

The Amish on the Iowa Prairie, 1840 to 1910

STEVEN D. RESCHLY

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Acknowledgements, Appendix, Notes, Indexes. 268pp. ISBN 0-8018-6388-0. \$42.50 hardcover.

Steven Reschly's book on the Iowa Amish between 1840 and 1910, specifically the Amish in Washington and Sharon Townships in Johnson County, is an excellent treatment of this successful, flexible, resourceful religious group. Arriving in Iowa even before statehood, the Amish found the area much to their liking, and, in general, their communities prospered here. But Reschly's book is far more than the story of the two townships as he examines all aspects of Iowa Amish society including their European religious origins, their persistent agricultural system, their patriarchal households, their response to the Civil War, their continual internal conflicts (particularly their struggle with worldliness) and their persistent geographical expansion. Throughout his study, Reschly puts the Amish experience in the broad context of the Amish experience in America; moreover, the author frequently draws on sociological theory to enhance his analysis of Amish behavior.

Every part of this book offers insightful observations about the Amish experience. The Civil War, for example, allowed many Amish families to expand their land holdings. But even with material success, the war produced conflicts within the traditionally pacifist Amish community, such as whether or not to pay the commutation fee to exempt their young men from military service. The Amish agricultural system is examined in depth with Reschly observing that the agricultural system has been the most enduring part of their experience in America. In contrast to that of many non-Amish immigrants who quickly changed their agricultural practices to conform to their American neighbors (which, in turn, led to other changes within their lives), the Amish reversed that process: Within Amish society, agricultural practices remained fairly well intact well into the twentieth century. This was true for both the Old Order and the more reform-minded Amish-Mennonites. Another area of great durability was the Amish system of household formation with its strong emphasis on patriarchal power.

For this reviewer, the most fascinating part of Reschly's study deals with the continual conflict within Amish society. In fact, this book could well have been sub-titled, "The Resolution of Continual Conflict." While some time periods produced more conflict than others, there seemed never to be a time of real harmony. Sometimes the conflict involved Amish families selling land to non-Amish (a clear violation of the Amish sense of community, or what Reschly calls the Amish repertoire of community); sometimes conflict dealt with responses to "sleeping preachers," men who preached in their sleep and attracted great attention in the wider society; and conflicts frequently stemmed from use of modern technology such as the telephone, and whether or not members could own such conveniences. As Reschly succinctly states, the Amish faced the sometimes impossible tasks of maintaining "...the difficult equilibrium among individual choice, communal responsibility, and relations with the dominant American culture." (p. 205) In general, Reschly argues that the Amish have been successful in dealing with conflicts and have demonstrated great flexibility and strong leadership in doing so.

While some scholars have focused primarily on the Old Order rather than on the broad range of Amish-Mennonite groups, Reschly has integrated the experiences of what he terms the tradition-minded Amish (eventually known as the Old Order) and the change minded Amish-Mennonites. In fact, one theme is the effort these two groups expended to remain integrated, an effort that eventually failed. This broad approach of covering both the tradition- and the reform-minded groups, provides greater breadth of treatment, but sometimes leads to confusion. Nowhere does Reschly present a clear, explicit discussion of the development of the most traditional group, the Old Order (the group most Americans are familiar with today), and the major ways in which they came to differ from the Amish-Mennonite groups.

In general, Reschly's study of the Iowa Amish provides a much-needed work on the group's history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is apparent that Reschly brings to this study an in-depth understanding of Amish-Mennonite religious history, and it makes for a rich, interpretative account. This is an important contribution to our understanding of American religious communal societies.

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