

Nonconforming

by [J. Brent Bill](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

On the Background to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren. By Donald B. Kraybill and Carl F. Bowman. Johns Hopkins University Press, 362 pp., \$29.95.

I've always been a bit taken aback when, upon learning that I'm a Quaker, a new acquaintance asks, "So do you still ride in a horse and buggy?" I guess that plainly dressed man on the Quaker Oats box confuses people. Since I've spent so much time explaining the difference between Quakers and the Amish, and am a student of American religious history, I was sure that I knew the differences. But just how little I really did know became apparent when I read Donald Kraybill and Carl Bowman's new book. While far from light reading, this look at the history, similarities and differences between four groups of Old Order faithful in North America--Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren--is fascinating.

Kraybill and Bowman begin with an in-depth look at the history and social structure of the Old Orders, which helps us to understand that their resistance to modernism does not mean that they are cantankerous kooks, "relics of the colonial era" or "modern-day Luddites." Rather they are spiritual and cultural nonconformists--and always have been. From their beginnings in the 16th century, the Anabaptists took a radical reformationist stand which made them enemies of both the Catholics and Protestants who were their contemporaries. They were mercilessly persecuted and found their physical salvation in community and separation. The memory of those years, embedded in their collective DNA, calls them to be a part of God's kingdom and apart from the world. As the book says, "The stories of their martyrs, retold again and again in sermons, remain fresh in the collective memory," and "non-conformity is grounded in the idea that persons who are baptized into the Christian faith become members of a redemptive community that stands apart from the larger society."

Their most obvious similarities are their commitment to wearing plain clothes and their resistance to what passes for progress in the "real" world. Less obvious are their common beliefs: that the life of the individual is not the primary reality; that the past is as important as the future; that work is more satisfying than consumption; that a unified community is the supreme value; that salvation comes via the grace of community. These beliefs are what truly run counter to modern and postmodern life and faith.

But it's the differences between the Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren that I found most fascinating. The Old Orders are not nearly so homogeneous as they seem to most of the "English" (the rest of us). The small differences lie in the cut of their clothing and the color of their buggies. The larger ones make the four groups quite distinct. The Hutterites live in communally owned agricultural enclaves, mostly in the upper Midwest. They do without checkbooks, credit cards, private telephones or wills. They do use modern farming technology, however, harvesting their crops with huge combines. The Mennonites, Amish and Brethren all hold private property.

Old Order Mennonites have electricity and telephones but don't drive cars. Yet they use steel-wheeled tractors for their field work. The Brethren drive cars (without radios), use computers (without sound cards) and work in such professions as law and medicine. There are even Brethren cheerleaders. The Amish, who are known for their reliance on old ways of farming, use telephones (located at the end of the lane or in a separate shed attached to their buildings) and tractors (in the barns, but not in the fields).

Perhaps most surprising is that the Old Orders, far from being swallowed up and digested by modern culture, are actually flourishing. "In short," say Kraybill and Bowman, "the Old Orders . . . won the battle with modernity." Their numbers, unlike those of most mainstream Protestant groups, are growing. They live in the world without being part of it--and are none the worse off for separating themselves from it. Indeed, their active nonconformity has earned them a place of respect in society at large.

The irony is that most moderns applaud the Old Orders for the very things they perceive (wrongly) as unenlightened in Puritanism and some other colonial American faiths--separatism, a rigid community ethos, strong judgments about behavior and so on. Members of the Old Orders find this admiration amusing, and have learned how to turn it to their financial advantage--hence the explosion of Amish and Mennonite goods.

Kraybill and Bowman focus a lot on *Ordnung* (roughly translated, "rules and discipline") and *Gelassenheit* ("yielding and surrendering to a higher authority") as reasons for the hows and whys of Old Order faith and practice. But they speak too little of the Old Order's understandings of the scriptural commands behind these two things.

Still, that's a small criticism of a book that, in one volume, tackles history, sociology and future trends--and does it well. While much of contemporary American faith and life seems to be rushing along the superhighways of society and technology, the Old Orders are content and flourishing while traveling the back roads to heaven. The radical Christianity of their witness is both illuminating and challenging.