

**Wissenschaftliche Begründung
zur Durchführung des internationalen Symposiums**

Anabaptist Roots in North American Landscapes: The Plain People Today

July 2 – 4, 2015 at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Germany

As the lands of origin for the Plain People, German-speaking countries in particular should have a greater interest in the teaching of and research on the Anabaptists. However, not only the seminars taught but also the body of research conducted in Germany and beyond does not sufficiently reflect the importance of the Plain People. In light of the paucity of research emanating from Europe on the Plain People, the conference at Leuphana University Lüneburg seeks to initiate new discourses. The aim of the Anabaptist conference is fourfold: first, to challenge our knowledge of the Plain People as the Other, i.e. people who are simultaneously demonized and exoticized; second, to shift the focus from neo-evangelical and Islamic fundamentalist discourses – especially prevalent in North America after 9/11 – to the study of religious groups who appear to be the exact opposite of fundamentalism; third, to build a network of European scholars of various disciplines dealing with the Plain People, and fourth, to support teachers who work in the area of religious studies and English (with an emphasis on Amish, Mennonite and Hutterite life-writing).

According to the Young Center for Anabaptist Studies, the Amish dot the US-American landscape in 30 states. Since their population doubles every 20 years, they are expected to reach one million members by 2050. In order to retain their rural way of life and their small settlements as strategies for survival, the Amish have had to push beyond the confines of the Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states to find adequate land for expansion. Whereas the Amish population in Canada stems to a certain degree from disenchanting pacifists who left the US in the 1960s and is limited mainly to the Province of Ontario, the Mennonite settlements in Canada have flourished since the late eighteenth century. Unlike the Amish, roughly half of the Canadian Mennonites have migrated to urban areas. Not only through their migration patterns but also through their wide-spread presence in popular culture, the Amish and Mennonites are literally on the move, making their presence felt across the two nations.

In contrast to acts of discrimination committed against Native Americans and First Nations, federal, local as well as state governments in both Canada and the United States have pursued an entirely different policy toward the Plain People: one of accommodation and acceptance. Yet, academics have not always shared this uncritical attitude. When open fascination meets apparent contempt, a closer look at the societal setup of the Plain People is warranted – especially in times of problems such as high levels of personal and national debt, growing inequality, environmental degradation, and torn-apart families. Who are the Plain People? Admirable citizens or stubborn farmers who refuse to exercise their civil rights by avoiding political involvement? Caring husbands who provide for their families or patriarchs who unfairly limit women's opportunities? Realistic parents or narrow-minded educators who lack tolerance for anything beyond a rudimentary education? A closed society that operates today much as it did in the 19th century or a confederation of changing societies that tolerate the use of solar energy panels and mobile telephones?

In order to acknowledge the diverse inclinations of the Plain People as well as mainstream stereotypes surrounding their ways of life, the symposium will explore both the opportunity

for change and the need for continuity in Plain People cultures. Moreover, the conference aims to present the complexities of a religious minority that extend beyond the dichotomies of the questions posed above. While it certainly appears difficult to give definitive answers to these questions, the organizers hope not only to spark a new field of research in US-American and Canadian Studies in Germany but also to further transatlantic research. Perhaps together we will find out that Anabaptist influences in the United States and Canada are not as isolated from modern life and insignificant as many might like to believe.

The following interdisciplinary topics will be discussed during the three days of the conference:

- The other Other: North America's Most Beloved Fundamentalists?
- Living Together – Worlds Apart: Resistance and Cooperation in Contemporary Society
- Anabaptist Heritage and German Roots in Plain Societies Today
- Reel Plain: Documentaries and Films
- Inside Out and Upside Down: Plain and Ex-Plain Perspectives in Life Narratives