

Jamie Coots' Snake Theology Was Not That Crazy, Says Secular Journalist

The death of Jamie Coots could be read as just another bit of evidence that the universe doesn't much care what you believe. Physics, biology, geology—all perk along with or without our assent.

Coots may have been the most famous of America's snake-handling **Pentecostal** preachers. He was featured last year in a reality show called *Snake Salvation*. He died after being bitten by a rattlesnake during the regular Saturday service.

According to a report in *The Wall Street Journal*, this was the ninth time he'd been bitten.

Not every snake is going to want to bite. The effects of a snakebite can vary: How big is the snake? How much venom got in? How sensitive is the victim to that particular venom? And news reports say that both Coots' father and grandfather performed the same rituals without being killed.

So Coots' grabbing the rattler wasn't quite like stepping out a window in the belief that angels would hold him up. But it was in that direction, as this bite demonstrated. Faith or no faith.

Snake handling churches all look to a few verses in the New Testament:

- Mark 16:17-18 – “And these signs shall follow them that believe ...They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them...”
- Luke 10:19 – “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.”

- And Acts 28:1-6 tells a story about Paul being uninjured by a venomous snake attack.

To most people, these seem like a crazy justification to handle deadly serpents. But I evaluate these kinds of claims through Weiss’ Law of Religious Relativism: Any religion is, by definition, crazy to a nonbeliever.

That’s not to say that someone of one belief can’t appreciate the piety, values or even practices of a different belief. But those areas that depend on faith will seem irrational–crazy.

Is it crazier to believe that the creator of the universe had a son who is somehow also him and required that son to be tortured to death and resurrected to allow his creations to escape the consequences of sin—or that he would protect his faithful believers from the effects of snake venom?

From the outside, it’s a coin toss. Although gambling on the snakebite protection can have much clearer this-world consequences.

And to be fair to **Christianity**, most Christians see their snake-handling brethren as misguided. They’ve got their own proof texts, including Luke 4, where Satan tempts Jesus to jump off a roof. Old Scratch quotes **Psalms 91**:

“He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus counters with a line from Deuteronomy: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Other faiths have their traditions of wonderworkers—and of warnings against putting too much stock in them. In Judaism, for instance, the Talmud warns against depending on miracles for protection from evil. And Maimonides, one of Judaism’s

greatest sages, said more than 800 years ago that the basic laws of the world weren't going to change even with the coming of the Messiah:

"Let no one think that in the days of the Messiah any of the laws of nature will be set aside, or any innovation will be introduced into creation. The world will follow its normal course."

But here's another truth: Friends of mine who have attended and written about Coots' church tell me that Coots was a powerful preacher. That members of his church say it saved them from the street, from drugs, from self-destructive and evil ways. And I believe it.

I believe it because, of the many flavors of faith I've covered, I can't think of one where practitioners didn't make a believable case that their religion helped give them purpose and peace and structure against the chaos of everyday life. Muslim, Jew, Pentecostal, Brahma Kumari, Sikh—my list could go on for a while.

And every one of them would consider the **faith** claims of the other to be as crazy as most of us consider seizing a poisonous snake. Yet somehow each one apparently does some good for some people.

The *Journal* quotes another pastor who was at Coots' home Saturday: "He died for what he believed in."

Sadly for his friends and family, the universe didn't much care.

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