Between Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism: Religious Vitality in a Beachy Amish Mennonite Congregation

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The Beachy Amish Mennonites are a plain Anabaptist group who value congregational autonomy and whose dispositions and practices range from conservative to progressive. They are neither Amish nor Mennonite but fall into the category of "in-betweens" whose identity is based on each of these two diverse traditions (Anderson, 2012a; Kraybill, 2001; Redekop, 1989). Beachy Amish Mennonites have been described as an ethno-religious society (Anderson, 2013) and as "outside the contemporary Amish orbit" (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, & Nolt, 2013, 422). They are the largest group within the Amish Mennonite movement and emerged in 1927 in response to a series of disagreements among Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania about shunning, automobiles, and electricity (Anderson, 2011; Beachy, 1955; Nolt, 2003). Group identities and boundaries within the Amish Mennonite movement are often blurred and complex making exact classification difficult

(Anderson, 2011). The Amish Mennonite movement (Ambassadors Amish Mennonites, Beachy Amish Mennonites, Berea Amish Mennonites, Maranatha Amish Mennonites, Mennonite Christian Fellowship, Midwest Beachy Spring Garden-type, and Unaffiliated Amish Mennonites) consists of 201 churches and 22,464 adherents with a membership of 12,960 (Anderson, 2012b, 289). The Beachy-Amish Mennonites have 100 churches and 12,648 adherents with a membership of 7,562 (Anderson, 2012b, 289).

For more than half a century the Beachy Amish Mennonites have experienced sustained growth in both congregants and congregations, but surprisingly they have received little attention from scholars in comparison to the Old Order Amish and the Mennonites (Anderson, 2011; Schwieder & Schwieder, 1977). This article focuses on one Beachy Amish Mennonite congregation and the process it has undergone to maintain its identity in a changing world. This article is one small attempt to contribute to the scholarly literature on the Beachy Amish Mennonites.

Montezuma Mennonite Church was founded in 1953 by eleven Beachy Amish Mennonite families from Kempsville, Virginia and it was the first Beachy Amish Mennonite congregation in the American Deep South. These eleven families purchased 5,000 acres of farmland in southwest Georgia (Yoder, 1981). Montezuma Mennonite Church is located in rural Macon County in Montezuma, Georgia and it is one of the most conservative Beachy Amish Mennonite congregations in the American southeast. It is the fifth largest Amish Mennonite congregation in the United States (Anderson, 2012b). By 2012 the congregation consisted of seventy-eight households with 165 adults and one hundred children under the age of sixteen (W. Smith, 2013). The congregation has established new Beachy Amish Mennonite churches in Orrville and Hartselle, Alabama. Former members of Montezuma Mennonite Church have founded other Beachy Amish Mennonite, Mennonite, and non-Mennonite congregations.

Subcultural identity theory can explain the religious vitality of Montezuma Mennonite. This theory focuses on the importance of identity and symbolic boundaries although it does share with the rational-choice/religious economies perspective the belief that some degree of sociocultural tension with society strengthens membership (Finke & Stark, 2003; Lechner, 2007). As such, it "compliments rather than contradicts existing rational-choice perspectives" (C. Smith, 1998, 118). Subcultural identity theory is an important model because it uses "a non-economistic language drawn from fields such as cultural sociology, social psychology, and the sociology of group behavior. And [it] focuses on factors and

dynamics other than those highlighted by existing economistic analyses of pluralism and religion" (C. Smith, 1998, 118).

One of the leading proponents of subcultural identity theory, sociologist Christian Smith, studied churchgoing American Protestants who self-identified as evangelical, fundamentalist, mainline Protestant, or theologically liberal Protestant. While few, if any Beachy Amish Mennonites, seem to have been interviewed for Smith's 1998 project, the following two key statements summarizing subcultural identity theory are relevant for this article. First, religion survives, "by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging" (C. Smith, 1998, 118); and, second, "In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant out-groups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural" (C. Smith, 1998, 119). Smith argued that the distinction-with-engagement orientation, which characterizes evangelicalism, is the best subcultural strategy for religious vitality. Fundamentalism's and mainline and liberal Protestantism's cultural toolkits lack certain crucial elements that make them less strong than evangelicalism. In Smith's account, fundamentalism's subcultural strategy of distinction-without-engagement suffers from defensive separatism, while mainline and liberal Protestantism's strategy of engagement-without-distinction suffers from enculturation and accommodation.

In contrast to Christian Smith's work, a growing body of scholars has argued that fundamentalists are increasingly engaged politically in their respective societies (Shupe, 2011; Freston, 2007; Emerson & Hartman, 2006; Lawrence, 1989). As Emerson and Hartman (2006) note, "Perhaps more so than many other concepts, fundamentalism is a contextual phenomenon" (129). Secularists see fundamentalists as, "reactionaries, radicals attempting to grab power and throw societies back into the dark ages of oppression, patriarchy, and intolerance" while "Fundamentalists and their sympathizers see their stand against the tidal wave of change as honorable, right, life preserving, and a life calling" (Emerson & Hartman, 2006, 131). The ethos of contemporary fundamentalism in the United States has evolved but according to Smith, it "still retains noticeable vestiges of its separatist cultural heritage. And those vestiges shape its prevailing outlook and experience" (146-147).

Since the Beachy Amish Mennonites are "in-betweens" it is important to briefly mention how the Amish and Mennonite

traditions have encountered fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Redekop (1989) acknowledged that fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism have influenced the Mennonite tradition to the extent that some "thoughtful Mennonite leaders see fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism as the major threats to the survival of the Mennonite belief system" (289) [note that evangelicalism and neo-evangelicalism are used synonymously]. The Old Order Amish have struggled to distance themselves from the influence of fundamentalism and evangelicalism because, "Evangelical faith privileges the subjective authority of the individual over communal authority (Ordnung), separates salvation from ethics, and encourages a customized personal spirituality with thinner communal links" (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, 2013, 411). Fundamentalists and evangelicals advocate the "assurance of salvation" rather than the Amish view of a hope for salvation (Hostetler, 1993, 306). These specific fundamentalist/ evangelical beliefs undermine the Old Order Amish understanding of Christian theology and from their perspective are threatening to their faith and traditions.

But are these subcultural strategies as mutually exclusive as they appear at first glance? Even Christian Smith (1998) acknowledged that "significant sectors of fundamentalism appear to have become 'evangelicalized,' that is, convinced that social and cultural engagement is valuable and necessary" (146). Politics is one area in which this engagement has occurred. Fundamentalists and evangelicals along with other conservative Christians joined together to form the once nationally powerful and influential Christian Right movement (Olson, 2007). It should be noted that not all fundamentalists and evangelicals are supportive of the Christian Right, and that evangelicals' views about politics, "are replete with diversity, complexity, ambivalence, and incongruities" (C. Smith, 2000, 94). Another example is that fundamentalists are less likely to pursue higher education than evangelicals, and when they do it is most often at "a fundamentalist college or a Bible school" (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997, 308). Modifying or altering subcultural strategies is another example of how changing symbolic boundaries have contributed to the restructuring of American religion (Wuthnow, 1988). What strategy does Montezuma Mennonite Church employ to generate religious vitality?

Methodology

I visited the Montezuma Mennonite Church community fifteen times during the period from April 2011-May 2012 and interviewed thirteen men who were key leaders (bishops, ministers, the deacon, teachers, and business owners) in the congregation. I recorded field notes after each visit. The interviewees, all male, since this is a traditional congregation and women are not in leadership positions, participated in digitally recorded, in-depth, semi-structured, personal, face-to-face, ninety-minute interviews. Their names and contact information were provided by the presiding bishop, since I was an outsider and did not know any church members. Only one of the recommended key leaders declined to be interviewed formally although we did have several informal telephone conversations. The interviews were held in the school, homes, and/or places of business of the interviewees. Interviewees were asked to discuss the congregation's history and its position on religious beliefs and practices, family life and gender roles, education, community life, and work life. These findings were discussed at length in a 2013 *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* article in which I addressed the themes of continuity and change in the congregation (W. Smith, 2013).

In addition to the interviews, I attended three Sunday church services, a funeral for an elderly sister, and a Saturday afternoon fundraiser at Montezuma Mennonite School. At the end of Sunday church services members usually remained and socialized thus giving me the opportunity to speak informally with some of the brethren. When my interviews were scheduled near noontime I usually dined at a restaurant owned and operated by a church member. On several occasions I shared noon meals at an interviewee's home. In one occasion at a farm family's home, I was the only "English" among thirty people present, enjoying a pleasant afternoon full of conviviality, singing, and laughter, as well as lively conversation on a variety of topics.

Application of Subcultural Identity Theory

Using subcultural identity theory, Evans (2003) concludes that, "Liberal Protestants do not thrive where they are the most conservative, but rather where they have created a unique identity – a unique social niche – somewhere between evangelicalism and secularism" (467). I argue that Montezuma Mennonite Church

thrives because it has also created a unique social niche, one between fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

Based in part on its Old Order Amish roots and its gradual adoption of certain aspects of conservative Mennonite theology and traditions, Montezuma Mennonite Church has created a distinctive religious subculture and its vitality stems from its cultural distinctiveness and a tempered engagement with modern society. I have previously written that it is a vibrant and healthy congregation, one that has weathered change well, while holding to its core beliefs and worldview, and that it uses cultural bargaining wisely to preserve its conservative Beachy Amish Mennonite identity (W. Smith, 2013). Some examples of cultural bargaining enacted by the congregation include: switching the language of Sunday services from German to English; modifications made to clothing requirements, such as women's head coverings; and lifting restrictions regarding vehicle colors and camera usage. The congregation is now very supportive of members earning the general equivalency diploma and pursuing technical training. What has not changed is the congregation's belief system.

Strength of Faith

Christian Smith (1998) considers a Christian faith-tradition strong when the following conditions are met:

> Its members (1) faithfully adhere to essential Christian beliefs; (2) consider their faith a highly salient aspect of their lives; (3) reflect great confidence and assurance in their religious beliefs; (4) participate regularly in a variety of church activities and programs; (5) are committed in both belief and action to accomplishing the mission of the church; and (6)….effectively socializ[e]…new members into [long-standing]….tradition, and winning new converts to that tradition (21).

The remainder of this article, based on my interviews in the community, will discuss how Smith's criteria are met and lived in the life of Montezuma Mennonite Church.

The congregation's core beliefs are outlined in its *Statement of Belief and Standard of Practice* also known as the *Brethren's Agreement*. It states, "We accept the Apostles Creed, the Schleitheim Confession of 1527, the Dordrecht Confession of 1632, and the Christian fundamentals of 1964 as giving expression to our general Christian faith." Their beliefs include believers' only baptism, strict nonresistance, and marriage within the same church. They take very seriously the following statement: "The

Bible is clear that conduct rather than creed will determine eternal destinies." Members believe it is very important to embrace and put into action the teachings of the Bible, especially those found in the New Testament. Because they are "born again" and have accepted Jesus as their personal savior they speak of being assured of salvation; as one of the interviewees stated, "They are comfortable with their salvation." Another interviewee noted that although "[w]e think of ourselves first and foremost as being Christian…we endeavor to pattern our lives after His [Christ's] example and the teachings of the New Testament." The following quote from one of the interviewees clearly reflects aspects of Smith's (1998) first three conditions regarding adherence to religious beliefs, importance of faith, and the robustness of faith and similarly links belief and action:

> So it's conversion, and new birth, and knowing Christ as my personal savior and maybe next I should mention humility as being such an important part of our life, and humility is putting to practice, it comes out in the area of nonresistance and nonconformity to the world. So I would say humility is something that's so important, too, and I see it as the virtue we really should pursue because a humble person is normally a more thankful person. He finds it easier to obey God and he finds it easier to get along with people. He finds it easier to be nonresistant. He finds it easier to be peace-loving. He also finds it easier to even live a separated unto God lifestyle.

In addition to this stance, as well as believers' only baptism, nonresistance, and marriage within the same church, members believe "that God has a leadership structure within the home." According to one of the interviewees, "We believe that the man is the head of the home. We believe that then it's the wife and then the children and each in that order. And if that is kept…but one not using that authority or that structure selfishly is the way that we can best operate. And if each one respects each one, the other in their role, it can be a great family relation." To further clarify this belief in patriarchal order, another interviewee noted, "If you don't live and if you don't build on scripture, you're building on sinking sand. And that's where the headship order comes in. … As they both do their respective duties, it's a beautiful place and it functions beautifully. It's because it's God's way of doing it, God's design for the home."

This is also a tight-knit, solid congregation. Its sense of group solidarity is sustained by members' participation in a variety of events. Since no one is a stranger in this congregation, except for the occasional visitor who is not a stranger for long, everyone

knows everyone and families intermarry with other families. One's absence from church services and other community events is noticed. The congregation meets for close to three hours every Sunday morning, again that evening for a shorter service, and on Wednesday evenings for a mid-week service. Members also serve on church committees and are involved with Montezuma Mennonite School. Since members do not have health and life insurance, and most of them are exempt from social security, they are often called to help other members from their congregation and other congregations who are in need of financial assistance. Group participation reinforces the social ties that bind members to one another and provides opportunities, as one interviewee mentioned, to build a "sense of community and love for our brother." Another interviewee noted the following:

> It's just a blessing for me to be in a congregation, a community like this…there's others about my age that you just enjoy sharing with…sometimes we have a, what you call a work bee or you get together to help someone. And it's something about seeing someone in church every Sunday, but to get out and work side-by-side with someone you actually learn to know another part of them.

This emotion is rooted in social reality. Another interviewee spoke of how the congregation meets physical needs:

> I feel safe for my children to freely mingle and go and fellowship. We have ministers that really look after the needs of the congregation…I don't have to worry…if something were to happen to me, if I were to lose my life or my ability to work or provide. I don't have to worry about my family going hungry or having to apply for benefits, government benefits and things of that nature.

The primary mission of Montezuma Mennonite Church, however, is the salvation of its members' souls, and they believe this is best accomplished through separation from the world. Montezuma Mennonite Church practices a limited or tempered engagement with the world. In this regard they are more like fundamentalists than evangelicals. They are much more outwardly evangelical than the Old Order Amish, but less so than more acculturated Mennonites. Part of the reason for their parochialism is they believe that sustained contact with the larger cosmopolitan society brings higher risks of spiritual contamination, especially for the young. That is one reason why they have their own elementary school. The school provides, according to one of the interviewees, another venue where children are taught about the important goal

of integrity, "integrity of character, integrity of actions, and learning to be a man after God's heart and a woman after God's heart." They also do not allow their teenagers to "run around" like some Old Order Amish communities who practice *Rumspringa*. The congregation is engaged in limited ways with society because they want to expose their young people to the evils of the world that run counter to their own worldview. The congregation hopes that these few encounters outside of the church community will reinforce the benefits of group membership in the minds of young people. Like evangelicals, they believe that living a good, moral life is the best way they can influence modern society (C. Smith, 2000). One example of this is being ethical in their business affairs. They are committed to sharing their brand of Christianity, through organizations like Christian Aid Ministries of Berlin, Ohio, while also supporting members of their own congregation and other Beachy Amish Mennonites in local, statewide, national, and international mission activity.

The salvation of members' souls at times requires very strict discipline. According to one of the interviewees, errant members are counseled to repent and reform their ways, "But if they refuse to listen, then they will be excommunicated. And then when you're excommunicated, well you're on your own." Another way members attempt to fulfill the mission of the church is through their family life. As one interviewee mentioned:

> Thinking of family life, man and a wife, of course one man one woman, for life and then if God blesses with children that they would be dedicated to the Lord…we think it is important to have family devotions, and bringing up our children – I don't believe in being cruel, please understand me – but teaching at a very young age what 'no' means. And for a family to be together, be together. It is important that children early on have something to do. An idle mind is the devil's workshop.

Another interviewee specifically linked child rearing and salvation: "Well the ultimate goal of family life, of parenting, family life, is the saving of the child's soul…if the child doesn't learn the respect and the authority in the home when the child gets to be an adult, it'll be very hard for him to submit to the almighty God."

Montezuma Mennonite Church is the largest Beachy Amish Mennonite congregation in the American southeast. At a typical Sunday morning service the church is almost full to capacity. The retention rate of young members has improved significantly the past three decades. Only two or three young members have left within the past decade to join other local Beachy Amish Mennonite or Mennonite congregations. The congregation's large size is due to

its high birth and retention rates. Membership rates are also augmented by the influx of Beachy Amish Mennonites from other congregations. Church services were once conducted in German but today are in English. As one interviewee stated, "the change to English was probably for the better simply because as we have visitors and as we have people that come in, they can understand." Another reason that motivated the congregation to switch to English was the interest of English-speaking families in joining the church. Church members have recently discussed the need to start a new church since they soon will reach their capacity. They currently have no plans to expand the present meetinghouse. The new church will not be located in Macon County or in an area that is saturated with other Beachy Amish Mennonite congregations. Families from Montezuma Mennonite Church will be chosen by lot and/or volunteer to start the new church.

Conclusion: Mixing Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism

The congregation's vitality is the result of a blending of fundamentalism's distinction-without-engagement orientation and evangelicalism's distinction-with-engagement orientation. It does not fall neatly into either orientation and, like most fundamentalist churches, they do not belong to a formally organized denomination but are affiliated with a loosely organized fellowship. Montezuma Mennonite Church practices more of a tempered engagement with society than do evangelicals, resembling slightly more fundamentalism's approach of defensive separatism. While the congregation's approach is not as aggressive as one might find among some evangelicals, it is not nearly as defensive as one might find it among certain fundamentalists.

This congregation values "separation from the world" but it is also realistic and pragmatic in not letting that mindset negatively impact its business/economic relations with the wider society. The congregation also values missionary and evangelistic work outside of their community. The men regularly visit prisons in Georgia and Alabama and minister to inmates. They also distribute religious tracts in the nearby city of Macon and in the Atlanta metropolitan area, as well, they provide assistance to neighbors in time of need and disaster. The congregation's rural location, its practice of self-employment and hiring within the group, its belief of marrying within the church, its parochial school, its ban on television, radio, and attending films, among other practices and rules, reinforces its separation from the world. Maintaining an ideology and a practice

of separation from the world is not easy; as one brethren noted, "Living a life of integrity – and one that's accountable – is so much to me, in my mind, it's becoming more and more difficult with the connections that we have to the outside world."

Since this article focuses on only one congregation, Montezuma Mennonite Church, readers are cautioned against generalizing the findings from this study to other Beachy Amish Mennonite congregations. A methodological limitation of this study is that it investigates only one congregation and it provides only a brief glimpse – a one-year snapshot and an incomplete picture – of the life of that congregation. Nevertheless, this study captures the dynamic through which this congregation constructs its identity and maintains its vitality. This study also contributes to the small but growing body of scholarly research on the Beachy Amish Mennonites.

The Beachy Amish Mennonite strategy, explained in this article with reference to "subcultural identity" theory, may or may not work well for other Beachy Amish Mennonite congregations, but it has sustained the Montezuma congregation for more than half a century. Whether the Beachy Amish Mennonite tradition here is less strong than the religious traditions among other fundamentalist or evangelical congregations is a question that needs further study. Researchers should also investigate additional Beachy Amish Mennonite congregations, including both conservative and progressive congregations, and in other regions of the United States and Canada, to determine similarities and differences in religious orientations and levels of religious vitality.

Author's Note

I am grateful for the warm reception and the cooperation I received from the members of Montezuma Mennonite Church, the assistance provided by Miranda Scott and Eric Silva, and for the funding from a College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Faculty Research and Creativity Seed Grant.

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