

Religion in Appalachia

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Chapter One: The Roots of Religion in Appalachia

Religion is defined as “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods,” according to Oxford English Dictionary. Across the globe, religious practices vary from simple church worship to ritualistic ceremonies which are only practiced in small populations in the world. Within Appalachia, religion is one of the significant cultural characteristics that define the people who live here. Religion has evolved from the first Appalachians, Native Americans, to today’s modern worship practices across the region. Religion in Appalachia has been influenced by the diversity and complexity of settlers who have called Appalachia their home.

The Appalachian region is a geographically and culturally defined region that follows the southern core of the Appalachian Mountains. Made up of sedimentary rocks, the Appalachian Mountains are amongst the oldest mountains in the world. Within Appalachia there are three subregions: The Blue Ridge Mountains, the Valley and Ridge Section, and the Appalachian Plateau (“Mountaineers and Rangers”). Appalachia is a region that encompasses thirteen states and 423 counties, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission, which was created in 1965 (“About the Appalachian Region”). It stretches from southwestern New York to the northeastern corner of Mississippi. West Virginia is the only state that is completely within the boundaries of the governmentally defined region. Other states include Alabama,

Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Despite being labelled as rural, the region does have some large urban areas. The biggest cities in Appalachia are Pittsburgh, Knoxville, Birmingham, and Chattanooga. Roughly, the region follows the Appalachian mountain chain. Additionally, there are currently 26.1 million residents occupying the region (“About the Appalachian Region”). The region is not just geographically defined by the Appalachian mountain chain, but also politically defined. When the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was created, the purpose of this group was to provide funding for investment purposes to address issues such as poverty and economic distress (“About the Appalachian Region”). Despite ARC’s federal development boundaries, there are scholars that oppose ARC’s boundaries of the region. Others that have defined the boundaries of the region were John Campbell and Thomas Ford. However, each of these scholars agreed that the Appalachian region encompasses the area around the southern part of the Appalachian mountain chain (“Mountaineers and Rangers”).

There have been several periods of both in-migration and out-migration throughout Appalachian history. Many of the groups who have called Appalachia home have come here looking for a better life culturally, ethnically, or economically. The first wave of European migrants to settle in Appalachia came to escape religious persecution and economic hardship. A second, much larger wave of immigrants,

would come after the Civil War to work in the industrial jobs such as coal and timber. However, around the time of both WWI and WWII, there would be an influx of Appalachians leaving their mountain towns to move to cities where they could get industrial jobs. The coal industry has not always been reliable for Appalachians, as coal has often gone through periods of booms and busts throughout the region. Finally, today we are seeing many from Appalachia flocking to other areas of the country in order to have more economic opportunities. Because of these complex migration patterns in the region, Appalachia's cultural and religious landscape has been shaped by the people who have both moved in—and out—of the region. Throughout history, several ethnic groups have called Appalachia home. Native Americans, African-Americans, and various European groups have lived within the region. In order to properly understand how religion evolved, one must first study the cultures and backgrounds of those who live within the region.

The first people are believed to have settled in the Appalachian Mountains about 12,000 years ago in the Paleo period. By the time of European contact, these Native American groups had built large communal settlements with farmland primarily in river valleys where the soil was fertile and within proximity of fishing (Yarnell). However, as European migration began to speed up in the Eighteenth Century, many Native American groups pushed westward and abandoned their homelands of thousands of years.

The first European to see the Appalachian Mountains on record was Hernando De Soto in 1540. On his expedition in what is today called Florida, De Soto encountered the Apalachee Indian tribe and thus the mountain chain was named after this tribe, despite the fact that they were geographically not located in the mountain chain. Exploration and expedition groups were sent by both the French and English to explore the area west of the Blue Ridge throughout the Seventeenth Century. For example, one famous expedition led by John Lederer, paved the way for eventual settlement. Lederer, sent by colonial Virginia Governor, William Berkeley, was the first to reach the Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah Valley, and Allegheny Mountains in 1669-1670 (Mountaineers and Rangers).

Many in Appalachia can trace their lineage back to the Scots-Irish people. The Scots-Irish began migrating to Appalachia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from Ulster, Ireland. It is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 Scots-Irish migrated into America between the years of 1700 and 1820. Most of those fleeing Ulster were Presbyterians leaving a century-long feud with the English monarchy and Catholics in Ireland (Ridner). Other reasons for their migration include rising rent, economic distress, and crop failure. The Scots-Irish eventually settled in Appalachia where the landscape was similar to the highlands they were used to in the British Isles.

The Protestant movement in the Great Britain was spurred by Henry VIII's quest for a son and the deterioration of the Catholic Church under his rule. Henry broke away from the church and created the Church of England, which would end up being the Anglican denomination. Over the course of the reigns of Henry VIII, and his three children, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I, Great Britain would go through a religious reformation. Mary, Queen of Scots, to the north of the turbulent England, the Catholic Queen of Scotland, would find herself facing the spread of the Protestant beliefs. In Scotland, the most important religious figure of the Protestant reformation was John Knox. Knox was at the forefront of Mary's reign and the Protestant and Catholic divide in Scotland. Educated as a Catholic priest, Knox would eventually be part of the Scottish movement to reform the churches. Serving as the royal chaplain for Edward VI in England, John Knox would be exiled under Catholic Queen Mary I to Geneva before returning to his native Scottish lands to serve as the Protestant leader under the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, while Elizabeth I reigned in England. While in Geneva, Knox became a companion of the father of Calvinism, John Calvin.

John Knox was the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland. Knox was also one of the men tasked with organizing the church in Scotland. He worked months on *The Book of Discipline* which describes the organization of Presbyterianism. The new Christian denomination was beneficial to the community as it emphasized the

importance of caring for the poor and educating all so that they could read the Bible (“Who are Presbyterians”). Under Knox’s direction, the Presbyterian Church would grow in Scotland, surpassing Catholic numbers, eventually making its way to the hills of Appalachia.

When King James I of England surged to power after Elizabeth I left no direct heir, King James was met with a religious divide between Catholics and Protestants. Even though Ireland was under the rule of Great Britain, Ireland was predominately a Catholic nation. Despite the nation being largely made up of practicing Catholics, Protestants would be the upper class in society. Although King James’ own mother was a Scottish Catholic, he practiced Protestantism and wanted to spread his own religion and ideals to all realms of the United Kingdom. His plan was to solve two problems with one declaration. King James I decided to transplant the Scots from his English border to Northern Ireland to help put an end to border raids and to allow the spread of their Protestant belief system in hopes of stopping Irish Catholic rebellion. However, after spending about a century in Ulster, the Scots-Irish began to experience deteriorating economic conditions and increasing religious persecution in what was essentially a Catholic country. Despite England’s plan to spread Protestantism, Catholicism still was practiced by the majority in the southern part of Ireland. Those Scots-Irish who called Northern Ireland their home, were faced with living in a country whose citizens held mostly opposing religious views. In addition,

the 1798 uprising of Irish who tried to overthrow British rule only enhanced the desire to migrate to the Americas for the Scots-Irish (Ridner).

Once the Scots-Irish decided to leave their homelands, many of them arrived on ships at Philadelphia ports. As for many of the European immigrants at this time, the Scots-Irish travelled southwards down the Old Wagon Road. The Old Wagon Road follows roughly the path of today's Interstate 81 and Route 11. The road continues south as it follows the Shenandoah Valley and the Blue Ridge Mountains before finally moving westwards into Appalachia through today's Hagerstown and Martinsburg. Crossing the Appalachian Mountains through West Virginia was tough, so most continued southwards to cross in today's states of North Carolina and Georgia. Their settlements oftentimes served as a protective barrier between the English flat-lander settlements and Native Americans in the mountains and to the west (Yarnell). Scots-Irish culture is apparent in Appalachia today. The dialect, art, food, and religion have all been shaped by this group of immigrants and enriched by others coming later.

For purposes of this paper, I have divided Appalachia's history into several time periods:

1. Pre-Colonial (10,000 B.C.-1700)
2. Early Settlement and the Great Awakening (1700-1850)
3. Antebellum Appalachia (1850-1865)

4. Industrialization (1865-1920)
5. Contemporary Appalachia (1920-present)

In each of these time periods, the region of Appalachia went through significant cultural change. The first period is classified as the time before European settlement in the region. Much of this part of the story relates to American Indian tribes and their spirituality. The second time period focuses on Europeans beginning to settle in Appalachia. The main groups at this time were the Scots-Irish and the evolution of religious sects, from Presbyterianism to denominations such as Baptists and Methodists was apparent. In this section, there will be a focus on the Great Awakening and revivalism in Appalachia. The third time period focuses on the role that religion played in both the Confederate and the Union's wartime efforts. Next, the basis of the fourth time period is the influx of immigrants during the industrialization of Appalachia, as coal, rail, and timber towns boomed following the Civil War. In this era, each ethnic groups brought new religions into the region. Lastly, a large portion of this study will focus on religion in contemporary times. The influence of the Holiness sector of Protestantism will be discussed, as well as some minority factions in Appalachia that have led the region to be stereotyped across the globe. Overall, an understanding of the evolution across centuries in Appalachian religion will be the goal of this thesis.

Religion in Appalachia is unique because of the combination of cultures, ethnic groups, and people that have influenced it throughout history. It is extremely important to examine the reasons why those who immigrated to Appalachia did so, in order to properly understand their cultural values and ideals. Serving as a fusion of different cultures, the region of Appalachia is diverse and complex. The religions of the people here thus emanate from those who have called Appalachia home throughout time.

Chapter Two: Religion in Appalachia: Pre-Colonial through Industrialization

The region of Appalachia has been, and continues to be, heavily influenced by the various ethnic groups who have inhabited these mountains as home. Groups such as the Cherokee, Scots-Irish, and Eastern Europeans have influenced and shaped the region culturally. One cultural aspect that has remained prominent in the region is religion. As one of the most religious areas in the United States, the heritage of Appalachia reflects a mixed and varied region. Today, the religious and spirituality practices of Appalachians can be traced to these various settlers and their unique religious values and traditions.

People have been living within Appalachia for roughly 15,000-20,000 years (“Appalachian Culture and History”). The first ethnic group of people were Native Americans. The largest Native American tribe within Appalachia were the Cherokee. However, the Shawnee, Delaware, and Iroquois people were also prevalent in the area. At the time of white settlement, it is estimated that 60,000 Cherokees resided in the Appalachian region (Sanford). Cherokee land ranged from along the Tennessee River, as far north as Virginia, and the southeastern part of the United States. Even though they belonged to different tribes, Native Americans typically had similar belief systems and almost always incorporated the environment into their spirituality (Albanese). As opposed to today’s widely accepted definition of religion, Native Americans did not even use the word *religion*. Instead, they considered themselves to

be “spiritual” individuals, rather than religious individuals (Raley). Both religion and spirituality believe in some level of transcendentalism and belief in a higher power. However, the major difference is that religion is more heavily organized and reliant on leadership and hierarchy. On the other hand, less organized spirituality is more based on self-reflection. Spirituality derives from one’s experiences and personal belief systems rather than a communal experience or belief. Theology for Native Americans often varied from tribe to tribe and was more individualistic (Aftandilian).

Spirituality to Native Americans included all things in the material world—including nature. Not only were humans imbued with the spiritual, but in Native cultures everything had a spirit (Maggitas). Crops, resources, animals, and water had the most prominent spiritual essence in American Indian culture. Each aspect of the Earth was put there purposely to balance man and Earth (Raley). Because of their spiritual connections with the Earth, Native Americans had different views on nature than most Europeans did. They treated the Earth and all that is within it with more respect and as an equal, rather than something that had to be conquered. They did not want to rule over nature because their spirituality was intertwined within it. Instead, they believed in a balance between man and nature (Maggitas).

Furthermore, in Native American theology animals are always an important aspect because of their role and importance in practices such as farming, fishing, and hunting (Aftandilian). Some of the sacred stories passed down in Cherokee tradition

claim that animals are more powerful than humans because they have lived in the physical world longer and therefore have more experience in both the physical and spiritual worlds (Aftandilian). Specific animals tend to have major roles in Cherokee spirituality. For example, birds, especially eagles, are almost always seen as a representation of power because they can fly and travel throughout the globe. Moreover, in one sacred Cherokee story, Earth was just water, but animals decided to hold a council meeting and decide whether or not there should be all water or some land as well. In this council meeting, the eagle was the chief. Another example of an animal associated with Cherokee spirituality is the water spider. In Cherokee lore, the water spider oftentimes represents the underworld (Aftandilian). Lastly, rattlesnakes regularly are used to represent humans in Cherokee stories. The indigenous group tends to not want to kill rattlesnakes because they view them as their relatives (Aftandilian). Animals are additionally important in rituals. Many ritual and dance ceremonies include animals such as the eagle, buffalo, fish, and more. Also, some sacred stories also include animals participating in ritual ceremonies themselves. An example of this would be the Green Corn Ceremony where the panthers are known to participate (Aftandilian). Overall, according to the Cherokee and other indigenous people in America, animals are an important source of knowledge and power and should be given respect by humankind.

In American Indian spirituality, plants also are seen as spiritual beings as well. In fact, in the Cherokee creation story of Selu, corn is responsible for the creation of humankind. In the creation tale, the first human to be on Earth was Kanati. Kanati is portrayed as a bored and lonely hunter who, in his boredom, killed too many animals (Awiakta 24). The animals turned to the Creator for help for their species and in response, the Creator sent Selu. Selu was a woman created from a tall, straight, and green corn stalk. Emerging from the top of the cornstalk was Selu. She was strong, tender, ripe, and singing (Awiakta 24). This story heavily contrasts with the Christian creation story where Eve, the woman, was created out of the man. Instead, in Cherokee societies women are seen as equal and their own entities—such as Selu being forged from the Earth.

Several Native American tribes have similar creation stories that involve nature. The Iroquois, one of the most powerful tribes, created lore that claims there was an island floating in the sky for the sky people before Earth was created. There was no hardship until one day, a woman was going to give birth to twins. In response, her husband began to rage. In his rage, he tore up a tree that was the source of light for the island, leaving a hole in the ground. As the woman peered into the hole, her husband came behind her and pushed her. Two birds saved the woman and brought her to other animals. In order to help the woman, the animals gathered mud to put on the back of the turtle. By forming this mountain of mud, the animals created the

continent of North America on the back of the turtle. Eventually, the woman would be responsible for the creation of the moon and stars. Her sons would help create the good and the bad of the world (Iroquois Creation Myth). In sum, the involvement of animals, the natural world, and women are important to indigenous groups in the United States.

The beliefs of indigenous people in America were heavily influenced by their abilities to gather food, both within hunting and gathering and agriculture (Weiser). They would hold several spiritual rituals and ceremonies, which ranged from those for agricultural purposes, to puberty, or to marriage. Many of these ceremonies included elaborate songs and dances (Maggitas). One of the ceremonies that the Cherokee participated in was the Ripe Corn Ceremony. The ceremony occurred in late September once the corn matured. It is the end of a cycle of ceremonies, including the Green Corn Ceremony. The Green Corn Ceremony, or *puskita*, was a ceremony held to express gratitude for the crop which the tribes heavily relied on. Lasting for eight days in large villages, the ceremony was held in July or August. The Green Corn Ceremony consisted of cleaning the village, breaking worn pottery, and putting out old fires. To add, the Green Corn Ceremony focused on a quest for spiritual purity. One way the tribes achieved this purity was by fasting. Finally, the Green Corn Ceremony was a time of forgiveness. Crimes such as adultery, theft, and debts were forgiven. The only exception to this forgiveness was the act of murder (The Green

Corn Ceremony). At the Ripe Corn Ceremony, Thanksgiving is offered to the creators for providing fruitful and mature corn (Seven Sacred Ceremonies of the Cherokee). Overall, Native Americans placed heavy importance on ritual ceremonies for various rites of passages and environmental changes throughout the year.

Finally, the American Indians had distinct “levels” of existence—similar to how Christians navigate Heaven, Earth, and Hell. First, Native Americans had the Earth which they called the Middle World (Maggitas). Within the middle world, living beings (humans, animals, plants, etc) along with spirits lived in harmony. The Under World is where the bad spirits lived, whereas the Upper World was where the spirits of past ancestors resided. Even though these are three distinct levels, bad spirits from the Under World can come to the Middle World to cause chaos. On the other hand, spirits from the Upper World can also visit the Middle World to balance out the bad spirits who may be there from the Under World (Maggitas).

Europeans and other explorers began surveying and prospecting in the Appalachian region in the Sixteenth Century. However, most of the region would not be explored and discovered by Europeans until middle of the Seventeenth Century. Some of the earliest English explorers of Appalachia included Abraham Wood, John Lederer, Thomas Batts, Robert Fallam, Alexander Spotswood, and Christopher Gist (Wood 305-311). The French explorers were beginning to survey the land from the north in order to conduct the fur trade. One of the well-known French explorers was

Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle (Wood 310). Although it would take some time for Europeans to begin calling the region of Appalachia their home, La Salle and other groups almost immediately moved to convert the Native Americans to Christianity.

Europeans viewed the Native people as uncivilized and rejected their forms of religion and spirituality. Thus, Europeans attempted to convert Native Americans to Christianity. During the times of the early Republic, missionaries began to move into Appalachia to tackle this task. Father Roger, a Catholic priest, appears to be the earliest on record to attempt to convert the Cherokee. In 1799, Moravian missionaries were given permission to preach to the Cherokee Nation (Kilpatrick). Most missionaries claimed that the hardest part of converting the Cherokees was the language barriers. Some accounts claim that missionaries spoke several European languages, but that it sometimes took upwards of ten years to learn the Cherokee language in order to try to preach and convert the tribe to Christianity (Kilpatrick). In 1824, a full blood Cherokee convert by the name of John Arch felt the need to create a lexicon guide for Cherokee language and translated a section of the Bible; and the following year Sequoia would develop the Cherokee syllabary. Also in 1824, a half Cherokee minister completed the translation of the entire New Testament (Kilpatrick). Overall, with the achievement of breaking down language barriers between the natives and the white settlers, communication was allowed between the

two groups. Ultimately, the lives of the Native Americans and the state of their religious practices would be turned upside down with the settlement of white Europeans, where white ways would impact not only spiritual practices, but would change Cherokee and Native American society as a whole.

After the Seventeenth Century, mass European migration began to the New World. The first countries to settle the “New World” were England, France, and Spain. However, the first group that called the Appalachian Mountains their home after the Native Americans were the Scots-Irish. In the early 18th and 19th centuries, most whites in America were Protestant Christians. In fact, unless they were of the upper class, they did not own many books other than those that were religious based. Almost every family owned a Bible. In addition, if you could afford them, John Fox’s *Book of Martyrs*, (a book against Catholicism), and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* were popular items to have in the home (Williams 98). These Protestant books and practices would remain prominent as settlers began making the frontier and mountains their homes.

As white settlers began moving westward into the mountains after the Revolutionary War, they brought their religions with them. The Scots-Irish travelled down the Great Wagon Road from Philadelphia and down the valley. From there, they branched off at various stages to move westward over the mountains. Pushed from Ulster, Ireland, because of the rising rents, economic crisis, and discrimination

from the Anglican Church, the Scots-Irish brought their religion with them to Appalachia—Presbyterianism (Ridner). In addition to their faith, the Scots-Irish brought traditional Scottish revival practices. Some of these practices included fasting on Thursday and Friday, preparing for services Saturday, Sabbath exercises (prayer, psalm singing, communion, and sermons) on Sunday, and finally a thanksgiving service on Monday (Blethen 66). Influenced by the creation of new denominations and a lack of Presbyterian clergy, most of the Scots-Irish would eventually convert to become Baptists or Methodists (Blethen 67).

With Europeans moving in to the new Republic following independence from Britain, Appalachia was center stage for the Great Awakening. The Second Great Awakening lasted from about 1790-1830 in the United States. Until the Great Awakening, the largest religions in the United States were Anglican and Quakerism. Those with English heritage typically were a part of the Anglican Church (which would later become Episcopalian). The Methodist and Baptist religions continued to grow dramatically during the Great Awakening with the help of circuit riders. During the Second Great Awakening and through the growing sectionalism in the United States, Appalachia's population began to grow. However, in many of these remote areas in Appalachia, sometimes the only form of organized religion was provided by circuit riders. Circuit riders travelled on foot or on horseback to secluded geographical

areas carrying only what they could fit in their saddlebags. These circuit riders mostly practiced the Methodist faith, but other denominations had circuit riders as well.

Francis Asbury, an apostle of Methodism, visited Appalachia 120 times within 1776-1816 (Williams 92). On his journeys through Appalachia, Asbury frequently had a German companion who was able to translate between Asbury and the Dutch and German Quakers. Asbury's goal was to convert the Dutch and Germans to Methodism. Over the course of his time as a circuit rider, Asbury covered about 300,000 miles and delivered roughly 16,500 sermons ("Francis Asbury"). Additionally, he was responsible for ordaining roughly 4,000 Methodist ministers ("Francis Asbury").

The lives of circuit riders were determined by the Methodist church. The early days of circuit riding in remote Appalachia were oftentimes lonely and difficult journeys. One circuit rider, Samuel Wakefield, wrote a hymn to reflect the feelings that came to him during these journeys:

Yet still they look with glistening eye,
Till lo! a herald hastens nigh;
He comes the tale of woe to tell,
How he, their prop and glory fell;
How died he in a stranger's room,
How strangers laid him in the tomb,
How spoke he with his latest breath,
And loved and blessed them all in death.

Even though these missions were lonely and physically difficult, these religious leaders were dedicated to spreading their belief system even in the remote areas of the region of Appalachia. In addition, Methodist circuit riders were paid a salary by the church, which was initially about sixty-four dollars per month. If they were married, their wives could also be allotted money (Powell). In 1816, the church increased that salary to one hundred dollars, and they increased it again by 1826 to two hundred dollars per month (Powell). Normally, the church congregation would pay for basic necessities for the minister such as food, water, and shelter (Powell). Overall, the lives of circuit riders and other religious leaders were ultimately determined by the support they received from the church.

One famous circuit rider, Parson Brownlow, would go on to serve as Tennessee Governor after the Civil War. Born in Virginia, he entered the travelling ministry for the Methodist church in 1826 (Conklin). After his circuit rider career, he settled down to provide for his family and was extremely involved in the community. Opposing Tennessee secession, he would serve as a Tennessee politician and eventual Governor after the Civil War in 1865.

Throughout Appalachia, Asbury and other religious leaders began preaching to larger crowds at various religious revivals. One of the largest revivals that occurred in Appalachia was the Cane Ridge Revival. Located in Kentucky, the August 1801 revival included Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist teachings. It is said that the

revival took place outside of a small cabin and on the hillside (Humphrey). About eighteen Presbyterian preachers participated in the revival with religious leaders in the other denominations probably outnumbering them (Humphrey). One famous minister that preached at the revival was George Whitfield (Williams 97). The Cane Ridge Revival had roughly 25,000 attendees (Covington, Salvation 68). Reports of the Cane Ridge Revival claim that hundreds reached emotional highs and participated in strange activities including jerking, rolling, falling, laughing, dancing, barking, and singing. At that point, Presbyterians decided to distance themselves from the revival concept (Humphrey). In the times of the Second Great Awakening, Presbyterian clergy were well-educated and well-trained by the Church. On the other hand, Baptist and Methodist clergy were known to be uneducated farmers turned preachers who simply answered a personal call to preaching the works of a higher power (Humphrey). Between the prime revival period years of 1800 and 1802, Kentucky Baptist membership grew from 4,766 to 13,569 (Humphrey). Overall, the Second Great Awakening brought Protestantism to Appalachia and assisted in emphasizing religion's importance to those within the region (Williams 99).

As the young Republic grew, so did the divide between the regions of the northern and southern areas in the United States. The American Civil War lasted from 1861-1865 and saw the south's Confederacy fighting for what they believed to be their Godly right to own slaves. The region of Appalachia in itself had a unique experience

during the Civil War and even had one of its states, West Virginia, forge its freedom by separating from Virginia in 1863. The argument over slavery was one aspect of that decision, though not the definitive reason. Many religious people in Appalachia found themselves at a cross-roads on whether or not they supported slavery. The Methodist Church outlawed bondage of African-Americans in 1784 and labelled slavery as a sin. However, many religious leaders still approved of the racial practice. It was argued that slavery itself was never outlawed in the scripture and therefore it was a debatable practice (Powell). Nonetheless, a total of seven Appalachian states joined the Confederacy during the war, while three remained solely within Union territory. Three states—Maryland, Kentucky, and West Virginia—would be border states during the wartime period. These border states oftentimes saw their citizens divided, based on their economic and geographic interests; however, their economic interests didn't necessarily define their stances on slavery.

To many southern and Confederate Appalachians, they were simply fighting for what they considered to be God's work. The Confederate supporters believed that the creation of the Confederacy was God's will and they labeled the newly formed nation a Christian one (Manning). The south believed that they were godlier than their northern opponents, and therefore would win the war (Faust). Additionally, those who supported the Confederacy viewed their military misfortunes based on their religion. If battles were won, or lost, they always considered it to be the work of God.

If the south had lost militarily, they believed it was God's punishment. However, they did not necessarily believe that slavery itself was evil, rather the slaveholder whose faith was not strong. In 1862, large religious revivals swept the south as a sign of their religious loyalty to the higher power (Faust). Many religious southerners, however, considered their overall loss of the American Civil War a punishment for their sins (Manning).

For some, religion gave a sense of comfort to those within Appalachia during the Civil War. Nearly all common soldiers' letters mention God in some capacity. An example of this would be John T. Harrington, a Kentucky Appalachian and soldier in the 22nd Kentucky Regiment. His letters give us an inside look into the minds of Appalachians who were fighting in the American Civil War. He writes: "Men who have their hearts enlisted in their cause and believe God is with them and ever willing to favor and defend them from the hand of oppression" (Sanders). Harrington also explains how God will be with those who support and worship him: "The Lord is with those who love him and I doubt not he will protect in the hour of danger and make a breach which I shall escape this tholdon" (Sanders). To the common soldier in Appalachia, faith in God provided a sense of solace. These dedicated worshippers turned to their religion in a time that was in the utmost turmoil.

At the time of the Civil War, the Methodist church served as the largest denomination in Appalachia, just as it was in the south. In 1845, the Methodist church

recorded more than twenty million members across the globe and one million members in the United States (MaGuire 168). However, around the time of the American Civil War, we begin to see a shift into more reliance on denominations, rather than simply labelling yourself as Protestant or Catholic (Bush). After the Civil War there was widespread accessibility to education and other resources, which gave the more “learned” Protestant denominations an opportunity to educate the mountaineers in “proper religion.” The region welcomed the aid that the larger church groups who offered hospitals, schools, and doctors to serve in the region. However, when it came to being provided a “proper” religion, mountaineers were conflicted about turning away from their old-time mountain religion or with accepting the widespread changes that were beginning to happen in Protestantism after the war (Bush).

The industrial revolution began in the United States in roughly 1825. However, the industrialization within Appalachia truly began after the Civil War. The extraction industry, including timber, salt, oil, and natural gas, would flourish across the region. However, the resource that was exploited most in Appalachia was coal. With the rapid expansion of the coal mining industry came the need for people to work in the mines. While many of the miners were native Appalachians, many immigrants were recruited into the region specifically to work in the mines, and fulfill company needs for a large work force. A large number of Italians moved into Appalachia to work in the mines,

and they brought their religion with them. Mainly, these Italian immigrants were Catholic. For native-born, white Appalachians, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, the denomination of choice was typically primitive Baptist, with Methodism also remaining very popular (Bush). Furthermore, religion was modified with industrialization due to accessibility to other denominations. Many mill or mine owners provided ministers within the company towns who practiced the religion of the company owners (Williams 287). Oftentimes, these clergymen did not practice more individualistic mountain religion. Coal operators labelled those who followed the old-time religion as dangerous because they did not necessarily bend to the *status quo* of the time, and the coal operators believed that the coal workers should comply with their religious standards. Other industrialists believed that the mountain people were too ignorant to start practicing more modern denominations (Bush). Clergymen in a coal town were typically on the company pay roll. They were paid by the company owner and therefore oftentimes sided with the coal companies in times of strife with the miners. Their sermons were centered around thriftiness, hard work, sobriety, and loyalty to one's employer, and they claimed that each of these traits were backed by the scriptures (Bush). In fact, one scholar did a study on the social lives of the coal miners of the Tug Valley in West Virginia in the early twentieth century. He found that socially the ministers and members of clergy were usually associated with coal company owners rather than coal miners (Bush). The hired clergymen were young

and middle class and typically had no similarities to those they were preaching to. Moreover, the clergymen likely hired by the coal companies to preach in company towns were not from Appalachia. Because of their regional differences with the miners, the hired clergymen knew little about the mine wars and the struggle of the coal miners during this time. Because of the lack of knowledge and understanding these clergymen had of work place conditions, many workers in the company towns would sometimes simply stop attending church.

Not only did churches serve as places of worship, but for company towns they were also institutional enforcers of law. In remote areas of Appalachia, there were no executive authorities such as a sheriff and many times the coal company oversaw law enforcement and the judicial system. Because of the lack of a fair justice system, church congregations would sometimes act like a court. For example, one would be charged with a crime in a church and then have to make a plea to the church for forgiveness rather than serve any true sentence. In some ways, the church congregation acted as a jury (Bush). Additionally, even if miners had access to “outside of town” churches, most miners did not attend those churches that remained neutral in any conflict between coal miners and coal companies (Bush). If the workers were unhappy with the clergy or if the workers practiced a different religion, typically someone among them would be elected as the minister and they would practice privately (Williams 288). By the time of the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek strikes in

West Virginia, almost all of the miners had turned their backs on company clergy (Bush).

In mine camps in Appalachia's coal mining communities, which were oftentimes company towns, different ethnic groups and religious groups were segregated. For example, the Italians (who were almost always Catholic) were kept away from the Appalachian Methodists and Baptists. The reasoning behind this religious and ethnic segregation was so that the workers would not unionize against the company. If the groups were pitted against each other, then there would not be enough of them to band together and mobilize to fight back against unfair company policies implemented by company owners.

Also during this time, the Pentecostal movement began to attract communities within Appalachia. This denomination can be traced back to the early 1900s to the borders between Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina (Williams 288). With the boom of the coal industry also came the downsides of industrialization—low pay, poor working conditions, and the mine guard system among them. To counteract the company's unfair rules and practices, many miners and industrial workers chose to go on strike. It was known that several Pentecostal and Evangelical churches were safe havens for striking miners during the Mine Wars (Billings). These churches provided food, shelter, and aid to miners and their families. In addition, they were safe havens for union meetings, rallies, and recruitment activities (Bush). Moreover, those within

these denomination were typically supportive of unionization and miner's activism. In fact, John Welborn, a preacher, exchanged his Bible for a rifle during the Battle of Blair Mountain. Welborn would go on to be tried and convicted of treason for his role in this climatic final incident of the Mine Wars (Williams 288).

The modern Pentecostal-Holiness movement is believed to have evolved from negative working conditions of industrial and rural Appalachia. The sermons of the Holiness churches were geared towards the lower class and less educated people, and these preachers portrayed God as more assessible to every individual. The Holiness belief that anyone at any time could pray and hold worship, and that God was available to everyone was appealing to the masses in Appalachia (Bush). Furthermore, Holiness churches were likely to be built on someone's property, rather than in a town, and therefore they were much more assessable to local coal miners. Most of the time, miners would work coal six days per week, with the only exception being Sundays when they would attend church (Bush). Church members referred to one another as "brothers" and "sisters" rather than using a standard hierarchy of other denominations at the time, thus making the religion more inviting to all classes of people (Bush). Because of the inclusionary qualities of Holiness churches, more Appalachians felt accepted and able to worship in their communities.

The modern Holiness movement was begun by John Wesley in the late Eighteenth Century as a movement to restore primitive Methodism to what is was

prior to the Civil War (MaGuire 169). Wesley believed that there were three stages to salvation. The first two stages were similar to other denominations with stage one being conversion. Conversion was normally sparked by crisis in one's life. Stage two was when one had a close relationship with God and was not tempted by sins or the Devil. The last stage was when one was baptized by the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues (MaGuire 170). The main congregations that came out of the Holiness movement were the Church of God, the Holiness Church, and the Church of the Nazarene (MaGuire 169). The Holiness churches still hold a stronghold in the mountains and have become largely stereotyped as a denomination across the nation.

One author, Emma Bell Miles, shared her insight on mountain religion at the turn of the Twentieth Century. She wrote about the structure of the church. Her local pastor, Brother Abalsom, was a travelling preacher. He preached around the mountain communities, and he would typically restart his location cycle every third week. Brother Abalsom, according to Miles, was a volunteer, and he did not get paid for his work. Moreover, Miles gave an inside look on the structure of a church service. Almost every service began with a hymn, then the congregation kneeled in prayer, followed by the sermon, and ended with more hymns. The church participated in various ceremonial traditions throughout the year including foot washing and baptism. Miles claimed that foot washing was not accepted by city folks; however, baptisms were more likely to be accepted by outsiders. Baptism ceremonies were done

in “clear pool fringes with ferns” and were held year-round. She had witnessed winter baptisms in ice covered pools (Miles 133). The lack of consideration of the water conditions during baptism is considered a show of faith for the mountain people. In summary, Emma Bell Miles preserved much of her mountain life for future generations and provided clear insight to these typical Holiness church services in the early Twentieth Century.

Music also played an important part in religion in Appalachia. According to Emma Bell Miles, popular hymns in Appalachia at the turn of the twentieth century included, “They’ll Pray for Me,” and “We Have Father’s Up in Heaven” (Miles 122). However, religious hymns can be seen across all religions in the region. In comparing different hymns, there is one, Walker Calhoun’s “Trail of Tears Song,” that is sung to the same tune; however, the words vary based on the ethnic group and religion performing it. To Native American’s, specifically the Eastern Band of Cherokee, this song is a prayer to the creator in order to protect them on their journey to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears. The root of the tune is a Methodist hymn asking God to protecting the singer from a storm. Native American spirituality ceremonies oftentimes include song and dance. One example is the “Bear Dance Song.” In this ceremonial song, the bear is being honored for what it will be used for. Ballads also exerted an influence on religious hymns throughout the region. Examples of these can be found in the collections by Cecil Sharp and Olivia Dame Campbell.

Additionally, the gospel writer and author, Phoebe Palmer, had a huge influence in music used during Holiness movement. As a teacher and musician, Palmer is said to converted forty thousand souls during her time as a musician (“Phoebe Palmer Knapp”).

To summarize, religion gives Appalachians a sense of community and purpose. The people of Appalachia have always been community-centered throughout their history. Secluded in geography, families frequently considered church to be an outing and social event, as well as a time to worship. For Native Americans’ spiritual ceremonies and traditions were associated with landscape and connected with the creator through nature, while European groups relied on religion as a cohesive social structure. As one of the largest cultural aspects of the region, religion was something Appalachians took pride in. Today’s variety of modern religions in Appalachia are a result of these evolving traditions, ethnic groups, and religious practices in the region.

Chapter 3: Religion in Contemporary Appalachia

In contemporary times, religion still flourishes throughout the region. Serving as a blend of the variety of cultures that have called Appalachia home, religion in the mountains of Appalachia today has some less common and unique characteristics within it. As one of the defining traits for any culture, religion oftentimes is at the forefront in Appalachia due to the uniqueness of this region. While an exploration of religion in Appalachia is crucial to understanding the culture of the people who dwell in the hills today, many recent studies have simply focused on small minorities within the mountains, rather than religion as a whole. The modern era of religion was spurred by an influx of missionaries moving into the region following the mine wars (1920-21) and the emergence of the Holiness and fundamentalist churches at the turn of, and early, twentieth century.

Today, the majority of Appalachians are Protestant. In fact, none of the Appalachian states fall within the top ten of states with high numbers of Jews, Catholics, Mormons, or non-religious groups (Jeffery Jones). According to surveys Jones presents, roughly 75% of West Virginians are Protestant. High percentages of Protestantism can also be found in other Appalachian states including Tennessee (72%), North Carolina (70%), and Kentucky (69%) (Jeffery Jones). The largest denomination within Appalachia is Baptist (Blethen 65).

According to a study conducted in 1958, amongst the 190 counties in Appalachia, 90% of them stated that they had a religious preference (De Jong). Of that 90%, almost 40% of them belonged to the Baptist denomination. Of those belonging to the Holiness sect, most did not specify which Protestant denomination they belonged to. This study, done by De Jong and Ford, paralleled a similar study conducted by the United States Census Bureau in 1957. The bureau's survey found that compared to the national average of 25%, only 7% of Appalachians practiced Catholicism. Additionally, this survey claimed that 60% of Appalachian religious beliefs fell into the fundamentalist Christian category (De Jong).

A recent 2017 study classified people in each state as either "very religious," "moderately religious," or "non-religious." According to the study, they found that no Appalachian state falls within the top 25 of states with the most non-religious people. Additionally, this study stated that over half of the population in many states in the Appalachian region were "very religious" ("Religiosity"). Another U.S. study had similar findings about Appalachia. This study focused on four categories to determine their findings: religious attendance, frequency of prayer, belief in God, and self-assessment of the importance of religion. Alabama and Mississippi were considered the most religious states with 77% of adults considering themselves religious. In Tennessee, 73% of adults were religious. West Virginia and Kentucky had similar percentages with 69% and 63% respectively. These percentages were well above the

national average of religious adults which was roughly 55% (Most Religious States 2023). The only Appalachian states that fell below the national average are Maryland and Pennsylvania, states with large urban city centers.

West Virginia is the only state that the national government considers to be completely Appalachian (all 55 counties are including within the region's boundaries). A 2021 study conducted in West Virginia found that 78.6% of those living within the state were Christian. Within that category 8% identified as Catholic. Compared to the national average of 23% of practicing Catholics, this low percentage could be due to the majority of settlers in the area being Scots-Irish Protestants (Scheitle). The study also found that 27% of West Virginians attended religious services on a regular basis (Scheitle). However, like most states, more and more people are identifying as less religious than generations before them. These surveys give us a more detailed look at the religious lives of those living within the Appalachian region.

The twentieth century was a turning point economically, politically, and culturally across Appalachia. By 1920, at least 17 denominations had missionaries doing missions in Appalachia. However, these missionaries were not simply coming to the mountains to convert the people to Christianity. Since most of those living within the region were already Christians, the churches sent their missions to establish their denominations within Appalachia. Prior to the twentieth century, many considered the less structured churches in Appalachia as "uncivilized." Mountain religion was

frequently considered to be a mixture of superstition and tradition. These assessments evolve from the remoteness of the area. Missionaries saw the Appalachian region as a place full of mountains and wilderness. Within those mountains and less structured churches, the social landscape was thought less orderly and outside norms of law and order, as well as “godliness.” Furthermore, Appalachia was seen as a feared place because of the vast amount of wilderness and remoteness of the area. Eastern flatlanders questioned the faith of those who called the mountains their home. By sending missionaries to the region, churches hoped to create a more traditional hierarchical religious system (Fraley 31).

Contemporary churches and religious centers serve as volunteers and service in the community. Many churches in Appalachia thus focus on service and help the community in hard times. One example of this is Appalachia Service Project (ASP). A Christian ministry, Appalachia Service Project strives to repair housing for those in rural Appalachia. They claim that because Appalachia’s residents experience a higher rate of poverty than the rest of the nation, they believe God has called this organization to provide the basic fundamental need of shelter to those in the rural mountains. The group was begun by Tex Evans, a minister in the United Methodist Church in Kentucky. Throughout his time in the organization, he witnessed several households that could benefit from home repairs. He decided to create ASP to transform Appalachia through that organization’s work and ministry (“About

Appalachia Service Project”). A second example of the service that church communities do throughout Appalachia is the Christian Appalachian Project. This group focuses on four main service areas: hunger and poverty relief, child and family development, disaster services, and elderly services. While they continue to provide these services and claim to have helped 13,000 people in need, they also take prayer requests. The group claims to provide hope and to share Christ’s messages while they perform their volunteer work (Christian Appalachian Project). Overall, churches have been staples in the community during times of trouble for the people of Appalachia and continue to focus on service in addition to ministry.

In contemporary Appalachia, religion is also associated with the environment. Appalachians have always had a deep connection to the landscape of the region. Today, some Christians combine their duty to God with duty to the land. Christians for the Mountains (CFTM) is a group of evangelical Christians who stand against mountaintop removal. Mountaintop removal is devastating the landscape and is currently destroying much of the beauty of the environment in Appalachia. According to CFTM, the book of Revelations forecasts God will destroy those who destroy the Earth. Additionally, by participating in mountaintop removal, humans are breaking the Covenant of creation (Billings and Samson). In brief, Christians in Appalachia are often passionate about environmental activism which they construe as a mandate from the Bible.

In order to properly understand the importance, beliefs, and role of religion in contemporary Appalachia, one must study the emergence of the Holiness movement in the United States and Appalachia. Loyal Jones, pointed out that most of the study of Appalachian religion comes from the work of outsiders. He claimed that mountain religion is often misunderstood because the scholars and “experts” do not grow up around it or practice it. However, to Appalachians, the “holy roller” sect is completely normal and socially accepted (Jones). As mentioned in previous chapters, John Wesley began the Holiness movement in order to restore the belief in primitive baptism after the Civil War. Three contemporary movements—Fundamentalism, Pentecostal, and Holiness—all evolved from this time. Fundamentalism is defined as beliefs that uphold a strict interpretation of the scripture. Pentecostalism is the branch of Christianity which emphasizes a direct experience with God and baptism in the Holy Spirit. Lastly, Holiness is a religious revival movement centered around the Wesleyan doctrines. The people leading and participating in these movements originally were, according to sociologist John Holt and Anton Boisen, economically, culturally, socially, and educationally deprived (Maguire 170). Boisen stated that there was a direct correlation between economic crisis and the emergence of these religious groups. Moreover, Holt claims that the reason behind this was because people search for hope and solace in times of depression (Maguire 170). To add, Walter Hallenwager wrote that those within the Pentecostal faith were typically among the racially,

educationally, and socially deprived (Maguire 170). In the early days, the Holiness movement thus appealed to minority groups within the United States and Appalachia.

In 1900, a group of college students began to speak in tongues, which is a fundamental tradition of the Pentecostal church (Maguire 169). Speaking in tongues is a unique form of salvation only practiced in fundamentalist denominations. Speaking in tongues or “glossolalia” is a characteristic of the early apostles of Christ who had received the Holy Spirit on the day of the Pentecost. The Bible explains that speaking in tongues came to the apostles when they lacked the courage to spread Jesus’ word prior to Jesus’ resurrection. Many Pentecostals also practice the Wesleyan spiritual stages, the third stage of which is receiving the Holy Ghost. This third stage of salvation, mentioned in my previous chapter, is strictly unique to the churches that were formed within this fundamentalist Holiness movement. Contemporary churches that developed out of this fundamentalist movement are the Church of God, Church of the Nazarene, and the Holiness Church (Maguire 174). In summary, the act of speaking in tongues and other acts of the Holy Spirit are strictly found within the fundamentalist Christian denominations in Appalachia.

Fundamentalist churches initially tended to be less progressive than other denominations. Some of these churches prohibit activities such as dancing, music, tobacco use, cosmetics, immodest clothing, and cutting of the hair for women. Men likewise are clean shaven. Services are held typically on both Saturday and Sunday and

are in the evening, sometimes as late as 8:00PM-11:00PM. Members of the congregation sometimes greet themselves with a “holy kiss” which is mouth to mouth. However, the holy kiss does not occur with the opposite sex (Kane 256).

Lastly, religion in Appalachia is frequently stereotyped and talked about across the nation and in popular culture. The idea of the Holy Roller concept is oftentimes stereotyped. The practice of snake (or serpent) handling in Appalachia is also written and talked about in both religious and non-religious spheres. Snake handling is practiced in traditional Pentecostal and Holiness Churches; however, the number of snake handling churches in the country is minimal. Today, only an extremely small number of remote churches perform the act of snake handling. It is extremely rare to see these churches in Appalachia today. Even with its rarity, snake handling is rather well known across the country because of its representation in popular culture.

The practice of religious serpent handling had an interesting history, which is relatively contemporary. Although much of the history of the practice is unknown, the first documentation of it came in 1909 from a church in East Tennessee. The “father” of snake handling was George Hensley. Hensley’s fate, ironically, would be to die of a snake bite, in a Florida shed in 1955 (Covington, “Snake Handling”). It is said the Hensley had a box of rattlesnakes dumped in front of him. It was then that he decided to pick one up (Nye). Throughout his 45 years of snake handling, he was bitten over 400 times (Kane). However, despite snake handling being considered an Appalachian

practice, today some experts claim that it did not originate in the mountains, but rather snake handling began when people moved into the cities and observed what they considered ungodly practices (Covington, “Snake Handling”). Since Hensley’s fate, an estimated 100 people have died of snake bites that were received during a religious ceremony; however, the actual number of those bitten is unknown because these people normally do not seek medical care or antivenom medication, but rather solely rely on God to heal them. Even so, some in these churches expect to be bitten because it is a reminder to them of the danger they face. Experts believe that 100 fatalities within the roughly 100 years of snake-handling in the United States is a rather low number, considering the thousands of times that the practice has occurred (Nye). Scholars have several theories why the number of bites is so low. The first theory is that snakes may like the gentleness of someone’s hands. The second theory is that the dancing, rocking, and speaking in tongues that coincides with snake handling puts the snakes into a “drugged” or drowsy state. The last accepted theory is that over time the snakes become tolerate of the practice (Kane 261).

It was not until 1919, when the first person was bitten during a service, that the practice of snake handling became controversial. The first victim did not die, but the fright surrounding the bite began to cause a stir in non-fundamentalist communities. Before then, snake handling was overlooked and most did not see a problem with what happened behind church’s doors. In fact, the first recorded person to die of a

snakebite was Lewis Ford of Tennessee in 1945. Kentucky was the first state to outlaw snake handling in 1940 (Kane 258). Some within this religious realm claim that death by a snake bite is a direct effect and punishment for one's past sins (Maguire 175).

States began to enact laws prohibiting the practice of serpent handling in the mid-twentieth century. Today, most states have laws outlawing the use of serpents in religious practices. In fact, Lloyd Payne was the first to be tried under the snake handling law in Alabama (Covington "Snake Handling"). West Virginia is the only state in Appalachia that has not outlawed snake handling during church services. Despite the laws that condemn this practice, those who still partake do so because they believe that God's law is above man's law. West Virginia is also home to a well-known snake handling church in Jolo, McDowell County. In addition to the church in Jolo, there are two more West Virginia churches that have received media coverage for the practice (Maguire 177). The stance on snake handling is driven by two Biblical passages: Luke 10:19 and Mark 16: 17-18 (Ross). The two passages are as follows:

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. (Mark 16: 17-18)

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. (Luke 10:19)

Dennis Covington details his experience of attending and participating in a snake handling church in his book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Of his time experiencing this practice in Scottsboro, Alabama, he writes: “They spoke in tongues, anointed one another with oil in order to be healed, and when instructed by the Holy Ghost, drank poison, held fire, and took up poisonous snakes” (24-25). For a period of time, Covington completely immersed himself into the culture of the snake handling churches in southern Appalachia. He was referred to as a “brother,” and even experienced the thrill of what he considered the Holy Ghost in handling snakes. The idea of snake handling is that individuals surrender themselves to God during the practice, and that God will protect and heal through the laying of hands, if necessary (Duin). According to Covington, there were two types of snake handling in churches. The first type is done as a simple sign of faith. The second is done as a sign that the Holy Ghost is within you (Covington, “Snake Handling”).

Dennis Covington’s time in a snake handling church and community had a lasting effect on him. He himself actually partook in the practice. Covington claimed that the practice makes you disappear and become immersed in the Holy Spirit, so much that one cannot recall the actions made while in this state of mind (Covington,

“Snake Handling”). In conclusion, even though this practice is minimal within Appalachia, it is widely known and stereotyped, not only the region but also in certain Protestant denominations where snake handling sometimes occurs.

In total, some 8,000 people in the United States are bit by poisonous snakes per year; this data includes religious practices. Of these, an average of 12 people die of their bites (Covington, “Snake Handling”). Of the pit vipers in the United States, the least dangerous are the copperheads. The most dangerous are the Eastern Diamondbacks. In a small number of churches that do participate in the serpent handling practice, the most common snakes that are used are timber rattlesnakes (Covington, “Snake Handling”). Timber rattlesnakes are the West Virginia state reptiles and are very common in the Appalachian hills. Scholar Steven Kane notes that the typical snakes used in churches are copperheads and timber rattlesnakes and sometimes, but rarely, cottonmouths (Kane 259).

Just as sociologists claim that those within the Holiness realm of Protestant religions are the typically poverty stricken, they also state that those that partake in snake-handling are likewise dealing with economic stress. In fact, one sociologist went as far as saying that snake-handing is indeed a stress reliever to those in a depressed state of mind (Maguire 177). However, a sociologist named Gerrard completed a study of a church that practiced snake-handling. According to his study reported by Marsha Maguire, those within the church were perfectly happy and normally balanced

people (Maguire 178). In conclusion, there are conflicting views concerning the mental state of those who practice serpent handling in Appalachia and their rationale for the act.

It is important to note that not every person in the congregation handles snakes. Typically, one handles a snake only if he or she you feels called upon by the Lord and overcome by the Holy Ghost. This means that snake handling does not occur at every single service, and it is not a practice carried out by every single member of the congregation (Nye). The handler leaves the decision up to the Holy Spirit, and as Covington describes his experience, most of the time the individual has an out of body experience as it is happening (Covington, "Salvation").

Snake handling is not the only religious practice in Appalachia that is considered outdated and stereotyped by "mainstream" society. A second example would be foot washing. Foot washing is mentioned several times in the Bible including in the books of Genesis, Samuel, Timothy, and John. This practice involves literally washing the feet. Although it is practiced among several religions, including Catholicism, many associate this practice with the primitive Baptist and Holiness sects in Appalachia (Davis 394). Additionally, the drinking of strychnine is occasionally practiced in some fundamentalist churches today. Strychnine is a highly toxic chemical used in the making of pesticides. The act of drinking this chemical is carried out for the same reasons as snake-handling, and it follows the same scripture. Typically, the

act of drinking poison occurs in churches where snake-handling is also taking place. James Nye reports that Mack Wolford, a famous advocate and travelling snake handler, claimed before his death (due to a snake bite) that he had ingested roughly two gallons of strychnine throughout his lifetime. He explained that when you ingest the poison your muscles contract and you begin to have difficulty breathing. However, he would never seek medical attention because he never lost faith in the Lord (Nye).

Advocates of these dangerous contemporary practices claim that they are protected under the Constitution. The First Amendment to our Constitution explicitly allows the freedom of religion and religious practice. The U.S. Supreme Court does protect such practices resulting from the “sincerity of religious belief”; however, a case has never been brought up for debate in the Supreme Court and these practices, as noted earlier, still remains legal in West Virginia. At the state and local level, most law enforcement officers do not act on the unlawfulness of these practices until somebody perishes. Once there is community outrage, people will be brought up on various charges (Nye). Overall however, supporters of these religious practices cite the Bible and the U.S. constitution as resources that protect their right to religious freedom.

One example of a popular culture that has contributed to the stereotypes of the Pentecostal religion in Appalachia is a movie called *Them that Follow*. An article written

in the *Los Angeles Times* details this Appalachian film thriller. Even as the film was meant to display snake handling as a secluded practice within the denomination, the movie was relatively popular and only added more fuel to the fire. The lead herpetologist on the project, Jules Sylvester, is famous for his work in Hollywood movies. His credits include “Jurassic Park” and “Godzilla.” Although the practice of snake handling is extremely rare, Hollywood and the rest of the country is still portraying these practices in stereotypical ways which distort our understanding (Kelley).

The damage of these religious stereotypes in popular culture and across the world have had damaging effects on the understanding of Appalachia. It is extremely important as a community that scholars note these “outdated” practices of certain types of worship are not largely practiced in these denominations or in Appalachia itself. The acts of serpent handling, drinking of harmful liquids, and foot-washing are minutely practiced in contemporary Appalachia. By portraying these stereotypes, however, damage is done to the Appalachian image and thus hurts the people of the region in a variety of ways. Most of the religious communities within the region operate similar to other parts of the country; nonetheless, there are larger numbers of religious people and Holiness sectors still worshipping in the region and using these unusual religious practices.

Religion gives Appalachians a sense of community and purpose. The people of Appalachia have always been community-centered throughout their history. Secluded in geography, families frequently considered church to be an outing and a social event, as well as a time to worship. From Native Americans' spiritual ceremonies and traditions, to today's Protestant denominations, many in Appalachia have religious values instilled within them, whether they still attend church or not. As one of the largest cultural traditions of the region, religious belief and practice are part of the life that Appalachians take pride in, just as they emphasize the spirituality in themselves and in the landscape. It was not until recently that Appalachia was recognized as a diverse region culturally, and this diversity includes religious practice. In conclusion, today's variety of contemporary religions in Appalachia are a result of the long evolving traditions, ethnic groups, and cultural practices in the region.

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