Chapter Five: Rites of Redemption and Purification

Overview

Chapter Five describes and interprets religious rituals that shape Amish life by focusing on:

• The importance of the *Ordnung* for regulating Amish behavior;
• The centrality of baptism as a rite of entry into the Amish church;
• The patterns of worship and fellowship in the local church district (congregation);
• The importance of the biannual communion service for unification and revitalization;
• The selection and ordination of leaders through a process known as “the lot”;
• The importance of confession for cleansing moral decay and restoring transgressors;
• The procedures of excommunication when other means of social control fail; and
• The ritual of shunning that shames excommunicated persons.

Key Points

• Explore the illustration of an orchestra (page 111 of the text) to show how ritual rests on both culture and social structure. Select other examples — an athletic event or a family gathering — to distinguish between culture, ritual, and structure. Show how ritualized interaction rests on culture and structure and also blends them together.

• Emphasize the importance of the *Ordnung* for defining the Amish moral order. Although unwritten, it defines the normative order and moral boundaries of Amish life. Explore with students why the norms of Amish life are unwritten and less formalized than those in contemporary society. Are there equivalents of the *Ordnung* in contemporary society?

• As Anabaptists, the Amish emphasize the importance of adult baptism as the primary rite of entrance for membership in to Amish society. Baptism is a point of no return for Amish youth because at baptism they promise to uphold the *Ordnung* for the rest of their
life. Indeed they will face excommunication if they break their promise. Explore the different meanings of baptism in the Amish church compared to mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches. Identify and discuss other initiation rituals in contemporary society (sports teams, prison, gangs, and military) that carry significant life-long consequences.

• Show how the Amish worship service embodies and ritualizes key Amish values — patience, humility, self-denial, *gelassenheit*, communal solidarity, gender roles, power and status. How does a contemporary Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist or Catholic worship service embody cultural and religious values?

• Explore how the preparations leading to communion and the communion service itself, help to maintain social control, preserve unity, and energize the life of an Amish congregation. The Amish do not permit persons who are not members of the local congregation to participate in the communion service. How do the Amish communion practices reflect different cultural values compared with typical Protestant communion practices?

• The selection of Amish ministers differs radically from the ordination practices of many mainline Protestant groups. Show how the ordination procedures of the Amish give extraordinary religious legitimation to the authority of Amish leaders. How might using the lot to select ministers diminish dissension and conflict in the congregation?

• Amish leadership selection practices identify the best potential leaders in the local congregation who are known by the members and who in turn know the members well. What are the strengths and weakness of this model for selecting leaders?
• In many ways the public confessions in members meetings, which are expected of wayward members in the Amish church, clash dramatically with the individualistic values of contemporary culture. Amish adults are accountable to the other members of their congregation for their behavior. Explore how public religious confession runs counter to the individualism of contemporary society. How does the role of therapy in modern life, compare, and contrast with confession in Amish culture?

• Excommunication sounds harsh to modern ears. Are there contemporary equivalents to excommunication when the larger society deals with social deviants, political traitors, criminals, terrorists, or employees with poor performance? The Amish argue against the use of force in military, law, litigation and politics. Does their use of excommunication contradict their rejection of force?

• Shunning is a powerful form of social control. How do the Amish rationalize the use of shunning and harmonize it with their commitment to love? Show how shunning is a symbolic ritual of shaming rather than absolute exclusion that terminates social interaction. What forms of shaming and exclusion are found among families, friendship groups, and political groups in contemporary society? Is imprisonment a form of shunning?

**Questions**

1. Discuss the important social functions of the *Ordnung* in Amish society. How does the *Ordnung* change and evolve over time?

2. Why do Anabaptist groups like the Amish take baptism so seriously? How does it contribute to Amish life and vitality?
3. Identify and discuss the values of Amish culture that are ritualized in the Amish worship service.

4. Identify and discuss the key differences between an Amish worship service and the typical worship service of a non-Amish religious group with which you are familiar.

5. How do Amish communion services embody different values than the typical service of Protestant communion or Catholic mass?

6. What reasons might typical Protestants give for objecting to a self-examination service before the communion service and for making public confessions in church for their transgressions?

7. Discuss how the use of “the lot” to select leaders reflects Amish values. How does it provide a powerful legitimation of the authority of Amish leaders?

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “Baptism is the most important practice and the most central value in Amish religious life.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “Excommunication is an inhumane practice that violates Amish values of love and nonviolence.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “Shunning is a cruel practice that has no place in a Christian church that seeks to practice love and compassion.”
Activities

1. Assume that you have decided to join the Amish. Make a list of the things that you would have to “give up” before you could be baptized. What would be the five most difficult things to give up? Identify the five most important things you would gain if you joined the Amish.

2. Some Amish-raised youth decide not to join the Amish church and some adult members are excommunicated. These folks leave for many different reasons. Some leave with good feelings about their Amish heritage and others leave with bitterness because of painful experiences in their family or church. Explore the material on a website (http://www.amishabuse.com) written by an ex-Amish man who left an ultraconservative Amish community with painful experiences. What do these vignettes tell us about some of the shadows of Amish life? Summarize your reactions and thoughts by writing an essay on the “Pros and Cons of Amish life.”

3. Social control is central to the operation of any society. Make a list of the informal and formal means of social control in American society at large, in your local community, in your school, and in one of your groups. List the means of social control — informal and formal — in Amish society. What are the purposes of social control among the Amish and in the list you have constructed? How do different groups use different means of social control? Why is social control necessary, even critical for the survival of any society?