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Review of: **Cates, James. 2020. *Serpent in the Garden: Amish Sexuality in a Changing World*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 204. \$39.95.**

By Mark A. Yarhouse  
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James Cates offers a fascinating look at Amish views and experiences of marriage, family, sexuality, and gender in the book, *Serpent in the Garden: Amish Sexuality in a Changing World*. The analysis is based on “many years of interaction, informal interviews, and conversations with Amish confidantes...” (p. xiii). The upside of this approach is that the book has an “insider” feel to it. The downside is that the reader is not always sure how representative the stories are of the Amish community. From the opening story in the Preface to similar, colorful anecdotes throughout, the book may lend itself to a kind of salience bias because accounts are emotionally compelling in areas in which little research with the Amish has been conducted. Cates acknowledges this, as it was brought to his attention by a reviewer. There are the appropriate clarifications and qualifications surrounding the more colorful stories, but still the reader is left with an impression and little knowledge of the frequency of such behaviors. Thus, the representativeness of the accounts and indeed the basic validity of the analysis hinges upon the accuracy, veracity, and wisdom of the personal anecdotal accounts of the author or of those he informally interviewed.

Layer into this presentation of Amish views and experiences of sexuality and gender the desire by Cates to offer an analysis steeped in queer theory, you have an intriguing reflection and critique of Amish sexuality. Queer theory itself, however, is difficult to define. It is a postmodern theory that functions as a lens through which adherents view any topic. In *Serpent in the Garden*, which is Cates’s second book through Johns Hopkins University Press, queer theory focuses on which identities among the Amish are acceptable and which are unacceptable, an emphasis on the community rather than the individual, and the use of a hierarchy to support the community commitments to identity and personhood. According to Cates, the approach the Amish take forbids sexual orientation identity, diverse gender identities, such

as transgender experiences, and paraphilic experiences or fetishes. Of course, such experiences exist in the world, including the Amish world, but more descriptively so rather than prescriptively so, and not with reference to identity and community of like-minded others, as has dramatically shaped society outside of the Amish community in the West. I am thinking, of course, of the mainstream lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) community and any sexual or gender identities or expressions of self that might be associated with the mainstream of that community. But the book is broader than just how the Amish respond to same-sex sexuality, paraphilias, or diverse experiences of one’s gender. The book addresses Amish sexuality broadly, so that Cates addresses adolescent sexuality, marital sexuality, gender roles, and child sexual abuse as well.

Because the ideological commitments inherent to queer theory contrast so sharply with historic Christian theological anthropology and morality, the book could have been written as a critique of Christian sexuality and gender broadly. The Amish embody these conventional views in a much more communitarian manner that allows for more communal identity and corresponding reinforcement of such norms.

The queer community itself is comprised of diverse identities that are *not that*—that are not heterosexual or cisgender, two common, normative experiences of sexuality and gender from which it is claimed power is established and through which arises the denigration of diverse, minority sexualities and gender identities. The language throughout *Serpent in the Garden*, then, is about the “heteronormative” which functions as both adjective and noun. There is both a “heteronormative social order” (p. xii) and there is just the “heteronormative” itself, which appears to be the set of beliefs and assumptions held by individuals and groups of people who hold to conventionally religious beliefs and values not held by proponents of queer theory. In this way, queer theory functions essentially like an alternative set of religious beliefs taken on faith and the individual experiences of its adherents that are used as contrasts to Amish beliefs.

The book opens with two important chapters that are intended to orient the reader to Amish life and discipline and to the lens through which the author intends to engage Amish culture, that

is, queer theory. The remaining chapters address sexuality and behavior in terms of education in community and a developmental perspective encompassing especially adolescence, marital sexuality and gender roles, child sexual abuse, the paraphilias, and same-sex sexuality.

I want to especially focus on the first two chapters. Chapter one, “The Pilgrim Journey”, helps the reader locate the Amish and their relationship historically to the Mennonites and to the Anabaptist movement, as well as the broader Protestant Reformation. Cates then offers ten “Amish religious beliefs” (p. 6). These are the idea of being a pilgrim on the earth who is moving toward heaven; the biblical admonition to be separate from the world; that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present; that humility should characterize the followers of Jesus; that one must avoid pride; the importance of baptism; the role of confession in the life of the Christian; the value of church discipline; regular communion; and a complementarianism in male-female relationships. These beliefs are largely Christian beliefs. Some of these beliefs and practices reflect different branches of Christianity, so other Christian denominations or expressions of the faith would adhere to infant baptism; still others would take communion more frequently or view it as less symbolic and more a means of receiving God’s grace. Some branches of Christianity reflect complementarian male-female relationships, while others reflect egalitarian relationships. Other branches, too, would practice confession directly to God or to a priest but may not insist on public confessions, but there are Christian communities that practice public confession as well.

These beliefs, along with distinguishing aspects of Amish culture, such as the Gmay (church district), clergy, affiliations and relationship to government, all represent the heteronormative to Cates. This brings the reader to chapter two, which is an introduction to queer theory. The closest Cates comes to defining queer theory is to say it is “a social model arising from the ostracism of sexual minorities...” (p. 20). Otherwise, it is a “lens” that allows the person seeing through it to critique or respond to the “heteronormative” (p. 21). Queer theory, according to Cates, is committed to constructionism (rather than essentialism). That is, adherents view sexuality, gender and (for Judith Butler, anyway) even biological sex as a

social construction. Such a view lends itself to analysis of power, especially as it applies to sexuality and gender in a society. The end goal of queer theory appears to be sexual self-actualization of the individual premised on the assumption that “sexuality can be experienced, understood, and even constructed as a cultural and historical phenomenon” (p. 22). Such a perspective would contrast sharply with most historic Christian teaching on what has been referred to as telic congruence or the idea that one sets aside one’s impulses to develop as a person who holds beliefs and values associated with transcendent purpose and meaning. For Christians, the end-goal is sanctification or Christlikeness. In queer theory, such a claim might be decried as the heteronormative, but such a position must be argued for rather than simply asserted. Even more basically, the reduction of Christian belief to expressions of heteronormativity begs the question of the basis for taking that perspective for analysis. To his credit, Cates recognizes that queer theory “lacks empirical foundations” (p. 26) and “resists hypothesis testing that would add to its merits” (p. 26). Indeed, any theory that cannot be tested is one that is difficult to critique as it also resists falsification, explaining all critiques as a reflection of the heteronormative it decries.

Perhaps a more helpful framing of the issues is to recognize that there are ways in which people who experience different sexual attractions or experience of gender interact with the language and categories of a society. This kind of analysis—and I am thinking here of what Ian Hacking refers to as “a looping effect”—gets at ways in which people interact with and change their behaviors in response to classification, as well as why some people or groups may elect not to utilize such linguistic categories. There are essentialist and constructionist components to this, according to Hacking, and this may provide another angle of entry into the Amish experience.

Chapter three is about how young Amish people learn about sexuality, while chapter four is about marriage and sex in the context of that relationship. Chapter five is about gender roles in the Amish context, while chapter six is about intimacy—marital, church, and cultural intimacy.

The remaining chapters address child sexual abuse (ch. 7), paraphilias (ch. 8), and same-sex sexuality (ch. 9). The chapter on child sexual

abuse is fascinating in addressing how the Amish relate to outside authority and government around the care and protection of children.

I appreciated the many times Cates reminds the reader that people are given a choice to leave or be a part of the Amish community. In other words, there is a consent here to be part of this unique Christian community. Cates also demonstrates great awareness of what is given up by the individual in order to be a part of the collective. This is seen perhaps most evidently in the chapter on same-sex sexuality, in which again moving accounts of such decisions are on display.

Cates emphasizes the proscriptive constraints of the Amish community insofar as certain ways of identifying oneself and certain behaviors are proscribed—the idea that the Amish do not talk openly about such and such behavior or use language that reflects contemporary identities associated with such behavior. But he seems unaware of the prescriptive constraints that exist within mainstream LGBTQ+ community, including among adherents of queer theory. That is, a person can be constrained by proscriptions (sexual identity discussions are not welcome here), but a person can also be constrained by prescriptions (sexual identity must be discussed in this particular way—as a means of sexual self-actualization, which is a value in queer theory). These are both constraints, and I think a more even-handed analysis of Amish sexuality and gender could have taken more of an emic perspective (a within-community perspective) rather than the deconstruction of norms surrounding sexuality and gender viz a viz queer theory that functions as a critique of the “heteronormative” from outside the community itself.

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