

Introduction: Boundaries in Communal Amana¹

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IN THE 1850s the Community of True Inspiration relocated from the vicinity of Buffalo, New York, to a large tract of land in east-central Iowa where they established seven villages and adopted the name, "the Amana Society." One of the principal reasons given for the move was a desire for greater separation from "the world." The leaders of this religious association, whose German-speaking members adopted communal living shortly after arriving in New York in 1843, believed that "worldly" influences would compromise their efforts to live a virtuous and spiritual life which would be pleasing to God.

Earlier writers on communal-era Amana (1855-1932) have uniformly taken the position that in the nineteenth century the members of the community sought and achieved virtual isolation from the wider American society. They describe the seven Amana Colonies during this time as "introverted," "insulated," "autonomous," "withdrawn," and "self-sufficient." For the most part, these writers viewed this condition favorably, as one which allowed the Inspirationists to preserve or develop (this distinction is not always made clear) an authentic culture distinct from the wider American culture. They go on to claim that at the beginning of the twentieth century contacts between Amana and the outside became unavoidable and increasingly numerous, disrupting the traditional social, economic, and religious order and culminating in 1932 in the "Great Change," when Amana abandoned communalism, separated the religious from the economic functions of the community, and began to operate businesses on a for-profit basis. In short, the history of communal Amana

1. I wish to thank Metin Cosgel, Lanny Haldy, and Adele Jenks for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

is interpreted in terms of initial boundary strength followed by gradual boundary weakening and eventual reintegration with the wider society.

This introductory essay and the three that follow share the premise that Amana's external boundary has been inadequately analyzed by earlier scholars, leading them to a distorted understanding of Amana's history. While it is true that Amana's leaders sought to regulate contact between the community's members and their American neighbors in various ways, it is not true that they achieved, or indeed sought, complete isolation from the outside world at any time during Amana's communal period.

The boundary between an intentional community and the wider society is one of its most significant social structural features, and students of communitarianism have often included boundary phenomena in their discussions.² However, the analytical utility of the boundary concept has been limited by a tendency among researchers to describe the outer boundaries of particular communities in terms of a simple strong/weak continuum. At one end of the continuum lies the closed community with an impermeable boundary separating it from the wider society. At the other end is the open community, which interacts with the wider society without restrictions. Both extremes are obviously "ideal types," but students of communitarianism often characterize particular communities as lying closer to one end or the other: New Harmony, for example, is said to have had a "weak" boundary, while the Hutterites have a "strong" one. Such characterizations are often taken to indicate the vitality or viability of a community.

There are problems with such uni-dimensional assessments of boundary strength. In the first place, it is important to distinguish between inward and outward boundary crossing, the dynamics of which might be quite different. Secondly, since no boundary is complete, there is the matter of exactly what is permitted to cross the boundary and what is not; automobiles might be allowed and television not, or vice versa. The permitted and prohibited items must then be analyzed for the effects they have and also for adhesions. Thirdly, the formalized contingencies which affect boundary rules must be identified; thus, members might be allowed to visit relatives outside

2. See, for example: Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972); Roy C. Buck, "Boundary Maintenance Revisited: Tourist Experience in an Old Order Amish Community," *Rural Sociology* 43 (1978), 221-234; Carol Weisbrod, *The Boundaries of Utopia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Ruth Shonle Cavan, "Public and Private Areas and the Survival of Communal Subsocieties," *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, 13 (1984), 46-58.

only for funerals, or outsiders might be allowed to visit the community on specific days of the year, or the community's physician alone might have use of an automobile. Finally, informal exceptions to the rules should be documented.

These points have been ignored by earlier students of Amana. In his 1970 book, *Religious Sects*, the sociologist Bryan Wilson offered a typology of religious sects in terms of what they believed was necessary for their adherents to achieve salvation. Wilson placed Amana (and several other communal groups) in the category of "introversionist," which he described as follows:

Although all sects separate from the orthodox and, at least in some respects from the wider society, introversionist sects make this pattern of action their overriding concern, the issue on which salvation is to be realized.³

Most of the characteristics of Wilson's introversionist sect do fit Amana: (1) an emphasis on community rather than the individual, (2) belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of holiness, (3) rules of dress and deportment and often special language, (4) a rule confining marriage and other social relations to members of the community, and (5) a disinterest in proselytizing.

Wilson never claimed that *no* contact occurs between introversionist sects and the "world," but he did assert that this category "has achieved far greater insulation than other types of sect, and it has defined its boundaries more closely."⁴ Such comparative statements may help us to discriminate among different kinds of sects in an abstract sense, but they are of little value in clarifying the strength and character of a specific group's boundaries. Comparative statements are especially unhelpful in revealing the relationship between spatial boundaries and boundaries of other kinds, since not all introversionist sects withdraw from the world physically.

For his information about Amana, Wilson relied mostly on Bertha Shambaugh's classic 1908 study of Amana (revised in 1932 as *Amana That Was and Amana That Is*). Shambaugh repeatedly stressed Amana's desire for isolation. Describing the group's relocation from New York to Iowa in the 1850s, she wrote, "greater seclusion and cheaper and more abundant land were what they wanted . . ."⁵, and "isolation from the world was one of the community's prime purposes in seeking a home in the then frontier Commonwealth of

3. Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company [World University Library], 1970), p. 118.

4. Wilson, *op cit.*, p. 122.

5. Bertha M. H. Shambaugh, *Amana That Was and Amana That Is*, (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1932), p. 67.

4 COMMUNAL SOCIETIES

Iowa."⁶ The Inspirationists, she said, "fled to the wilderness to escape the vexations of the world."⁷ Shambaugh also implied that the Inspirationists had a long-standing tradition of shunning contact with outsiders:

Trained for nearly seven generations to "have no intercourse with worldly minded men," the Inspirationists until relatively recently [in 1908] have been exceedingly reticent with reference to the business and religious affairs of the community.⁸

The sentence quoted by Shambaugh in this passage comes from "The Twenty-One Rules for the Examination of Our Daily Lives," issued in 1715 by Eberhard Ludwig Gruber, co-founder of the Community of True Inspiration, the European forerunner of the Amana Society. Another rule states, "Therefore, what you have to do with such [worldly-minded] men do in haste; do not waste time in public places and worldly society, that you be not tempted and led away." A third reads, "Have nothing to do with unholy and particularly with needless business affairs."⁹ Shambaugh appeared to have believed that these proscriptions reflected the Inspirationists' actual behavior prior to the twentieth century.

Shambaugh likewise identified few outside influences on Inspirationist thought and culture prior to the period of her own research. She mentioned only four religious thinkers whose writings influenced Inspirationism: Johannes Tauler and Thomas a Kempis, both fourteenth-century churchmen; Jakob Boehme, the sixteenth century mystic; and the seventeenth-century Pietist Philip Jakob Spener. As for non-religious writing, she mentioned none, except for school textbooks, which she said had been only "of minor consideration," noting in a mere three lines that texts in American history, world geography, and physiology were used in the Amana schools.¹⁰ The implication of her portrayal is that Amana was an autonomous community, novel in its origins and largely independent of the social influences of the wider American society.

Against this image of nearly complete isolation up to 1900, Shambaugh portrayed Amana in the early twentieth century as beset by outside influences which its members could no longer resist. One of

6. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 90.

7. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 77.

8. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 91.

9. The entire set of rules is reproduced in Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 243-44.

10. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 168. It might be noted that the education of children was a special interest of Shambaugh's.

her best-known statements is, "The Forefathers had drawn a circle around the Community designed to keep the world out; but the world made a larger circle and drew the Community within its orb."¹¹ Shambaugh wrote of the "encroachments of the world and the powerful influences of the machine age," of new amusements and luxuries "creeping in": radio, baseball, bobbed hair, the telephone, the daily newspaper and magazines.¹² The Amana schools, she said, began to lose their distinctiveness and to adopt the typical rural school curriculum. And of special interest in the present context, she wrote in 1932: ". . . and the free Traveling Library of the Iowa Library Commission brings to the Amana villages its treasures and its thrills."¹³ In short, Shambaugh wrote in 1932, "In the last quarter of a century the old admonition of the Founders, 'Have no intercourse with worldly minded men,' has become obsolete."¹⁴

What is objectionable in Shambaugh's treatment of Amana is not the general point that the twentieth century brought an increasing number of "worldly" objects and ideas into the Colonies. In fact, this happened in every small town in Iowa. What is objectionable is the simplistic portrayal of Amana's relations with the world prior to her own research there. It is as though she discovered the community just as it was emerging from its traditional isolation, just as it was dragged from Eden into history.

The most recent general study of Amana, Diane Barthel's *Amana: From Pietist Sect to American Community* (1984), to some extent corrects this view. Barthel pays more attention to the forces in the wider society that influenced Amana. However, she reiterates Shambaugh's view of Amana's isolation and extrapolates it back to the Inspirationists' existence in Europe:

What they *did* want was separation from the affairs of the world, political and otherwise; the time and space to recreate the integrated community life they had known in Germany and experimented with in Ebenezer. By choosing this still new state of Iowa, they would for a time succeed in controlling, or at least mediating, the impact of the outside world on their villages.¹⁵

Barthel presents no evidence to support the dubious proposition that the Inspirationists had enjoyed "integrated community life" in Europe. My reading of the European period (pre-1843) is that the Inspi-

11. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 362.

12. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, pp. 343, 362.

13. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 343.

14. Shambaugh, *op cit.*, p. 345.

15. Diane Barthel, *Amana: From Pietist Sect to American Community*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 33.

rationists lived "in the world," scattered in towns and villages in Germany, Switzerland, and France (Alsace), living, one might even claim, wntegrated lives as religious separatists.¹⁶ Clearly, the move to Iowa was made in part to reduce the amount of direct contact between Inspirationists and "worldly" people, but Barthel implies that their isolation was so great in the first fifty years that they did not know what was occurring outside the community. She makes the point that the *Inspirations-Historie*, the group's "official" history, contains very few references to events outside Amana prior to 1890, and offers this as evidence for a general ignorance of worldly events. Barthel also implies that what news the members did receive about the outside was selected by the Elders as a means of social control, as when the Elders interpreted the 1906 San Francisco earthquake as divine punishment for the sins of a wicked city. While the Elders did often draw theological lessons from natural and man-made disasters, this applied equally to disasters in the Colonies. It does not represent prior censorship of information.

Barthel also follows Shambaugh in portraying a gradual opening of Amana to the outside world after the turn of the century. She further implies that this opening resulted from a failed policy of striving for complete isolation from the world. Speaking of the problems that led to the Great Change in 1932, she writes, "The major difficulties arose because the Amanas had never achieved economic independence from the larger society,"¹⁷ as if that is what they had been seeking, evidence for which is lacking. Barthel does a good job in tracing the *increase* in outside elements in Amana, but, again, what is wanting in her analysis is an accurate assessment of how much contact Amanans had with the world outside the Colonies, especially prior to the turn of the twentieth century.

Earlier scholars have overlooked or de-emphasized a good deal of boundary crossing *prior* to 1900 that took place in *both* directions between Amana and the wider society. The reason for this oversight may be a combination of a desire for conceptual simplification, a romanticized view of communal-era Amana, and/or a too literal reading of the rule forbidding "intercourse with worldly-minded men." It encourages an image of Amana as truly separate from and different from the wider society, a virtual Eden that represented an "other" in our midst. The following articles attempt to set the record straight.

16. The word "separatist" has a specific meaning in this context, referring to separation from the established church.

17. Barthel, *op at.*, p. 70.