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2003

Review of *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren* by Donald B. Kraybill and Carl F. Bowman

Royden Loewen
University of Winnipeg

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Loewen, Royden, "Review of *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren* by Donald B. Kraybill and Carl F. Bowman" (2003). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 672.

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On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren. Donald B. Kraybill and Carl F. Bowman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xiv+ 330 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$57.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

This is a model ethnography of four pacifist, Christian sectarian groups, each refusing to conform to the urbanizing, consumption-driven, individualistic society of modern times. The groups are European in origin, historically self-conscious, and descended, either directly or indirectly, from the sixteenth-century radical wing of the Reformation, the Anabaptists. They are the progeny of “old immigrants” who arrived in North America in various migration waves between 1711 and 1874. Their frequent censure of modern technology, use of non-conformist plain dress, and life in close-knit and self-sufficient communities have made them highly noticeable. Adding to their visibility, they have become romanticized as bucolic communitarians by the very society they anathematize.

These common features constitute the subject of the book. Though certainly not the first study of “Old Order” life in the United States (indeed, both authors have written other similarly structured works, Kraybill on the Amish, Bowman on the Brethren), it is a bold attempt to bring together four significant “old order” groups and, through comparative analysis, create a typology of “old order” society, or, as the authors put it, “to see Old Orderliness across a spectrum.”

The authors identify “old order” as a culture based on heritage and custom shaped less by written rules than inherited social practice. Old Order groups are historic peace communities that stubbornly confront the lure of modern society and venerate humility and mutual submission. But the book is not only about social practice; it reproduces in sympathetic tone the

culture—the cosmology, world view, ideology, understandings, and symbolic system—of these people who see the everyday world as comprising the “path to heaven” and thus all of their activities imbued with religious significance. The authors carefully describe these multifaceted “sacred” activities, including everyday work, special communal events, child socialization processes, worship, and moments of communal policy creation. But they also distinguish among the groups: the Hutterites are communalists; the Amish and Old Order Mennonites reject most technologies (though the former are more conservative than the latter); the Brethren are urban, pietistic, English-speaking, non-conformists. Each group may practice a common “Old Orderliness” but each also confronts modern society with a different set of cultural tools.

The authors are careful, moreover, to point out at every turn that these groups are not static, not “fossilized relic[s] of the past,” but adapt their conservative world views to new situations. They invent their mythologies, judiciously engage the market place, reject or adopt elements of new technologies, and readily face and even confront assimilative governments. They also socialize new generations of children with such remarkable success that they have experienced an astonishing population growth in recent decades. Defying modernist assimilation models and postmodern ideas of relative truth, these “old order” groups have advanced their premodern communal identities within a postmodern context, one that embraces particularity and localism. The authors provide a complex dialectic: employing the theoretical approaches of Bourdieu, Giddens, and others, they reveal how the groups’ social practices and symbolic rites work in concert to create a dynamic, holistic, and sustainable lifeworld.

Ironically, the elders of the “Old Orders” and the authors of this book seem to share a common enterprise: drawing borders between the “Old Orders” and the wider society. Often, it seems, the borders are less clearly defined than either the elders or the authors permit. The authors promise to examine four “Anabaptist groups in the United States” and critique “American exceptionalism,” but the fact is that they devote considerable space to “old order” groups in Canada, raising questions of one of the book’s central interpretive mechanisms. Although alluding to everyday worlds, the book focuses mainly on the highly visible worlds of life cycle ritual, communal gathering, and institutional structure. Communal or generational conflict, household-based gender relations, family-oriented economic strategies, or internal power differentiations have not been as fully described here as they have in other academic works, including those by Steven Reschly or Julia

Erickson and Gary Klein, not mentioned in the volume's bibliography. Finally, it is not clear why certain other Anabaptist groups, such as the Holdeman Mennonites, Old Colony Mennonites, Amish Mennonites, or the large variety of so-called Conservative Mennonites, were not included in this study. The spectrum of "Old Orderliness" may be less "orderly" than the authors suggest.

Overall, however, this is a perceptive and rigorous ethnographic study, well conceptualized and sensibly executed. We moderns may not be on the "backroad to heaven," but this book will compel us to applaud its existence. Ironically, its success will aid in the commodification of an anti-consumeristic world. **Royden Loewen**, *Department of Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg*.