

Religious Customs and their Bearing on the Maintenance and Growth of Religion¹

Prof DDr. Julian Sigmar, Duquesne University, Pittsburg, Pa.

1. Customs of the Amishmen

They came to America as early as 1712 and settled at first around Harrisburg, Lancaster County, in Pennsylvania. Later on, a smaller part came to Indiana, where they live around Middlebury, about 40 miles from South Bend. The Amishmen may not exceed 250 thousands people in the whole. Their name is derived from Jakob Ammon, a Swiss, under whose leadership a faction seceded from the Mennonites in 1693, because of belief that the Church had become too progressive.

The Mennonites belong to the anabaptists whose militant branch under Jan Bockelsohn, called Johann van Leyden, brought indescribable calamity into Westfalia. The other, peaceable branch of anabaptists has been founded by Menno Simonis in 1536. From their incessant migrating through all parts of southern Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, and Poland, as well as through Friesland, Danemark, Gotland, and East Prussia, we can conclude that they have not been favored by other Protestant sects. Towards the end of the 17th century they decided to sever all connections with a tottering world, and to follow the example of Abraham, the patriarch, who left his native country, Chaldea, in order to save his faith. They welcomed incitations of Katharina II. of Russia, and of Frederick the Great of Prussia to settle in the vast eastern provinces of their reigns, and they endeared themselves to the kings by their success as farmers and by their exemplary, honest, and frugal life. Before leaving Switzerland for the American wilderness, Jakob Ammon tried hard to convince his contemporaries that only the return to the simple life of the Patriarchs could save mankind from losing the achievements of redemption. When he failed, he resorted to the principle of defeating the world by deserting it. Jakob Ammon's ideas were about the following:

¹ Siehe die Ausführungen des gleichen Verf. über dasselbe Thema in Heft 2 der Viermonatsschrift für Missionsw. und Religionsw. Den dort entwickelten mehr grundsätzlichen Überlegungen folgen hier wertvolle geschichtliche Belege und praktische Hinweise für die Missionare. In ersterer Beziehung weist der Verf. hin auf interessante Beobachtungen über das religiöse Brauchtum bei den „Amishmen“. Durch konsequentes, unbeugsames Festhalten an den Lebensgewohnheiten der Vergangenheit, sowohl in sozialer und wirtschaftlicher wie kultureller Hinsicht gelang es ihnen, Jahrhunderte hindurch inmitten einer ganz andern, modernen und fortschrittlichen Welt ihre religiöse Eigenart trotz der geringen Zahl der Bekenner unversehrt zu erhalten. In der praktischen Schlußfolgerung für Missionare und Seelsorger betont der Verf., daß die Religion den ganzen Menschen durchdringt und darum auch im Werk und Brauchtum sich einen Ausdruck schafft. Dieses Brauchtum ist nach dem Verf. der beste Nährboden und Schutz der Religion. Darum bietet sich der Mission eine besonders günstige Gelegenheit dar, wenn das heidnische Brauchtum zerfällt, wie z. B. nach der Völkerwanderung, im heutigen China usw. Verf. fordert eine Neuorientierung der Seelsorge unter dem entwickelten Gesichtspunkte. Die Schriftw.

1. Because the world in which we live always was, and will be, inimical to the doctrine of Jesus Christ, its achievements of civilization should be guarded against and even repudiated for the benefit of the faithful.
2. Farming is the vocation of man, most congenial to his nature, affording him all opportunities to exercise his virtues, and thus to make sure his salvation.
3. The preacher, or Minister of the gospel, must be a farmer himself, lest he yields the temptation to become a parasite and, eventually, a tyrant of the community.
4. The perfection of human nature and, for that matter, of mankind in general, is the Christian marriage.
5. Christian marriage can attain its purpose only under a strong authority, vested in the father of the family. Wife and children are in an unqualified sense subject to the father. The children are relieved from it when leaving the father house to be married themselves.
6. The patriarchal system is to be observed also in community life. Since the crowd cannot be kept to the observance and practice of Christian virtues by persuasion only, law must be enforced.
7. Forms and habits of life must agree with the tenets of Christian doctrine. Customs which express them adequately, ought to be observed strictly. „Honor the customs of your ancestors.“ Man betrays his attitude by the way he carries, behaves, and dresses himself. Therefore, a Christian should not indulge in the worldly pleasure of changing fashions on the suggestion of barbers and tailors.

The Amishmen attracted public attention recently, February 1937, when they drove out sit down strikers who refused to work in dairies for a wage, which the Amishmen found quite sufficient. However it was not so much the financial side of the problem that provoked the Amishmen to fight, but the destruction of milk that had to be poured out, because men were too greedy, or, too lazy, to use it according to God's will. Shortly afterwards, the Amish were compelled to oppose even the Government, because it tried to impose on them some blessings of civilization which the Amish do not appreciate without discrimination. Schools are a fine institution, they say; but when a child is supposed to spend in school more than eight years, that is driving things too far, it certainly alienates the children from the patriarchal style of their folks. That was, at least, the opinion of Aaron King, a prosperous farmer of Honey Brook, Penna., who preferred to go to jail rather than to pay \$ 2.— and \$ 5.40 fine for violating a state law requiring all children under 15 years to attend school. King told his school board he feared education on such large a scale would alienate his daughter Rebecca from her people, imparting her nothing but worldly knowledge.

As mentioned before, they are living in Pennsylvania and Indiana. Their barns with overhanging sections have not the architecture of most American barns; houses, neat and compact, stand closely together on narrow, well-swept sidewalks; the residents, quiet and devout, dress in a different way, follow customs that differ from most customs in America. Their prayers and hymns which belong to the early days of the Reformation are still unchanged in melody and rhythm. Male

members of the sect wear broad-brimmed hats over their square-cut hairs. In addition, after marriage, they grow heavy beards, but the upper lip is shaved. They despise buttons, a worldly invention of tailors for vain people, their dresses have hooks and eyes instead, as it was in the time of Jakob Ammon. The women wear black bonnets and plain woolen skirts of black or blue color. They know that their strange fashions distinguish them from other people, nay, alienates them, and they like it.

With Quakers and Adventists with whom they share the strictly spiritualistic principle of religion they believe that war and military service are foreign to the doctrine of Christ; they have managed, somehow, to be excused from duty during the world war. Insurances against sickness, death, fire, lightening, and tornados are taboo, because they are regarded as against the spirit of Christian love, excusing the greedy and lazy from helping his neighbour in distress. The insurances are thwarting God's plan to make us practise neighbourly love, therefore the Amishmen see to it that a brother is not forsaken when in bad luck. As a logical consequence, they disapprove of governmental subsidies, security legislation, and borrowing policies, although they dutifully pay the taxes for social security and old age pensions.

Technical contraptions likely to disaccustom people from labor „in the sweat of their brows“ (gen. III, 19) are frowned at. Their Bishop Bontreger in Middlebury, Ind., who gains his livelihood from farming as anybody does among the Amishmen, explains that modern inventions make it difficult to keep wordliness from crowding in upon them. „We forego modern things to protect our young folks from non-spiritual influences. We find nothing sinful in the use of automobiles, motion pictures, and radio, particularly not in the first two, but they tend to make the young generation worldly, and since our church seeks no converts, it must maintain a hold upon its young people if it is to survive“².

The time, when a daughter should marry, is determined by her father, who, after all, must worry about her dowry. When he thinks the time has come, he paints the doors of his house blue, whereupon the boys drop in, by chance, to get a discreet information. Romances, and flirting without serious intentions, however, are not allowed; thus the full moon in beautiful nights has no charm on young Amishmen. It is their tradition that young men and women should marry, when harvesting is done and the winter approaches. The participants of the wedding stage, then, a ceremony that dates back to the time, when their sect was founded.

This ceremony, although festive in character, is performed only in the presence of Amish folk. Outsiders are not allowed to attend, and photographers carefully kept away. What we got to know about, is based on rumors, not disavowed though by the Amishmen. The ceremonies fill an all-day program, starting in the early morning with sermons and prayers in one of the farmhouses. After the formalities are over, all men but the bridegroom leave for outdoor games, while the women prepare the wedding meal. Later, the bridegroom is cheered and seized by the unmarried men. Following a time-honored custom,

² Bontreger's interview, News Times, S. Bend, May 1937.

he is then lifted over the barnyard fence to the waiting arms of the married men, a gesture signifying that he has passed the single state of life for ever.

The birth of a child is announced by spreading a cloth over the fence, varying in color according to the child's sex. At the family table as well as in the church the women are sitting separated from the men, the father presiding. Hospitality is gladly rendered and the guest can stay as long as he sees fit. During his stay the guest is treated like a member of the family, according to reports from students who have been hiking during their sommer vacation.

The school problem seems to worry the Amish unabated. In East Lampeter, Penna., the government intended to build a new school house with PWA funds, a little out of town though, but attractive. The children of several hamlets would have to walk very far, so the government offered a special bus for the transportation. That aroused the opposition of the Amishmen for more than one reason. In the first place, they did not want any PWA funds from the government, as borrowing money and accepting gifts is against their customs. In the second place, the proposed building was to be so far out of town that the children really would have to use the bus. However they want their children to walk to school. So important was the issue that they sent a delegation to Washington to ask the surprised PWA officials to take back the 56 200 \$ allotted for the school project, and not to operate an omnibus for the children. For the first time in their life, four Amishmen went to the Nation's capital, and there they sat in the court, bearded, and dressed in true Amish fashion, with their wide-brimmed, low-crowned black hats on their knees, while the lawyers argued the technical aspect of the case. Amishman Zook spoke up: „Borrowing money and accepting gifts is against our traditions. We do not ride in automobiles, and it is against our wishes that our children ride to school in omnibuses. They are going to grow up into farmers, like their fathers and forefathers did before them, and they will need strong legs. We want them to walk. East Lampeter is probably the only political subdivision in the United States which has no public debt, whose residents have no bills unpaid, and who want nothing from the government. But we wish no interference with our principles, when we teach our children how to practise them“³. As a matter of fact, none of the Amishmen of Lancaster County has gone on the county's welfare rolls, and they have steadily refused to take Federal farm aid.

A similar school case happened October 1937 in Smoketown, Penna., where Amish tobacco growers called on Governor George Earle in an appeal to return to the ten little red schoolhouses which were replaced, by a new Building. They resorted to boycotting of the new school when it was opened. It has electricity and radio, and the Amish forbids such worldly innovations to which their children were to be accustomed; moreover it was built with borrowed Federal relief funds.

2. Consequences for Missionary Work

When a comparatively small number of Amish families is capable to preserve their belief and world-outlook successfully

³ Pathfinder, Washington, D. C., April 1937.

for more than two hundred years, growing rather than losing in membership, it gives the theologians something to think about. There is no doubt that the Amishmen have maintained their hold on the people by minutely adhering to the customs and folkways, laid down by their founders. That is an eloquent prove of the power of religious customs, and it reminds us, once again, of the truism which we know so well, but fail to remember: Religion is not only an affair of the intellect, nor, only of the heart (Feelings), but it takes into its service all faculties of man, his whole personality, and permeates, if true religion, every bit of his nature. Hence its efficiency in creating forms of behavior, habits, customary functions, as the expression of inner religious experiences.

It is, therefore, imperative to appreciate and to favor the development of religious folkways and customs:

1. Human nature follows but its esthetic-religious instincts when forming customs; if not guided and encouraged in doing so, people are bound to go astray, i. e., to indulge in secret, superstitious cults.

2. We are often told that a high standard of culture is incompatible with a religious worldview, and that well cultured people follow always the easiest religion. That may be so, if we mistake civilization with culture; we have quite a crowd of highly civilized pagans around us. But with regard to genuine culture the statement is false: The early Church observed until to the 12th century a very severe penitential practice originating austere religious customs, and the cultured world did not mind it. In fact, the Church conquered the whole cultured society of those times. That she is kind of unattractive, since the reformation, is something we should think more about.

3. We are getting pretty poor in good and appealing religious customs, probably because we do nothing to build them up. During the reformation, Christian folkways suffered their first discomfiture. Another defeat followed during the enightment period, when a confession of faith in public was regarded backwardness. We still have this inferiority complex, and are quite unaware of how much religion has suffered, when we retreated into the walls of the Church, confining our religiosity to hearing Mass on Sundays and, for the rest, resorting, inadequately, to the "ex opere operato" doctrine (— sacraments have efficiency in themselves —). Those who believe that we can propagate religion by merely teaching catechism and

administering sacraments unwittingly drift in the wake of rationalism.

4. Certain missionary experiences in China, Japan, and in countries following the Greek orthodox and Mohammedan belief seem to suggest that the Christian religion does not prevail over pagan customs when deeply interwoven with civic and political life. On the other hand, the unprecedented growth of the Church after the period which we call the migration of nations, in the 5th century, teaches that it was the breakdown of pagan customs during the general commotion that opened the road for Christian faith. Of course, the Church was, at those times, very ingenious in forming religious customs and christening pagan folkways. It can be expected, therefore, that, when the present war in China, hand in hand with communism, will have had obliterated the pagan structure of the nations concerned, Christianity will have a great future there.

5. What is missionary work, after all? — Is it distinct from pastoration in civilized countries? — It is if we understand pastoration as the care for only pious people who look for their edification and perfection exclusively. But the majority of people among whom we are living are neo-pagans. Did Christ exclude them, when entrusting the Church with the mission of the whole world? — It is our duty to care for the neo-pagans as well. If the present forms of our pastoration do not permit this, we shall have to alter them. There is no real distinction between the work among uncivilized and civilized pagans, every pastor is a missionary. The only distinction lies in the different degree of culture of the people to be converted. Too long have we tarried in acknowledging our duty, to adapt our ways and means of pastoration to the level of culture on which the people whom we approach are living. Therefore our pastoration has become unattractive. A reconstruction and rebuilding of our pastoral theory is indispensable.

„Un tempo, specialmente nell' America del sud, prevaleva il metodo missionario di assimilazione . . . Questo metodo non si segue più; nè avrebbe alcuna probabilità di successo presso i musulmani. Ora prevale il metodo di *adattamento*; adattamento, si intende, di tutto ciò che è accidentale ed accessorio alla religione, salvi i suoi principi teologici, morali e gerarchici. L' antico metodo imperialista fa ora luogo al metodo apostolico, che mira a costituire la Chiesa indigena.“ Celso Costantini in *Il Pensiero Missionario*, Rom 1938, S. 119/20.