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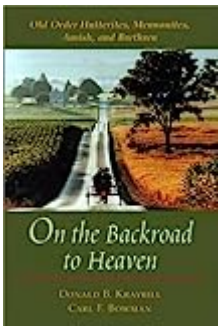

Donald B Kraybill, Carl F Bowman. *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xvi + 300 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6565-7.

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The Old Order Genius

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Donald Kraybill, professor of sociology and Anabaptist Studies at Messiah College and Carl Bowman, professor and chair of the department of sociology at Bridgewater College are well-established scholars. In this comparative study they bring together their expertise to explain the survival and flourishing of four Old Order descendants of sixteenth century Anabaptists: the Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Old German Baptist Brethren.

Collectively these groups represent about one-fourth of the total population of the contemporary Mennonite and Brethren family of churches in the United States. Although small, these groups confirm the reality of religious diversity and cultural uniqueness within American society. Even in a multi-cultural society, their existence requires a continuing redefinition of religious freedom in the public sphere. These groups also represent a persistent challenge to evangelical conversionism in religion, and serve as a reminder that culture can be structured apart from a consumer driven market. The authors summarize these groups distinctiveness well:

"In place of the cultural canon of progress, Old Orders look to the ancients. In place of personal rights, they stress accountability. Instead of inclusive diversity, they treasure exclusive unity; for unity bespeaks of clarity, and clarity, from their cultural pedestal, bespeaks divine inspiration" (p. 212).

The first half of the book provides chapter length descriptions of each group. The second half analyzes the similarities, differences, survival strategies, and contemporary threats to their continuance. The inquiry is appreciative and the analysis respectful. The tables and photographs are excellent. The authors' particular interest is "how groups construct meaning through symbolic objects and behavior" (p. xiii). Particularly during the past fifty years there has been a lot of public interest in the Old Orders for their distinctive way of life, with their particular costumes, their own dialects, and their bias toward the rural and traditional technologies.

What is fresh and novel is the comparative approach. There have been numerous substantive studies of the Hutterites and Amish. The Old Order Mennonites and Old German Baptist Brethren have attracted less schol-

arly attention. The Hutterites don't quite fit the mold of "Old Order" with their sixteenth century roots and their vigorous commitment to holding property in common.

The other three groups emerged in the late nineteenth century as protests to the modernizing of the majority Brethren and Mennonite traditions. The authors make a convincing argument that most Hutterite immigrants in the 1870s and 1880s joined Mennonite congregations; hence those who maintained the tradition can be viewed as "Old Orders."

There are interesting differences between these groups. The total Amish community grew from 5000 to nearly 200,000 in the twentieth century. The Brethren grew from 4000 to 6000. The Hutterites live in 225 separate and somewhat isolated colonies, two-thirds of which are in Canada. The Brethren are found only in the United States, two-thirds in Ohio and Indiana. They are the least distinct from American society. There is a German ethnic component to each of the groups. The Brethren dropped the language nearly a century ago and include many more non-Germanic family names in their group. The Hutterites and Brethren use the latest technology on their farms and in their shops. The Amish and Mennonites are more suspicious of technology. All four groups proscribe listening to or watching the mass media. The Brethren are more open to education than the other groups although the Hutterites are beginning to send some youth to high school. The Brethren have an Annual Conference whereas the other groups are largely decentralized without a central governing organization. Each of these groups is suspicious of individualistic, subjective, innovative, experiential religion.

Religion is what these groups are about. Kraybill and Bowman's chapter "Common Convictions" defines the Old Orders not primarily as "an interesting social experiment but a sincere attempt to obey Christian teachings that point to eternal life" (p. 58). The themes that motivate each group are an "ordnung," the rules and discipline required for a common faith and life, "gelassenheit," another German word meaning yieldedness and surrender to the will of God and the community, nonresistance, a defenseless and nonviolent way of life, and nonconformity, a willingness to live separately from the world with distinctive practices and symbols. Each of these themes fit together in a tightly woven set of patterns that define behavior and provide ultimate meanings. "For all of these groups, religion flows through every aspect of life" (p. 211).

The emphasis on lifestyle and community means that these Old Orders are more than an anti-modern fundamentalism. Yet they are parallels which could make for more interesting studies. Does the Old Order paradigm connect with Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist groups who find the modern project inadequate? How do Old Orders compare to the fundamentalisms now found in many places around the world and among several religions? Is there something unique among sectarian Mennonites and Brethren that encourages the turn toward the ancients rather than keeping up with the moderns? This study concentrates on North American experience. Old Believers in Russia or Old Catholics in Germany or Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn could provide parallels for further study.

Both general readers and specialists will find this a significant book. While these authors have written more extensive analyses of the Amish and the Brethren elsewhere, this volume provides fresh comparative material and interpretative data. Anyone interested in the rich variety of religion in the United States will find *On the Backroad to Heaven* engaging and stimulating.

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