

Postmodern Amish: Paradoxes and riddles

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

The United States Supreme Court in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972) went on record in effect endorsing a particular religious group—the one time in its history that I am aware of its having done so. At the same time, the court advanced postmodernism, deconstructionism and relativism with this sentence: “There can be no assumption that today’s majority is ‘right’ and the Amish and others are ‘wrong.’” I’ve often pondered that “others”: who in the world is excluded? Commenting further, the court added: “A way of life that is odd or even erratic but interferes with no rights or interests of others is not to be condemned because it is different.” In other words, let him who is without oddness or erraticism throw the first stone.

Lately I’ve been reading up on the Amish, while busy writing a foreword to a new edition of Donald B. Kraybill’s *The Amish and the State*. I can also commend his revised *The Riddle of Amish Culture* and, with Carl F. Bowman, *On the Backroad to Heaven*. They all ponder the paradoxes and riddles of Amish (and their kin’s) life. One of these paradoxes, on which I’ve commented earlier, hit me on the Indiana Toll Road, where at rest stops one can pick up folders on the tourist excitements of Mishawaka and Kokomo, plus a folder advertising Amish Acres, a recommendable tourist stop. We learn that the Amish preserve the simple, nontechnological ways of the past—and can then find out more about them by logging on to www.amishacres.com.

During this time of visiting, researching and writing, I picked up the *Wall Street Journal* (April 15) where Timothy Aepfel’s story from, of course, Intercourse, Pennsylvania, discussed riddles and paradoxes of Amish economic life. While everyone else’s investments, in stocks and bonds, nose-dived, the Amish economy boomed, thanks to their concentration on real estate, some of it at the edges of developing cities. Aepfel tells us that the boom has meant that Amish people, who are forbidden to own or drive their own autos, are often chauffeured to work in company-owned cars. “We don’t talk about what we have,” said an Amish mother of

nine. But she has much in material goods. What goes on here? We all knew that the Amish, growing in numbers, were selective in their adaptation to modernity. They forbid the placement of telephones in homes; no wiring connects them with the world. Yet the cell phone undercuts the no-connection rule as much as the chauffeured autos counter the no-ownership stipulation.

Some things don't change. Writes Kraybill, "Tourists are enchanted by the Amish. Social analysts hold them up as models for development, and energy experts herald their efficiency. Others point to the humane character of the Amish social system. Despite these accolades from academics, few have chosen to join them. Few outsiders have chosen to toss aside technological convenience and the delights of individualism and submit themselves to the collective order of Amish life. There is a price to being Amish . . ."

What strikes me as I read all my sources is this: the Amish and we have made a bargain. If they will remain picturesque and idealistic, we will allow them the technological and commercial devices and practices that have corrupted us. In turn, if we will keep visiting their Acres, buying their excellent products and their close-to-the-city farms for real estate development, they will aspire to remain roughly who they are. We who are not Amish and the Amish who read us can settle for Supreme Court-style relativism about our odd and erratic choices: "There can be no assumption that today's majority is 'right' and the Amish and others are 'wrong.'" Not since our mutual fall into modernity.