Chapter Two: The Quiltwork of Amish Culture

Overview

Chapter Two introduces the basic values of Amish culture by:

• Introducing the concept of Gelassenheit as the master cultural value that undergirds the entire Amish cultural system;

• Showing how Gelassenheit shapes other dimensions of Amish life — personality, symbols, values, rituals, and structures;

• Demonstrating the differences between Amish values and mainstream American values;

• Profiling their primary religious beliefs, convictions, and understandings;

• Describing key values — obedience, self-denial, separation from the world, work, thrift, and tradition; and

• Summarizing the “upside-down” values that set Amish culture apart from mainstream American culture.

Key Points

• Chapter Two focuses on culture — values, beliefs, norms; whereas Chapter Three views Amish social structure and patterns of social organization. Contrast the concepts of culture and society.

• A central concept of Chapter Two, and throughout much of the book, is Gelassenheit. Compare/contrast the values of individualism in American society with the values associated with Gelassenheit in Amish life.
• Make a distinction between dominant culture, subculture, and counterculture. Demonstrate how the Amish are a subculture. Identify the values and behaviors that they share with the dominant culture, as well as those which are unique to their subculture.

• Identify and discuss the core values of American society and compare them with the values summarized on page 52 of Riddle.

Questions

1. Discuss the importance of *Gelassenheit* in Amish culture. In what ways is it central to their way of life?

2. How do Amish children learn the habits of *Gelassenheit*? What activities and practices teach these values to children?

3. How do child-rearing practices differ between Amish and American culture?

4. Discuss the role of a résumé in Amish and American society. Why is the word “résumé” a foreign concept in Amish culture?

5. Kraybill argues that kneeling is the posture of *Gelassenheit*. Why is that the case? What is the typical posture of American individualism?

6. In what way do Amish values provide cultural capital for the operation and success of Amish society?

7. How do American child-rearing practices prepare non-Amish youth to succeed in an individualistic society?

8. What is unique and distinctive about the Amish view of spiritual salvation? How do Amish views of salvation differ from some other religious groups?
9. Why is personal pride such a threat to the harmony and stability of Amish society?

Statement

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish are mindless robots who are captives of their culture.”
2. Support or Refute this statement: “Because it suppresses individualism, Amish society is an oppressive society that stifles human freedom and happiness.”
3. Support or Refute this statement: “Unlike the Amish, other Americans are free from traditions and customs.”
4. Support or Refute this statement: “Because their religion is shaped by tradition and custom the Amish are not ‘saved’, in a spiritual sense.”
5. Support or Refute this statement: “Because they restrict individualistic and emotional expressions of religious faith Amish people cannot experience ‘personal salvation’.”

Activities

1. Construct a list of words and phrases that are associated with individualism in American culture. How do these shape daily behavior as well as social policy?
2. Visit an Amish cemetery and a public cemetery. Describe how individualism and Gelassenheit are symbolized and displayed even after death?
3. Compare Amish child-rearing practices with how you were raised as a child. How do different values in the two cultural systems impact child-rearing?
4. Interview five friends (not in the class). Ask them to rank order the following five values: Freedom of choice, obedience, conformity, independence, and entertainment. How does their ordering of values compare with Amish values?

5. Assume that you were considering joining the Amish. List the ten things that would be the hardest for you to relinquish? Why do you value these things; why would it be difficult to give them up?

6. Identify four important traditions in American culture. Why do Americans comply with these traditions? What happens to those who violate them?