Amish Stories, Images, and Identities: Two Windows and a Mirror on Contemporary Conversations

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In the early 1950s a young woman named Gertrude Enders Huntington was pursuing a Ph.D. in anthropology at Yale University.[1] As she considered possible dissertation topics, her professors urged her to study the Amish "before they died out." At mid-century the reigning assumption was that the Old Order Anabaptist group was in its last generation and certain to disappear. Indeed, one of her professors "was convinced that such a rigid religious orientation was certain to create serious mental illness, which certainly would contribute to the death of their culture."[2]

The Yale faculty proved to be poor prognosticators. In 1950 there were some 27,000 Amish in the United States and the Canadian province of Ontario. Today there are more than 290,000 horse-and-buggy-driving Amish, and their population doubles every 20 years. Retention rates of youth, which had been 60-70 percent in the mid-20th century, are now 85 percent and higher.[3] As a Quaker, Enders Huntington had more confidence in the staying power of religious dissenters. She did not believe the story her professors used to narrate reality and, although she knew that cultures are not static, she did not expect the Amish she interviewed in Holmes County, Ohio, to be the last remnant of a dying people.[4] Sixty years later

[1] This article is based on the author's Winter 2014 Bechtel Lecture at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario.

[2] Gertrude Enders Huntington, lecture at Pennsylvania State University, Nov. 5, 2009; her papers and Amish research files from her years of teaching at the University of Michigan were being donated to the Penn State archives that day.

[3] Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013), 155-58, 162-64, 168-70. For the most recent population numbers, see the "Statistics" tab at www2.etown.edu/amishstudies/.

[4] Assimilation was a dominant framework in the 1950s, and owed its popularity to more than simply melting pot mythology. Demographically, the foreign-born as a percentage of the US population had fallen to a record low (a result of strict immigration laws), so academics were taken with studying social acclimation of minority groups no longer reinforced by newcomers and often cut off from cultures-of-origin by travel limitations of the cold war. Ideologically,

The Conrad Grebel Review 33, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 4-28.

Enders Huntington recalled that the Amish "were considered stupid and were universally disliked. They were backward and they impeded progress for everyone." But because she did not accept as inevitable the Western story of progress, she was able to produce a thesis that remains a work of academic substance and significance more than a half-century later.[5]

The stories we tell matter.[6] This year's fiftieth anniversary celebrations at Conrad Grebel University College have followed a theme of story and story-telling. How do we narrate our identities? What stories do we tell ourselves about ourselves, and what stories do we tell others about ourselves? What is the relationship between our many stories—the individual and the communal, the confessional and the ecumenical, the national and the transnational? As someone who studies Amish society and simultaneously counts Amish people as real friends and not merely "research subjects," and as a Mennonite who, in some ways, recognizes the Amish as spiritual cousins, I think about the stories I tell about the Amish and about myself. How do we think about and represent one another in various contexts and to various audiences?

I invite yout to join me in looking through three windows—or perhaps two windows and a mirror. First, I want to examine how North American, and especially US, tourism and popular culture have understood the Amish as a North American "other." Second, I want to consider how some Amish have recently come to see themselves as North Americans through their sojourns in Mexico as short-term teachers in Low German Mennonite schools. Finally, I will look at how some Mennonite scholars have viewed the Amish as fellow Anabaptists, and I will reflect on my own representation of the Amish to others.

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meanwhile, the civil rights movement championed social integration and condemned giving any quarter to cultural separatism; it would take the coming of the Black Power movement to call such assumptions into question.

[5] Enders Huntington's dissertation, which focused on the Amish of Holmes County, Ohio, remains an impressive three-volume work (though never formally published): "Dove at the Window: A Study of an Old Order Amish Community in Ohio," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1956).

[6] There is a vast literature on this topic. Two works that have influenced me are Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), and Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003).

First Window: North American Views of the Amish[7]

In 1900 the North American Amish population was small—numbering perhaps no more than 6,000—and attracted virtually no public notice. Observers would have been hard pressed to imagine the Amish developing a coast-to-coast reputation, let alone becoming cultural icons. Yet during the course of the 20th century, and without an organized public relations campaign, promotional budget, or celebrity spokesperson, a tiny and publicly self-effacing religious group became widely known. By the turn of the 21st century, comedians, cartoonists, and television scriptwriters could include offhand references with the assurance that audiences—even if misinformed about the details of Amish life—recognized "the Amish."[8] That most North Americans came to regard the Amish in certain ways said more about the viewers than the objects of the mainstream's gaze. Still, popular understandings—accurate or not—have an impact on ordinary Amish life, shaping everything from public policy to tourism. Amish identity in the 20th century, then, was hewn not only by Amish convictions but also by the stories that other people told about them.

As I have mentioned, today there are more than 290,000 horse-and-buggy Amish people in 30 US states and in Ontario. But it's not simply the growing numbers that have raised the group's profile. Despite remarkable growth, the Amish remain a tiny sliver of the general population. Instead,

[7] Much of this first "window" is adapted from a section I originally drafted for chapter 11 of Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace. A Global Mennonite History: North America* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books; Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2012), 292-95.

[8] One relatively recent example is a story in the satirical publication *The Onion*, September 15, 2009: "Amish Woman Knew She Had Quilt Sale the Moment She Laid Eyes on Chicago Couple." After my 2014 Bechtel lecture (on which this article is based), Professor Michael Driedger suggested that comedian David Letterman played an outsized role in bringing the Amish into popular culture by including them in his late-night Top Ten Lists, e.g., "Top 10 Amish Pick-up Lines" (1989) and "Top 10 Amish Spring Break Activities" (1991). I agree, and would add that Letterman's use of the Amish also illustrates the reflexive, often dialectical relationship of mass media stories and images, since Letterman's lists often build on a current event or news item. For example, his "Top Ten Signs Your Amish Teen is in Trouble" followed the 1998 Amish "drug bust" story (see mention, below) that was a news story in itself. Comedians such as Letterman had helped familiarize North Americans with the Amish, which then made events like the "drug bust" story more recognizable, which in turn provided more potential comedic material.

they have become a prism and lens, both distinguishing and focusing popular hopes and anxieties since at least the 1930s. Amish people first gained widespread attention in that decade as they became entangled in an effort to resist government involvement in local life.[9] In 1937 Amish parents in East Lampeter Township, Pennsylvania, organized opposition to the consolidation of rural schools and tried to halt construction of a new building.[10] Since most communities were fighting for a share of New Deal dollars, Amish opposition to federal funds was newsworthy, and their cause made the *New York Times.* The image in the news stories was of ill-informed people fighting a futile battle against the future. One article characterized Amish life as "drab."[11]

An image of the Amish as stubborn traditionalists gained ground as the United States expanded programs that cared for the aged or dictated workplace dress. After 1955 some self-employed Amish farmers stubbornly refused to participate in public social welfare programs. They garnered sympathy from government critics such as the editors of *Reader's Digest,* and eventually received exemptions in the US and Ontario.[12] As minority rights

[9] Food historian William Woys Weaver has recently demonstrated that in the early 1930s, a few years prior to the East Lampeter school scuffle, cookbooks and restaurants in eastern Pennsylvania—all non-Amish in origin and ownership—were using drawings of Amish people and the name "Amish" itself to market regional cookery. See Weaver, *As American as Shoofly Pie: The Foodlore and Fakelore of Pennsylvania Dutch Cuisine* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 67, 126-37. Weaver's is an important corrective to academic publications on the Amish image in popular culture, though I suggest that the *New York Times* articles on schools were the first extended national notoriety that the Amish received.

[10] For an overview of the East Lampeter conflict, see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 164-68. I took all seven years of my primary schooling (1974-1981) in the 1938 building that the Amish of East Lampeter had opposed; the building was torn down in 2003.

[11] "Amishmen Battle to Keep Life Drab," *New York Times*, August 15, 1937, 36.

[12] Peter J. Ferrara, "Social Security and Taxes," 125-43, in *The Amish and the State*, 2nd edition, ed. Donald B. Kraybill (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003), 125-43); Clarence W. Hall, "The Revolt of the Plain People," *Reader's Digest*, November 1962, 74-78. See Dennis L. Thompson, "Canadian Government Relations," 235-48, in the first edition (1993) of *The Amish and the State*; Thompson's essay was not revised and included in the second edition. Examples of more recent conflicts with the US government are surveyed in Herman D. Bontrager, "Encounters with the State, 1990-2002," in *The Amish and the State*, 2nd ed., 235-52.

and identity politics gained ground during the 1960s and '70s, the Amish won additional group-based exemptions. In this context, conflicts over compulsory high school attendance found resolution in a US Supreme Court ruling in 1972. Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote in defense of the Amish dissent, legitimating, as one observer put it, "the right not to be modern." This anti-modern image was closely tied to the logic of the ruling, since the justices' arguments were based largely on the assumption that, as backward farmers, the Amish had no need for advanced schooling.[13]

By the end of the century, however, conflicts with the state often conjured popular appraisals of the Amish that were much less sympathetic. Could ultraconservative Amish refuse to immunize their children? Could they persist in using primitive plumbing that undercut public health codes? Local jurisdictions often said no. And when cases of child abuse surfaced, the public was decidedly unsympathetic to the Amish argument that their self-trained counselors and homespun treatment centers were better suited to punish perpetrators and handle victims' needs than were social service professionals, whom the Amish kept at bay.[14]

Another set of popular images revolved around Amish aversion to the latest forms of technology. As rural electrification, telephone cooperatives, and agricultural mechanization became common in the early 20th century, Amish refusal to connect to public utilities and to buy cars began setting them apart from their rural neighbors. After World War II, most Amish refused tractor farming, even though agricultural extension agents encouraged them to "get out of the mud." Working with horses kept their agriculture small scale, and although some Amish adopted hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers, their farming remained labor intensive.[15] More visibly, horse-and-

[13] Thomas J. Meyers, "Education and Schooling," 87-107, in *The Amish and the State*, 2nd ed.; see also contemporary essays and the court ruling in Albert N. Keim, *Compulsory Education and the Amish: The Right Not to Be Modern* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

[14] See, for example, Nadya Labi, "The Gentle People," *Legal Affairs*, January-February 2005, www.legalaffairs.org/issues/January-February-2005/feature_labi_janfeb05.msp; and the assumptions and argument in William A. Fischel, "Do Amish One-Room Schools Make the Grade? The Dubious Data of *Wisconsin v Yoder*," *University of Chicago Law Review* 79 (Winter 2012): 107-29.

[15] "Urge Amish Use Tractors to Boost Yield of Wheat," newspaper clipping dated Saturday, April 27, 1946, 5, likely from a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, newspaper; copy pasted inside a copy of Bernice Steinfeldt, *The Amish of Lancaster County: A Brief, but Truthful Account of the*

buggy travel marked the Amish as technophobes in nations committed to automobile ownership and multi-million-dollar interstate and provincial highway systems. Indeed, this narrative of aversion to technology may be why the Amish loom larger in popular culture than do the Hutterites. The Hutterites' rejection of private property is arguably a more fundamental rejection of mainstream values, but that can seem abstract when Huttertites are buying and using all the latest farm equipment and operating large scale agro-enterprises. In contrast, the fact that most Amish reject many forms of technology, although they embrace private property, suggests a people strikingly out of step with neighbors who rely on smartphones.

The story of the Amish as fossilized throwbacks of another era was itself a dynamic narrative. Suddenly, in the 1970s, the image of the Amish as irrelevant relics was flipped upside down. The energy crisis and an emerging environmental movement created an atmosphere in which they were hailed as *ahead* of their time, keepers of traditional wisdom in a new atomic age of science and suburbia. Activists certain that "small is beautiful" applauded the Amish as a people who lived off the grid. Indeed, some outsiders began to see the Amish as Luddites opposed to all technology. As such images gained currency in ensuing decades, observers were shocked or indignant to learn that Amish youth used in-line skates and Amish contractors used cell phones on job sites.[16]

Inadvertently, popular understandings of the Amish as technophobes also created a mystique about their products—in effect, an Amish brand—for consumers looking for distinctive goods that bespoke a plain, homespun aesthetic. The appeal of the Amish brand, mostly promoted by non-Amish entrepreneurs, fueled small business growth and a boom in Amish-built furniture and other woodcrafts. Ironically, this demand often encouraged

Actual Life and Customs of the Most Unique Class of People in the United States (Lancaster, PA: Arthur G. Steinfeldt, 1937), housed in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania Mennonite Historical Society. On the dramatic transformation of agriculture during the mid-20th century, see John L. Shover, *First Majority, Last Minority: The Transformation of Rural Life in America* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1976), 77-79.

[16] E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973); David Chen, "Amish Going Modern, Sort of, About Skating," *New York Times*, August 11, 1996; Howard Rheingold, "Look Who's Talking," *Wired*, January 1999, www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.01/amish.html.

Amish entrepreneurs to adopt new technologies in order to boost production and match consumer appetites.[17]

The consumption of Amish products with their enticing brand was intertwined with Amish-themed tourism. By the mid-1950s middle class tourism was mushrooming. Bus and car tours promised views of an old-fashioned way of life for east coast urbanites living in a post-war society undergoing dramatic social change. The Amish Farm and House, the first Amish-focused attraction to charge admission, opened in 1955.[18] Visitors came to gaze at old style farmers living not far from sprawling post-war metropolises peopled with the children and grandchildren of East European immigrants nostalgic for a peasant past.

The same year the Broadway musical *Plain and Fancy* by Joseph Stein, later famous for *Fiddler on the Roof*, presented the Amish as sturdy yeomen who also embodied self-determination and patriotic progressivism. The script allowed Papa Yoder to critique Cold War society—"Look at your world. Poor people you have plenty, and worried people and afraid"—but in the end, Papa admitted that his people would sooner or later surrender sectarianism and join the mainstream.[19]

Nostalgia and avant-garde art merged in the 1970s and stirred an interest in Amish quilts. In 1971 the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City included Amish quilts in an exhibition titled *Abstract Design in American Quilts,* which treated functional handicraft as boldly designed modern art. Collectors began flocking to Amish settlements to buy old quilts, which one scholar dubbed "America's first abstract art." The sudden rush birthed a new cottage industry among Amish women, and reshaped their quilting tradition as they adapted to demands for contemporary design. "We have to keep up with what colors are fashionable so we can make the changes from one year to the next," said one. Within a few years,

[17] Donald B. Kraybill and Steven M. Nolt, *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004).

[18] David Luthy, "The Origin and Growth of Amish Tourism,"113-29, in *The Amish Struggle with Modernity*, ed. Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (Hanover, NH: Univ. Press of New England, 1994), 113-29. See a case study from eastern Ohio: Susan L. Trollinger, *Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012).

[19] David L. Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish in the American Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 107-14; quote, 109.

Doug Tompkins, founder of the Esprit clothing company, had filled his San Francisco headquarters with Amish quilts that seemed at once both old-fashioned and cutting-edge.[20]

Hollywood boosted the Amish profile in 1985, thanks to the Academy Award-winning film *Witness*, starring Harrison Ford. The unlikely plot revolved around a clash of cultures that occurred when a hardened police detective, on the run from corrupt cops, hid out on an Amish farm.[21] *Witness* presented Amish people as peaceful, naïve, and totally unfamiliar with modern ways or technology of any sort, creating a popular image of them as principled rural craftsmen in a society undergoing a revolution of personal computers and telecommunication. This same image of naiveté propelled the sales of millions of Amish-themed romance novels in the opening years of the 21st century, offering, as critic Valarie Weaver-Zercher has put it, "chaste texts and chaste protagonists living within a chaste subculture" to modern readers weary of hyper-sexualized mass society.[22]

Popular media had been complicit in shaping public perceptions of Amish identity, but two events near the turn of the new century highlighted how the Amish had become media icons. In 1998 and 2006 high-profile crime stories wove together images of pastoral innocence with hard-edged drama. In 1998 two Amish-reared young men linked to a Pagans motorcycle gang cocaine distribution ring were caught selling drugs to their Amish friends in eastern Pennsylvania. This remarkable collage of images made the "Amish drug bust story" a sensation, but it also revealed that some unbaptized Amish teens lived very differently from their parents, a fact that generated intense media interest. Overnight, *rumspringa*—the Pennsylvania Dutch term for the years when teenagers "run around" and socialize with peers before joining the church—found its way into the vocabulary of reporters.[23] Soon, an independent film entitled *Devil's Playground* tracked

[20] Janneken Smucker, *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013), 77-70, 105-12, 167.

[21] D. L. Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish in the American Imagination*, 152-80.

[22] Valerie Weaver-Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013), 13. The theme of naiveté also spawned spoofs of over-sexed Amish that inverted the chaste stereotype, as for example in the 2008 Hollywood film *Sex Drive*.

[23] Diane Zimmerman Umble,"'Wicked Truth': The Amish, the Media, and Telling the Truth,"

drug use among a few Amish teens in northern Indiana. Other media stories focused on alleged child abuse and animal abuse at Amish hands; reality TV shows, such as "Breaking Amish" followed. The theme in this string of exposés was hypocrisy: the Amish had been too good to be true; in fact, they were not very good at all.[24]

In 2006 another crime story propelled public perceptions in a different direction. On October 2, a non-Amish man entered an Amish school near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and shot ten girls, five of them fatally, before killing himself. News media swarmed to the crossroads village to cover the horrific event in a place of pastoral beauty. But within hours, a story of lost innocence shifted to one of bewilderment as reporters struggled to understand how the Amish community seemed almost immediately to forgive the shooter and reached out in compassion to members of his family, hugging them at his burial and treating them as fellow victims.[25]

This incident thrust images of the Amish as an unbelievably forgiving people into hundreds of stories around the world. Many writers saw the Amish as living Christian values that many people professed but few practiced. For their part, the Amish were as uncomfortable with this new status as they had been with the drug bust story, though for different reasons. "The news reports have set a high standard for us," one confided. "We don't want to be exalted," another explained. "Now we're under the public eye. . . . We wonder: can we Amish people really be what the public expects of us now?"[26]

What does the public expect of the Amish now? The fluctuating answers, as religion and media scholar David Weaver-Zercher has argued, have oscillated between two poles. North American popular culture views

221-41, in *The Amish and the Media*, eds. Diane Zimmerman Umble and David L. Weaver-Zercher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008), 221-41; Michael A. Goldstein, "Party On, Amos," *Philadelphia Magazine*, August 1997, 137-44. On *rumspringa*, see Richard Stevick, *Growing Up Amish: The Rumspringa Years*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014).

[24] *Devil's Playground*, directed by Lucy Walker (New York: Wellspring Media, 2002, videodisk); Ariel Leve, "Back to the Future," *Sunday Times Magazine* (London), January 30, 2005, 20-27; "TLC Takes Amish out of the Country and into the City in New Groundbreaking Series," press release, August 2, 2012, www.thefutoncritic.com.

[25] Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

[26] Ibid., 50.

the Amish as both a "saving remnant"—a simple, pious community living life as it once was and still could be—and simultaneously as a "fallen people"—the subject of exposés and the butt of jokes purporting to reveal the real and repressed nature of their life. Perhaps these conflicting interpretations always go together, because we moderns want reassurance that we need not feel guilty if we admire, but then quietly dismiss, the Amish way.[27]

Second Window: Amish Images of Themselves as North Americans

The stories North Americans tell about the Amish are varied, even contradictory. North American society—if it may be described in the singular—is a complex thing. Nevertheless, Amish people have tended to speak of their host society in singular terms, owing to the two-kingdom outlook animating their traditional Anabaptist worldview. The Amish are "not of this world," and to the degree that horse-and-buggy Amish live only in the US and Ontario, "this world" is North America and they do not readily identify themselves with it. At the same time, they have not developed the sort of transnational sensibilities found among traditionalist Low German Mennonites who sojourn throughout Latin America and North America and who routinely emigrate across political borders.[28] All of this makes recent Amish ventures into Mexico fascinating, especially as participants recount their work in Low German Mennonite schools, a story casting the Amish narrators as North Americans.

"When visiting the Mennonites in Mexico, our neighbor to the south, we see a culture similar to ours in some ways, yet very different in others," says an anonymous participant. "Not only have they adapted to a climate and terrain quite different from ours, but they also interact with the Spanish and Indian cultures around them."[29] These observations come from one of more

[27] D. L. Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish in the American Imagination*, 185-96.

[28] Royden Loewen, *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2013). The last Amish church in Europe dissolved in 1937, but there was never an old order movement among European Amish in any case. The so-called Beachy Amish-Mennonites, who engage in verbal evangelism and do not live within the old order orbit, have members in a number of African and Latin American nations.

[29] *Called to Mexico: Bringing Hope and Literacy to the Old Colony Mennonites* (Nappanee, IN: Old Colony Mennonite Support, 2011), 327. This book is a compilation of many short essays, some anonymously authored and others with attributed writers, some original pieces, and

than a hundred Amish women and men who, since 2000, have spent from several months to several years teaching in Old Colony Mennonite schools in Mexico.[30] This "Old Colony Mennonite Support" network, as it is known in Amish circles, is a recent example of Amish engagement with the world beyond their own settlements. The letters and publications of participants reveal, among other things, a new view of themselves as North Americans.

The involvement of Amish teachers in Mexico bears some novel marks of mission and international development work, all but unknown in Old Order circles, yet it also expresses and is constrained by Amish history and cultural values.[31] Given its unusual character, this work requires more than a bit of background and explanation before its implications for Amish identity become clear. The roots of the project stretch back to 1995, when Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) staff facilitated a learning tour to northern Mexico for MCC's Amish constituents living in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. The group visited Old Colony and Kleine Gemeinde communities in which the MCC had contacts, and members of these "plain" Russian Mennonites and Amish sensed a kinship that warmed into ongoing contacts apart from MCC channels.[32] Amish woman Prisilla Stoltzfus was surprised that "the Old Colony Mennonite way of thinking seems to be more like the Amish than I would have expected from a group called Mennonite." For her, the term "Mennonite" connoted "the more liberal side," but the people she worked alongside in Mexico were "entirely as strict as the Amish," which she took to be a good thing.[33]

The next year, Mexican Old Colony Mennonite leaders visited Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The Amish remembered these reciprocal meetings this way: "The purpose of this was to help these people be more open-minded. It was also an effort to introduce some cottage industry as an alternative to their crop failure. They now saw the need to improve their

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others reprinted from newsletters.

[30] Ibid., 395-401, lists Amish participants in the program.

[31] Mission work in a conventional sense is highly unusual and even discouraged in Old Order Amish circles. See Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 74, 366-67.

[32] Atlee Raber and Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Who is My Neighbor?" in *Called to Mexico*; "History Report. Old Colony Mennonites of Mexico," [1], 23-33, author's files; "From the Diary of Our Mexico Trip," *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter* 2, no. 1, May 1999, 1.

[33] Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," in *Called to Mexico,* 300.

schools and farming practices. They also had a lot of questions concerning church matters."[34] An immediate outcome of the exchange was Amish interest in economic development. Concerned with what they saw as the Mexicans' poverty, they raised money to allow Old Colony Mennonites to buy more land, improve their dairy herds, drill wells, and construct a cheese plant to offer an outlet for their milk.[35] These development projects moved forward with Amish assistance, but over time the focus of the relationship became Amish support for reforming Old Colony Mennonite school curricula and pedagogy.[36]

Reforming Old Colony schooling became the focus because it connected deeply with both groups. On the Old Colony side, parochial schooling was at the heart of their identity—a reason for leaving the Russian Empire and *the* reason for moving from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s.[37] It was an area of life most closely regulated by their *ordnung* and served as a marker, much like the horse-and-buggy for the Amish. They resisted suggestions from assimilated North American Mennonite development workers that they change their system of education; but they felt that Amish educators, as "plain people" also committed to separation from the world and successfully dissenting from modern curricula and high-tech pedagogy, might have something valuable to say. On the Amish side, parochial schooling was a point of humble pride. Having won the legal right in the 1950s-1970s to educate their children in their own way, Amish parents had set up scores of schools across the US and Ontario. By the 1990s two or three or more generations had been educated in these schools and had gone on to prove their mettle as operators of thriving small businesses.[38] If there was anything the Amish were willing to talk about, it was their satisfaction with the schools.

In 2000 an Amish-organized Old Colony Support Committee began

[34] "History Report. Old Colony Mennonites of Mexico," [1], author's files; "Old Colony Mennonites Visit U.S.," *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter* 2, no. 2, November 1999, 1.
[35] "Campo 70 Cheese Factory" in *Called to Mexico*, 378-83; "Campeche Heifer Project" in ibid., 384-86; "Wells in Campeche State" in ibid., 387-88; "Campo 4 Dairy Co-op" in ibid., 389-91.
[36] Carol Helmuth, "Pioneering the New System Schools," in *Called to Mexico*, 108-11.
[37] Loewen, *Village among Nations*.
[38] Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 250-71.

sending Amish teachers—virtually all young women with some teaching experience in the US—to Mexico to train Old Colony teachers for existing Mexican Mennonite schools and, in some cases, to start new schools on the "Amish model," which meant graded classes, phonics-based reading, pedagogy other than rote memorization, the use of workbooks, and the posting of charts and pictures on the walls.[39] During the first few terms, Amish teachers interacted with Old Colony teachers apart from students and outside the school day. Beginning in 2002, Amish teachers "were able to be in schools while they were in session, thus, being able to teach the teachers how to use the new system successfully."[40]

Logistically, the Amish teacher arrives in a cooperating colony, instructs for several weeks with the Old Colony teacher observing, assisting, and slowly taking more responsibility until the Amish teacher turns the class entirely over to the Old Colony teacher for ten days. Generally, at this point, Amish teachers return to the US to participate in their home church's fall or spring communion service before returning to Mexico for another stint. Bus and train travel facilitate this shuttling back and forth, and often an older Amish couple accompanies a group of teachers, acting as "house parents," and providing meals and laundry service to allow teachers to engage in full days of work often stretching into evenings and Saturdays.[41] Not all Amish groups participate in the program—more progressive Amish settlements, such as Nappanee and LaGrange, Indiana; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and segments of Holmes County, Ohio are overrepresented, while highly traditional and especially conservative Amish churches show no interest—nor do all Mexican Old Colony communities host teachers.[42]

However, for the several scores of Amish who have spent time in

[39] One in-depth account of a teacher's experience over several years in Las Bombas and Nueva Holanda colonies in Chihuahua State is [Rachel Miller], *A Vision for the Journey: An Amish Schoolteacher's Mission among the Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico* (Sugarcreek, OH: Carlisle Printing, 2008). See also "Guidelines for Teachers Serving in Mexico" and "Guidelines for the 'Main Teacher,'" in author's file. In addition to the typical schools described here, Amish teachers in Nueva Holanda also started a school for special needs children; see Lizzie Hershberger's account in *Called to Mexico*, 233-34.

[40] "History Report. Old Colony Mennonites of Mexico," [3], author's files.

[41] "Serving as House Parents" (various authors) in *Called to Mexico*, 271-80.

[42] Colonies participating in the network include Manitoba, El Camello, Las Bombas, Nueva Holanda, and Moctezuma.

Mexico in roughly the last dozen years, the experience has been important, judging by published letters, accounts in Support Committee newsletters, and memoirs circulating in Amish homes. Indeed, the newsletters' influence reaches well beyond the circle of teachers and house parents, sharing the views of participants with Amish readers of all ages in many communities.[43] Reading these sources[44] reveals a complex Amish self-understanding, one that not only recognizes historical and theological links with Old Colony Mennonites but also toggles between a sense of North American superiority and a hint of cultural relativism—both of which, one senses, are products of spending time in Mexico and new departures of thought for the teachers and those back home avidly reading their letters.

Among these new departures is a sometimes subtle but clear sense of North American superiority. Traditionally, Amish people have not represented themselves as North Americans, but as standing apart from mainstream culture, politically and otherwise. They typically see themselves as subjects, rather than as citizens, and few wax patriotic even when they routinely express the sentiment that "We have much to be thankful for to live in a land of religious freedom" and should "pray for our rulers."[45] Experiences outside North America, however, yield different sensibilities. "Our government and the American culture, even with its faults, is seen in a different light upon having seen Mexican conditions," wrote one. "In the United States, honesty is expected in the business world even among non-Christians. Up-front dealings are the norm instead of merely a possibility." Similarly, having lived in Mexico, "we value in a new way our [U.S.] police forces and emergency services."[46]

Amish interaction with Hispanic Mexicans is quite limited, given

[43] *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter* began in 1998, and may be contacted at P. O. Box 150, Nappanee, IN 46550.

[44] The presentation here is built very largely on these print sources, although I have conducted two interviews with participants.

[45] *1001 Questions and Answers on the Christian Life* (Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 1992), 157.

[46] Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," in *Called to Mexico*, 292; see also Atlee Raber in *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter* 9, no. 1, Summer 2008, 3; and Samuel and Rachel Chupp, "911? Do It Yourself" in *Called to Mexico*, 337-38; Elsie Yoder, "This is Mexico," in ibid., 229; and anon., "Mexican Culture," in ibid., 358.

the teachers' roles and residency in Mennonite colonies. But life in these communities offers plenty grist for musing. Amish sojourners found Old Colony schools surprisingly deficient. They try to be polite in their reports, but some of their assessment is blunt.[47] The schools rely far too much on rote memorization of the High German catechism and on a hymnal. Unlike the Amish, whose first language is Pennsylvania Dutch but whose schooling is largely in English (the local vernacular), the Old Colony Mennonites' first language is Low German but their schooling is in High German (which they rarely used) rather than Spanish. Moreover, school attendance seemed episodic and unenforced, and parents took too little interest in schooling.

Amish teachers, whose rejection of high school had put them in risk of jail time in North America in the 1950s and '60s, were suddenly placed in the position of encouraging more rigorous schooling and building a case for the centrality of formal education! In letters home, teachers write repeatedly of the value of education, their thanks to past generations of Amish parents who stressed that value, and the blessings of public truancy laws that *require* children to attend school and do not leave such matters to chance. This is a new narrative of the Amish by the Amish.

As well, Amish teachers—all young women—give muted but discernible criticism to the place of women in Old Colony Mennonite society. Accurately or not, they see their Old Colony peers as having limited autonomy. They note that these women do not vote in church business meetings (Amish women do) and that small businesses run by women seem rare, whereas retail and wholesale establishments owned and managed by Amish women have become common in the open economy of contemporary North America. As teachers, the young Amish women spent months living abroad and offering leadership, creative ideas, and direction to male-centered Old Colony school boards. They write monthly reports to the Old Colony Support Committee, some of which are published in the quarterly newsletter.[48]

The sense of northern superiority noted above is conveyed in the subtitle of an Amish-published book of school teacher experiences: "Bringing Hope and Literacy to the Old Colony Mennonites." Negative descriptions of

[47] Examples throughout *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter*.
[48] Mary Stoltzfus, "Working with the Board and Teachers," in *Called to Mexico*, 264-69.

Old Colony communities also serve as a sort of moral warning to Amish churches. Low morals among Old Colony Mennonites "cause us [teachers] to come home and look at our own issues in a different light. We realize more fully the dangers of allowing or tolerating ungodly conduct among our people, even in small ways, such as reading books with low morals, in filthy language and smoking, in disrespect for parents and the ministry, and wearing revealing clothing." Said another, "I recognize that in all cultures there are strengths and weaknesses, and in order to maintain anything of value one dare not become lax."[49]

Such comments suggest the second theme in Amish reporting from Mexico, namely the self-criticism that comes from seeing oneself from another vantage point. Unlike critiques of Low German Mexicans leveled by assimilated North American Mennonites, Amish criticism of this group is wedded to a sense that "each of us need to search our own heart and see where we stand . . . and where we personally need to 'clean house' in our heart."[50] Indeed, using Mexican Old Colony Mennonites as a foil works only because the Amish also see themselves as near kin facing the same challenges and temptations. Unlike assimilated Mennonites, the Amish who venture to Mexico have no interest in leading Old Colony people to an evangelical conversion experience.[51] Amish writers accept the Old Colony worldview and basic theological framework, and so their criticisms quickly turn back on themselves. For example, with regard to illiteracy, one teacher wrote, "there are many things to be learned by experience when a person cannot read. Though many of them [Old Colony Mennonites] can't read, they are by no means dull people. We learn that they grasp solid Christian concepts that we think we'd never have learned if we had not read."[52]

[49] Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," and anon., quoted in "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," both in *Called to Mexico*, 294.
[50] Ibid.
[51] For example, Amish supporters of the school project invoke the wise admonition of Manitoba Colony Ältester Franz Banman (1927-2009), signaling their respect for Old Colony traditions. A handful of Old Colony Mennonites have married into Amish families in Ontario and joined the Amish church, but these cases do not represent religious conversion in the sense that evangelical and mainline Mennonites use the term; names of such individuals appear in a letter from David Luthy, Aylmer, Ontario, Sept. 19, 2011, author's file; see also *Called to Mexico*, 66-74, on the experience of John Fehr.
[52] Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," in *Called to Mexico*, 291-92.

Amish humility theology perhaps even prompts an Old Order version of cultural relativism: "My own way of doing things—the way I grew up with—no longer seems like the only way to do it," reflected one teacher. "It's funny how prejudiced we can become, how defensive we can be of our own ideas and opinions and methods. Experiencing a different culture showed me how narrow-minded I was."[53] In some cases, spiritual concerns are framed in ways that transcend cultural differences—a somewhat more abstract notion of identity: "Most important, we learn to understand better about God's unconditional love for us and His will for us to love one another in the same way."[54]

Also common is the Amish observation that life in Mexico is slower-paced and that northern Amish need to learn to slow down, avoid the trap of escalating commercialism, and spend more time visiting one another.[55] "In Mexico they look at time differently than we do. There is always time for interruptions. After all, what is time? A day later works just as well. . . . It would be nice to always have time for one another, wouldn't it? We could use some of that mentality."[56] Old Colony Mennonites offer an image of life as it once was in agrarian North America, and Amish who care about maintaining tradition take note.

Going to Mexico has also inspired northern Amish to give more attention to their own history, stories of migration, and appreciation of language. Teachers express surprise at how transnational stories of migration and of being "strangers and pilgrims" *in* this world shapes Old Colony identity, and contrast that with the less historicized "separation *from* the world" trope more often invoked in Amish circles.[57] Newsletters regularly feature articles about Old Colony history and Russian Mennonite history generally, and end by urging readers to re-familiarize themselves with their own Amish story.[58] "Those who return from Mexico seem, without fail, to testify to a fresh realization of our priceless heritage," wrote one. Another

[53] Anonymous quotes cited in *Called to Mexico*, 295.
[54] Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," 295.
[55] Anonymous quotes cited in *Called to Mexico*, 290-91; also the questions in ibid., 32.
[56] Anonymous quotes cited in ibid., 293.
[57] For example, Sarah Bontrager, "Visiting Dr. Gonzáles," in *Called to Mexico*, 358.
[58] For example, Aaron Hershberger, "Who Are These People?" in *Called to Mexico*, 1-19, as well as frequent pieces in *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter*.

person returned from Mexico "with a longing to thank his parents (who are no longer living) for what they did" in passing on the faith.[59]

Old Colony Mennonites' commitment to German instruction—though drawing Amish criticism when German is the only mode of instruction—also inspires northern Amish to view their own dialect of Pennsylvania Dutch as "a real way of speaking, not something ignorant and unlearned."[60] The need to work multilingually—often translating among High German, Low German, Pennsylvania Dutch, English, and Spanish—has made Amish teachers aware of the importance of language and created a sort of "linguistic turn" in their own thinking.[61]

The Old Colony Support project is less than fifteen years old, and its future remains to be seen.[62] The experience has involved too few people and for a too brief duration to have spawned any real transnational identity, although it has already refined Amish identity for participants and their communities. By bringing teachers into contact with other Anabaptist groups in different political, environmental, and cultural contexts, those connected to the Old Colony Support network still see themselves as different from assimilated Mennonites—plainness has been affirmed—but also as decidedly North American in ways they had not anticipated or accented in the past.

A Window and a Mirror: My View of the Amish

Thus far I have reported on how North Americans have narrated Amish identity and how some Amish have begun to tell their own story as North Americans, in both cases speaking as an omniscient observer. Of course, I

[59] A house parent, quoted in *Called in Mexico*, 298.

[60] Priscilla Stoltzfus, "Effects on an Amish Schoolteacher," in ibid., 296.

[61] "Lively Languages" (various authors), in ibid., 303-26.

[62] In recent years the program has expanded into the US as some Old Colony Mennonites have moved into Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma from Mexico, and Amish teachers are assisting with schools in these states; see "Teaching with the Old Colony Mennonites in Kansas," *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter* 12, no. 4, Winter 2011-2012, 2. Other more recent initiatives include the publication since 2007 of a quarterly periodical, *Geschichten aus dem Alltag*, of mostly Amish-authored articles for Old Colony readers; and the publication since 2011 of Amish-authored children's books in German translation for use in the Mexican schools. These books were originally published in English by the Amish publisher Pathway Publishing of Aylmer, Ontario; see Joseph Stoll, "Update on German Book Project," *Old Colony Mennonite Support Newsletter* 12, no. 2, Summer 2011, 1.

speak and write from my own social and theological location, with particular interests in mind. That's always the case, and cannot be avoided. The questions we have shape the stories we tell. For example, Orland Gingerich's *The Amish of Canada* was in many ways an attempt to explain who the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference was, where it came from, and why it differed from other Mennonite bodies in Ontario, rather than an exposition of the lives of those Canadians who, today, call themselves Amish.[63] This kind of perspective-taking is as it should be, since our academic work has value to the degree that we ask questions that matter. And we ask better questions when we are honest about who we are. The burden is greater for Mennonite scholars, since mainline Mennonites have often used the Amish to enhance ourselves in a game of let's-compare-my-highest-ideals-with-your-worst-examples. Such games may even be cloaked in the language of pastoral concern, but the desire to put the Amish in their place so as to assure ourselves of *our* place, inevitably surfaces.

What then is the relationship—professionally, personally, ethically—of Mennonite scholars and the Anabaptist subjects they study?[64] This question is hardly unique to Amish studies, but it emerged with clarity in the work of John A. Hostetler (1918-2001), an Old Order Amish-reared man who opted for Mennonite church membership and taught anthropology for many years at Temple University in Philadelphia. Hostetler was the first academic to publish widely on the Amish, and from the early 1960s to the '90s was a leading authority, informing millions of people—from academics to tourists—through his widely disbursed writing.[65] Given Hostetler's prominence in introducing the Amish story to those who have followed him, I have found myself thinking about his interpretations as I recognize my own.

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[63] Orland Gingerich, *The Amish of Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1972).

[64] See the thoughtful reflections of Diane Zimmerman Umble in "Who Are You? The Identity of the Outsider Within," in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, ed. Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Steven D. Reschly (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2002), 39-52.

[65] David L. Weaver-Zercher, ed., *Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2005), 5-35. Earlier in his career, Hostetler taught at the University of Alberta (1959-1962), the home province of his wife, Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, and also conducted important work in Hutterite studies.

Hostetler's relationship with the Amish was complex. In both Pennsylvania and Iowa, the states in which John was born and came of age, his father fell under the bishops' *bann*. Privately yet directly John would criticize the bishops in uncompromising correspondence over his father's treatment, but then spend years sympathetically explaining the practice of shunning to tens of thousands of readers.[66] As a young man, Hostetler matriculated at Goshen College, where he was influenced by the 1940s interest in the "Anabaptist Vision," later critiquing aspects of its self-assured posture in his Ph.D. dissertation and trying to make sense of Amish life with the latest anthropological theories, invoking such notions as "little communities" (Robert Redfield) and "high-context culture" (Edward Hall).[67]

Hostetler was a student of Harold Bender—dedicating his early works to the dean of mid-century "recovery" of the Anabaptist Vision—and despite criticizing self-confident neo-Anabaptism, he remained deeply indebted to Bender's narrative of Anabaptist origins and meaning. The Swiss Brethren Schleitheim Confession, which Hostetler often referred to as the "charter," was the interpretive key for understanding the relationship of latter-day Mennonite and Amish groups. To the degree that Schleitheim commitments could be identified in a group's 20th-century practice, the group fit under an Anabaptist "big tent" among theological cousins. In locating Amish on a broad Mennonite spectrum, Hostetler ticked off adult baptism, nonresistance, non-swearing of oaths, and resistance to holding public office as points of similarity. "The Amish today differ from the Mennonites mainly in the extent to which external changes have affected the groups," he wrote in 1963.[68] Differences were mostly surface variations on deeper "charter" commitments.

I wonder if Hostetler's telling the Amish story as a subplot of Swiss Anabaptism was a way that enabled him to make sense of his own ecclesial evolution, and to signal to his still-Amish relatives that he had not abandoned

[66] Ibid., 103-106, 154-60; John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), 85-87, 345-48.

[67] John A. Hostetler, "The Sociology of Mennonite Evangelism," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1953); John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 1st ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1963), 9.

[68] Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 1st ed., 50.

the faith or betrayed his heritage.[69] I also wonder how his neo-Anabaptist narrative has shaped my interpretation. Unlike Hostetler, I didn't grow up in an Amish home and have no Amish ancestry, although I did have Amish neighbors in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. My Mennonite church was not much interested in the Amish, and most members would likely have found the Old Orders slightly or even distressingly embarrassing with their old-fashioned ways and lack of interest in evangelism. My introduction to Old Order life came from the sympathetic scholarship of Goshen College historian Theron Schlabach and, soon after graduating from Goshen, from my work as a research assistant with sociologist Donald Kraybill, a former graduate student of Hostetler. Like Hostetler, both these scholars wrote from a broadly neo-Anabaptist perspective that situated the Amish under a "big tent" that included Mennonites of various stripes, Brethren in Christ, and Hutterites. Amish ways were distinctive in that scheme but also broadly expressive of values found throughout the tent. The Amish were first and foremost Anabaptists, so that although they expressed their faith in a different register, it was one that echoed familiar Mennonite convictions.[70]

While elements of these two scholars' orientation continue to shape my thinking about and relationship with the Amish, some of my views have changed over the past quarter-century. First, although I still find value in locating the Amish alongside Mennonites under an overarching Anabaptist canopy, I am increasingly aware that a great many Old Order Amish neither readily imagine that big tent nor tell their story as one chapter in a larger Mennonite narrative. In their telling, the relationship between Amish and Mennonites might be akin to the relationship that Bender described between Mennonites and Presbyterians: joint heirs of the Reformation, all Christians, but each group's story can easily be told without much reference to the other.

In some Amish settlements, my being a Mennonite is a point of interest for my interlocutors, but in just as many I might as well be Catholic or Jewish. For many Amish, I don't represent their story in a different register;

[69] D.L. Weaver-Zercher, ed., *Writing the Amish*, 28, 60, 64, 67, 122.

[70] See the wonderfully argued chapter 8, "Keeping the Old Order," in Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 201-30; Donald B. Kraybill, *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010).

I'm simply not their story in any meaningful way and haven't been for a long time. Fifty years ago Hostetler could write that "most young people who leave the Amish group become Amish Mennonite or Mennonite"—something that is no longer true.[71] Given their population growth and geographic spread, more and more Amish now live in places with no meaningful connection to a Mennonite population, and urbanizing Mennonites are less apt to interact with Amish (except as tourists). Combined with declining Amish defection rates, the result is that there are very few formerly Amish people in Mennonite churches under age seventy. Common experiences at mid-century—especially Civilian Public Service during World War II—have faded. Moreover, dynamics within Amish society today often accentuate the distance. The fastest growing Amish subgroup, the so-called Swartzentruber Amish, is the most culturally conservative and the least apt, by some measures, to fit within the classical neo-Anabaptist framework or to care about either other Amish or Mennonites.

Here's an example of the inadequacy of the "big tent" model. A typical neo-Anabaptist interpretation of the Amish approach to technology explains their choices as a keen sociological response to modern life, in which the Amish take each piece of new technology and analyze it, asking: Will this strengthen our community or encourage individualism? Will it replace *Gemeinschaft* with *Gesellschaft*? The Amish are thought to employ roughly the same categories and assumptions as mainline Mennonite academic social critics. This sort of interpretation is not always incorrect, but as I have come to know, especially, the Swartzentruber Amish via my colleague Karen Johnson-Weiner (who has extraordinary contacts within Swartzentruber groups, and does not view the Amish through a neo-Anabaptist lens), such an interpretation is less satisfying. While technology and community are connected, the Amish logic often runs like this: "If we adopt technology X, then we will be out of fellowship with church district Y, and then who would our children marry? So we can't have X." Such concern reveals serious considerations but not necessarily of the sort framed by the individual-versus-community assumption that might animate the conversation among 21st-century neo-Anabaptists.

Likewise, a neo-Anabaptist theology of believer's baptism leads to

[71] Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 1st ed., 214.

talking about the decision of children to join the Amish church. Yet for most Amish families the issue is whether children will leave. As I have become aware of the theological assumptions—my own included—behind the sterile language of "retention rates" and "defection rates," I am more comfortable narrating Amish experiences in terms of children being "born Amish," even though some Mennonites find such phrasing religiously offensive to their neo-Anabaptist ears. There is still adolescent agency in the Amish world, but I am less inclined to present it narrowly in terms of a search for church membership.

Similarly, as a neo-Anabaptist Mennonite I expected the Amish to be concerned about such things as church-state conflicts involving war and peace, or the USA Patriot Act (because it has implications for border crossers who lack government issued photo IDs).[72] Those matters are not absent, but among the fastest growing segments of the Amish world, the church-state issues they raise are about whether they should concede to installing septic systems, immunize their children, or allow building inspectors into newly-constructed homes before occupancy. Again, I don't belittle these issues, but they do not obviously seem to connect to a neo-Anabaptist reading of the Schleitheim Confession! Indeed, in recent years Amish legal battles in the United States have often drawn allies from conservative Catholic quarters or libertarians, such as the lawyers of the Becket Fund. Today, Mennonite Central Committee advocacy on behalf of the Amish, when it exists, is less a case of representing a constituency than a parallel to MCC work on behalf of, say, a politically marginalized non-Anabaptist group in Asia.[73]

Despite my growing awareness of the spiritual gulf that separates at least some, and perhaps many, Amish from me, my Amish contacts have challenged my faith and religious practice. For example, in 2006 and 2007 I learned about the profound importance of the Lord's Prayer in the rhythm of Amish spirituality. Lancaster Amish people generally pray the Lord's Prayer

[72] Rachel Waltner Goossen, The Mennonite academic who reviewed Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish* in the July 22, 2013 issue of *Mennonite World Review* hoped for more discussion of the Amish peace witness and Amish relations with mainline Mennonites; see www.mennoworld.org/archived/2013/7/22/amish-recent-challenges-analyzed/.

[73] Steven M. Nolt, "MCC's Relationship with 'Plain' Anabaptists in Historical Perspective," in *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*, ed. Alain Epp-Weaver (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2011), 135-66.

eight times a day at regular intervals, and suggest that a child's readiness for starting school may be measured to terms of whether he or she has memorized the prayer in both German and English.[74] And in this process of learning, my wife and I recognized that that ancient prayer was not a part of our household life and that our daughters were unfamiliar with it. So we began to use the Lord's Prayer as a family prayer at meals.

So, where does all this leave me in relation to the Amish and the stories I tell about them? When I as an outsider seek to interpret Amish life for other outsiders, I strive, in the interest of fairness and Christian generosity, to highlight the values of Amish society so routinely dismissed by the modern world. Yet that interpretation says as much about my understanding of fairness and what I think the world needs to hear as it does about the Amish themselves. Two decades ago, a reviewer of my book *A History of the Amish* suggested that the text implicitly offered a critique of mainline Mennonites as well as a narrative of the Amish past. He was probably right. The "saving remnant," in the words of David Weaver-Zercher, may lurk close to the surface of my mind as I scan today's Anabaptist panorama. I confess that the values of community, the place of the past in the midst of change, and skepticism toward the modern cult of progress are all virtues I associate with the Amish.

When I consider how I have used the Amish, though, I hope it has most often been in a corrective effort to avoid making my own experience into a universal yardstick. Scholars have big words for such mental traps—solipsism, or essentializing the self—but it comes down to the belief that my world, my abilities and limitations, and my fears, wants, needs, and resources are typical of everyone, and so I safely can make all sorts of assumptions about other people. This temptation is especially real for white middle-class men, since so much of North American society *is* structured in ways familiar to people like me.

Among other things, the Amish have been for me a nearby reminder that there are people who inhabit my modern world, and live with many of the same daily realities as I do but have responded to them in ways very different from my own, and who live quite happily and productively with an alternative they have chosen. My assumptions about technology and

[74] Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace*, 90-95.

entertainment, higher education, and faith all have been tempered by my association with the Amish. They remind me, gently but persistently, that there are other stories than my own.[75] The Amish are not the only people who could provide such insights; other relationships might offer the same correcting perspective. But in this case the Amish have served me well. May we all find such communities where we can serve and be served, where we can know ourselves as we know others, and where we employ our stories for our mutual benefit.

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[75] Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has famously warned of "the danger of a single story"; see transcript and video of her 2009 lecture: www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript.