

# THE AMISH COMMUNITY OF AMERICA

## Different On Every Point from American Modernity.

### Religion, the Secret of Their Prosperous Survival.

by K. N. Dastoor

America is a curious place. It is known to be engulfed by material pleasures and devoid of any serious religion. Yet there are several groups scattered all over the country which are intensely religious and keep themselves at a reasonable distance away from the material mainstream. The Amish Community is one of them. They are about one and half lacs of people spread over different places in North America. Their way of life is astonishingly different from almost everything that goes on in America. They are like aliens in a foreign territory; and yet they are thriving.

Look at their ways:

**They never use motor cars;** the horse buggy is their only mode of conveyance and transport.

**They do not use public electricity.** There are no electric lights, fans, gizzers, radios, t.v., telephones, microwaves, vcr's, air conditioners, washing machines, mixers in their homes. The light is from gas-pressured lanterns.

They do not send their children to American high-schools. They have their own schools.

They are basically farmers. No tractors. Ploughing by horses only.

Their dress is quite different and immediately identify them. Men's heads are covered by distinctive wide brimmed hats straw hats in summer and black felt hats in winter. They have long hair. Shirts are pocketless; belts are prohibited. Black is the dominant colour, but dress shirts can be blue, purple, green or wine.

**Amish men grow beards when they get married;** but the mustache is necessarily shaven.

Women also cover their heads with white swiss organdy coverings specially shaped. Dresses can be gray, blue, purple, green or wine. They wear woolen shawls draped over the shoulders and fastened in front at the neck with a hat pin or safety pin. A home made woolen coat with a quilted lining is usually worn under the shawl by adult women. The girls and women wear capes and aprons.

Most of the Amish dresses are home made. **Mothers sew all the dresses,** capes, aprons and head coverings for themselves and her daughters, as also the pants and shirts for men and boys.

**Everything they do from birth to death, the dress, the food, the farming, the daily life, family life, social life, and everything they avoid like electric gadgets, modern education and the pit falls of modern. American life - all their acts and avoidances are based on and revolve around their RELIGION, religions tenets, traditions, teachings, and instructions,** which are treated as the spiritual exercises and exertions for the whole community as well as each individual, and also intended to preserve and protect the identity of their community and culture. Their Religion is Christian. We shall go into the details of this a little later. Let us delve a little deeper into their amazing ways.

#### **MARRIAGE, LORD'S COMMAND**

Marriage for the Amish is a religious duty and sacrament. They marry at the age between 22 and 25. The marriage days are Tuesday or Thursday in November when the harvest season ends. The family is the keystone of Amish society. To marry and raise a family is a duty ordained by Religion. To break the marriage vow is a sin. In rare and exceptional cases couples may live apart but divorce is totally discouraged and the divorced couple, a very rare phenomenon, are automatically excommunicated.

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Here I would make a request to my readers. As you go on reading this, you may please compare the Amish ways with our Parsi ways.

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Birth control for an Amish is tampering with God's wish. To rear large families is God's wish. **By forty-five an Amish woman is, on an average, the mother of 7 children.** One Amish friend of Behrose and Dr. Minoo

Karanjia of Pennsylvania told us about her near relative having 18 children including one triplet and two twins! I read about an Amish great grandmother who left more than 300 direct descendants and whose funeral horse-buggies-procession was quite a few miles long! **About 13 % of Amish families have ten or more children.** No problem; they are prosperous enough to rear such large families and in case of need the whole local congregation will jump out to help. Children are not seen as economic burdens, but heartily welcomed as blessings of the Lord and as members, who will contribute their share not only to the family economy but also towards the spiritual upliftment of the whole community. Family is the fort of spirituality and survival, both.

To bring my reader in the real mood to enter into and appreciate the field of the Amish community and its inseparable connection with their Religion, I would narrate an event which happened in one of their congregation.

First a little background. Being Christians, tracing their antiquity to 16th century Europe, confession is a most important spiritual exercise of the Amish. Man has faults of the flesh within him. They lead him astray and induce him to commit acts, which are ordained as sins. In spite of the best endeavours to avoid falling into the pit falls of sin, he does fall. If that happens, the Lord has commanded repentance by confession. Confession is an act of humility and healing. It is, in the language of the Zarathushtrian Religion, "Patet", which we do in our Kushti as well as every Manthra prayer by reciting "Az Hamah Goonah Patet Pashemanoom .....". The Christians do it by confessing the sin before the priest. The Amish way is sterner and stricter. They do it before the 'church' meeting.

Their church is not a separate exclusive building, where worship services are held. They hold the services, turn by turn, in the individual family homes. This mobile sanctuary keeps them in touch with each other, and turn the family homes into places of worship. Normal Christians have no notion of worship in one's home. For them, prayer and worship are to be done in Churches alone. The Amish mobile sanctuary is a beautiful notion: meet at home, pray, hear the priest, have food together, discuss the community problems and above all undergo the strenuous 'yoga' - a "Hatha - Yoga" - of public confession.

Marriage, for the Amish, is a gift, a blessing from God, an opportunity to rear a family and induce the children to do God's work. **As marriage is sacred, so also sex is sacred.** One cannot exist without the other. Unless one undergoes the strictly religious sacrament of marriage, sex is sin. Pre-marital sex i.e. sex before marriage is a sin.

Now the true story. There was a young Amish couple who were married for several years. They had succumbed to the demands of sex before they had got married. Although years had gone by, their conscience was pricking at the sin they had committed. In their daily life, God was so kind to them. It appeared, he had forgiven them. But that thought made them more remorseful. "We have violated His law and not done anything about it. He in his infinite grace and mercy has forgiven us. But that is not fair to Him. If we have violated His command and He does not want to punish us, let us punish ourselves and carry out His command to make a confession."

One fine day, they requested the church to exclude them for six weeks from the congregation, by way of repentance for their sin and to allow them to confess it after six weeks. Their request was granted; they excluded themselves for six weeks; passed that time in prayerful repentance and then presented themselves before the church meeting. After the usual service, sermons and singing, the couple rose up and walked to the ministers and confessed openly before them. The ministers asked some questions and then declared that the couple having followed the command of God to confess, they were reinstated. All persons present had their eyes moistened. All had lord Christ awakened in their hearts. No matter they had sinned, but what a grand way to get up after the fall. Everybody felt themselves nearer to the Lord and nearer to each other. One person described his experience in the following words:

"They asked to be expelled and so there was this six week period of repentance. Then they were reinstated as members and it was such a sensational thing, and everybody felt that this young couple really wanted to expose themselves and let the church know that they were sorry for what they had done and wanted to lead a better life. Everybody felt so good about it. It was really a healthy thing for the church. It was really a good feeling."

Now just think. Here is a country which is on a sex rawpage. In America school children are taught 'safe-sex' when they go on 'dates'. They are given condoms in lunch boxes. Condom sellers are going round in school compounds. The famous graduation day is a free sex day. Marriage has no sanctity. Love is

thoroughly and absolutely equated with sex and nothing else. Marriages are based and broken on sex performances. Premarital sex, a sin? Pooh! No man or woman on his or her marriage day is "virgin". Such uncontrolled sex currents have now entered the hell of homo sex and bisex, and HIV virus. Are the Amish wrong in declaring even premarital sex, a sin? But that is not merely an Amish doctrine. It is the Christian doctrine. It is the teaching of every Religion. It is not for nothing that marriage is manifestly a religious rite. We Parsis recite a powerful Nirang, "**Aa Airyema Ishiyo.....**" during the marriage ceremony, declaring in the Manthric language, that **this marriage pleases Asho Zarathushtra, since it is going to bring the "Khaetvodath", the unifications of the souls, nearer.**

We just wonder, how in such a sex-infected country, the Amish are able to preserve their strict religious and moral values and convictions? We wonder, how can they remain so different from their surroundings and yet thrive, prosper and multiply? What survival lessons we Parsis can learn from them, if at all we have any capacity of learning left in us?

Let us first have a swift look into the history of the Amish who are they? Where did they come from?

## **THE HISTORY OF THE AMISH**

It is well known that in about 1517 Martin Luther revolted against the official church in Europe. A few years later, the revolt took a stronger form in Zurich, Switzerland. A group of religious dissidents came into being. They were called Anabaptists. Their main difference lay in their belief that baptism should be conferred not on children, but on adults who were willing to live a life of radical obedience to the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ. They therefore rebaptised themselves, which amounted to discarding their childhood baptism. They also contended that the civic authorities guided by official priesthood should not have the right to interpret and prescribe Christian practices. The Bible should be the sole and final authority. A simple service in a small house in Zurich for rebaptising the adults was held on 21st January 1525 and thus was launched the movement of the Anabaptists.

Between 1635 and 1645 Anabaptists, wherever found, were severely persecuted, tortured and killed. By the late 1600, a group of Swiss Anabaptists emigrated from Switzerland to then Alsace region, now in France. A controversy erupted between them and the original swiss Anabaptists. **One Jacob Ammann became the leader of Alsace Anabaptists and founded the Amish Sect.** The original Swiss were known as Mennonites.

Both these sects were compelled to leave their homelands. Mennonites arrived in America in 1683 and established a settlement in Philadelphia. The Amish seems to have arrived in Philadelphia in near about 1737 by a ship with the name Charming Nacey after an eighty-three days voyage. Two settlements were established by them. Between 1760 and 1880, they came to Lancaster (Pennsylvania) in different congregations. This was their first permanent home. They are there today. They have transformed a 946 sq. mile area in an agricultural paradise, locally known as the world's Garden Spot. They are divided into separate congregations or Church districts, each with 25 to 35 families living in the one locale. A cluster of congregation forms one 'affiliation' with common religious practices.

Today in North America there are 660 Amish congregations scattered through twenty states and the Canadian Province of Ontario. They do not maintain population statistics; but on a reasonable estimate their number is around one and a half lacs. 70% live in three states Indiana, Pennsylvania and Ohio. Ohio is the largest settlement with 110 congregations.

They do expand. **More than 53 % of the population in Lancaster is under 18 years. That settlement has expanded from 6 church districts in 1878 to nearly 90 in 1990. Population there has increased 13 times between 1890 and 1990!**

What is the secret?

The Amish have a blueprint of behaviour. They call it "**Ordnung**". It is not a written code but is taught by example to the children and understood by everybody. It prescribes certain practices and prohibits certain others. The first list includes "marriage within the church". The second prohibitive list includes artificial birth control, divorce and premarital sex. The greatest thing is that they faithfully follow "Ordnung".

The home, the family, the church district, the congregation, the community, the Religion are more important than the individual. That is their secret.

The reverse is the secret of the impending Parsi extinction.

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### **What is "Ordnung"?**

An Amish leader explains:

"Our father's church leaders had a strong desire to hold on to the old way of life, and although much has changed over the years they have been successful in holding the line to the point that we have been separated from the world, which, in time, created a culture different from that of the world. This did not come on overnight, nor did it come through rash or harsh commands of our bishops, but by making wise decisions to hold firm to the old-time religion from one time to another, from one generation to another."

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"Tradition to us is a sacred trust, and it is part of our religion to uphold and adhere to the ideals of our forefathers."

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## Amazing Story of the Amish Way of Life.

### "GELASSENHITE" - SUBMISSION, OBEDIENCE, HUMILITY, THE KEY TO THEIR RELIGIOUS CULTURE.

#### "Catch Them Young", the Secret of Their Survival.

How to be away from the surrounding culture and yet survive, multiply and thrive? The Amish Community in U.S.A. is a living answer.

We had, in the last issue, some idea about their history and amazingly different way of life. We shall go a bit further in that. I shall adopt a different style to give you a better and more effective idea of their religion based culture. An Amish himself will be talking to you, in answer to the questions asked to him. The questioner, the Amish and the dialogue will all be imaginary. Let the questioner be a Parsi, Mr. P. Q. and the Amish Mr. A. The content of the dialogue however will be based on solid recorded facts, which I take mainly from a 1989-1991 book: **"The Riddle of Amish Culture" by Donald B. Kraybill** (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London). This 300 pages book contains an authentic and well researched account of the Amish life. The author has gone as deep in the Amish psyche as is possible for him to go. Let us now begin the dialouge.

Q: You people are so mild and docile, you have a calm look in your eyes and a contended smile on your face; and yet you are so strong willed and determined to preserve and live by your traditional culture in the midst of strong opposing currents of modernity. How do you do that?

Amish: (Smiling serenely) You want to know our secret? It is not a secret. It was proclaimed and publicised 1900 years back by Lord Jesus Christ, not merely by spoken words but also by His own acts and example. (A flash of devotion glows on the Amish's face). Our forefathers, Anabaptists, used just one word "Gelassenhite" to convey our thinking. That German word is the key.

PQ: ""Gay-las-en-hite"! Difficult to pronounce. What does it mean?

A: It has a many coloured meaning. But the undercurrent can be best translated as "submission". - submission, obedience and resignation to God's will with dedicated heart and forsaking all selfishness. Look! How submissive our Lord Jesus was to God's will? How humble, how meek, how selfless?

PQ (thinking in his mind without speaking): This sounds like Sarosh, the Yazata of "Implicit Obedience"...

A (continues): The word has, then, several practical dimensions. The foremost are humility and obedience to the authority of not only God, but also of our priestly guides, our elders ad advisors and leaders. We know, they themselves are selfless people with no selfish motives. Their only motive is our spiritual good and preservation of our religion, culture and the way of life based on them..... Humility is the opposite of ego and pride. Too much emphasis on 'I' and individual whims and fancies, is extremely harmful. **Individual in our society is subordinate to the will of the community. That keeps us united and preserves our identity.**

PQ: So, all this naturally flows from 'Gelassenheit', the fountain source of Religion?

#### ARMAITI, IN ACTION

A: Yes, It explains all our ways. Everything that boosts the ego should be avoided, be it American high school education or industrial competition or cars and electric gadgets, or photographs or scientific pursuits or even abstract thinking. Anything leading to conceit, arrogance, pride and selfishness is to be discarded.

PQ [thinking by himself]: This is really 'Armaiti in action.....

A: Our dress, our farming practices our family life, our religious pursuits our education, revolve round this spirit of Gelassenheit. That induces us to respect and trust tradition and the wisdom of our elders.

PQ: But how can you continue all this, when everything that goes around you runs in the reverse direction? In the American society the individual is given high importance. A teacher friend of mine told me that when she rebuked a child in her school not to go around breaking things and fixing nails all over the wall, the parent told the teacher not to obstruct the "creative tendency" of the child, but allow him to develop his individuality. Let the child "find itself" was the parent's instruction to the teacher!

A [laughing heartily]: **We teach our children not "to find themselves" but "to loose themselves"**. You ask how can we go on with our ways, generation after generation. Answer is simple. We catch them young, right from the age of two years. We impress upon them that they are lucky and blessed to have been born as Amish; and should adhere to the Amish ways throughout life. **We teach them to "give up" and "give in"**. Since our families are large, they learn to wait their turn and yield to the needs of their elder brothers and sisters. They enjoy waiting. They learn how not to cry to get the thing they want. They never insist on "right now". Patience, obedience, thinking for others and giving rather than taking, are the very early lessons in life.

[KND's note: Kraybill on page 29 in his book quotes Mervin Smucker who found "that **Amish children are less likely to use first person singular pronouns like I, me, mine, myself, my - than non Amish children**". Another researcher, John Hostetler using a personality test on Amish children found that they were, **"quiet, friendly, responsible and conscientious**. Works devotedly to meet his obligations and serve his friends and school... Patient with detail and routine. Loyal, considerate, concerned with how other people feel when they are in the wrong" (ibid page 29).

A (continuing): We teach them to wait, yield, obey, submit. Our parents and teachers work together to achieve this. A spanking is not ruled out, if required. As one of our leaders said, "By the time that the child reaches the age of three, the mold has started to form and it is the parents' duty to form it in the way that the child should go. When the child is old enough to stiffen its back and throw back its head in temper, it is old enough to gently start breaking that temper". By that time, he has learnt to resist his or her ego.

PQ: This is wonderful. In our society, it seems, we are actually teaching them to be haughty and egoistic and disobedient; and when they revolt, we lament and cry.

A: We also make them do all the duties of the home and family, like washing dishes, feeding cows, hauling manure, pulling weeds and mowing lawns.

PQ: Is there any special way by which you drive in all this?

A: Oh yes! There are many. For instance, **there is a school motto called "JOY". The first letter is for Jesus, the last 'Y' is for 'You' and 'O' for 'Others'. Jesus first then others and last you**. To serve Jesus by following His commands, to serve others by helping them and to keep one's self last is the key to real JOY.

PQ (in his mind): Oh God! This is "Ushta" in action.

A: There is then a simple poem for children:

I must be a Christian child  
Gentle, patient, meek, and mild,  
Must be honest, simple, true.  
In my words and actions too,  
I must cheerfully obey,  
Giving up my will and way.....  
Must Remember, God can view  
All I think and all I do  
Glad that I can know I try  
Glad that children Such as I  
In our feeble ways and small  
Can serve Him Who Loves Us All.

PQ: How beautiful? But what about the schooling of your children? They would not escape from the onslaught of the American culture if you send them to their school. Because your ways are diametrically opposite to theirs.

A (Silent for a while and with a flush of pain on his face): Oh! we have suffered so much on that point. We had direct conflict with the American law, when we refused to send our children to the public high schools and insisted on our own right to educate our children according to our culture and our ways.

....It is a long story.... We were arrested, fined, imprisoned and mocked. In 1949 more than two dozen Amish fathers were arrested for violating the law which required us to send our children compulsorily to the American high schools. We petitioned and entreated the Government authorities and even the Courts to relax the law for us, but in vain.

PA: But what were the reasons you gave them for your resistance?

A: They were many. We wanted the schools to be near our homes. We wanted teachers who know and can teach our culture. We argued that the American high schools lauded "worldly wisdom", which, according to us, "clashed with the wisdom from above". We quoted 1 Cor. 1-18-28 that "**Worldly wisdom of man was foolishness in the eyes of God**". Worldly knowledge puffeth up and makes one proud (1:Cor 8:1). We pointed out that sex education, science and evolution prescribed in the school curriculum symbolized the vanity of worldly wisdom.

PQ: Who will understand all this today? This is like trying to setup an ice factory in an ever burning village.

A: Ah! you are right!

PQ: In Bunyan's "Pilgrims Progress", Mr. Christian, who started his journey from the city of Destruction towards the Celestial City, had his first encounter with Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who led him off the divine path.

A: Yes. Amish sages have said, **the wisdom of the world makes you restless, wanting to leap and jump and not knowing where you will land.**

PQ: Vah! This has really happened to the modern science, which thought that its 400 years long exertion has revealed all "laws of nature" to man; and now in the last decades of this century it has found that it knows nothing. "Miracles" of technology like H-bomb or computers are no proof that science is in contact with reality.

A: Yes, truth requires spiritual exertion, not worldly wisdom, which has now jumped – it knows not where.

PQ: Why, friend, it has jumped into the pit of mankind's own destruction..... But sorry for the diversion; please continue your education story.

A: We contended before the authorities that "**for us our religion is inseparable with a day's work, night's rest, a meal or any other practice**; therefore our education can much less be separated from our religious practices". In college you have to pull everything apart, analyze it and try to build it from a scientific standpoint. That runs counter to what we've been taught on mother's knee." This education would be a great separator.

PQ: What is that? What separation?

A: Just think. First, it would separate children from their traditions, their values, even their parents. Everything is divided into its visible component parts. Even religion would be analysed and eventually separated from family, history and daily life. It will become just another subject of "critical analysis."

PQ (thinking himself): Baaprey! How true! The critical analysis of the Parsi Religion has led the much acclaimed Max Muller to say that the Prophet Zarathushtra was a mythical figure! Every tradition of the Parsi life was sought to be swept away by this monster of critical analysis.

A (continuing): Our whole life would be destroyed. Intellectual gymnastics would be a matter of pride.... Most important, **high school would separate Amish children from humility - our first virtue, our gelassenheit, which is the very foundation of our religion, culture and daily life.** Our children would become arrogant, proud, egoistic, self confident and even revolting. We would be separate from our original self and ultimately dissolve....

PQ (in his mind): - The present fate of the Parsis! (Loudly) Did all your labour with the authorities lead to any fruitful result? Did this modern scientific American culture hear your pleas and entreaties? I think you were quoting Bible before the devil.

A: No! No! Don't say that. They are not so bad. They have a constitution which actually came to our rescue! In 1972 the Supreme Court ruled in our favour. The Judges said, "There can be no assumption that

today's majority is "right" and the Amish and others and wrong. A way of life that is odd or even erratic but interferes with no rights or interests of others is not to be condemned because it is different."

PQ: Ah! what a relief! Definitely, an answer to your Prayers! After this ruling, what is the position?

## **PRESENT DAY AMISH SCHOOLS**

A: Good! Very Good! Thank God! We have now our own schools. They are small, mostly one room with Amish teachers. In Lancaster settlement alone, we have more than three thousand Amish pupils learning in about 101 private schools. Mind, we don't directly teach religion in schools. **Religion is not to be made an academic subject; that will invite that "critical analysis", a sure destroyer of faith.** Religion is a way of life, so it is the duty of the parents to nurture the children into religious life; and the church also has to impart Religion, not as intellectual exercise but a set procedure of everything to be done in life: talking, eating, sleeping, working, helping, enjoying, praying, obeying.

PQ (in thought): That is 'tarikah' in action (loudly): How do you select your teachers?

A: They are often single Amish women. Their foremost qualification we just insist upon is "good Christian character". This is in our guidelines for selection. Each school has a board of three members, who are from the parents. The teachers hold country wide meetings to discuss the teaching methods and other school problems. There is an Amish teachers' magazine "Blackboard Bulletin". As far as possible parents would like one single teacher for their children right through all the standards.

PQ: It seems, in spite of all the agonies you have passed through, ultimately you have your way with the American law.

A: We thank God, Jesus and the American constitution for that.

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So, my dear reader, here is the Amish way. A Community, though humble in every vein, can, through the strength of their strong conviction, raise their head against the mighty culture surrounding them from every direction and have their way. I have personally observed that the Americans look on Amish with great respect and admiration. Governments have given them several concessions. Their agricultural and dairy products are in great demand. They live and thrive sticking to their amazingly different way.

We Parsis could have done this. Until 18th century, we were living in the midst of diverse cultures, without changing our religious way of life. Anquetil Duperron described our way of life in his 1771 book, which makes an amazing reading. By 19th century we were swept away by the western winds, fast abandoned our religious way of living and now all of us are talking about our impending extinction - yes, talking only, not doing anything.

I shall take you a little further in the Amish's ways and attitudes hereafter.

- K. N. D.

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# Amazing Story of the Amish Way of Life.

## THE RIDDLE OF ELECTRICITY - WHY DO THE AMISH AVOID IT?

We continue the dialogue between the Parsi Questioner, Mr. PQ, with his questions and the Amish, Mr A. with his answers.

**PQ :** The ways and life style of your community is entirely out of the world. You till your farm with a horse and never use a tractor; you go places in a horse buggy and never in a car. You do not use public electricity; your homes have no light, no fan, no radio, no television, no telephone even. You do not take pictures with a camera and you greatly dislike your photographs being taken. All these amazing constraints cannot be just to preserve your separate identity. There must be other reasons behind them. What are they?

**A :** The answer is again in one key word : "Gelassenheit". It means humility, submission to God's will, self denial; and also peace, contentment, calm spirit. That is the undercurrent of our ways. Now all this can be put in the expression; "absence of ego". Every modern gadget or equipment boosts the ego in man. They make man proud; and pride just does not go before a fall, it is a fall by itself. To resist pride and ego is a spiritual exertion. All spirituality begins at humility. The path to God is made up of humility. It is it all the way. When the Satan says, "Let there be pride" and man succumbs, he is thrown out of the path in a dense jungle of doubt and confusion.

**PQ:** How true! All varied Religions current amongst the humans of this globe, has this Truth at the base.

**A :** Is it so?

**PQ :** Yes. Compassion and tolerance of the Buddhist, non-violence of the Jain, love and submission of the Christian faith, 'ishqa' - divine Love - of the Muslim, the faith unshakable amidst extreme suffering of the Jew, Spenta Armaiti the earth-like humility of the Parsi Zarathushtrian (the more you trample the earth, the more it gives) - all these revolve round the absence of ego.

**A :** That is so good! 'I' in oneself is to be dissolved. The capital 'I' is to be transformed to the small 'i'!

**PQ :** Ah! 'i' with a point above its head, as if saying there is a God point above!

**A :** Yes! With a 'G' capital. Not the 'I' of I but the 'G' of God. **That explains everything we do.** Take photography. It is nothing but one of the many faces of pride. When you see yourself in a picture, your pride is boosted. You would think, "I am somebody". "How handsome or beautiful I look". "I think I must have now a different hairstyle ..... " So here goes that 'I', and along with it all that is counter to "Gelassenheit".

**PQ :** In the modern society surrounding you, every child goes with a camera in his or her hands. There are albums upon albums of photographs stockpiled in every American home ..... Lessons in I-complex! .....

**A :** There is a command in the holy Bible, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or a likeness of anything". (Exod. 20:4). And here you are making a likeness and an image of your own body, an aggravated violation of this injunction. When in the latter part of the 19th century, the modernity boosted its ego by fast advancing photography, we applied this Biblical command to avoid it.

**PQ :** Now tell me about your avoidance of electricity. Your homes are elegantly devoid of all electrical gadgets, which are the very foundations of American life. No radio, TV, air conditioner, microwave, hair dryer, toaster, dish washer, washing machine, refrigerator, mixer, stove ..... why is that ?

**A :** First let me tell you a few facts about our encounter with electricity. It has led to some differences

amongst us. But we have adopted certain restraints and drawn a line beyond which we do not go. Electricity from the public power stations are to be strictly avoided. So all the luxury gadgets are ruled out, and so also all connections with the outside world. But electricity from home made 12 volt battery was permitted. From 1919 onwards, as electricity went on drawing all American life in its powerful net, some concessions were allowed. Generators are used by some for welders, bulk-tanks and battery chargers. Some use of 'private' electricity has crept in the farming and dairy businesses. We always insist on these businesses not expanding beyond a limit and not becoming automatic gadgets oriented. That would make us idle and avoid hard work. Idle mind is fertile ground for doubts and confusions and lead away from faith. Our fathers were convinced that electricity would bring along all that our pure and simple life does not need. All the modern conveniences through electricity has made Americans its slaves. With our simple diesel engines and air power, we are not hooked up with worldliness. At the time of early invasion of electricity, an Amish farmer had said, "After people get everything hooked up to electricity, then it will go on fire and the end of the world is going to come." It sounded a bit rustic, but not wrong perhaps.

**PQ** : I remember, my grandfather who was a priest, resisted the installation of electric lights in our village home, in the late twenties. He said, "such lights will render the chanting of the Manthra prayer ineffective and join our priestly home with the outside impurities."

**A** : These old people were instinctively right. The end of the world has not come, but most of the war weapons of destruction owe their existence to electricity.

**PQ**: Yes. And as the old Amish predicted, we are now completely and inseparably hooked up with electricity. So much so that it is shuddering to think what would happen if some mystical being neutralises all electricity on the earth! Everything will come to a grinding halt. In the fifties, somebody had made a film, "The Day the Earth Stood Still" in which a man from some star - an extraterrestrial man - was shown to have neutralised all electricity for an hour and all activity on the earth ceased.

**A** : (Laughing heartily) : Was it? But surely our Amish activity will not cease if electricity vanishes from the earth.

**PQ** : Earlier you said you were compelled to compromise on the use of private electricity. Will you please tell me an example of such compromise?

**A** : Ah! We had an interesting encounter in our milk business. You see, dairy is our most important business. Our milk has a great demand among the American people. We supply it to large milk companies. Before 1968, we used to chill our milk cans in mechanical coolers powered by diesel engines. In 1968, the milk companies told our farmers to store and chill milk in large stainless steel tanks, powered by electricity. "Do that, or loose your market." Our bishops and leaders were in a quandary. Do we loose our flourishing business or give up our tradition? We frankly informed the Milk companies that it would be impossible for us to give up our tradition of not using public electricity and at the same time we did not want to loose the business. A series of meetings were held between five senior bishops and four milk inspectors from the Companies. The senior milk inspector knew our Amish dialect. That was God's doing, because our bishops could explain to him our stand more effectively. Our frankness and our insistence on our tradition generated a lot of sympathy in the inspectors. They did not want to lose our milk. So, a compromise was arrived at. The refrigeration units on the bulk tanks would get their power from diesel engines.

**PQ** : That was really a triumph for the Amish. No electricity!

**A** : It was God's wish and help. But there was another point on which we had to agree to the use of a 12 volt motor rigged up by a battery. The milk inspectors insisted that the milk should be stirred by an agitator, five minutes per hour, to prevent cream formation at the top, as that would invite bacterial growth. They demanded that the agitator be operated by an automatic switch requiring 110 volt electricity. Now that would gravely violate our tradition of not using 110 volt. And we have a natural dislike for the word 'automatic'.

**PQ** : I could guess the reason. You don't want to be machine dependent. You would prefer physical labour to push button laziness.

**A :** That's right. Too much physical comfort and convenience are downright worldly, leading us away from our religious life and habits. So there was a stalemate. But if both the parties are genuinely sympathetic to each other's stand, there is nothing to stop a give and take solution. We suggested that the milk agitators would be powered by a special 12 volt motor run by a 12 volt battery getting its electricity from a small generator installed on the farm. The inspectors agreed.

**PQ :** So, from 110 to 0, it was settled at 110 to 12! Great!

**A :** Yes, but there was a third point, on which we very politely but firmly refused any compromise. Because it concerned a purely religious dictate. The milk companies planned to carry away the milk in large tanks every other day. That meant, they would be taking delivery of the milk every other Sunday. That was the Lord's day. We could not indulge in a worldly business on our Lord's day. That day is to be reserved for the Lord, not for man. There could be no two-ways or mid-way about this. We told them that they could collect the milk on Saturdays or a few minutes after Sunday midnight. The milk companies had no course left but to agree despite the higher costs of such collection. They wanted the Amish milk.

**PQ :** Great! But with the fast advancing electric gadgets, the temptation to use them must be great. Were there any further compromises?

**A:** Yes. Compelling ones. Farming has not remained our only business. We have diverted to carpentry and other cottage industries. There we require power. We use air or hydraulic pressure tools; however, battery supplied 12 volts current is allowed for several uses: fence chargers, cow trainers, reading lights for the elderly, small motors in work shops. In 1975 another gadget, "inverter", had arrived in the outside world. It has the size of a car battery and can convert 12 volt current into 110 volt current. This 'home made' 110 volt current is allowed in special circumstances. But the 'public' electricity is to be avoided and no 110 volt appliances are permitted.

**PQ :** But you may be needing 'public' electricity in emergencies, say for medical treatment in a Doctor's clinic or hospital. Don't you permit that?

**A :** Oh yes! We do. We can avoid modern equipments but not the modern diseases which are in the air. A family with an asthmatic child is allowed to use 110 volt electricity to provide oxygen. Our people do visit doctors and get treatments as they give..... But one thing I must say. The surrounding world is so much entangled in electrical equipments and the physical conveniences are so tempting that our society has gone through several dissensions. There has been minor break-ups and there are some groups who have diverted from the mainstream.... We do not know how far and how long our culture, so strongly preserved, would be able to withstand the ever increasing pressures of modernity. It is quite a strenuous task for us to train and nurture our youths in our religious traditions, when the world around us is so devoid of religion. So far we have tried and succeeded to a great degree. But who knows when the cracks would appear may God forbid!

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# Religion Oriented Practices of the Amish.

## Compare Their Baptism with Our Present Day Navjot!

Greetings! My dear readers! I have placed before you the true story of some of the amazing ways of the Amish life. The story is long and the whole of it will require a large book. As I have already told you, most of the materials here are taken from a 300 - pages long book, "**The Riddle of Amish Culture**" by **Ronald Kraybill** (John Hopkins University Press - 1989-91), supplemented a little by my personal contact with an Amish family of Pennsylvania, which was through my friends Behrose and Minoo Karanjia of Indiana. Minoo has the good fortune of being one of the Doctors, whom the Amish visit for medical treatment. Kraybill's book has gone through five printings. One John A. Hostetler, a renowned authority on the Amish, has written 12 books on Amish life. I will therefore, continue this series with a couple of further articles. Emphasis will now be on their religious practices, which are a lesson for us, the Parsis.

We have seen that "**Gelassenheit**" and "**Ordnung**" are the two key words of the Amish culture. The former means: submission, obedience, humility, selflessness, resignation to God's will, and love and devotion towards Lord Jesus Christ and His commands. This is the undercurrent in all that they do and don't do. The "Ordnung" is an unwritten but living code of conduct, flowing from Gelassenheit. Humility should pervade all thought, word and deed. Obedience to the elders, the church, Lord Jesus and God should be reflected in all actions. The family, the community and the church are to be always thought of more than the self. Ego, pride and selfishness are to be ceaselessly avoided. Whatever is contrary to or inconsistent with all this is to be steered clear of.

### RELIGION, INSEPARABLE FROM LIFE

In other words, Religion is the foundation of all their work, values, practices, social life, family life, daily life, education, bringing up children, temperament, and dealings with the outside world. As an Amish said, "For us our religion is inseparable with a day's work, night's rest or any other practice."

Let us now see how they inculcate and maintain Religion in their community.

Baptism is a most vital and important event in the life of an individual Amish as also for the whole community. The age for baptising a youth ranges from 16 to 21 years. Girls often join at a younger age than boys. Before baptism, the child is entirely in the hands of the parents. Gelassenheit and Ordnung are to be implanted and instilled by them. The church has no official jurisdiction over the children and youths before baptism. They are taught not by mere words but by the practice and example of their own parents and the social contacts with others. At the same time, they are allowed to have a taste of youthful enjoyments. As they grow up, Ordnung penetrates deep into their psyche. Even then they are permitted to take liberties with the strict dictates of the Ordnung. Because they are required to decide themselves whether they would go for Baptism. It is not a trivial matter. Once baptised, a youth will have to stick to the ways and culture for life. The choice he or she has to make is the test of his own temperament and inclination as also his or her parent's exertions to mould him to the Amish ways. After Baptism, an Amish should not falter or revolt; otherwise he could be socially ostracised and excluded from the community. If he chooses not to be baptised, he is not shunned, but is free to leave the community.

Four out of five opt for Baptism. The parent's upbringing and the social nurture induce them to do so. Romantic attraction is another reason; because their priests do not perform the marriage ceremony for the unbaptised. Childhood impressions of the family ties, the farm, the horse, the buggy and the pleasant surroundings also draw them to be within the community.

[Talking of pleasant surroundings, the Amish colonies, spread over 20 states in North America, present breath taking scenic beauty. Two veteran and renowned photographers **Doyle Yoder** and **Leslie Kelly** have captured the calm and serene beauty of all the 20 colonies in a large colourful 136 pages book: "**America's Amish Country**" (1992), containing about 200 natural colour pictures, each of which looks heavenly. They not only display the breath-taking scenes, but also depict the Amish way of life as lived amongst the heart-stirring meadows and farms and flowers and woods and forests and curved paths and calm lakes and rivers. The horse drawn buggies of the Amish, the setting of their houses and farms, and the men, women and children working there, add tremendously to the serene charm profusely and lavishly spread out by nature. This is the original beauty of the mother earth gifted to man to live with. This is the true Godly way to pass

through the earth on our journey towards God. Alas! What has this "scientific" man of the last three centuries done to this beautiful globe?.....]

### **FIVE MONTHS TRAINING BEFORE BAPTISM.**

Coming back to Amish Baptism, five months preceding the ceremony, the youth attends ministerial classes where they are instructed on religious and spiritual significance of Baptism and the strict and sober life to be adopted thereafter in the selfless and humble service to the family, the community, the church, Lord Jesus and God. The youths are enlightened about the vows and Confession of Faith and the strict rules of Ordnung. On the Saturday before the actual ceremony, a special wrap up session is held. "You now know what life is ahead of you", the minister tells them, "If you have any doubt about your capacity to live that life, you can turn back. This is your last chance. The path that is straight and narrow is full of difficulties, stress and strain. It is better not to take the vow than to make it and later on break it."

### **STRAIT IS THE PATH!**

[The "strait and narrow path" refers to Mathew 7:13-14 in the holy Bible:

***"Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. "***

***"For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few."***

In a glorious book "**The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta**" (Shri Ramkrishna Math, Madras), **Swami Prabhavananda** transmits the above Biblical axiom in the vedantic language of the great Hindu Dharma:

***"The natural human tendency is to rush out through the broad ways of the senses and loose oneself in the world. The process of religious growth is to turn that whole current of life around and make it flow inward through "the strait gage." (page 117).***

There is a similar message in Gatha Yazashney **Ha 53-6 and 30-2. The natural tendency of man is to take pleasure in the accelerating chariot of the druja-evil. But following the ordained prescriptions leads to the most enlightened state of consciousness - "Soocha Mananghaa."**

### **THE RITUAL**

As to the actual Baptism ceremony, I can do no better than quote Kraybill.

"The baptismal rite follows two sermons during a regular Sunday morning Service. The deacon provides a small pail of water and a cup. The bishop tells the candidates to go on their knees "before the Most High and Almighty God and His church if you still think this is the right thing to do to obtain your salvation." The candidates are then asked three questions:

(1) "Are you willing, by the help and grace of God, to renounce the world, the devil, your own flesh and blood, and be obedient only to God and his church?" (Yes)

(2) "Are you willing to walk with Christ and his church and to remain faithful through life and until death?" (Yes)

(3) "Can you confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" (Each candidate repeats, "I confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.")

The congregation stands for prayer while the applicants remain kneeling. Then the bishop lays his hands on the head of the first applicant. The deacon pours water into the bishop's cupped hands. It drips over the candidate's head. The bishop then extends his hand to each new member as he or she rises. The bishop says: "**May the Lord God complete the good work which he has begun in you and strengthen and comfort you to a blessed end through Jesus Christ. Amen.**" The deacon's wife greets new female members with a "holy kiss," and the bishop likewise greets new male members and wishes them peace. In a concluding word, the bishop admonishes the congregation to be obedient and invites other ministers to give testimony. The ritual of baptism places the new members into full fellowship, with the rights and responsibilities of adult church membership."

I would request my Parsi friends to compare this with our perspective of, and attitude towards, **the Navjote ceremony of our children**. We are utterly oblivious to the most vital base of Navjot viz Religion, the Daena. The child is never told what the ceremony is and what it does to her or him. The truth that the Navjot is the **confirmation of the promise our Ruvan has given to Ahuramazda and Asho Zarathushtra before coming down to earth**; that every movement done during the ceremony has a **profound effect on the inner**

**personality of the child**; that proper procedure is to be strictly followed by the **spiritually oriented priests** while performing the Navjot; and that **it is manifestly a spiritual and religious exercise**, is utterly forgotten. Mobeds know nothing of this and go through the ceremony in a mechanical way. Parents, in their ignorance, look more to the worldly glitter than the religious dictates and with the ignorant connivance of the priests break all the laws of procedure required by Daena to be followed strictly during Navjot. The ceremony today has become a downright farce.

### **STARK IGNORANCE**

**The child is never taught the spiritual significance of Navjot.** Nothing whatsoever is told to her or him about the divine meanings of the prayers recited during the ceremony. The child's questions: what is Navjot, what is Sudreh Kushti, why are they compulsory, what do they do to me are never answered to her or his satisfaction. The worst part is that there are no standard answers to these questions. The philological Dasturs have no spiritual strength to resist the brainwashing flowing from their pet western grammatical abracadabra. **Not that our children are not capable of understanding the spiritual truths of the Daena.** They are intelligent and crave to know. But alas! there is nobody to tell them!

Look at the amish. Baptism for them is the opening door for a spiritual life in the midst of worldly deeds and duties. They have a five months - just see, five long months instructional class before baptism. **We Parsis do not have even a five minutes class!** The Amish priests explain thoroughly what is baptism, what vows are to be taken, how are they to be strictly adhered to throughout life and tell the youths to think a thousand times before accepting it. Yet the youths accept it; their parents have already moulded them. Look at the three questions that are asked during the ceremony. Look at the way in which the priests perform the ceremony. Look at the behaviour of the parents during the ceremony. While the youths are kneeling, the whole assembly prays. We Parsis go on babbling our worldly chatter as the priests, far away on a decorated stage is faintly heard murmuring their prayers. Women are busy making a show of their clothes and ornaments and having a grand discussion on their makes and brands.

Look at the final blessing of the Amish bishop. **"May the Lord complete the good work which He has begun in you....."**

Their baptism is the first step in life towards the individual development of the soul, and an effective measure for the survival of the community and its religious ways of life.

. . .

The lamp that is lit up by baptism is to be kept burning not only by the individual prayers but also by the communal worship services, held every other Sunday in each district, in the home of an Amish. Again, the aim is the individual progress of each soul and the survival of the community. Both go together; both are inseparably inter-connected. I will now take you a little in the serenity of the collective prayer assembly of the Amish.

- K. N. D.

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