maintains

that this species is docile and relatively pleasant-natured, especially by comparison with its western counterpart. He explained that the western diamondback is far more aggressive and generally considered more dangerous. Phelps bears this out by saying " This species is considered by many to be the most dangerous snake in the U.S.A."³⁹ Klauber also considers the western diamondback more dangerous. Weston La Barre quotes him as saying that it is responsible for "more serious bites than all the other rattlers in the United States combined, because of its plentifulness in the large area of its range and its more powerful though smaller quantity of venom than the eastern diamondback."⁴⁰ Considering the fact that both eastern and western diamondbacks are absent from many of the relevant areas (the western diamondback does not occur at all) we are left with a selection of snakes that are considerably less dangerous.

Since the species that occur locally are important it is necessary to list those most likely to be used. Copperheads and cottonmouths occur widely and so do timber and canebrake rattlesnakes. There are also various pygmy rattlers, although these are not generally considered dangerous. All of the above as well as the eastern diamondback, where it occurs, must be considered. Dr. Branch and Mr Griffin stressed that the diamondbacks are definitely potentially lethal while the others would be considerably less so. Dr. branch emphasised though that even a lesser adder, not usually considered particularly dangerous, could

be responsible for a fatality if a bite was inflicted on a sickly, elderly or very young person. Death could also occur if a less dangerous snake inflicted a bite penetrating a major artery. Time Magazine reported in November 1968 that Oscar Pelfrey was handling a pair of timber rattlesnakes when one struck him on the left temple. He died six hours later.⁴¹ La Barre reports the death of Reece Ramsay in 1954 who was struck on the side of the head three times in quick succession. He died within minutes.⁴² This case is unusual in that the colloquial name "Satinback" is given to the snake that killed Ramsay. The death took place in Georgia in parts of which the eastern diamondback does occur, so the the diamondback may have been responsible. In both cases the bites were inflicted on the side of the head and considering the rapidity of Ramsay's demise it is more than likely that it was a diamondback. The death of Pelfrey however demonstrates the importance of the area of the bite, since the recovery-rate from timber rattlesnake bites is apparently high - but a bite inflicted on the temple is clearly extreme. There is possibly an element of bad luck here too, since both Dr. Broadley and Mr Griffin consider the timber rattlesnake to be timid and easily frightened. This being the case, it demonstrates the degree to which the snake was provoked.

Overall it appears that the cultists are geographically fortunate. If they lived in the West, where the western diamondback is extremely wide-ranging and the dangerous Mojave Rattlesnakes occur, it is highly likely that the

mortality rate would increase by leaps and bounds. Mr Griffin considers the geographical occurrence of species to be the major factor in the low mortality rate.

It is also important to note that even a serious bite from a potentially lethal adder is not necessarily always fatal, even without treatment. All those interviewed said that the toxicity and venom of the puff-adder was very similar to that of a diamondback. Fred Sterzel and Dr. Branch both emphasised that puff-adder victims can (and do) survive untreated, albeit badly scarred. John Visser even reports a survivor of a bite from a gaboon viper, which Phelps describes as "probably the largest viper in the world".⁴⁴ The Science News Letter compared the venoms of various species of American snakes, and related the information to the cult: "Copperhead snakes are less deadly than rattlesnakes, water-moccasins and coral snakes. This may explain why followers of the cult have been able to withstand copperheads in their church rites with apparently few fatalities. The bite of the coral snake is very dangerous because the venom of this reptile attacks the nerve-centres. The venom of rattlesnakes, moccasins and copperheads on the other hand, destroys red blood cells and breaks down the walls of the blood vessels. Serious as this condition is, it takes a little longer to become fatal, giving a chance for the victim's recuperative powers and medical aid to overcome the effect of the snake venom".⁴⁵

The mental state of the cultists while handling the snakes was taken into account. Apart from the lack of fear already discussed, the experts all felt that in the case of a bite, the trance-like state would be beneficial in warding off shock - a major factor in snakebite. As Dr. Branch pointed out, when panic sets in, adrenalin causes an increase in pulse thereby circulating the venom more rapidly. Dr. Broadley felt that faith could assist in healing, providing a more positive attitude. Mr Wilson agreed partially with Dr. Broadley, although he maintained that no amount of faith could change the chemical reaction of the venom. Mr Morgan and Mr Gear both felt that avoiding shock would be the most advantageous element, especially when medical attention is refused.

Lastly, the possibility of immunity was discussed. As noted in the first chapter, George Hensley claimed to have been bitten hundreds of times. Many of the cultists boast about how many times they have been bitten, and there are literally dozens of accounts of believers merely 'shaking' rattlers off a finger. Dr. Branch suggested that in cases like this a degree of immunity would be built up. He explained that in the Japanese Islands an inoculation programme had been attempted because of the high incidence of snakebite. While it was successful in granting immunity between similar venoms, it also involved inoculating with various venoms every three months to maintain immunity. The programme therefore became impractical but it proved that

immunity is possible. He suggested that cult followers who are repeatedly bitten are building up antibodies in the same way that horses do during the manufacture of snake serum. Therefore, providing they are bitten regularly enough, they can be avoiding death rather than risking it. Ironically Hensley eventually died from snake bite and if anybody was immunised he should have been. But he was 70 years old, he was bitten by a diamondback and most importantly, we don't know when the previous bite had occurred. It is possible that too much time had gone by and his unintentional immunity had lapsed. According to this theory it would be necessary to survive the first few bites which, in the east, are often inflicted by lesser adders. The fatalities would, in the main, be first-time victims who have suffered serious bites from potentially lethal snakes or alternatively on victims who have bites inflicted in vital areas. Fred Sterzel agreed completely, especially since he is allergic to snake serum and says he is regularly immunised himself because of his profession. David Morgan had reservations about immunisation in an African context since he maintains that being immune to Cape cobra venom does not ensure immunity against other elapid venoms. Steve Gear had the same doubts, but both agreed that where the venom was similar it was possible. It was generally agreed that while cross-immunity is not realistic, the cultists use a limited number of species all having similar venoms which vary in strength rather than in chemical balance. Roger Conant has this to say regarding rattlesnake bite. "The venoms of the rattlesnakes,

copperheads and cottonmouths are similar enough so the same first-aid treatment can be used for all, even in the case of the exceptionally dangerous Mojave rattlesnake. A bite from a snake of that species, which has a powerful neurotoxic venom, can pose a difficult problem for the attending physician..."⁴⁶ Elsewhere he elaborates on the Mojave rattlesnake "Despite its similarity to the western diamondback, its venom is much more virulent, a fact that makes the Mojave rattlesnake one of the most dangerous poisonous snakes in the United States"⁴⁷ Thus it is fortunate that this snake does not occur in the east, and it is especially fortunate that the cultists do not use the coral snakes. Immunity to this elapid would not be possible.

The only member of the group who felt that something paranormal may be present in the cult was Mike Griffin. Like the others he felt that there were many scientific questions which needed to be investigated, particularly with regard to species of snakes, toxicity levels, temperament and condition. But he was prepared to accept that there are certain elements of the cult which may have to do with things beyond science. The others regard it as purely scientific - questions that can be answered by people skilled in the field of herpetology.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was primarily to attempt to answer the question of 'how?' as opposed to 'why?' It was not my intention to psychoanalyse except in so far as I regarded existing interpretations to be demonstrably misguided and as such, misleading. I have attempted to accept human attitudes towards snakes, in both ancient and modern times, as being relatively logical and straightforward. It seems to me to be quite clear that when we compare Western society, typified by the identification of snake with evil, to ancient civilizations and cultures, we are doing the snake a grave injustice. Within the context of myth the snake has always been regarded with ambivalence - understandable in view of the frightening capabilities of this creature. In our culture however there is no ambivalence, only dislike and irrational fear. The snake was categorised, along with strychnine and fire, as being merely a tool with which the cultists confirm the word as they see it, or test their faith. It was only in discussing the problems and possibilities with herpetologists that I had any sense of the snake being regarded as just as much alive as the cultists. Only during research for this section was I aware that there are people who actually recognise the terror and bewilderment that these animals experience.

I recognise and admire the faith of the Southern snake-handlers, but I must also state that I feel they are deluding themselves. I cannot regard the low mortality rate as being miraculous in any way at all. In fact, taking all the possibilities into account, I am firmly convinced that the answer lies only with the snakes and not with any power the cultists have. I realise I have not been able to prove anything, but I hope that I have managed to cast a somewhat different light on the subject.

Carden and Pelton denounce in the strongest terms, the attempts to outlaw serpent-handling and the legislation against it. They vociferously deny any threat to onlookers and vehemently proclaim the cultist's right to religious freedom. The question nobody asks is "What rights do the snakes have?" The notorious Rattlesnake Round-ups have elicited response from a few conservationists who fear decimation of the population. But the snake-handling cult raises no such objections, presumably because it does not seem to pose a threat to the ecology. Nobody protests when snakes are injured and die during services, or just fade away from over-handling and maltreatment. Not a word is said when snakes are confiscated by the police and later destroyed, unless it is to protest that the cultists have the right to worship as they please. If the cultists were manhandling any of the higher animals in such a way as to cause such suffering, the animal welfare agencies would justifiably be

called in. But because a snake is a snake it is regarded as beneath pity or compassion. I find this a sad commentary on both the cultists and our society. It is also typical of man's desire to control and dominate so-called lesser creatures in the name of religion.

Notes
Chapter V

1. Carden & Pelton The persecuted Prophets. Pg 53
2. Ibid. Pg 55
3. Ibid. Pg 53
4. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 45
5. William Sargant. Battle for the Mind. The Mechanics of Indoctrination, Brainwashing & Thought Control. Pan Books Ltd. 1957. Pg 93
6. George Vecsey. New York Times. September 25. 1971
7. Carden & Pelton. The Persecuted Prophets. Pg 52
8. Findlay E. Russell. Snake Venom Poisoning. Pg 524
9. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 18
10. Ibid. Pg 21
11. Tony Phelps. Poisonous Snakes. Pg 191
12. Ibid. Pg 147
13. John Wilson. Religion in American Society. The Effective Presence. Pg 130
14. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 39
15. Findlay E. Russell. Snake Venom Poisoning. Pg 530
16. Tony Phelps. Poisonous Snakes. Pg 168
17. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 74
18. Minton & Minton. Venomous Reptiles. Pg 186
19. Findlay E. Russell. Snake Venom Poisoning. Pg 529
20. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 19
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26. Donald G. Broadley. Fitz Simons Snakes. Pg 18
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33. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take Up Serpents. Pg 23
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38. Roger Conant. A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians. Pg. 8
39. Tony Phelps. Poisonous Snakes. Pg 113
40. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 14
41. Time Magazine. November 1. 1968. Pg 86
42. Weston La Barre. They Shall Take up Serpents. Pg 46
43. John Visser. Snakes & Snake-bite. Pg 34
44. Tony Phelps. Poisonous Snakes. Pg 96
45. Science News Letter. Pg 103
46. Roger Conant. A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians. Pg 30
47. Ibid. Pg 237

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Dr. W. Branch. Curator of Herpetology. Port Elizabeth Museum.

Dr. D.G. Broadley. Curator of Herpetology. Bulawayo Museum.
Zimbabwe.

Mr. Mike Griffin. An American from California currently
working with the Department of Nature Conservation, Windhoek.

Mr. Steve Gear. Curator of the Queensland Reptile Park.
Brisbane, Australia.

Dr. J. Mclaughlin. Curator of Herpetology. Cape town
Museum.

Mr Fred Sterzel. Owner of Strandfontein Reptile Park, Cape
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Mr Vivian Wilson. Director of Chipangali Wildlife Sanctuary.
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- Mr. Mike Griffin. An American from California currently working with the Department of Nature Conservation, Windhoek.
- Mr. Steve Gear. Curator of the Queensland Reptile Park. Brisbane, Australia.
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