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Rachel Stein

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Book Review

Review of Nolt, Steven. 2016. *The Amish: A Concise Introduction*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 141.

By Rachel Stein, West Virginia University

In the book, *The Amish: A Concise Introduction*, Steven M. Nolt presents an overview of Amish culture. Nolt notes that while there are many different affiliations of Amish in today's society, the groups originated from a common background in the Anabaptist tradition. Nolt identifies several key values in Amish culture that surface in his discussions of the community, the church, rumspringa, the family, schooling, and work. The most prominent theme throughout the book is the negotiations the Amish have with the modern world. These negotiations highlight the boundaries of Amish culture are fluid and ever changing. Secondly, but related—Amish culture emphasizes community rather than individualism. The focus on community impacts every aspect of Amish life. Finally, the organization of Amish communities is pivotal to understanding the culture. Amish communities are organized around church districts. Each district is guided by a set of rules (*Ordnung*) specific to that district. This organization structure allows for great variation across and within settlements. Nolt uses broad strokes to paint a picture of common Amish values, while acknowledging the differences that exist across affiliations.

Negotiations with modernity were brought to the forefront when the Amish immigrated to America. Settling in a new country exposed the Amish to a different set of social pressures than were present in Europe. The Amish continue to negotiate pressures in modern society, which serve to constantly redefine the boundaries of Amish culture. Nolt outlines that as modern society strives for rationality and efficiency, life is segmented—work is separate from leisure, residential is separate from commercial. The English (non-Amish) who embrace modern society are characterized as a low-context culture; people know and relate to one another in specific roles. The Amish, in contrast, are considered a high-context culture, as people in the Amish community know and relate to one another in multiple ways. The emphasis on these overlapping ties helps the Amish to maintain their traditional culture.

The impact of modernization has changed over the past several years with the introduction and widespread popularity of new technologies, including the Internet and smart phones. English culture that was characterized by segmentation is now being redefined along blurred lines as people use the Internet to shop from home or work from home, for example. Nolt refers to this concept as liquid modernity. He argues, however, that liquid modernity maintains a focus on segmentation, specifically, the separation of time from place. Liquid modernity also retains the basic outlines of rational efficiency, while emphasizing individual choice and personal self-improvement. Even with the introduction of new technologies, Amish culture continues to prioritize the community over the individual.

Nolt highlights Amish culture values a slower pace of life concentrated on the community and connections across people. The move of mainstream society from modernity to liquid modernity, however, seems to impact Amish culture. The introduction of social media, for example, has provided a new way for Amish youth to connect with one another and to the outside world. Nolt notes that Amish parents are unsure of the extent and consequences of this new technology. The impact of social media on Amish youth is particularly interesting, as Amish adolescence is different from the adolescence life stage of English youth. Adolescence for the English is a time when youth struggle with their identity and start to establish their independence. In contrast, Amish youth understand their identity within the context of the community. The introduction of social media provides a medium in which the emphasis is placed on the individual. Traditional channels of face-to-face networking are disrupted, and the centrality of the community can be lost. The negotiations Amish have with liquid modernity begs further exploration. An explanation of how social media, for example, changes the dynamics of traditional Amish culture and impacts boundary negotiations would be informative.

Even with the potential problems of maintaining traditional communities in the era of liquid modernity, Nolt notes the Amish population is growing. Research indicates approximately 85% of Amish youth choose to join the church. The retention rate is higher today than it was 100 years ago. Nolt outlines how the growth of the Amish population has introduced struggles, including land usage and availability in terms of settlement patterns, the transition to non-farming jobs, and the impact of these changes on the family. Occupational shift is central to each of these problems. The move away from farming, however, has different impacts across settlements. The Lancaster County (PA) settlement, for example, has historically relied on farming, while the Elkhart/LaGrange (IN) settlement has a long past with industry. The introduction of a segmented and more modern life through industry jobs is less of a concern in Indiana. The Amish in Elkhart/LaGrange have negotiated the boundaries of working outside the home while maintaining traditional values for a number of years. Nolt recognizes the complexities that exist across Amish settlements evidence the diversity of Amish, but he does not explore these differences in depth.

The ways in which Amish adopt changes outside of occupational shifts can vary widely across settlements and across affiliations. Nolt introduces the idea of “Amish-izing” to discuss how certain technologies are reworked to fall within the boundaries of the *Ordnung*. Nolt uses the concept of Amish-izing to explore how Amish seek to control technology, not be controlled by it. While Nolt focuses specifically on technology, the ways in which the Amish rework aspects of modern culture to conform to their values applies across a variety of contexts. A further exploration in this vein could provide broader context for the reader. The negotiations with modernity and liquid modernity, for example, might include other illustrations of how the Amish have adopted English practices as their own, within the bounds of the *Ordnung*. The methods of adaptation across affiliations would also evidence the diversity across settlements.

Nolt presents a broad view of change in Amish culture, but does not explore how

contentious the process of change can be within settlements or the deep divides that negotiations with technological advances have caused amongst the Amish population. The boundary negotiations have become even more complex in the age of liquid modernity. The history and boundary maintenance across and within settlements is indeed an important consideration to the Amish scholar, but may prove counterproductive to a succinct introduction of Amish culture. Nolt's goal in his book is to present a concise introduction to the Amish. He accomplishes this goal. The reader who is interested in learning about the Amish will find that Nolt's text provides a clear and comprehensive overview of the values and beliefs shared across Amish culture.