

# The value of education in Amish society in the United States

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## (A) Introduction

“We came unto the land whither thou sentest us and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it.” (Numbers 13: 26)

I was very hot and dry on the evening of July 12, 1991, when I arrived in Fresno. I was naturally a bit worried about the kind of citizen life that I would be expected to lead upon my arrival here in Fresno. However on my arriving at I. E. I., the words of warm welcome and encouragement spoken by one of the faculty and Mr. and Mrs. Clark filled me with hope and confidence. Cultural shocks are always a richly rewarding experience, particularly so in case of me this time. The next day, on Sunday morning, Mr. and Mrs. Clark invited me to the Protestant church. I am convinced I have greatly benefited by this two-day experience. Mr. Clark, who has a true Christian for more than 50 years, explained the Baptism, Christian life, Reformation, and the history of Jesus Christ. These first two days experiences strongly impressed on my memory and decided to study the Amish community and their schools where they maintain separation from the world by Christian dualism, that is, a world containing opposites, such as good and evil, light and darkness. Two Biblical passages, are perhaps the most often quoted to this world even in Japan. The first

passage:

“Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that ye may prove what is that god and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12: 1)

Another key passage is:

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers, for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? The church, according to biblical teaching, must be pure, without blemish and without spot or wrinkle.” “chosen people” or “peculiar people.” (Corinthians 6: 14)

## **(B) Amish culture and the outline of education in Amish society**

This study is not a comprehensive work on the Amish and Mennonites, it may be only a brief study of the Amish culture and Mennonites. My intent with this paper is to share with Japanese students I teach the cross cultural communication, my knowledge, however limited, of Amish people and the world they live in; a world that is hard for us to comprehend; their history, their customs, beliefs, strange clothing, transportation, all are unique in twentieth century America. How can they survive? Also intend to discuss the outline of education in Amish society, and would like to emphasize the value of education in Amish society in the United States.

To begin with, I think I must briefly explain the history of the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, and then I am going to talk about the content of the educational process in which they are engaged.

### **(1) Concerning the history of the Amish and Mennonites**

According to the recent research by Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb (Amish

and Mennonites 1982)

“The Amish and Mennonites are direct descendants of the Anabaptists, who formed in the Reformation in Europe in the 1500’s. The name Anabaptists was given to the church movement,” because I guess new convents were re-baptized into the new fellowship.

“The Anabaptists believed that infant baptism was not valid. Factions of Anabaptists formed in portions of Switzerland, Germany, France, and the Netherlands.”

Before I started studying, as I had already read about the book of Reformation, and also taught by Mr. Clark, I felt easier to continue studying their religious behavior and its value. Generally speaking, the Anabaptist believed in a “back-to-the bible.” I could say it would be that Christian life based on the scriptures. According to the research paper (Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb “Amish and Mennonites History” page 2-7, 1982)

“The first Anabaptist confession of faith was drawn up in 1527. Later, the groups became known as *Mennists* and *Mennonites*, after a fervent leader and writer named Menno Simons.

In 1632 an expanded confession of faith was drawn up by Anabaptist leaders. By the late 1600’s a split took place in the Anabaptist groups. A group of Palantine Anabaptists advocated a return to conservative principles of the confession. When meeting with leaders in Switzerland, as a result of these differences in doctrine a splinter group broke off from the main Anabaptist body and began a church group of their own.”

Their leader was a young Bishop named Jacob Amman. That’s how the “Amish” descended from this conservative group. The big reason why they came to the United States is that most of the Amish and Mennonite groups were persecuted by Roman Church in the 1700’s, their history of persecution in the old world, gave them ties and utter dependence on each

other. It also gave them a reluctance to change, a distrust of those outside their own. and Migrations began and lasted many years. But churches seem to have grown and divided into several groups since their coming to the United States. In the late seventeenth century, the Amish broke away from the mennonites in Holland; not over persecution, but the controversy over Meidung. Today, according to the paper (Amish population 1988), records are not clear when the first Amish arrived in the United States, but early records hint of a few immigrants in Lancaster and Berks county, Pennsylvania in 1771. 1725 count house records show names of some of the best known Amish families. U. S. A. has the largest population of Amish and Mennonites. Now the Amish have broken into three main divisions: Old Order, New Order, and Beachy. The Old Orders are by far the most strict and traditional groups. Other groups have maintained a balance between contemporary matters and their original beliefs.

The Mennonites are much more different, divided into a variety of conferences and fellowships. I quite understand why their society has also been changing very slowly year by year, but not like our society. As you know our modern world is changing very rapidly. Whether when we look at it politically, socially, or culturally, it is no exaggeration to say that in this unstable world, there is no single group that is free from the sense of moral conflict, confusion, and contradiction that inevitably arises when changes take place too rapidly for individuals to make the necessary adaptations. Scientists, polititians, artists, teachers, students, children ..... all have to adapt themselves to prevailing conditions in society. And only those who are able to make this adaptation will survive. Now I have realized the Amish people, through reading some materials on the Amish and Mennonites, how they, too, have to make an effort to adapt them-

selves to their own world of new and changing values if they are to survive, not only as true Christians, but as a human beings.

### (C) Doctrines and disciplines held by the Amish

The rules for living are propagated in the Amish church service. Elders of the church encourage parents to make it mandatory that their young teenage children seek membership. Religious education is given each Sunday from April until October, covering all the do's and dont's of Amish religious life.

These principles are usually applied to most of the Old Order Amish groups. The followings are the explanation of doctriiness and disciplines in Amish society. I still wonder how they keep thir children behind the world. Of course those are their education.

#### a) Separation from the world and self denial

They live in the restricted place from the outside world and keep their own way. They do not use violence in war or selfdefense. They are unwilling to contribute in any way to human suffering through violence.

“.....That ye resist not evil: but whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matthew 5: 39)

[aku ni sakarau nakare: nanjino hohowo utaretara tuginiwa hidarino hohowo sashimukeyo.] (Japanese)

#### b) Humility and Holiness

They keep to themselves except members: close bonds between members, especially for responsibility to other family members and members of the church. The Amish own and manage their own schools, and they use their own standards of education and their own teachers. Because they feel that non-religious or non-sacred schools are ungodlly and a bad

influence on their children.

“... Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22: 6)

I am sure this would be the best way to keep themselves to avoid being influenced by the outside world. To my great surprise,

c) They may not own cars, telephones, and electrical facilities;

“..... and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch. not the unclean thing, and I will receive you...” (Corinthians 6: 17)

The lack of radio, television, electricity and phone virtually cuts the Amish off the strains of the modern day world.

The home is quiet and peaceful. Bed time comes early, as the Amish day begins at 5:00 a.m. By 7:30 the numerous morning chores are done, eggs gathered, cows milked, pigs fed, etc.. Mother is busy in the kitchen fixing a large breakfast for her hard working family. Then it is time for “dressing around” and off to school for the young children.

If it were not for such modern facilities, we would have no pollution on the earth. If you do not know how you can live along, you must learn how to survive from the Amish culture.

d) Fellowship and worship

They believe that children are born with man's fallen, sinful nature. They are covered by the blood of Christ until the age of adulthood, then must decide whether they will live for Christ or not. Parents are responsible to God for child-rearing. (Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb *The Amish and Mennonites Cultures and Education* page 36: 1983). I quite agree with this idea, because we take it for granted that adult should be responsible for children until they grow up to be old enough to think about everything or judge themselves.

“..... a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame,” (Proverbs

29: 15)

e) Hard work and farming

The Amish, as a whole, have always been a farming people, or self-employed workers. They have been really enjoying farming life. I think this is the very philosophy of “Return to the Nature,” which nowadays some people living in our modern world have started seeking for such peaceful society. On the contrary of the advance of science, compared with Amish world, we must notice we live in a very dangerous, noisy, and dirty world.

f) How do Old Order Amish operate their church services?

The Amish (Old Orders) hold their three to four church services, on a rotating basis, in each other's homes. They seem to be faithful to the Bible.

“... God that made the world and all things therein ..... dwelleth not in temples made with hands,” (Acts 17: 24)

g) Amish people are not allowed to own photographs;

I wanted to go and take pictures of them, but I am sorry that they are not supposed to let themselves be photographed. Because this means making a graven image.

“.... Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or that is in the earth beneath..... (Exodus 20: 4)

h) Uniformity of dress and transportation, Women's clothing and no jewelry

It is the modesty of appearance that I am very impressed. The Amish believe in very traditional, simple dress to show themselves to be the same as God's people. In our modern society, some people too much pride themselves on their hairstyles, valuable jewelry, and so on. I hope you do not agree to such stupid waste of money and vanity. They keep simple hairstyles and no jewelry.

“.. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel..” (1 Peter 3: 3)

i) They have no musical instruments and no use in their singing in church and home. Because any musical instruments will be the obstacles to their heart to the Lord. They make much of spiritual songs.

“..... Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord....” (Ephesians 5: 19)

j) Teacher qualification in Amish schools

The teacher is a highly respected person among the Amish elders.

“... The teacher is the hub, the very heart of the school. He can make or break the school.....” (Dr. Newcomb Amish and Mennonite culture and schooling, teacher selection 1988)

In Amish society men and women, young and old, may become teachers. “Amish teachers are expected to be well qualified in other areas. Spiritual values and Amish morals are intertwined with all school activities and work.” (Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb Perspectives on Amish and Conservative Mennonite Culture and Education page 5-8 1983)

Schooling for Amish youngsters continues only through the eighth grade. Each school is responsible for a four mile radius, thus making none walk more than two miles. When a child receives eight years of Schooling, he/she is considered to be educated enough for Amish life. To receive a high school education is considered too worldly. Instead the young woman is trained how to run a household and the youngman how to manage a prosperous farm. Some of the boys hire out as laborers or carpenters. The girls will become cleaning maids.

**(D) How do they educate children in Amish society?**

“... Up until the mid-20th century, most all Amish and Conservative Mennonites accepted public schoolings in the small rural schools that dotted the rolling farmland, where Amish and Mennonites were generally lived.” (Dr. Newcomb)

The Amish people believe they are born to work the soil. They feel the Bible to replenish the earth and by the sweat of their brow bring forth a bountiful harvest. The academic and scientific world around are concerned about theory and the reconstruction of nature.

According to the last statistics in 1980, there were 450 Amish parochial schools and upwards of 120 Conservative Mennonite schools in America. What do you think caused the Amish and Mennonites to build their own schools? Of course it's not difficult to find out the answer. Amish and Mennonites believe non-sacred knowledge is not for the Christian. Before I studied their culture, I was wondering how differences between the children growing up in a separated society and children growing up in a modern world in the United States are. It is natural that public education may differ from the culture of established religions. I am afraid if the Amish child is removed from his community and put into the comprehensive school in the larger society, there will be great confusion for him, and he will give up learning any longer. Because in the Amish school such ruled distinctions between school and school life do not exist, and also the basic function of the Amish school is not education in the narrow sense of teaching, but the creation of a learning environment through living in Amish culture. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22: 6)

If a young man “goes gay” (meaning to venture out of the Amish

world), he is shunned by church and family. His father does not have to furnish him with a farm. If a daughter “goes gay,” it costs her the rights to *Haush-dier* or the furnishings for a new home. As a result very few try to leave — the consequences being too great. I quite agree to this idea that children acquire understanding basic cultural rules to becoming an adult. They don’t have to have the idea to compete their friends in their school records, for the education in the Amish society emphasizes on interaction and continuity of lives, and also if we are to understand the goals of Amish education, we should think of the Amish teachers. I could say, for example;

Teachers in public schools don’t always have a good relationship, but in Amish society there is usually a strong bond of emotions and love between children and teachers.

“Amish and Conservative Mennonite schools are established and operated in local areas by Amish or Mennonite citizens.”

Each school is under control of the local churches and elected schools board (elected from within the church community). When we take a look at it, we feel something restrictive. However when you look around the whole world, I think there is no place to learn such spiritual values, religious idea and values of life as in Amish society. I think we must take into consideration of their own cultures in their school system. Then we will realize their thoughts and schools, community property and the responsibility of the local board. So I take it for granted that teachers in Amish society should be very important for the Amish and Conservative Mennonite schools.

According to the book of *Culture and Schooling* 1988 by Dr. Thomas, Amish society is on interaction and community of lives, of teachers with pupils, and of parents with children.

“True education is the cultivation of humility, simple living, and resignation to the will of God.”

Therefore, children in Amish school learn reading, writing, arithmetics, and the moral teachings of the Bible. Historically, the Anabaptist avoided all training connected with self-satisfaction (to make individuals higher in rank, honor, power, character, quality, pride of position, enjoyment of power, and the techniques of war and violence. But memorization, recitation, and personal relationships between teachers and pupils are part of a system of education.

On the other hand, parents are considered to be responsible for training their children and morally responsible for God to teach them right from wrong and hand down to them a knowledge of eternal life. The Amish believe that an individuals' talents are given by God. Therefore, no one should be praised if he is an easy learner and no one should be blamed if he is slow learner. These differences in talent are God's will, and there is a place for each person God created. To my great regret, in our society teachers always try to make their inborn talent develop, but I am afraid they tend to pay no attention to slow learners.

However I am happy to know that in Amish society teachers and children are tolerant of such differences. They are not all expected to master the same amount of each subject, and slowness in learning is nothing to be ashamed in Amish society. All children are expected to work hard and use their time. The followings are the matters of consequence in Amish schools.

“Little children you should seek  
Rather to be good than wise;  
For the thoughts you do not speak  
Since out in your cheeks and eyes.

If you would have your learning stay,  
Be patient, don't learn too fast;  
The man who travels a mile each day  
May get around the world at last."

Being aware of the Amish does not allow us to make assumptions about them. Because of various Biblical interpretations, traditions in their culture, there are many varied groups among the Old Order Amish. The obvious distinctons, clothing, are easy for us to see. The unseen are the philosophical in nature.

On the way home after this trip back time finds me feeling a sense of warmth, of love, a renewed spirit of what this small group of people have contributed both to my life and to this nation, the United States of America which they have helped make so great. Now I am convinced, were it not for the Amish culture in the United States, religious freedom and nostalgic American values might be changed into the worse, and what is worse, the Americans' dreams might changed under the control of economic growth, where the Americans either have contributed more to the gross national product, or have added to the welfare rolls. The careful protection to the cultural values by the Government in the United States and commnity support of their members have been strongly impressed on my memory. I strongly expect them to maintain these cultural continuity and cultural honesty for their own vision of the good life.

The more complicated the societies in the United States become, the more necessary separation of church and state should be, I believe.

In conclusion I would like to say a word of appreciation for the time that Mr. Bigler and Mr. Clark have so generously given me this study in spite of their busy schedule, and I sincerely hope that they will have much happier life in future. Thank you again.

“Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him. If he thirst give him drink. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12: 20, 21)

### Statistics

Amish schools:	1949	11 schools	237 pupils
	1959	71 schools	2392 pupils
	1980	450 schools	13500 pupils
	1982	453 schools	13750 pupils
Mennonites schools:			
	1982	124 schools	4000 pupils

The data for this case study are used as they are:

### Notes and References

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