
NOTES AND REVIEWS

Lorenzo Canás Bottos, *Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia. Nation Making, Religious Conflict and Imagination of the Future*. Leiden, Boston: Brill 2008, 216 pages.

Mennonites are Catholics of German origin who belong to the Anabaptists, i.e. people who reject child baptism. Together with Amish and Hutterites, Mennonites not only have their own concept of adult baptism but are also known as a group that tries to maintain their own religious identity, which is tightly linked to the conservative concept of lifestyle. These groups are believed to maintain the 'old' lifestyle, i.e. the way people lived in the 18th century. Such an image is often supported by the movie industry. Amish and Mennonites are romanticised in many movies as people who drive horse carts, work hard, maintain a high morality and dress as people used to dress 300 years ago.

These stereotypes are true to certain extent. The Professor of Sociocultural Anthropology of Tallinn University and the Associate Professor of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology Lorenzo Canás Bottos gives us an insight into the closed world of Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia. For several years he has studied the so-called Old Colony Mennonites in these countries and wrote an impressive monograph based on his PhD thesis defended at the University of Manchester. The Old Colony Mennonites are the conservative wing of the Mennonites, who are devoted to the "pure Christian religion". This devotion is measured by the adoption or rejection of mainstream society's consumer goods and lifestyle, participation or non-participation in the social life of the state and the following or non-following of Mennonite religious rules and dogmas.

After reading the book, the reader understands that being a Mennonite is much more

than living in a closed community without electricity and cars, following a strict dress code and reading the Bible. Old Colony people are those who refuse to be 'modern' citizens of the state in which they live. Crucial to the maintenance of the coherence of the community is the relationship to the 'worldly' state. To maintain their lifestyle and identity, Old Colony Mennonites are in constant motion. In the second chapter, the author gives an overview of how Mennonites as a Catholic minority group were established and have developed since the 16th century. The reason for their constant migration was their ambitious relationship to the state. From Tsarist Russia to modern Latin American states (via the USA and Canada) Mennonites were used by state institutions as hard working people who agreed to go and develop unsettled regions. Mennonites wanted to maintain their separation from the earthly world and countries needed people to go into remote regions. Over time, countries began to exercise pressure on Mennonite communities in order to integrate them into the nation state. As a rule, some inhabitants of Mennonite communities refused to adapt to state society. First of all, Mennonites resisted states' attempts to introduce state education in their communities and participate in the life of the civil society. The author shows that worldwide migration of Mennonites is caused by the wish of radical Mennonites to maintain their autonomous lifestyle. When Mennonite communities in Canada and the USA became too integrated into these states, radical members left for South America. The movement of Mennonites on the South American continent is caused by the same tendency – some members found that their colony's life was changed too much and in order to maintain their "pure religion" based lifestyle they established a new colony.

In this book, the author discusses how

being a "true Christian" is, in the Mennonite ideology, related to the maintenance of lifestyle. As in most such cases, maintenance of authenticity is very controversial strategy. Argentinean and Bolivian Mennonites participate in their states' capitalist economies by selling milk and other agricultural products. They trade with local entrepreneurs and consume more than one expects. Despite adopting modern consumer goods and tools, Mennonites keep their distance from the social and cultural life of the state. The author describes convincingly how the group of middlemen (both Mennonites and Argentineans or Bolivians) function to keep the community as a group apart from the society. At the same time Mennonites are very creative in manipulating products of the modern world and to adapt these into their own world. A very good example is the usage of tractors. Contrary to stereotypes, Mennonites use tractors on their fields. But they take away the original tyres and replace them with iron wheels in order to prevent people using tractors on roads. This keeps young people in the settlement and makes it difficult for them to travel to towns.

However, ideological integrity is more important than material integrity for Argentinean and Bolivian Mennonites. Mennonites have become a *jus sanguinis* group who do not accept outsiders. To be Mennonite one has to be born in the Mennonite family and follow rules of "real Christians". The author shows that the interpretations of these rules vary from colony to colony and my cause conflicts even within one colony. Colonies have developed their successful methods of social control to motivate colony members to obey elders. There are many different modes of group pressure and if this does not function, a person can be excluded from the colony. Surprisingly, colony elders seem

to have more problems with people who claim that the life of colonies has become too worldly, than with rebellious youths who want to dance and have fun. By following such conflicts, the author show how internal integrity is maintained in Mennonite colonies.

This book should be interesting not only for scholars focused strictly on South America. The book discusses how religion becomes a lifestyle within a closed community. Moreover, readers interested how identities are built, kept and negotiated will find this monograph useful and interesting reading.

Aimar Ventsel