Book Review

James Cates, *Dancing on the Devil's Playground: The Amish Negotiate with Modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. 160 pp.

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Dancing on the Devil's Playground explores the dynamics of cultural change within Amish subcultures. It begins by articulating differences. The "Amish" differ from "the world" in discernible ways.[1] Over the past seventy-five years, scholarly observers sought to explain the "riddle" of traditional Amish persistence against the hostile machinations of "modernity." This book contributes to that tradition by positioning traditional Amish practices (such as plain attire, the horse-drawn carriage, and the Pennsylvania German language) as sacred cultural boundary markers. These practices separate Amish people from "the world." However, such boundaries insufficiently protect Amish people from "worldly" influences. The winds of cultural change seep through the boundaries. In reacting to these encroachments, Amish communities maintain "robust social structures that guide their people toward that hoped-for eternity" (2).

Dancing's argument follows a general outline. First, the author articulates a theoretical framework for explaining stability and change in Amish communities. Building on a foundation laid out by Donald Kraybill over the past thirty years, Cates invokes a bargaining metaphor suggesting Amish people "negotiate with modernity." This imagery constitutes a helpful starting point. Negotiations demand give and take. They clarify values and provide grounds for innovation. Cates uses the metaphor to explore a variety of cultural intrusions into Amish culture, including telecommunications and internet technologies (chapter 2); DNA, medical ethics, and healthcare decisions (chapter 3); various maladaptive behaviors and their treatment (chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7); and the dynamics of domestic abuse within the context of church authority (chapter 8). While I question the utility of the construct (an argument developed in the final paragraph of this review), each chapter clearly illustrates a dynamism animating Amish life in the twenty-first century.

The book's strongest contributions come in its second half. Drugs, sex, and violence encroach upon Amish boundaries. As in the broader culture, meanings associated with drug use, sexual

[1] Of course, great differences also manifest among the people located within these categories. We should be careful not to equate the worldviews of a conservative Swartzentruber Amishman with a comparably "progressive" Beachy Amishman, just as we wouldn't equate the worldviews of a MAGA Christian Nationalist with the sensibility of a typical member in the Mennonite Church USA.

behavior, and interpersonal violence vary. Many churches tolerate (without necessarily accepting) drug and alcohol use by youth during the *Rumspringa* period. While many Amish people never experiment with these temptations, and most of those who do cease the behaviors upon joining a church, some continue using substances into adulthood and face the consequences of addiction. Likewise, Amish people express sexuality in a variety of socially accepted ways (monogamy within marriage) as well as in ways the subculture considers taboo (premarital sex, homosexual encounters, sexual contact between adults and minors, etc.). (See Cates' 2020 book, *Serpent in the Garden: Amish Sexuality in a Changing World,* for elaboration.)

Across these chapters, Cates focuses on a divergence between "mainstream" cultural solutions to such problems (12-step fellowship for addicts, state-driven intervention for adult-child sexual contact, and domestic violence advocacy for battered wives and children) against typical Amish solutions (confession before the congregation overseen by a church council). These strategies diverge from first principles. Whereas "worldly" solutions assume individual autonomy and responsibility, church solutions emphasize community engagement. "Mainstream" solutions emphasize personal responsibility for interpersonal harms mediated by due process protections extended to transgressors. Allegations of child sexual abuse, for instance, imply that an adult offender harmed the child victim. State officials adjudicate, sanction, and dictate terms of restitution for such offenses. Such "procedural justice" focuses entirely on individuals, muting the community's role.

In contrast, the church council frames the same conduct as sin; such transgressions affront God and all his people. They believe God commands the church to hold its sacred community accountable. This requires a collective response. Accordingly, Amish churches pursue a confessional strategy, followed by reconciliation within the holy confines of the congregation. These are not matters for the state. Such positioning often frustrates potentially helpful interventions from educators, therapists, and law enforcement personnel.

Cates artfully analyzes these misalignments, drawing attention to divergence from those first principles. In matters of victimization, the church pursues confession first and reconciliation second. In contrast, the state seeks to adjudicate guilt while respecting due process. Cates notes that in the world, "*justice* (the equitable treatment of people under the law) and *forgiveness* (an act of pardon or mercy for wrongdoing) are distinct concepts" tied to different processes (74). Most Amish churches do not share in this distinction. The inevitable clashes are consequential. Many accused Amish immediately confess before state authorities; they "blow past the checks and balances put in place to protect defendants" (75). At the same time, the church's emphasis on confession and reconciliation of the transgressor too often ignores the pain of their victims (as recent memoirs by Saloma Miller Furlong and Lizzie Hershberger poignantly articulate).

Throughout the book, Cates refers to these dynamics as "negotiations with modernity." That phrase reflects Donald Kraybill's earlier attempts to explicate "the riddle of Amish culture." However, I found it obscured more than clarified. Negotiation refers to action carried out by human agents. Modernity is an abstraction. It may set the context. But modernity cannot negotiate with

anyone; that requires people. Therefore, when we say that the Amish "negotiate with modernity," who negotiates with whom?

Reviewing the case studies in these eight chapters, I see that sometimes the negotiations involve the elders of Amish churches in dialogue with government officials (such as those in Chapter 6, "Sin like No Other"). Many other negotiations in the text involve deliberations between Amish people whose interpretations of particular practices differ. Disputes over cell phones, e-bikes, vaccination, or changing gender roles reflect flexing boundaries. In a chapter titled "The Sewing Circle," Cates presents an engrossing account of the emergence of a domestic violence support circle within an Amish community. This account clearly captures negotiation within the church, describing how Amish people grapple with countervailing forces of tradition and trauma. I believe this reflects negotiation *in* modernity rather than negotiation *with* modernity. My quibble, however, doesn't detract from the value of the volume. *Dancing on the Devil's Playground* presents an engaging, well-written provocation on the dynamics of change confronting Amish people in the twenty-first century and is a welcome contribution to the field.