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Old Order Amish

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BOOK REVIEWS

Review of: **Handrick, Frances M. 2019. *Amish Women: Work and Change- An Investigation into the Lives of Amish Women in Pennsylvania and Ohio*. Dissertation in Theology and Religion. Birmingham, England: University of Birmingham. 284pp.**

By Amy Schlabach
Old Order Amish

I opened the dissertation with hopeful interest. Would “Amish Women: Work and Change” be the factual, realistic view I had hoped for so many times before? The British author, Frances M. Handrick, interviewed 30 Amish women in Pennsylvania and Ohio. She compares our lives with the lives of Amish women 30 to 50 years ago. She also gleans bits of information from other writers and researchers, and the end result is a mixture of fact and the usual stereotypes. I want to recognize that, from what I understand, Ms. Handrick researched and wrote the dissertation for her own use, not for distribution to a broader audience. And I want to recognize that I am reading her thesis from the perspective of an Amish woman, not a college researcher, so I will not address how she did the study in ways relevant for her discipline. I included references where applicable when she sources ideas from other researchers.

I do appreciate Ms. Handrick’s effort. She put in many months of fieldwork in her attempt to put into words the changes we face as a society within a society. She writes, “One Amish community felt they had been misrepresented by previous researchers and were concerned this might happen again” (Feely 2012). I have rarely read an article or book about the Amish—even those written by an Amish person—that was able to capture the essence of our faith and heritage. All researchers face the same challenge as the one she mentioned. Taking into consideration the differing worldviews of various researchers, Handrick has done more than many of them, simply by reaching out and actually interviewing Amish women, rather than writing solely from outside observation. She describes a chance meeting with an ex-Amish man in California that opened the way for her to find women in Ohio to interview, in addition to the ones

she already knew in Pennsylvania. I like that Ms. Handrick had the courage to approach Mr. Beachy with her project. Then, here and there, she spent an hour or two with different women; I can appreciate that she sought to hear from women directly. The author also describes a long-standing friendship with an Amish woman from Pennsylvania named Anna. I was disappointed, though, that throughout her thesis, she threads a gentle condescension about Anna and other women that undermines her desire to learn from them. Various phrases such as “I wonder (or doubt) whether she would know...” or “I am applying it to them... though they may not even know it,” or “having to use language more sophisticated than they are used to” leaves me with the impression that Handrick views her friend as ignorant. Saying that Amish women are “unfamiliar with analyzing the nature of interactions” is a sweeping statement that seems out of place in an academic work.

To my disappointment, the thesis contains many cultural stereotypes. Ms. Handrick mentions several times that though we appear outwardly similar, we are diverse in personality and interests. But then, she still makes some generalizations from statements interviewees said or from other writings. Amish women, as women anywhere, are vastly diverse. I do not quilt or whitewash my trees. My husband has buttons on his pants, and the width of his hat has no bearing on his standing in the community; this was true for my father and grandfather as well. Some of these comments appeared to have been made independently and not gleaned from her interviews (Kreps, Donnermeyer and Kreps 1997[2004], 13; Scott 1986[1997], 104). As a woman, I do not feel like a second-class citizen (Kraybill 1989, 82). I do not feel like my highest purpose in life is producing children. I do not feel oppressed by our patriarchal society; instead, I feel it is a blessing. I do not feel unable to make decisions. There is nothing to suggest, for myself or the women in my home community, that our status at home is elevated by money we earn (Graybill 2009). She uses the phrase “Significant living without work” to describe an Amish woman’s traditional role, using a model of disabled teenagers who are unable to live independently. Most writers who undertake the subject of Amish

women struggle to grasp the idea that a woman might be content, even fulfilled, by working as a biblical keeper at home.

Ms. Handrick felt more at home with the New Order women than with the Old Order, since she says the New Order share her beliefs about assurance of salvation, whereas the Old Order only “hope” to be saved. I found that curious, because my New Order friends understand salvation the same way we do in our Old Order church. Perhaps the terminology tripped her up. New Order churches tend to use the term “assurance of salvation” while Old Order churches use “living hope.” This is not to be confused with the “once saved, always saved” teaching of unconditional eternal security. (I double checked with my New Order friends, as well as a New Order minister, and they confirmed my statements.) In particular, I was distressed to read the following: “although the Amish can read the Bible and most will have a Bible at home, it has largely been interpreted for them and undertaking Bible study at home is not encouraged other than teaching their own children.” This could be true in some areas but is an unfamiliar concept to me.

Ms. Handrick rightly points out that our church services haven’t changed, though the *Ordnung* undergoes gradual change. The example of wool dresses versus washable fabrics amused me. Wool dresses were worn years ago, long before I was born. Better examples of change she mentioned included the impact of natural gas wells, which brought about the introduction of refrigerators and freezers in the home instead of an icebox or rental freezer space, or the addition of battery powered appliances in the kitchen. Still, some changes mentioned vary greatly from one individual to another. One lady interviewed said that it used to be forbidden to have non-Amish friends, but my grandparents, both born in the early 1900s, had a steady stream of “English” friends passing through, openly and freely. Perhaps I am just not old enough to properly assess Handrick’s work, since many of the changes she writes about are things that I have done all my life. Many of the material items mentioned, such as the fabric, were not used because they were not available. And now the wool fabric that was used in my great-grandmother’s day is no longer available. The fabric industry is constantly introducing new and

better fabrics and we use what works best for our lifestyle.

Handrick made mention of the fact that she felt she sometimes saw only what the women wanted her to while other times she was privy to information that members of the community possibly were not aware of. She mentions in particular one lady who has a large collection of Lladro China but displayed only a few pieces in the main areas of the home. Another woman kept her automatic washer behind bi-fold doors in her laundry room. I am not familiar with the guidelines in all churches, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate the Maytag wringer washers traditionally used and many are turning to automatic washers. In my area, they are not hidden or concealed.

In an interesting twist, I realized I knew several of the women interviewed, both in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Each of the situations is unique. Some of the women chose to work to supplement their husband’s income while building their business. Others chose to follow a work interest that is slightly off the beaten path. Other women are single, working to support themselves. When observing change and jobs other than home-keeping, I looked to the women around me. Currently in our church, several women have jobs that are, for the most part, sideline work, not careers. This is nothing new. When asked who we are, our work is rarely included in our answer. None of the women interviewed have young children at home in addition to a full time, out of the home job. I spoke with several of my friends in Pennsylvania since I am not as familiar with their day-to-day lives, and they all agreed on that.

Handrick devoted an entire section to multi-level marketing (MLM) businesses, which surprised me, since most of the women I know who are affiliated with an MLM do it as a hobby. She describes a meeting at the home of one of the women she interviewed. It was attended by almost 200 ladies and Handrick noted that her non-Amish taxi driver and herself appeared to be the only ones who felt uncomfortable. She describes the noisy, enthusiastic meeting as not seeming congruent with the spirit of *Gelassenheit* or *Uffgeva*, traditional terms used to describe humility and faith in God’s sovereignty. An interesting note on this event is that the hostess did not grow up Amish. Did that make a difference in the style of meeting she chose to present? I would not be comfortable

at an MLM recruiting event as described, either, and I wondered if Ms. Handrick would be interested in knowing that.

The ending of the thesis leaves me feeling that Ms. Handrick grasps only a fraction of the Amish when she says, “Walking up the land and smelling the fresh air, I experience a feeling of excitement and liberation; there seems to be so much space here, not just physically but living as they do within carefully set boundaries, I always have a sense that they enjoy security and freedom.”

I want to reflect now on Amish- and Mennonite-focused research beyond Handrick’s thesis. One of the frustrations I have is the glaring inaccuracies. Too often, the information about the Amish comes from one of three sources; (1) outsiders who come with preconceived ideas, (2) people who leave the Amish and are dealing with bitterness, or (3) Amish who are hampered by group sensitivity. All of these sources represent challenges for people seeking accurate information about the Amish.

The first group finds it hard to leave behind outdated or false characterizations, even when the data do not match, such as Ms. Handrick’s comment about a lack of central heating keeping us from pursuing individual activities. Our homes are heated throughout, and have been for all my life. She researched the community where I grew up, so I would expect that she experienced the warmth of the homes she visited. (Handrick appears to have been influenced by Kraybill and/or Nolt on the point of central heating, though she makes no specific reference.)

The second group is harder to define. Often they have reasons for the bitterness they carry, but they translate that bitterness into contempt for all things Amish, like the person who told her that Amish people are unable to think critically. Ms. Handrick applied it to Amish couples going on cruises. According to her, they are not able to see that their actions may cause change in the community. When I mentioned that to my husband, he chuckled and said, “It’s not that they can’t see it, they just don’t want to or don’t care.”

The last group, those who write about their own lives or experiences as Amish people, face a formidable obstacle. We have a hard time finding the balance between an overly negative view and a highly idealized version. Honest transparency is hard to find in persons who write about their own culture.

I conclude with the fact that we have always changed. We must, in order to thrive and survive. However, the prosperity in our communities, and the world in general, coinciding with the time frame noted, has brought the changes to our way of life that Handrick described. However, I appreciated her effort and couldn’t help but wish that she would have put together a focus group for her study. Thirty women out of thousands leave a lot of room for error and lack of a complete picture.

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Amy Schlabach reads, writes, paints, and prays in a little gray house in the woods, with her family and collection of lively pets.

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