

The amish in modern culture

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The Amish share a rich tradition that dates back to the sixteenth century. In America, they have steadfastly resisted assimilation while still respecting the surrounding culture. The Amish have retained their identity by adhering to a specific set of practices and beliefs. Their faith is reinforced by the others around them through a number of traditional practices. As American society becomes more urban and technologically advanced the Amish become all the more isolated. Still, they typically resist those influences.

Americans generally regard the Amish as a harmless, isolated group, so government intrusion into their group is held to a minimum. As a general rule, cultural or religious groups that are not seen as a threat are accepted into American society. The Amish are an example of this. Amish Practices The Amish are primarily located in the eastern and Midwestern parts of the United States. The largest settlement is in Ohio. In total, there are about 180,000 Amish in the U. S. (Elder, 2001). They describe themselves as a “ plain” people. This is evidenced in their dress and resistance to technology. They are primarily agrarian in nature.

The Amish cling to their traditional culture by taking what some might see as extreme measures. They are often seen in unusual dress, traveling in horse-drawn carriages. The pursuit of a modern life, to Amish, is distracting from the practice of faith. One way the Amish reinforce their cultural attitudes in the family is through song. All children are taught traditional songs that promote subservience to God, a strong work ethic and a generous nature. The importance of singing to reinforce cultural mores cannot be underestimated. According to a study by D. R. Elder of Ohio State University,

only 5. % of Amish rated singing as “ not important” in their family lives (2001).

Unlike some cultures that live with one foot in the American culture and one in their own, the Amish, with some exceptions, are almost wholly insular. They see this as a necessity to maintain a culture of true believers. Consistent with this belief, the Amish do not recruit new members. They do, however, take great care to bring their own children into the faith. Behavior in the Amish communities is strictly governed by biblical principles. If the standards of behavior are to be changed, the changes must be agreed upon formally by community leaders.

The Amish are primarily interested with living a simple life. This allows them to better devote themselves to living a godly life, as materialism is only important for survival of the community. The Ordnung is a set of rules that dictate behavior for the community. In many cases, they are quite specific, i. e. no cars, no rubber tires on buggies, no worldly insurance or benefits (Kokkola, 2000). The Amish are not exempt from United States laws and practices. They accept these laws, feeling that it is biblically warranted to do so. However, the Ordnung contains the rules that are most important to their daily lives.

Resistance to Assimilation The Amish preserve their native language in America, unlike many immigrant groups. Many Amish speak German or Pennsylvania Dutch. There have been divisions within the Amish belief about how resistant they should be to modern influences. Concern that this will lead to a loss of faith, however, has kept the Amish as an insular group. The

Amish faced hostility to their practices early in their history. They were founded in Switzerland in the 16th century. Their belief that infants should not be baptized eventually led to persecution.

Like many religious groups, the Amish traveled to America to escape persecution. Early experiences with assimilation, along with an influx of more conservative members, led the Amish to seek safe havens away from the non-believers. The Amish faced many hardships in early America. They learned to survive by hard work, faith and relying on one another. The Europeans in America at the time came from many different faiths, some of which carried antipathy toward others. They were also, for the first time, among Native Americans and people from several different nations. They turned toward each other, reinforcing the faith.

In time, they came to see outside influences as detrimental to the practice of their faith. Many Amish still adhere to this belief. Modern Culture The Amish are a silent, somewhat mysterious culture within a rapidly changing America. Because the Amish isolate themselves from the influence of American culture, they are a largely forgotten about group. They are not seen as a threat, nor are they an outspoken political force. This lack of exposure to the rest of the culture can lead to discrimination when exposure becomes necessary. Generally, though, the Amish are tolerated well by the rest of society.

Occasionally the two cultures have clashed. In 1968, Amish parents objected to a law forcing them to send their children to public high schools. The case went all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court, where the Amish eventually

won (Kokkola, 2000). Seemingly against the odds, the Amish have been able to retain a distinct separate culture within the United States. Their traditions, such as song, manner of dress, and a strong work ethic, hold them together to this day. Faith is one of the most cohesive elements to hold together a group of people. In the Amish community, faith is a strong driving force.

Even the Amish have to make some concessions to the realities of the outside culture. Some communities, secure in their own beliefs, are now establishing more contact with the outside world. In Lancaster, Pa. , for example, the Amish mix with others, even welcoming visitors curious about their culture. In other situations the Amish are forced by economic reality to take jobs in the outside world. The Amish may be forced in future years to adapt some of their rules in order to survive in modern America. Still, their faith is strong and they are likely to survive for many more years.