

## Book Review

**James A. Cates. *Serpent in the Garden: Amish Sexuality in a Changing World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Pp. 204.**

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*Serpent in the Garden: Amish Sexuality in a Changing World* is James Cates's second book about the Amish, a population he has learned about through his clinical psychology practice in northeast Indiana. His 2014 book, *Serving the Amish: A Cultural Guide for Professionals* (Johns Hopkins University Press), intends to increase the cultural competency for mental health and other social service providers. In the preface to this second book, Cates notes that professionals, including sociologists, historians, theologians, and others who have written about the Amish, do not address sex and sexuality although they may discuss gender roles. His intent is to fill that gap with a professional analysis of Amish sexuality, information the Amish themselves would not provide. While his first book had mental health and other social service professionals as the targeted audience, this book will be of interest to them as well as to scholars and a more general reading public.

Cates begins the book with a chapter that briefly summarizes Amish history and theology, which would clearly be helpful to readers who lacked familiarity with Amish culture. He explains the collective and high-context nature of the Amish community, with its multiple overlapping relationships. This contrasts with a low-context mainstream culture where a distinction is maintained between the public and private domains. He also stresses the heteronormative and patriarchal nature of Amish culture, which has both historic and, in their interpretation, scriptural roots. When they join the church, Amish people agree to uphold the rules of the *Ordnung*, the written and oral disciplines regarding dress, use of technology, and separation from the world. Confession and repentance are expected if the *Ordnung* is not upheld.

In the chapters that follow, Cates takes up in sequence the topics of Amish children learning about sexuality; sexual prohibitions and fertility practices; gender roles; personal identity and intimacy within the family, marriage, and church; child sexual abuse; paraphilias (fetishes), including, for the Amish, masturbation and oral or anal sex; and same-sex attraction.



Cates notes the characteristics of Amish culture that impact attitudes about and expressions of sexuality. Amish see education beyond the eighth grade as hubris, rebellion against God. Critical thinking—not to be confused with problem-solving skills—is not taught. Sex education—unless in the family—is not provided, and talk about sexuality is avoided. This is consistent with the expectation of repression of sexual thoughts and feelings. Procreation according to the *Ordnung* is the only legitimate purpose of sex.

But what about the reality of sexual desire and the pleasure of orgasm? Masturbation is a sin that could eternally separate one from God, as are other behaviors that lead to sexual pleasure other than vaginal intercourse within marriage. Church members found guilty of these acts would be expected to confess and repent, in some settlements before the entire congregation. A problem with the *Ordnung* and other published guidance is that these acts are not prioritized in order of severity, and victimless sex, such as masturbation, would seem to be on a par with sexual abuse of a minor. This may be true on paper only, and in his first book, Cates gave an example of an Amish mother who questioned why her son did not masturbate rather than molest his sister. It is not known if the expectation of repression of sexual awareness results in greater incidence of child sexual abuse.

Among many contributions, one warrants special mention—Cates's nuanced analysis of the resistance of Amish clergy to reporting child sexual abuse to law enforcement. He asserts that the Amish do oppose child sexual abuse but prefer to handle it internally. If the perpetrator confesses and seeks repentance, the Amish believe that God has forgiven him. Knowledge of the developmental origins of such impulses and the frequent repetitive nature of such behavior because of internal psychological issues is not understood. The fear of trauma to Amish children if removed from their homes and placed in non-Amish foster homes for their temporary safety is another reason given not to report. The diminishment of the clergy's power could also be threatening.

Mainstream mental health professionals may decry the practice in some settlements of having sexual abuse victims of a certain age, usually girls, confess their part in the sexual encounter and forgive the perpetrator. The girls may be told that they must suffer and forgive as Jesus did. Cates gave an example where making such a "confession" allowed the victim to resume her place in the community. He shows how a professional can be respectful of Amish beliefs without personally condoning or accepting them.

To what extent the anecdotes and vignettes he uses can be generalized to the larger Amish population is a question. Cates acknowledges the diversity of belief and practice among settlements. He notes the lack of surveys regarding Amish attitudes and practices but can infer that couples are using birth control from data showing that the average number of children born to Amish parents has dropped to seven. Interestingly, conservative groups still have on average more children. Another change is the acceptance by many of cell phones, providing ready, private access to the internet and the temptations of the outside world.

I found Cates's decision to use Queer Theory (Chapter 2) as a lens for his analysis of Amish sexuality to be puzzling. In my view, he did not provide adequate evidence for a flux in an Amish

person's sexuality over the lifespan sufficient to represent a destabilizing of heteronormativity. (That some adolescent boys engage in dominance/submission, apparently homoerotic sex play, can be understood through a developmental model.) Greater clarity of definitions and assumptions would have been helpful in this chapter. I do not, however, believe the lack of clarity on this point will distract from the usefulness of the book for most readers.

It can be difficult for those in the mainstream, and I count myself in that group even though reared in an Anabaptist (then called "Old" Mennonite) family, to empathize with groups whose beliefs and practices justify the exclusion of noncelibate, same-sex individuals and the submission of women. Cates's accounts of his respectful involvements in the lives of his Amish clients and friends, his obvious affection for them, and his suspension of judgment are compelling examples of how professionals need to interact with those they are responsible to give care to or study.

### **Erratum**

12/5/2022: Activated links in PDF file.