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# Review of Donald B. Kraybill, *Renegade Amish: Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes, and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers*

Carol A. Leibiger

*University of South Dakota*, C.Leibiger@usd.edu

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**Renegade Amish: Beard Cutting, Hate Crimes, and the Trial of the Bergholz Barbers.** By Donald B. Kraybill. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. xvi + 207 pp. \$24.95.

From September through November, 2011, members of a “maverick” Amish community near Bergholz, Ohio, perpetrated attacks against other Amish. Male victims had their beards shorn, and one female victim’s long hair was cut (ix). Since beards and long hair have religious and cultural significance for the Amish (17-19), the attacks were understood as religiously motivated, and local law enforcement invoked the Shepard-Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 to bring federal authorities into both the investigation and subsequent prosecution of the perpetrators (92). The trial, which in late 2013 returned guilty verdicts on multiple counts of the charges of conspiracy, assault, lying, and obstructing justice, set a precedent for its “first-time conviction of assailants for religion-driven hate crimes” and as the “first religion-driven hate crime within the same faith community” (x). In order to prosecute the “barbers,” federal lawyers “stretched” the definition of bodily injury to include beard and hair cutting and broadened the evidence necessary to prove use of interstate commerce by the low-tech Amish (x).

Donald B. Kraybill, Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at Elizabethtown College and Senior Fellow at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, served as expert witness for the prosecution of the Bergholz Barbers. His expertise in Amish religion and culture, participation in the preparation of and testimony for the trial, and unique access to participants in both the trial and the communities involved in the attacks augment the discussion of the trial and its significance. Kraybill illuminates the sociocultural factors contributing to “cultlike practices,” an “inverted moral order,” and “moral collapse” in Bergholz that eventually led to acts of violence against Amish of other communities (xi, 143). Kraybill traces the history of the Bergholz community, organized around Bishop Samuel Mullet and bearing the strong stamp of his overbearing personality, and the deviant practices that grew out of—and reinforced—that community’s isolation from other Amish. He demonstrates how concerns about the community’s dwindling population led to acts of remorse like beard cutting, paddling, and finally voluntary incarceration as efforts to cleanse the community and purify its faith. Beard and hair cutting were then extended to Amish who had left the Bergholz community or had encouraged their relatives to do so. Kraybill demonstrates that the attacks were motivated by a “Bergholz ‘narrative’ [that] offered a meaningful albeit alternative worldview” oriented to strict, conservative Amish tradition and Old-Testament views, claiming Christian love as justification, yet meting out violence, atypical of Amish belief. According to this narrative, Bergholz perpetrated the beard cuttings to help outside “hypocrites” become righteous. However, Kraybill reveals the dark underbelly of the Bergholz narrative, namely an “ideology of malice...legitimated by religious belief to exact vengeance on those [the perpetrators] thought had treated them unfairly” that validated acts of revenge (xi, 79-80).

Kraybill’s analysis of the Bergholz case is well written and insightful. However, the book will not teach lay readers enough about Amish history, beliefs, culture, and language to allow them to understand fully the context in which the beard-cutting attacks occurred. Books written about religious minorities generally contain much more historical, cultural, and religious background information than Kraybill provides in a seven-page appendix. Lay readers might also be confused by Kraybill’s terminology. For instance, he consistently calls the German dialect

spoken by the Amish “Dutch” (e.g., 8, 87), and he refers to the beliefs of the Christian Anabaptist Amish denomination as the “Amish religion” (16, 141).

As the author points out in his conclusion, the prosecution of the Bergholz Barbers under the Shepard-Byrd Act was not a challenge to religious freedom; rather, it upheld First-Amendment freedom of religion by prosecuting perpetrators of religiously motivated violence. However, this book is not the last word on this case, since it was published after the defendants had appealed their guilty verdicts in February 2014, but before the adjudication of the appeal. In September 2014 the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld counts of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and lying, but ruled that the attacks did not amount to hate crimes. Time will tell how this case develops in the light of the appellate court’s ruling. Interested readers can find updates at Kraybill’s “Amish Beard-Cutting Attacks and Hate Crimes Convictions” site (<http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/supplemental/AmishHateCrimesResearchNotes.pdf>).

*The University of South Dakota*

*Carol A. Leibiger*