

Brethren Society: The Cultural Transformation of a “Peculiar People”

CARL F. BOWMAN

Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Preface and Acknowledgements, Appendices, Notes, Selected References, Index, 491 pp., ISBN 08018-4904-7, \$65.00 hardcover; ISBN 08018-4905-5. \$19.95 paperback.

Fruit of the Vine: A History of the Brethren, 1708-1995

DONALD F. DURNBROUGH

Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1997. Preface and Prologue, Epilogue, Reference Abbreviations, Endnotes, Index, 675pp., ISBN 0-87178-003-8. \$39.95 hardcover.

These two impressive volumes are a significant and welcome addition to Brethren studies. This “peculiar people” began in Schwarzenau/Eder (Germany) in 1708 with the rebaptism (by trine immersion) of eight adult believers, thus breaking with the state Reformed and Lutheran churches. The Brethren emerged out of radical Pietism but throughout their history have been strongly influenced by Anabaptism. Many of the first converts immigrated to the New World between 1719 and 1740 where they soon became known as “Dunkers” (or more vulgarly, “Dunkards”). They grew rapidly and spread across the United States, but they also experienced troublesome schisms. The largest wing, the Church of the Brethren, became well known in the twentieth century for their mission efforts, peace witness, relief and service ministries, and ecumenical work.

Scholars of communal movements will recognize the Brethren in several contexts. In eighteenth century Europe the Inspirationists (Amana Society) developed out of the same radical Pietist and social milieu—the two groups

had numerous contacts and were in competition for converts (Durnbaugh, 17, 31-32, 37-38). In colonial America, the seventh-day Ephrata Society was begun by a former Brethren minister, Conrad Beissel, and this schism deeply divided the struggling movement (Durnbaugh, 87-102). Many practices of the Ephrata Cloister such as trine immersion baptism, love feasts, and Biblical nonresistance, came from the Brethren. More recently, between the 1950s and 1970s, students at the Brethren theological school (Bethany Theological Seminary) have been attracted to communal Anabaptism. Several families eventually joined Eberhard Arnold's Society of Brothers (Bruderhof). Reba Place Fellowship, one of America's largest urban communities, has a joint affiliation with both the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonite Church. (Durnbaugh, 543-544).

At first glance the reader might mistake Bowman's *Brethren Society* for another in the fine series of books on the plain churches issued by John Hopkins University Press: *Amish Society*, *Hutterite Society*, and *Mennonite Society*. These books provide a sociological analysis across a wide range of human relationships, such as marriage and family, education, economic patterns, and so forth. Bowman's study is quite different. It is a cultural analysis (in the manner of Robert Bellah and Robert Wuthnow) of the "changes that have completely transformed the Brethren since 1850" from a narrow, plain peculiar sect (thus the subtitle) into a mainstream denomination (20).

The book is divided into three sections. Part I describes in broad strokes Brethren origins and the culture of nonconformity that had developed by the mid-nineteenth century. Part II explores "pathways beyond plainness" in which the faithfulness, unity, nonconformity and authority of the church—all highly valued ideals—were challenged. The author examines tensions not only over new evangelism efforts (including salaried evangelists and gospel hymnody) and the dress question, but also over such moral issues as temperance and the use of tobacco. Part III is a penetrating analysis of the changes that have taken place since the "Old Order" and "Progressive" divisions of 1881-1883.

One of the most valuable chapters in the entire study is in this third part, aptly titled "Brethren Cultural Transformation [Ch. 14]." It is a striking assessment of the "symbolic bridging" and "symbolic translation"—the author's terms—of how Brethren in the early decades of the twentieth century sought to "overhaul their culture without the sensation of having abandoned their religious birthright" (344). Brethren leaders worked to revise the church's history, repeal official minutes, alter the ministry and the authority patterns in the local church, and rewrite their language of moral values—all as an accommodation to popular religion. For example, the long cherished tenet of "no force in religion" (the state cannot compel religious loyalty) and "noncreedalism" (no formal creed) were transformed into respect for "individual conscience." The traditional understanding of nonconformity to

the world was repackaged as “the simple life” (expressed through outward behaviors that lifted up a rejection of materialism and materialistic values). The simple life itself gradually transformed to a subjective attitude toward possessions and their use, and finally into an internal “individual spirituality.”

Bowman’s approach to the topic is original and sweeping, and his research is sound. The writing is often engaging, and Bowman’s conclusions are little short of profound. It is difficult to find fault with such an impressive book. There are points, however, at when the narrative seems to drift. The author spends several pages exploring a possible future name change for the Church of the Brethren (396-399), which is not closely related to this thesis. Or again, an early discussion on the respective contributions of Pietism and Anabaptism to Brethren life was fresh and probing (46-50), but somewhat off the topic. A different editor might have cut the book by a fourth without losing any of its essential impact. In addition, there are a few minor misstatements of fact. For example, there were no congregations in Kansas by mid-century as the text suggests, 95-95. Such imperfections, however, do not detract from this carefully done and insightful study.

Donald F. Durnbaugh’s *Fruit of the Vine* provides the reader with the broad sweep of Brethren history. While, as the author notes, the book is not a comprehensive of the entire Brethren movement, it is nevertheless a thorough and well-balanced treatment of the Church of the Brethren. Approximately half of its 594 pages (13 of 27 chapters) describe the movement from its origins until a painful three-way division in the early 1880s. The remainder surveys the largest branch, the Church of the Brethren, until the 1990s.

With considerable justification Prof. Durnbaugh is widely recognized as the “dean of Brethren historians.” It is unlikely that any other historian, from either within or outside of Brethren tradition, could have produced this splendid volume. His distinguished career teaching church history at three Brethren-related institutions and his thorough grounding in the sources (Durnbaugh has written numerous books and articles, compiled two collections of primary documents, and edited the monumental 3 vol. *Brethren Encyclopedia*) uniquely prepared him to write this history. Moreover, his personal work in the church and observations of many of the events described in the latter twentieth century, make for a sympathetic, sensitive, yet balanced and accurate portrayal. Scholars especially will welcome his attention to detail and appreciate the documentation provided in 56 pages of endnotes.

Although brief, the Preface contains a survey of Brethren historiography. Previous generations of Brethren writers, most notably John S. Flory (346), explained Brethren experience in terms of three eras. The first was the founding up through the Revolutionary War, in which the church attained a high level of cultural achievement. This was followed by a cultural decline, a “wilderness period,” as the church moved west and became increasingly rigid in its practices. The third was a renewal or progressive period that began about

the time of the Civil War and emphasized missions, publications, and education. Durnbaugh has been critical of this tripartite “arise, fall, and revival” viewpoint elsewhere. The *Fruit of the Vine* provides an alternative to this understanding, which becomes apparent with the contents page. The chapters are not divided into thematic parts or sections. For Durnbaugh the Brethren story is without sharp peaks or deep valleys, it is a fluid stream influenced by larger religious, political, and social contexts.

For example, the reader learns that economic factors, not simply the call of religious freedom, prompted Brethren immigration to the New World (59-60) or to work with corporate America (the transcontinental railroads) in colonizing the West (321-322). Another example is Durnbaugh’s care to relate the Brethren to other religious traditions. One might expect to find sections on the Moravians, Mennonites, or Friends (Quakers). But it may be something of a surprise to learn of Brethren contributions in shaping Universalism (168-172), the Disciples of Christ (172-176), the Latter-day Saints (Mormons)(177-180), or Adventist movements (180-183). On a somewhat different note, Brethren were unusual for an Anabaptist people in their support (although not without controversy) for ecumenical work, particularly with the Federal Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and World Council of Churches.

Fruit of the Vine is an extremely well written work. The narrative is developed both chronologically and topically. It is frequently interlaced with anecdotes and character sketches that enliven the narrative and provide insights into the fabric of Brethren life. Clearly Durnbaugh has his favorites, among them Sarah Righter Major, the first female woman preacher, Pennsylvania Governor M. G. Brumbaugh, and Brethren Service and ecumenical advocate M. R. “Bob” Zigler. Topical issues range from migrations, to Dunker entrepreneurs, to gender issues.

There are only very minor flaws in the book and they perhaps reflect more on the publisher than the author. One annoyance is the use of periods (. . .) for spaced ellipses (. . .) to indicate omitted material. There is no bibliography; sources must be gleaned from the notes. Some readers may wonder about sources Durnbaugh consulted but did not reference. There is no table of illustrations—indeed the volume has only a minimum of photos. The book would be greatly improved if more visual aides and illustrations were added. Finally, the index is a disappointment. While it includes many names, it is surprisingly weak on topical subjects, particularly ideas and themes.

Both Durnbaugh and Bowman write with conviction, if not passion. Both sense a historical memory loss among Brethren and these books constitute a heart cry for Brethren to remember and understand their past. But *Brethren Society* and *Fruit of the Vine* are no less valuable to scholars, particularly of Anabaptist and Pietist traditions. They illustrate how a tiny sect was born, matured to make significant contributions to American religious life, yet at the same time were divided and overcome by forces of religious accommodation and acculturation.

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