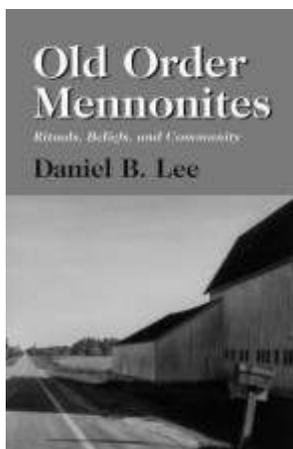


Old Order Mennonites: Rituals, Beliefs, and Community

(Burnham, 2000, 167 pages)

by Daniel B. Lee



Reviewed by Kenneth Westhues¹

The public importance of this book is underscored by headlines in the Canadian press even as I write. In the course of systematic factual description of the social life of a rural community of Weaverland Mennonites in New York state, Lee notes that corporal punishment is a routine method for disciplining children, the “standard remedy” at home and in the parochial school. By the biblical “rod” is understood a paddle with holes drilled in it, a strap or hose, or a doubled-over length of plastic jump rope.

In June 2001, when members of a similar community in rural Ontario refused to promise child-welfare authorities never to use this method of punishment again, the seven children of one couple were forcibly taken away, kicking and screaming, and placed in foster care. When public protest failed to secure the children’s return, a hundred other members of the community, mainly mothers and their children, fled to Mexico. The latest news is that some are seeking refugee status in the United States, on grounds of religious persecution in Canada. The dispute will be with us for a very long time.

Lee does not say whether he would spare the rod, nor whether he favours letting these fundamentalist Christians refuse to spare it, but the net effect of his book is to enhance readers’ understanding and appreciation of the Weaverland community’s way of life. Lee is not himself a Mennonite, though his conservative Protestant background, knowledge of German, and love of the countryside predisposed him to a sympathetic view. His two and a half years of participant observation began when his neighbour’s cow, which had been supplying Lee’s family with milk, went dry, and Lee ventured farther down the

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road to a Mennonite family in search of a dependable milk supply. “My admiration for Weaverland Mennonites,” he writes, “precludes any desire to alter the characteristics of their community” (13).

On the one hand, Lee’s book is a straightforward ethnography of a *Gemeinschaft* continuing to exist in the midst of North American *Gesellschaft*. He sketches its historical origins, its economic and social underpinnings, its religious rituals, its methods of social control, and the church rules. In an especially illuminating penultimate chapter, he compares the Weaverland community to a less traditional Eastern Mennonite congregation nearby, which has drawn some members away from Weaverland.

Lee’s prose is crisp and fluent. He has a fine eye for detail. A dozen well-chosen photographs round out a clear and informative presentation. Readers come away with an understanding that these “different people” are as real and human as the rest of us.

On the other hand, and more than most community studies, this book addresses fundamental issues in social theory, and deserves the attention of any sociologist, whether interested in Mennonites or not, concerned with the basic features of life in society. Lee attends in particular to the basic concepts and assumptions of Durkheim and Weber. For understanding how the Weaverland community differs from its more modern neighbor, for example, Lee uses Weber’s concept of rationality, seizing upon one after another rule or folkway of the Eastern Mennonites to demonstrate their more rational approach to religion and life.

This book’s key theoretical contribution is about the relative importance of shared beliefs or interpretations and shared behaviours or rituals, for social cohesion. The importance of shared beliefs, Lee maintains, has been generally overstated. Orthopraxis (following the accepted practices and rituals) does not require orthodoxy (following the accepted interpretations). Lee shows, for example, that members of the Weaverland community held widely divergent understandings of the kiss of peace, its meaning and origin, and were not even sure of the correct words to be said during it. As one man told him, “I just say, ‘May the Lord . . .’ and mumble something.” The important thing, the man said, “is to make it look right.”

The basic sociological premise Lee defends is in the quote from Durkheim with which he concludes the book, that “the real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge, nor to add to the conceptions which we owe to science . . . , but rather, it is to make us act, to aid us to live” (157; the quote is from *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Free Press, 1965, p. 463f). True enough. But what of sociology? Can it, too, “aid us to live”? More specifically, to return to the topic of the Biblical rod, what guidance does Lee’s book yield on the pressing policy issues surrounding

fundamentalist Christianity in our time and place? Should children be taken away from parents who believe it is okay to hit them with a paddle? Should Christian dissenters from prevailing secular ideologies be allowed to home-school their children, or place them in religious schools? Should the state subsidize education of this kind? What about when the anti-birth control, anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, pronatalist teaching of groups like the Weaverland Mennonites becomes a political force strong enough to threaten the moral relativism espoused by postmodern elites?

Lee's concluding characterization of the Weaverland community as "a group of people who know how to live" connotes a generally sympathetic attitude, but it skirts the tough questions of public policy. This is not altogether Lee's fault. Science, as Durkheim conceived of it, is about thinking, not acting, about knowledge as opposed to life. Only by moving beyond the Durkheimian conception, I suspect, toward a more engaged, pragmatist kind of sociology can we produce knowledge of direct relevance to questions of practice and policy.

In the meanwhile, this book deserves respect for its thoughtful documentation of the nonconformist way of life to which some of our fellow citizens are fervently attached.