

2015

Review of *Renegade Amish: Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes, and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers*—Donald Kraybill

Shawn Francis Peters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/amishstudies>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Peters, Shawn Francis. 2015. "Review of Kraybill, Donald. 2014. *Renegade Amish: Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes, and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 3(2):241-42.

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by IdeaExchange@Uakron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@Uakron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Review of **Kraybill, Donald. 2014. *Renegade Amish: Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes, and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

By Shawn Peters, *Integrated Liberal Studies Program, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Donald Kraybill is the author, coauthor, or editor of over a dozen books on Anabaptist and Amish culture. The latest addition to this list is *Renegade Amish: Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes, and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers*. Like its predecessors in Kraybill's oeuvre, this is a thorough, even-handed, and accessible volume that provides keen insight on Amish culture.

The details of the purported crimes of the Bergholz Amish are well known. Under the alleged direction of Bishop Samuel Mullet, members of the maverick Amish community perpetrated five attacks in the fall of 2011. After forcing their way into the homes of their victims, the assailants set upon both women and men, cutting their hair and, in the case of the men, completely shearing off their beards. Gentle barbering, this was not: several victims were treated so roughly that they bled. Eventually, a total of sixteen members of the community (Mullet among them) were arrested on a total of almost 90 federal felony charges, including conspiracy, lying, and obstruction justice. Among the more notable charges were claims that the defendants had violated the federal Matthew Sheppard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act by committing religiously-motivated hate crimes. In proceedings that drew international interest, they were tried in 2012.

Kraybill's brisk account—the narrative clocks in at a mere 160 pages—traces the Bergholz case from its origins through the federal trial. Writing for a broad audience, he briefly traces the history of the Amish in America, outlines their core beliefs and practices, and explains how the Bergholz sect was established and operated under the control of Mullet. *Renegade Amish* is not a polemic aimed at proving that Mullet's group somehow wasn't authentically Amish and had devolved into something most accurately described as a "cult," although both matters are addressed frankly. Rather, it endeavors to show how the beard-cutting attacks fit into the overall development of the fringe Amish community under Mullet's iron-fisted leadership.

Popular myths to the contrary notwithstanding, crimes are not unknown among the Amish. Nonetheless, as Kraybill shows, the crimes ascribed to Mullet and his followers were extraordinary, as nonviolence is a core element of Amish life. The attacks were all the more unusual because they targeted well-known symbols of Amish culture, hair and beards. These circumstances were so apparently strange that the alleged offenses drew the attention of the news media and federal prosecutors, who ultimately decided that they fell under the new federal hate crimes statute. It fell to a jury to decide whether the beard-cuttings were in fact hate crimes motivated by religious bias or simply part of an intramural squabble among the Amish. After a three-week trial, the jury convicted Mullet and fifteen of his followers on the federal hate crimes charges, as well as lesser charges. As the alleged mastermind of the beard-cutting plot, the bishop drew the harshest sentence: fifteen years in prison. His followers received lesser sentences.

Kraybill was not a mere spectator to these proceedings. As he acknowledges in *Renegade Amish*, he was called upon by prosecutors to offer expert testimony on the history and culture of the Amish. His participation at the trial might raise some legitimate questions about his objectivity in chronicling the case of the Bergholz Amish. After all, how could a de facto part of the prosecution team render an account that did not reflect negatively on the defendants? But to his credit, Kraybill's treatment of them in *Renegade Amish* seems nothing if not fair-minded; he does not seem bent on vilifying them and establishing their legal guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Rather, he argues that Mullet and his followers essentially lost their way and drifted – with disastrous results – from mainstream Amish life (at least in the sense that Kraybill himself understands the faith and its traditions).

Although he generally seems fair, one wishes that Kraybill had reflected more on his courtroom experiences and even compared them to those of John Hostetler, who testified in the famous Amish school attendance case, *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972). Hostetler of course found himself on this side of the defendants, not the prosecution, in that case, arguing that the application of a compulsory school attendance statute violated their religious liberty. Did these two scholars have differing views of the parameters of state power vis-à-vis the Amish, or can their perspectives be reconciled in that they both seem to have an over-arching concern for safeguarding a particular type of Amish community, one that is ultimately too vulnerable to defend itself? (The task of answering these kinds of thorny questions might fall to some enterprising scholar interested in analyzing how expert testimony from academics helps to mediate relationships between the Amish and the state.)

One of the drawbacks in writing about recent history is that portions of the narrative can become outdated rather quickly. This is at least partly true with the denouement of Kraybill's book. After it went to press, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit overturned the hate crimes convictions of the Bergholz Amish. The convictions were thrown out by the appellate panel because the trial court had erroneously instructed the jury on the degree of religious motivation required under the hate crime statute. This was a not a total exoneration of the defendants, however, as their other non-hate crime convictions remained standing. Mullet still will have to serve a total of nearly eleven years, but eight of his codefendants already are out of prison, having already fulfilled their much shorter sentences.

Subsequent editions of the book surely will have to include these developments and a reflection on their implications for the federal hate crimes law. As the statute relates to the protection of religion, it is almost certain to remain contested legal terrain, as American courts never have taken an entirely consistent approach to shielding religious entities and behavior, especially when it comes to intramural squabbles among members of one faith. Indeed, perhaps the most common approach is for courts to throw up their hands and claim that the matter is beyond their purview. If nothing else, the Bergholz case is noteworthy—and worthy of this serious treatment—because it centered on conduct so extraordinary that it prompted the secular legal system to lurch into action.