Leaving the Amish

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1 Introduction

Contrary to the persistent myth that they are dying out, the Amish population in North America continues to grow at a rapid pace. Numbering over 330,000 in thirty-one states and four Canadian provinces, the Amish population doubles every twenty years (Young Center 2018; Donnermeyer et al. 2013). While over 60 percent of the Amish still reside in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, home to the four largest Amish settlements, population pressures are increasingly resulting in out-migration to areas where land prices are more affordable. Because the Amish do not actively seek converts, this population surge is a result of two major forces—large family sizes and a high retention rate. Though family size differs by affiliation, Amish families still average approximately five children. At the same time, the retention rate is at an all-time high. Fully 85 percent of Amish youth get down on their knees in front of their congregation and pledge to uphold the *Ordnung*, or unwritten code of conduct, of their local church district (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013).

Less visible in this overall picture are the approximately 15 percent of Amish youth who leave the community. Like other Anabaptist groups, the Amish require youth to make a conscious decision to join the church at some point after they reach “the age of accountability,” usually age sixteen, and enter the period known as *rumspringa*, where parental supervision is relaxed. The focus on adult baptism arose during the Radical Reformation in the early 1500s as a sign that believers had made a “conscious decision to follow Christ and form a church apart from the state” (Nolt 2003: 12). Because the state church used infant baptism as a means of controlling the population, however, it saw adult baptism as a grave threat to its legitimacy. The persecution of Anabaptists over the next century—as many as 2500 were killed—was a key factor in their subsequent migration to the U.S. in the 1700s (followed by another wave in the 1800s) at the invitation of the Quaker governor of Pennsylvania, William Penn (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner and Nolt 2013: 24). Because adult baptism remains a cornerstone tenet of the Amish faith, the individuals who decide not to join the church, or who join but later decide to leave, provide a useful mirror on the rapidly changing relationship between the Amish and the outside world.

Two recent changes in the social fabric of Amish society are of particular importance in understanding the experiences of leavers. The first involves the unprecedented diversity now seen in the Amish world. Just a century ago, there were only a few Amish groups, whereas now more than 40 non-fellowshipping Amish affiliations exist in North America. These affiliations, or “clusters of church districts linked by social and spiritual bonds,” lie on a spectrum of accommodation with the world, which the Amish themselves refer to as “high” and “low” (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013: 12). Lower affiliations, such as the Swartzentruber Amish, generally observe stricter separation from the world, whereas the higher groups, such as the New Order Amish, have made more compromises with technology and “emphasise a more personal and reflective religious experience” (Hurst and McConnell 2010: 35).

Alongside this landscape of religious fracture, a significant transformation in the occupational structure of Amish society has taken place. Over the past fifty years, Amish heads of household have left farming in droves, mostly to start their own small businesses or, to a lesser extent, to work in non-Amish factories. This “mini-industrial revolution” (Kraybill and Nolt 2004: vii) has in turn spawned growing socioeconomic differentiation within Amish communities, as well as diversification in health care and educational choices. In spite of these far-reaching changes in the very fabric of Amish society, however, recent ethnographic studies of Amish settlements in key Midwestern states have painted a portrait of enormous vitality (Meyers and Nolt 2005; Johnson-Weiner 2010; Hurst and McConnell, 2010; Kraybill 2001). The number of speakers of Pennsylvania Dutch, the Germanic-derived dialect spoken by most Amish, is growing exponentially, even though Pennsylvania Dutch has not been refreshed by later waves of immigration since the late eighteenth century (Louden 2016).

Based on a review of earlier and more recent studies on leaving the Amish, this chapter argues that as the Amish community itself has become more heterogeneous and prosperous, the ways of leaving have become equally diverse. Early academic studies of departure from the Amish focused, on the one hand, on describing the cultural logic of rumspringa, baptism, excommunication and shunning and, on the other hand, on establishing, quantitatively, the predictors of apostasy. More recent studies have tried to clarify the motivations for and the process of leaving and to relate the different experiences of leaving to baptismal status, affiliation, and gender. While central themes can be identified as running through many Amish experiences of leaving, there is no one path or master narrative that captures the former Amish experience.

2 Previous Research and Empirical Material

Unfortunately, the general public has come to understand rumspringa primarily through the lens of popular culture caricatures of the Amish. Lucy Walker's (2002) documentary, *The Devil's Playground*, spotlighted northern Indiana teens, for whom rumspringa emerged as a non-stop party, replete with alcohol, drugs, and sex. The portrayals were widely criticised by Amish scholars who pointed out that rumspringa does not always equate with wild behaviour (Stevick 2014). This did nothing to stem the tide of reality television shows, however, where former Amish have gained fame and notoriety through shows such as UPN's *Amish in the City*, TLC's *Breaking Amish*, and National Geographic's *Amish: Out of Order*. Similarly, Amish-themed romance novels often turn on a plot line involving excommunication and shunning, yet they routinely overstate the frequency of shunning, the types of infractions that lead to shunning, and the severity of the punishment (Weaver-Zercher 2013: 205–209). Such superficial and often misleading accounts in the print and visual media do little to clarify the motives or the experience of those who choose to leave the faith.

Earlier scholarly studies tended to analyze both rumspringa and excommunication in functionalist terms and from the perspective of the church community, rarely delving into the perceptions and experiences of so-called defectors themselves. Hostetler (1993) describes apostasy in terms of “deviant behaviour” and partially blames evangelical churches who prey on the Amish for enticing youth to leave. Reiling (2002) also uses the frame of deviance but concludes that it is “culturally sanctioned” and leads to strong levels of angst and “negative affective response” when young people try to reconcile expectations of obedience to God and the church with unspoken parental assumptions that they should “sow their wild oats.” Kraybill (2001: 131–141) offers a detailed description of the process for excommunicating and shunning adult members who have taken their vows and then broken them. A series of minor confessions and punishments usually precede formal excommunication; the hope is that wayward individuals will see the error in their choices and decide to make things right again. An individual who is formally excommunicated, however, faces specific “rituals of shaming,” such as not being allowed to eat at the same table or accept gifts from other church members. Kraybill argues that shunning and excommunication are powerful forms of social control that place loyalty to God and the church over family ties, notwithstanding the inconsistencies in enforcement.

Kraybill's early work (2001) on rumspringa also views it as a liminal period of rowdiness that seems contrary to Amish beliefs but in fact serves a “redeeming

function” in their social system. Because the large majority of youth eventually settle down and join the church, Kraybill (2001: 186) argues that “flirting with the world serves as a form of social immunisation.” Zeroing in on the issue of whether Amish youth have a “free choice,” he argues that they do not because they are funneled towards joining church by their upbringing and other social forces around them. He concludes, however, that “the illusion of choice” plays a critical role in fostering obedience to the church rules later in life because members see themselves as having made a choice. Mazie (2005), a political philosopher, takes up the Amish “quandary of exit” as an instructive case for how liberal states ought to deal with conservative minorities. He affirms the notion that the cards are stacked against Amish youth leaving because they have to give up so much in the process, especially family ties, and have very little preparation for transitioning to non-Amish life.

In a somewhat different vein, early quantitative studies of predictors of defection were useful in shedding light on precisely which youth were at greatest risk of leaving. Meyers’ (1994) study in northern Indiana was the first to demonstrate statistically what all ultra-conservative Amish intuitively know: degree of isolation from non-Amish is an important factor in shaping retention rates. Meyers found that residential proximity to towns was positively correlated with likelihood of defection, presumably because of greater access to other plausibility structures. As Stevick (2014: 346) points out, however, it is difficult to know whether influences from the town or the characteristics of families who choose to live near towns are at work here. Meyers also found that Amish children who attend public schools are twice as likely to leave as those who attend parochial schools and that males are significantly more at risk for leaving than females, in part because they have more contact with the outside world as members of sports teams and assisting in family businesses. These findings corroborate the idea that the degree of physical separation from the world on the part of the family and the affiliation matters.

Other factors shown to correlate with retention rates include occupation, church leadership status, birth order, and family wealth. Greksa and Korbin (2002) found that farming families and families of ordained leaders in the Geauga settlement in Ohio have higher retention rates for their children, an outcome they attribute to a more conservative orientation. In addition, Meyers (1994) found that the oldest sibling is more likely to leave, while Greksa and Korbin (2002) discovered that if the oldest sibling in the family leaves, a younger sibling is four times more likely to follow suit. Using the 1988 Amish Directory and local data on real estate values, Choy’s (2016) study of Holmes County, Ohio, showed that children from wealthier Amish families were more likely to remain Amish than those from poorer families.

Finally, the emergence of an entire genre of narratives of leaving written by former Amish has allowed a glimpse into the diverse ways they reconstruct and make sense of their experiences. Among the earliest and most controversial memoirs was Ruth Irene Garrett's, *Crossing Over*, written by a woman who grew up in a conservative affiliation in Iowa and left the church to marry a divorced man who had worked as her family's taxi driver. Subtitled, *One Woman's Escape from Amish Life*, the book cast a harsh light on the Amish, even describing them as "cult-like" (Garrett 2003). Saloma Furlong's *Why I Left the Amish* is a somewhat more sympathetic account even though she highlights the physical and sexual abuses that may drive some individuals to leave (Furlong 2011). Ira Wagler's (2011) *Growing Up Amish* begins with the assertion that "one shouldn't be condemned for simply craving freedom," and yet his own departure was a protracted affair that involved many false starts before he achieved final separation. In fact, a recurrent theme in these narratives is the emotional difficulty of leaving because parents and extended family go to extraordinary lengths to convince their wayward children to return. One man who tried to leave related that when his dad found out where he was staying, he came and sat on the back steps of the house all night to persuade him to come home. Because most memoirs have been written by excommunicated former Amish from relatively conservative communities, they tend to accentuate the conflicts that unfold around their departures.

3 New Empirical Findings Focusing on "Leaving Religion"

Building on the foundation of early studies, but with sharper conceptual and methodological tools, a new round of research by Hurst and McConnell (2010), Stevick (2014), Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2013), Faulkner and Dinger (2014), and Foster (2016) has considerably improved our understanding of overall patterns of defection, as well as the diverse processes and experiences of leaving that can be seen across the Amish spectrum. Hurst and McConnell (2010) discovered that in all but the most conservative affiliations the decision to leave before baptism is treated much more positively than the decision to leave after having made one's vows. Focusing in further on baptismal status, Faulkner and Dinger (2014) found the narratives of those who left after baptism revealed a great deal of role conflict (see Ebaugh 1988), as well as a perceived lack of control. In contrast, those who left before baptism, though they were typically unmarried and had more truncated social networks, followed trusted individuals who led them to see that the benefits of leaving outweighed the costs; as a result, they decided they could no longer be passive followers.

Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2014: 162) explore the important question of why the overall rate of defection has fallen over the past 40–50 years at precisely the same time that the Amish were leaving farming in large numbers. They point out that the historical rise in the retention rate corresponded with the growth of Amish parochial schools and the end of military draft, both of which reinforced separation from the world at a critical time in late adolescent life. The rise of retention rates nationally was further supported by the successful entry of many Amish into small businesses. Young people saw that they could remain Amish and make a living that allowed for disposable income without having to work the long hours that come with life on the farm.

A more nuanced understanding of how Amish retention rates vary by affiliation has also emerged in recent years. Quantitative studies of leaving the Amish are made possible because of the existence of published Amish Directories for each settlement that list a wide variety of household information, including the baptism status of all children. Using the Holmes County, Ohio, Amish Directory, Friedrich (2001: 96) found that individuals from New Order families were four times more likely to no longer be Amish than those from Old Order families, and, in turn, those from Old Order families were three times more likely to leave than those from Andy Weaver affiliations. More recently, Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2014: 163) found that defection rates in the Holmes County settlement varied from 2.6 percent for the Andy Weaver affiliations to 25.1 percent for the Old Order and 40.4 and for the New Order. In general, these results seem to support the argument that the more conservative the *Ordnung*, the higher the retention rate because strict churches demand more of their members (Iannacone 1994). Yet there can be considerable differences within a given affiliation in retention rates, depending on the church district and settlement.

The diverse motives and processes for leaving have also come into clearer focus. Hurst and McConnell (2010: 84) found the desire for fewer lifestyle restrictions and for a more intense and personal religious experience to be the two dominant motivations for leaving in the Holmes County, Ohio, settlement. The latter motivation seems counter-intuitive to those who assume the Amish are already “hyper-religious,” but some Amish are attracted to the ideas of interpreting the bible themselves, being “saved” through faith alone, and establishing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Though such ideas are considered “strange beliefs” by most Amish—one New Order man criticised the “born again approach” as “fantastic emotionalism”—they are promoted by surrounding evangelical churches who actively proselytise the Amish.

Foster (2016), on the other hand, found that while four of her fourteen respondents left because they “had been saved,” frustrations with the rules of

their respective church districts were a central motivation for leaving. For some, a key turning point, such as a new restriction on technology, pushed them to make the final break. McConnell and Hurst (2010), for example, relate the story of an ex-Andy Weaver woman whose father had come to her house to cut her countertop in half because it was one foot longer than the 8-foot maximum allowed by the church. She recounted, "So then in my mind I was just like, 'Well, if this little piece of countertop is going to take me to Hell, I'm going to leave the Amish and drive a car and have some fun and go to Hell' That was my decision." Faulkner and Dinger (2014: 122–123) raise the possibility of gender differences in the process and perception of leaving. In their study, females who left harboured an intense resentment of specific rules that they saw as arbitrary and unfairly limiting their autonomy, while males expressed a more generalised sentiment of spiritual and philosophical conflicts.

The terms of separation can also be much more amicable, however. Foster (2016) found that most of those who left Old Order Ohio communities before baptism experienced a distancing from their families at first. Over time, however, they gradually improved their relations with their parents and siblings, sometimes even joining in family events or assisting their Amish kin in matters ranging from transportation to navigating the medical and legal systems. Most also stayed relatively close to the area where they grew up, did not pursue further formal education, and joined Mennonite or evangelical churches. Males overwhelmingly stayed in the manual trades they had mastered while growing up Amish, while females focused on mothering and homemaking. In addition, only a few of Foster's fourteen respondents were afraid of being "caught out," referring to the belief that a person's soul is at risk of going to hell if they die in the window of time between reaching the age of accountability and joining the church. They were more concerned that their departure would hurt their parents, a theme also mentioned in previous studies (Stevick 2014; Hurst and McConnell 2010).

Finally, the border between the Amish and the non-Amish is complex and multifaceted. In addition to religious differences, Faulkner and Dinger (2014: 109) found that it includes "different social networks and cultural traditions, practices, and ideologies, such as language, styles of dress, modes of transportation, and values." Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital, Foster similarly discovered that her respondents faced many practical challenges of adjusting to different expectations surrounding transportation, dress, and language in the outside world. Those with more robust social networks of non-Amish and former Amish were more prepared than others to

meet those challenges. Because such stories of a relatively uneventful transition to English life do not make for good sales material, they often go unreported.

4 Conclusion

Taken together, recent scholarship suggests that the institutional structures and processes surrounding the decision to leave the Amish are complex, flexible, and changing, which allows for a diverse set of experiences among leavers. Just as there are lots of ways to be Amish, there are many ways to leave the Amish. Faulkner and Dinger (2014) suggest that future studies take an intersectionality approach in order to capture the inter-relations between occupation, gender, affiliation, and baptismal status—to which we might add social class, type of education (public or parochial), age, marital status, and birth order. The presence or absence of non-Amish friends and the social and cultural capital they possess also shape the integration of former Amish into the wider society. In general, scholarship on leaving the Amish has moved beyond functionalist accounts that accentuate the perspective of the church community to more nuanced studies that focus on diversity, conflict, and change and attempt to understand the diverse, subjective experiences of leavers.

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