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# The West Nickel Mines Amish School Murders and the Cultural Fetishization of “Amish Forgiveness”

Darcy Metcalfe

Department of Religious Studies, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, USA; darcy-metcalfe@uiowa.edu

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**Abstract:** In the days and weeks following the West Nickel Mines Amish school murders, hegemonic U.S. cultural discourse largely fetishized the Amish response of forgiveness in revealing ways. Within this discourse, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were referenced in articles and commentaries which sought to weigh the moral value of forgiveness in response to extreme violence. In this way, understandings of Amish forgiveness were largely “strip-mined” from the Nickel Mines community and “transported wholesale” to other counter-cultural settings. In dominant U.S. capitalistic and consumeristic culture, Amish forgiveness quickly became a fluctuating material commodity that was fetishized in ways which revealed the destabilized moral consciousness of a nation. Dominant cultural discourse exposed this destabilization while it also worked to interrogate it. I conclude that the fetishization of forgiveness following the Amish school murders reflected collective concerns that reached far beyond the immediate context of the Nickel Mines Amish community. The U.S. cultural fetishization of forgiveness revealed, instead, a cultural consciousness that desperately sought relief from the chaos and confusion of what it means to be a citizen of nation that exists in and by the normativity of extreme violence.

**Keywords:** Amish; forgiveness; revenge; Fetishism; violence; September 11; Religious Ethics

## 1. Introduction

My primary argument is that hegemonic U.S. cultural discourse fetishized the Amish response of forgiveness in the days and weeks following the West Nickel Mines Amish school murders. The fetishization of forgiveness was a phenomenon that was produced, in part, from vital ethical indeterminacies of the word “forgiveness” as it moved across cultural boundaries of contrary determinations: Amish culture and dominant U.S. culture. This fetishization revealed a cultural consciousness that desperately sought relief from the chaos and confusion of what it means to be a citizen of nation that exists in and by the normativity of extreme violence. What U.S. cultural discourse underestimated or ignored in the weeks following the Amish school murders also reveals the potency of the normativity of violence within dominant culture.

In order to clearly articulate these contentions, it is helpful first to begin with a brief review of what happened on the day of the Amish school murders, followed by notable responses in the days immediately following.

## 2. The West Nickel Mines Amish School Murders

On 2 October 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV executed a calculated attack on young girls in a rural Amish community. He strategically overtook a one-room schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Prior to the attacks that morning, he walked his children to the school bus stop, left suicide notes for each family member at his home, and then filled a borrowed truck with supplies he had stored for the murders.

Roberts bought supplies throughout the previous week and kept them in a shed near his home. That morning he stopped at an Amish-owned Valley Hardware store to purchase plastic zip-ties to add to his supply stash. In the borrowed truck, he packed a 9-mm handgun, a 12-gauge shotgun, a 30-06 rifle, a stun gun, six-hundred rounds of ammunition, a tube of lubricating jelly, a hammer, nails, wrenches, binoculars, earplugs, batteries, a flashlight, a candle, tape, two-by-four and two-by six wood planks, and an extra set of clothing.<sup>1</sup>

Around 10:15, Roberts backed his truck up to the front entrance of the schoolhouse, entered with a semi-automatic handgun, and ordered everyone to the floor. The teacher managed to escape with her mother, who was visiting for the day, and ran to a nearby farm for help. Roberts then bound ten girls with zip ties, ages six to thirteen, and bound them to one another. He ordered every boy and every adult to leave. He pulled the blinds and nailed the doors shut.

Roberts then called his wife. He confessed to her that when he was twelve-years-old he had molested two female relatives between the ages of three and five. He told his wife that he had recently began fantasizing about molesting young girls again (Spicher Kasdorf 2007, p. 329). However, police arrived at the school before Roberts had opportunity to carry out his plans of sexual assault. At 11:05, gunfire rang out from inside the schoolhouse and police officers rushed the building. Before Roberts turned his handgun on himself, he shot all the bound girls at close range. Five of the girls died. The other five girls, although critically injured, survived.

The immediate response of this Amish community to these murderous acts was forgiveness as it is commonly practiced in Old Order Amish faith and history (Kueny and Cardenas 2018). In this article, I will explore the U.S. cultural fetishization of forgiveness in the days and weeks following the Amish school murders. I explore why and how “forgiveness” became a fetishized cultural commodity of this event and how the destabilized moral consciousness of a nation uniquely shaped the cultural discourse surrounding these murders.

### 3. “Amish Forgiveness”

Forgiveness is a virtue that is defined differently by various scholars and distinct fields of study. Aristotle, in his discussion of virtues and vices relative to anger, asserts that a virtuous person “is not revengeful, but rather tends to forgive” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle and Brown 2009, IV, 1126a1). An Aristotelian ideal perceives forgiveness to be a virtue as it is a mean of anger when anger is governed by reason. This idea of forgiveness as virtuous persists in many contemporary understandings of forgiveness.

Psychologist Everett L. Worthington, Jr. studies forgiveness and notes that forgoing revenge is often a primary component of forgiveness. Worthington gives specific attention to practices of forgiveness within religious traditions. He suggests that a person who values religion tends to perceive the world through religious values (Worthington 1988). For the Amish, forgiveness is a highly valued and foundational religious virtue that is vital to how the Amish perceive the world. Worthington uses the terms “decisional” and “emotional” forgiveness to describe the different ways forgiveness is often extended. He writes, “Decisional forgiveness promises not to act in revenge or avoidance, but it doesn’t necessarily make a person feel less forgiving” (Worthington 2003, p. 53). Working in tandem, “emotional forgiveness” involves a long-term process that includes replacing harmful and detrimental emotions connected to the offender with positive emotions. For the Nickel Mines Amish, one may contend that decisional forgiveness included the religious community’s initial commitment to the virtue of forgiveness, while emotional forgiveness includes an ongoing work of forgiveness which addresses the emotions that remain. Worthington maintains that with “decisional forgiveness”

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<sup>1</sup> Details of these events are primarily taken from *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, and from “‘Amish Forgiveness,’ Silence, and the West Nickel Mines School Shooting,” by Julia Spicher Kasdorf.

a person initially decides to forgo any claim to revenge and chooses, instead, to treat the offender in a way that values that person's humanity (Worthington 2003, p. 53).

Forgiveness is commonly defined as what takes place when a person who has been wronged or injured chooses to forgo payback or any claim to revenge upon the offender (Kraybill Donald B. and Weaver-Zercher 2007, p. 134). In the case of the West Nickel Mines Amish school murders, the Amish community immediately chose to forgo any form of payback. Instead, "Gracious words came first, quickly followed by gracious acts—words and acts offered in good faith that kind feelings would eventually replace bitter ones" (Kraybill Donald B. and Weaver-Zercher 2007, p. 134).

Within hours of the attack, members of the Amish community visited members of Roberts' family, verbally stating their forgiveness of Roberts with an assurance of the Amish community's commitment to accompany the family in this time of immense grief. When Roberts' family gathered that Saturday for his burial at the cemetery of Georgetown United Methodist Church, more than half of the seventy-five mourners were Amish (Kraybill Donald B. and Weaver-Zercher 2007, p. 45). A relationship between the Roberts family and this Amish community existed long before these horrific events, and this relationship continued to grow and extend far beyond the events of 2 October.

#### 4. A Nation's Response to "Amish Forgiveness"

Within the first week of the West Nickel Mines Amish school attack, over two-thousand global news stories appeared, many which focused upon the forgiveness extended by this Amish community (Doblmeier Martin 2007). Religious leaders and writers in the United States quickly offered commentaries that both scrutinized and praised the Amish community's response. The overall spirit of the commentaries was one of praise, but there were also many strong critiques of the moral nature of such a seemingly instantaneous practice of forgiveness.

Many of the articles that appeared in the weeks that followed the murders grappled with various religious and moral concerns and questions. Does the Amish Christian demand to forgive conflict with moral imperatives that secure a thriving and safe society? Is forgoing the right to revenge such a violent and egregious offense morally suspect? Can such practices of forgiveness be genuine in nature? Within these articles, diverse perspectives on forgiveness were offered based on differing ethical persuasions. Religion was often evoked in support of various ethical stances.

Diana Butler Bass wrote a brief article ten days after the tragedy entitled, "What if the Amish Were in Charge of the War on Terror?" in which she critiques the morality of the U.S. war response to the 11 September attacks. She writes:

What if the Amish were in charge of the war on terror? What if, on the evening of Sept. 12, 2001, we had gone to Osama bin Laden's house (metaphorically, of course, since we didn't know where he lived!) and offered him forgiveness? What if we had invited the families of the hijackers to the funerals of the victims of 9/11? What if a portion of The September 11th Fund had been dedicated to relieving poverty in a Muslim country? What if we dignified the burial of their dead by our respectful grief?

She continues:

So, here's my modest proposal. We're five years too late for an Amish response to 9/11. But maybe we should ask them to take over the Department of Homeland Security. After all, actively practicing forgiveness and making peace are the only real alternatives to perpetual fear and a multi-generational global religious war.

(Butler Bass 2006)

Butler Bass goes on to praise the Amish community's response of forgiveness as an example of the "Christian practice of forgiveness," as she encourages the U.S. government to follow these Christian practices with direct implementation in foreign policy.

Seven days after the murders, Catholic writer and nun Joan Chittister wrote "What Kind of People Are These?" praising the Amish response as "the Christianity we all profess" but the Amish

practice (Chittister 2006). Like Butler Bass, Chittister compares the Amish response to the Amish school murders to ways the United States chose to respond after 9/11, although she stops short of imploring the U.S. government to follow suite. She writes:

The real problem with the whole situation is that down deep we know that we had the chance to do the same. After the fall of the Twin Towers we had the sympathy, the concern, the support of the entire world.

You can't help but wonder, when you see something like this, what the world would be like today if, instead of using the fall of the Twin Towers as an excuse to invade a nation, we had simply gone to every Muslim country on earth and said, "Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you. We know that this is coming from only a fringe of society, and we ask your help in saving others from this same kind of violence."

"Too idealistic," you say. Maybe. But since we didn't try, we'll never know, will we?

Instead, we have sparked fear of violence in the rest of the world ourselves. So much so, that they are now making nuclear bombs to save themselves. From whom? From us, of course.

(Chittister 2006)

The common reference to 9/11 during the aftermath of the West Nickel Mines Amish school murders is vital to note. Jonathan Kooker details how 11 September was frequently mentioned in news stories and publications that focused specifically on understandings of "Amish forgiveness" (Kooker 2009). The 9/11 reference is especially intriguing when considering the prevalence of school shootings within U.S. culture. In the decade before the Amish school murders, there were many school shootings reported in mainstream media, such as the Columbine High School Massacre (1999), the Thurston High School shooting (1998), the Westside Middle School shooting (1998), the Frontier Middle School shooting (1996), the Sand Diego State University shooting (1996), and the Santana High School Shooting (2001). Twenty days before the Amish school shooting, there was a school shooting at Duquesne University that injured five people. Ten days before there was a school shooting at Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado in which the perpetrator took six girls hostage and sexually assaulted them before killing one of the teenage girls and himself. Six days before, there was another school shooting at Weston High School in Cazenovia, Wisconsin in which the principal was killed. However, these events were not often mentioned in the immediate cultural commentary that sought to connect to the tragedy of the Amish school murders. What was mentioned in cultural discourse more often was 9/11. Why? Given the context of the Amish school murders, at the surface it would seem more plausible for cultural discourse to evoke other similar events of extreme violence in U.S. schools, but this was not the case. Instead, this reference to 9/11 by dominant cultural discourse was consistently evoked primarily to analyze or question the moral merit of forgiveness in extreme circumstances.

The Amish community also referred to 9/11 in the aftermath of the shootings, although the usage was distinct and unlike usage in U.S. cultural discourse. "Amish Searching for Healing, Forgiveness After 'The Amish 9/11'" is an article that was published three days after the school murders (Burke 2006). This article highlights the specific reference of the Nickel Mines Amish community to the school murders as the "Amish 9/11." The Amish community did not reference this event as "the Amish Columbine" or "the Amish Platte Canyon." Instead, the connection was made to 9/11. This distinct reference within the Amish community underscores the magnitude of how the community viewed its own violent violation and devastation. It highlights the cataclysmic nature of how these events were interpreted by the Amish community.

Although U.S. cultural discourse and the Amish community referenced 9/11 in different ways, I contend this shared reference is important to note. The shared reference to 9/11 between two vastly different cultures served as a vital point of connection at which human pain seems to have been translated and its meaning shaped and communicated between Amish and U.S. cultures. The Amish 9/11 reference also reveals the purposely segregated nature of this community within U.S. borders.

While the Amish are U.S. citizens, there is also a degree of “set-apartness” that is important to the community’s way of life. This “set-apartness” creates the space for the community to abide by moral and religious ideals that predominately counter dominant U.S. cultural ideals.

In U.S. cultural discourse, “9/11” was used in the days following the Amish school murders to convey a sense of devastation and loss that seemed inarticulable in any other way. I contend that in this manner, “9/11” was shaped into a unique cultural point of connection across Amish and U.S. cultures. Its usage reflected a shared and palpable sense of violent disorientation and panicked chaos that reached across the boundaries of communities that were largely countercultural. What “9/11” conveyed in this usage was, in part, a shared (albeit very different) experience of seeking meaning and stability after life-altering acts of senseless and extreme violence. The shared experience of disorientation and despair reconfigured the expansive boundaries of these countercultural worlds in a way that viscerally connected people and the materialities of human pain. There was also a shared realization of the need for a change in foundational understandings of what it means “to be” in the world. It was impossible to return to what once was. One Amish fire official who responded to the emergency call on the day of the school murders acknowledged that life could never resume as it once had been. The community had to find “a new normal” in order to continue to live in the world in a way that had meaning (Kraybill Donald B. and Weaver-Zercher 2007, p. 30).

In multiple articles and commentaries in days immediately following the Amish school shootings, “9/11” was configured into a primary point of connection and communication between drastically different cultures. However, the reference that, by far, garnered the most attention in the articles and commentary that followed the murders was “forgiveness.” When used by dominant US. cultural discourse, the reference to 9/11 was primarily used to question the morality of forgiveness in the most violent and horrific circumstances. The word “forgiveness” became the primary material marker of the West Nickel Mines Amish school murders.

One of my primary questions in this article is, “Why?” After all, this is not an unfamiliar response from the Amish community. Amish history is replete with stories of the extreme practice of forgiveness compared to commonly held social standards of practice. In this case, what caused the collective consciousness of a nation to be so captivated, obsessed even, with the practice of forgiveness? What dominant cultural values and moral norms were destabilized and interrogated by the Amish response of forgiveness?

There were so many pivotal points of fact that were largely overlooked or underemphasized by media and social commentary in the days and weeks that immediately followed the Amish school murders. There were numerous significant factors that convened in that tragic day’s events which expose primary contributing components that can converge to create a culture in which such horrors occur. As Julia Spicher Kasdorf observed, this event was a violent crime “against girls who were separated from adults and boys for sexual assault and death” (Spicher Kasdorf 2007, p. 331). However, the prevalence of violence against girls and women, particularly at the hands of white men, was not a topic that garnered much attention. The ease with which Roberts acquired firearms and ammunition was not a topic of concern. The normativity of sexual/physical violence and the exploitation of young girls was mostly a moot point. Rather, the concern of a nation became the practice of “Amish forgiveness.” Why?

## 5. Anabaptist History and Practices: What Was Underestimated in National Discourse

Although the Nickel Mines Amish community’s response of forgiveness is a practice drastically removed from dominant U.S. socio-cultural practices, forgiveness is foundational to what it means to be Amish. The Amish tradition was birthed as part of the Anabaptist tradition during the Reformation in Europe. The Reformation was a time of religious-socio-political-cultural upheaval in which figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to drastically change what they perceived as the powerful and corrupt Catholic Church—the Church from which they would eventually separate. From

these reformers arose another group which sought to move the work of reformation beyond the church institution and more concretely into daily life and community.

This new group believed that only baptism by consent was valid. Child and infant baptism, as practiced in the Catholic and Reformed Church, was declared invalid due to the absence of the individual's capability to consent. These new reformists received the disparaging moniker *Anabaptists*, which means "rebaptizers," and they quickly found themselves condemned as heretics by both Protestant and Catholic church leaders. Although the Anabaptist movement was never large, it accounted for forty to fifty percent of all Western European Christians who were martyred for religious practice during the sixteenth century (Kraybill Donald B. and Weaver-Zercher 2007, p. 70). The Anabaptists eventually sought refuge from persecution in the colonies of the New World.

The ethos of Amish life is captured well in the German word *Gelassenheit*. Roughly translated, *Gelassenheit* means yielding oneself to a higher authority (Amish Studies: The Young Center n.d.). Habits and practices of this religious life and culture include commitment to community rather than individualism; submission and obedience to Christ's commands and church leaders; humility; separation rather than integration into modern society; and non-resistance and peaceful resolution of conflict, which includes the practice of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is much more than a decision, emotion, or process in Amish life and history. Forgiveness is a way of being in the world, which, from the Amish view, is demanded by the Christian faith. This practice of forgiveness is rooted in the belief that in order to be forgiven by God, one must forgive others, no matter how egregious the offense. Old Order Amish communities, such as the Nickel Mines Amish, intentionally instill forgiveness in their children through "multiple networks and strategies" (Kueny and Cardenas 2018, p. 1). Forgiveness is part and parcel of the spirit of peace and love in which the Amish choose to exist and operate in the world.

This history and these specific cultural/moral/religious habits and practices are paramount to understanding the Nickel Mines Amish community's response to the attack and murder of their children. I contend that, in most cases, in the weeks following the murders, the national discourse largely underestimated the countercultural value system from which forgiveness had emerged. The Amish response at Nickel Mines was "not so much the 'best of America' as it was an expression of love by a people who every day challenge many of the values the rest of us hold dear" (Kraybill Donald B. and Weaver-Zercher 2007, p. 177).

As Kasdorf so aptly explains, the responses that come freely and immediately from this Amish community are entirely consistent with deeply ingrained cultural patterns and theological convictions (Spicher Kasdorf 2007, p. 342).

## 6. Conclusions: The Cultural Fetishization of Amish Forgiveness

Hegemonic U.S. cultural discourse fetishized the Amish response of forgiveness in the days and weeks following the West Nickel Mines Amish school murders. The fetishization of forgiveness was a phenomenon that was produced, in part, from ethical indeterminacies of the word "forgiveness" as it moved across cultural boundaries of contrary determinations. In order to develop this argument more fully, it is helpful to give a working definition of "fetish" in this context. Although lengthy, the following definition from William Pietz is particularly beneficial. He writes:

The fetish is always a meaningful fixation on a singular event; it is above all a "historical" object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event. This object is "territorialized" in material space (an earthly matrix), whether in the form of a geographical locality, a marked site on the surface of the human body, or a medium of inscription or configuration defined by some portable or wearable thing . . . This reified, territorialized historical object is also "personalized" in the sense that beyond its status as a collective social object it evokes an intensely personal response from individuals. This intense relation to the individual's experience of his or her own living self through an impassioned response to the fetish object is always incommensurable with (whether in a way that reinforces or undercuts)

the social value codes within which the fetish holds the status of material signifier. It is in these “disavowals” and “perspectives of flight” whose possibility is opened in the clash of this incommensurable difference that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness.

(Pietz 1985, pp. 12–13)

In the days and weeks following the Amish school murders, “forgiveness” became the fixated point of U.S. cultural discourse and the medium of inscription that materially marked this horrific event. In U.S. cultural discourse, “forgiveness” also evoked an intensely “personal” response which highlighted a critical incommensurability of foundational moral codes as they drastically differed between cultures. “Forgiveness” was ultimately a material signifier bound to contraries, and this signifier became the discursive point at which a destabilized nation began to question and interrogate its own values, alongside its own violent nature and aggression in the world. “Forgiveness” in the written word—in the thousands of news articles focused on Amish forgiveness—became a term of Derridean *différance* that revealed and interrogated a disrupted cultural consciousness. The fetishization of forgiveness marked the space where codes and their logics broke down across cultural boundaries.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. war machine promptly pursued a new War on Terror in the name of the nation’s historically claimed values of “freedom,” “liberty,” and “justice.” The exposed fragility of these values awakened a collective cultural consciousness to the reality that even those who wield the greatest degree of militaristic and economic power globally are not immune to the most extreme and devastating acts of violence. Juxtaposed to this U.S. response, the Nickel Mines Amish were a peaceful, and mostly segregated people who responded to extreme violence and cruelty in a manner that was completely counter-cultural to the dominant social values and cultural norms of the U.S. In the aftermath of the Amish school murders, the nation witnessed that even the most peaceful people are not immune to the most extreme and devastating acts of senseless violence. Both the peaceful and the powerful are not immune. Within this space, the U.S. cultural fetishization of forgiveness worked to bring order to the emotional/spiritual/psychological upheaval of what it means “to exist” and live in a world in which extreme and senseless violence is entirely normative.

What U.S. cultural discourse underestimated or ignored in the weeks following the Amish school murders reveals the potency of the normativity of violence within dominant culture. As mentioned in the first section of this article, Kasdorf reminds us that this event was a violent crime “against girls who were separated from adults and boys for sexual assault and death” (Spicher Kasdorf 2007, p. 331). However, what was not widely present in U.S. cultural discourse in the days and weeks following the murders were other concerns, such as the prevalence of white male perpetrators in the U.S.; the deficiencies of federal hate crime legislation to protect women and girls; the normativity of violence and sexual exploitation of girls and women; or the ease with which citizens can purchase and stockpile weapons and ammunition. None of these horrific realities became a primary point of concern in national discourse.

Ultimately, it was not the violence itself that was most noted. What was most noted in dominant U.S. cultural discourse, what was most foreign to a nation’s way of life and moral values, was “forgiveness.” In this way, it seems that the fetishization of forgiveness in cultural discourse was not about the Amish at all. The fetishization revealed and interrogated a national consciousness that was violently awakened to its own mortality on the morning of 11 September 2001.

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