

Donald Kraybill, *Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 207. Hardcover, \$24.95 USD.

This book reports on a set of extraordinary and bizarre events. In 2013 a group of nine men and six women of an obscure Amish sect were found guilty of hate crimes in several different incidences in which members of more mainstream Amish (in one case the elderly parents of the perpetrators) were physically accosted, pinned down and sheared of beards and hair. Donald Kraybill, leading expert on Amish society in the United States and an expert witness at the trial, lays out the story in all of its complexity. He begins with asserting the significance of this event for United States legal and religious history, the actual crimes that first took place in eastern Ohio in 2011, proceeds to introduce the isolated Bergholz Amish, its array of eccentric and volatile members, a custody battle involving small children and a SWAT team, the trial itself, life in prison for these “original gangsters” and then the beginning of the appeal process.

Kraybill’s voice is intertwined in the story and, in a sense, offers a trial within the trial. Referencing newspaper and court documents, as well as numerous personal interviews, Kraybill also draws on his vast knowledge of Amish ways, to establish the Bergholz group as renegade Amish. Throughout the book, the reader is reminded of the well-established Amish convention of securing a peaceable and separate society, centered on the *Gmay* (Congregation), measured *Meidung* (Shunning), and the Dordrecht Confession of 1632. Especially sacred is the beard and hair, not only gender demarcations, but quoting one bishop, signifying that “the creature should be subject to the Creator.” (18) The departure of the Bergholz group from conventional Amish ways is well established: they refused any fellowship with other groups, excommunicated at will, its leader engaged in sexual impropriety (64), they resorted to physical punishment within the congregation, stopped Sunday services, fixated on “spirits and incarnations of the devil” (57), and in instances claimed not to be “Christian.” (50) The leader, Sam Mullet, “saying God was talking to him,” (13) referring to himself as a prophet in the tradition of Elijah, had clearly departed from the humble, servant leadership role of Amish bishops.

Students of Amish, and other Anabaptist societies, have become familiar with ‘horse and buggy’ communities which have sought to

distance themselves from others, or whose isolation somehow encouraged a lack of checks and balances. This story parallels other well publicized cases that went to trial: the vigilantism apparent in the Old Colony rapes in 2009 in Bolivia; the acquiescence to charismatic leadership based on claimed knowledge of sexuality in the Wesbourne community in Manitoba in 2011. But Kraybill reminds his readers that such perversions are not unique to fringe 'horse and buggy' groups: he references Stanley Milgram, Rene Girard and other scholars to explain ways in which ordinary people engage in horrific action.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the study are the numerous dilemmas arising from the case. First was the very question whether the nonresistant victims should press charges, as they were pressed to by a Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking FBI agent who had grown up Amish. Then came the question among the prosecutors as to whether this was a local assault case of little significance or something more heinous, a veritable violation of the U.S. Constitution in general and the 2009 Shepard-Byrd (hate crime) Act in particular. And how should the jury consider the claims by the Bergholz people that they voluntarily cut off their own beards in times of remorse and shame, and that their assaults were acts of love, "haircut[s that] 'might help them' in their spiritual life"? (78/114) In the end constitutional scholars debate the appropriateness of the charge of hate crime perpetrated by members of a single religious community, as well as the remarkably harsh sentences, fifteen years imprisonment for Bishop Mullet's indirect involvement, for example. Finally, Kraybill raises the question of how all this corresponds to the long standing Amish practice of forgiveness given global coverage in the 2008 shootings at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.

Even seasoned students of the Amish will find this a complex story. The book has an appropriate map and a genealogical table, thus aiding in sorting out the geographical matrix and kinship ties. And Kraybill's engaging style and careful organization sorts out the details. But he also presents the story in all of its ironies and persisting dilemmas. How, indeed, can a set of bizarre assaults that left no one badly injured become construed as an attack on the U.S. constitution when black teenagers can be shot at will by white vigilantes or when violence is sanctioned and commoditized under the guise of professional sport? This little book is certain to generate a great deal of discussion.

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