Who Are the Amish?

Mary’s back is turned away from the door when I enter the schoolroom. Clustered around their young teacher, five ten- to twelve-year-old girls murmur softly, intensely, conspiratorially. Mary is dressed, as they are, in a solid-colored dress. Her headcov- ering is white; theirs, black. Half a dozen other children, throughout the expanse of the high-ceilinged, century-old, one-room schoolhouse, turn to gaze curiously at me. Another rainy day in Ohio confines all the young scholars inside. Those at their desks play tic-tac-toe, read, or assemble puzzles. I hear a ball banging in a jerky rhythm; in the basement, some of the boys are playing dodgeball and ping-pong.

Mary welcomes me with a warm, genuine smile and draws me into her circle. Respectfully, the children fall silent. Forewarned of my visit by her cousin who teaches at the school I visited yesterday, Mary is garrulous. “I’ve been teaching for five years, and I learn something new every year,” she tells me. Mary inquires about my contacts within the Amish commu- nity, and we chat about people we both know. Very soon it is 8:30, time to take attendance—twentynine students with three teachers, which in-
cludes one for a special education group of four meeting in a back corner, partitioned off by a chest-high screen. The formal school day opens with singing. “We sing in German on Fridays,” Mary says, and hesitates. “Is that okay?” I assure her that it’s fine with me.

Junior serves as the first of the morning’s two Vorsingers, or songleaders. He chooses “Es sind zween Weg,” from the Liedersammlung, a songbook frequently used among the Amish. After an enthusiastic rendition of Junior’s song, the second Vorsinger, Roman, announces his selection, “Bedenke Mensch, das Ende.” The group happily joins him, but I cringe at the grim meaning of the text (Musical Example 1.1).¹


Translation: (verse 2) Consider, human, the end, consider the judgment;
Everyone—you, too—has to come before Jesus:
No one is spared. Everyone has to show up
To receive the reward earned in his [or her] lifetime.

Roman sings as loudly as all the rest of the children combined. Not all the children sing on pitch, but I hear a musicality to the line. The phrases flow. With their young teachers, the children thus joyfully place themselves along the vector of history, tradition, and faith that stretches back to the sixteenth century. Through music, they mine the repository of memory that was shaped by their ancestors and that remains a touchstone of their identity.

This leads us to the central claim of this study: singing accompanies many everyday events in Amish life and, through its frequent and central role in community life, becomes an essential vessel through which identity, memory, devotion, and culture are transmitted. We will turn to the role of singing in Amish life in chapter 2, but we should first examine the history of the Amish and some facets of their common life. A rudimentary understanding of their cultural and religious practices will illuminate the ways in which the Amish form their lives by and through their singing.
Overview of the Amish

The Amish derive their name from their first leader, Jacob Amman, who was born in 1644. Amman led a splinter group away from the Swiss Brethren Anabaptists (later known as Mennonites), who themselves had broken from the Swiss Reformed pastor Ulrich Zwingli’s church in Zürich in 1525. At its core, the Anabaptists emphasized the importance of adult baptism and a church that lived apart from the popular culture of the larger world. After years of persecution and forced diaspora throughout Europe, Amman’s group emerged in the 1690s as a renewal group within the Swiss Anabaptists and in the Alsace region of present-day France. Amman and his followers were concerned about what they considered increasing waywardness and conformity to the world among the traditional Swiss Brethren churches. In 1693, Amman led an offshoot branch that soon became known as Amish. Under his leadership, the Amish church emphasized a stricter shunning of excommunicated members, greater separation from the state churches, and practicing communion twice a year. Following the model of Jesus, they included footwashing in the communion service. In the 1730s, some Amish immigrants followed Mennonite pioneers and sought asylum in religiously tolerant Pennsylvania. Successful settlements insured a steady flow of Amish to the North American continent in two waves, between 1736 and 1770 and again in the years 1815–1860. In the New World, clusters of Amish families collaborated to support and encourage each other in faithful living.

In the twenty-first century, Amish people live in thirty different states and in the Canadian province of Ontario. They have established more than two thousand local congregations in some 470 geographical communities. The Amish call their local congregations church districts. Each district consists of twenty to forty families living in an area with geographical boundaries. Members of the district select and ordain a bishop, two ministers, and a deacon from among their ranks to provide leadership. The Amish gather in their homes for worship services every other Sunday because they do not have church buildings. When the number of families grows too large to meet comfortably in a home, the district will divide and form two new districts.

Outsiders frequently, and inaccurately, speak of “the Amish” as though they are one group. Each district belongs to an affiliation or subgroup of
the Amish. The Amish has differentiated into more than forty different affiliations in North America. Each has its own distinctive set of regulations and practices. There are nearly a dozen different affiliations in the large Holmes County, Ohio, settlement, which actually spans several counties. Affiliations range from the very conservative Swartzentrubers, who live austere lives without indoor plumbing and rarely interact with non-Amish, to progress-minded groups who use land lines or cell phones, operate sizable businesses, and interact freely with outsiders. Nevertheless, all Amish groups drive horses and buggies for their primary mode of transportation. They speak the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect and wear distinctive clothing that separates them from modern American culture.

One Old Order Amish woman acknowledges the schisms: “We don’t like to identify ourselves like that, New Order or Old Order. But on Sunday mornings there are buggies from five different orders that go down this road. They go every which way. There are the New Order Tobe, Old Tobe, Andy Weaver . . . They broke away from us . . . Swartzentruber, and ours. The Tobe broke away from the Swartzentrubers, but they got too ingrown. Now they commune with us and intermarry.”

The Amish experience great diversity, even within affiliations, because they believe theological authority ultimately rests in the individual church district. Thus, neighboring districts even in the same affiliation may have different regulations. Still, many non-Amish people familiar with one Amish community incorrectly assume that every Amish group looks and acts exactly the same. This brings us to the Amish in Holmes County, Ohio, the primary area of this study.

The Amish in Ohio

In 1808, Jacob Miller, the first Amish settler, arrived in Ohio. Jonas Stutzman, called “Der Weiss” because of his habit of dressing in white, soon followed and settled in Holmes County in 1809 (figure 1.1). The relatively isolated farmland of northeastern Ohio provided fertile ground for growing and preserving their sixteenth-century style religious community. By 1862, the Ohio settlement had gained enough strength and voice to organize and host a national meeting of Amish leaders called the Diener-Versammlungen. These national gatherings, which occurred virtually every year from 1862 through 1878, eventually produced a major schism, with the most traditional churches emerging as the Old Order
Figure 1.1 Ohio Historical Marker: Jonas Stutzman, First Amishman in Holmes County. “Jonas Stutzman ‘Der Weiss’ 1-31-1788—10-18-1871. Jonas Stutzman, from Somerset County, Pennsylvania, came to this site in 1809 to clear land for farming and to build a log home for his family. He was the first permanent settler in the eastern portion of what would in 1825 become Holmes County. Jonas and his wife Magdalena Gerber Stutzman were of the Amish faith—descendants from a group of strict Protestant Anabaptists with origins in Switzerland and Holland and dating from the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Some of their beliefs, including separation of church and state, refusal to take oaths, pacifism, and believer’s baptism, were perceived as threats to the state church and government. Persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants, Anabaptists migrated and some came to the New World, founded here what has become the largest Amish settlement in North America. Ohio Bicentennial Commission, The Longaberger Company, German Cultural Museum of Walnut Creek, The Ohio Historical Society 2002.” Photograph by Nathan Crook, 23 October 2013.
Amish and the more progress-oriented ones becoming Amish Mennonites who gradually joined various Mennonite groups.

Ohio has a history of birthing and nurturing new religious groups. From early nineteenth-century America, when the religious fervor of western New York spilled over into Ohio, the newly established state provided a haven for more than twenty-one religious, reform, and utopian communities. Affordable land prices, easier access through the transportation routes of the Erie Canal and National Road, and a tolerance for idealism and diversity positioned Ohio for rapid development, swelling the population from 231,000 in 1810 to 938,000 in 1830. Although the Amish did not specifically seek to create a heaven on earth in a true sense, their emphasis on godly living and separation from the world set in motion their search for a more isolated territory than eastern Pennsylvania. The gently sloping hills of Tuscarawas, Holmes, and Wayne Counties drew and nourished their communities with natural bounty.

In their home in the growing Holmes County settlement, the Amish pursued hard work and mutual concern, values similar to those of their non-Amish neighbors. Both worked, struggled, and experienced joy in creating handmade quilts, tending tidy gardens, planting straight cornrows, singing to pass the time in cart or buggy, attending church and saying prayers as a family, and raising their children strictly without “sparring the rod.” They respected each other’s privacy but called on each other in times of need. They were separate but equal in love of God, showing charity toward neighbors, living by the rhythms of the land, and enjoying simple pleasures. Throughout the twentieth century, mechanization, social change, and migration to cities widened the gulf between the Amish and their neighbors, but the two groups maintained courteous interactions and friendships.

Since 1970, the Holmes County Amish settlement has experienced rapid and unprecedented change. Land prices skyrocketed and tourism expanded rapidly, creating traffic snarls in small towns. Amish tourism in Holmes County surpassed Cedar Point Amusement Park as Ohio’s number one attraction. For some, peace of mind seemed a distant memory. The pros and cons of this development led one Amish bishop to observe, “Because of the traffic, we only take our buggies into town on Monday and Tuesday mornings.” Then he quips, “On the positive side, we don’t have to leave town to be missionaries. Just open the door and they’re there!”

For the Ohio Amish, these changes and choices have challenged their
self-sufficiency and long-standing traditions. Yet they have grown and prospered as never before. By 2013, Ohio’s Holmes County settlement, with 32,000 Amish, made up nearly 12 percent of the 275,000 Amish in North America. The Amish described in this book belong to several affiliations that reside in the settlement centered in Wayne and Holmes Counties.

Economic Life

The Amish across North America maintain a network of close-knit communities, thriving, well-kept homesteads and farms, and small-scale, Amish-owned and -staffed businesses in the midst of a sometimes hostile—albeit sometimes alluring—surrounding culture. The Amish still affirm a rural lifestyle sustained by hard work, conservative values, and close parent-child relationships that helps to preserve their “plain” way of living. Although many of them consider farming the best occupation, fewer than ten percent of the Amish in the Holmes County region receive their primary income from farming. For the last thirty-five years, the number of Amish farms has steadily decreased, because affordable land was not available and because of the low investment and high profitability of small businesses. Some members resisted this change and have moved to more remote areas to find farmland. But others are content to remain and devise other ways of making a living, such as furniture making, equipment manufacturing, carpentry, greenhouses, horticulture, and landscaping. One man started a printing press, another a hardware store that loans chainsaws and other tools. Some Amish businesses, such as blacksmiths and fabric shops, cater to the needs within the Amish community. Women sew quilts at home, work in shops, or provide childcare or clean homes for non-Amish neighbors. Married women usually work at home. Families grow large vegetable gardens and sell produce in family roadside markets. An increasing number of families earn their income by raising produce to sell to grocery chains. For example, at the vegetable auction in Mt. Hope, Ohio, visitors see semi–tractor trailers adorned with the logos of major grocery stores. Students of Amish life have researched whether farming is necessary for the continuation of the Amish culture. They have observed that, despite the rapid downturn in family farming, the number of people in the Amish community continues to double about every twenty years.8

One grave concern that older Amish people deliberate is whether eco-
nomic openness and entrepreneurship will undermine the mutual dependence that characterizes Amish culture. “If a community is to survive, it must structure the interaction of its members to strengthen ways of being and knowing which support community,” maintains social scientist Stephen Marglin. “It will have to constrain the market when the market undermines the community.” As interdependence weakens, Marglin predicts that community solidarity will decline and more members will defect from the community. One bishop advises that this is the reason that Amish leaders discourage large businesses.

Family Life

Amish daily life revolves around the routines of work and family, punctuated with planting and harvesting, disinfecting the barn for a new batch of poultry, or spring housecleaning. Mothers and daughters often work together on major tasks, even after daughters have their own families. One summer morning, four generations—great-aunt, mother, three sisters, and two granddaughters (who ride tricycles on the gravel drive)—are preserving endless bushels of peaches. At a nearby homestead, two small tots follow their father into the garden to pick beans. Down the road, two sisters are mowing the lawn. Buggy rides to the store or to visit neighbors, walks, baseball or volleyball games, and rocking on the porch swing round out the days.

The normative Amish family remains quite large, with typically six to eight children. One Amish woman mentions that her neighbor had fourteen babies over a twenty-year period. She insists that this mother continues to be unfailingly kind to all and that her children have become very nice, well-adjusted people. Even as family size decreases in the dominant culture, Amish parents continue to have more than five children, a few families as many as sixteen.

The use of contraceptives is not acceptable, but some groups find ways to limit fertility. One Amish woman volunteered, “As the bishop put it, he’s not in favor of birth control; he’s in favor of self-control. On the other hand, when you go back in genealogy or relationship books, children were generally born two years apart. They were breastfed and I think that’s probably how God intended it to be. I don’t think a woman was meant to have a baby every year.” One Old Order Amish woman in her sixties
discloses, “My younger sister had eleven children and as of today has 105 grand- and great-grand children.”

Large numbers of children function as an asset to Amish families. Unlike in mainstream American homes, where raising children means costly college educations, music lessons and sports clubs, a never-ending stream of clothes in the latest fashion, or endless consumer and leisure expenses, Amish parents do not focus on the financial burden but on the blessing of having children. Of course, having children ensures the well-being of Amish parents as they grow older. Amish adults prepare for their retirement years but also depend on their children to care for them if they become disabled.

Producing children only begins the process of growing the community. These children must, as young adults, elect to stay within the community and take up their responsibilities as members and, probably, parents themselves. To this end, Amish parents and grandparents model a strong work ethic, self-discipline, interdependency, and selflessness.

Amish Identity

Identity formation in Amish communities mirrors the process observed in other cultures. An individual’s identity is a complex combination of genetic endowments (nature) and personal experiences (nurture). Psychologists have found that an infant’s personality is enduring. Fussy babies tend to make fussy adults; placid babies, adults with sunny dispositions. But, experiences with others, such as the parenting a child receives and interactions with siblings, also have their influences. As one author explains, “The self-contradiction—a Westerner would call it paradox—[is] that we only acquire our own identity by imitating others.” Relative and friends apply “procedures of measuring, surveillance, and correction,” writes Michel Foucault. The individual also measures himself against internalized standards of what it means to be a good, successful, honest child.

The “ideal” personality that the Amish value is that of a “quiet, friendly, responsible, conscientious, devoted worker, patient with detail and routine, loyal, considerate and concerned with others’ feelings even when they’re in the wrong.” Amish parents have the responsibility of nurturing these qualities in their children. Although they believe that children are born with sinful natures, Amish parents also trust that their children
are teachable and will become loving, dedicated people in the proper environment. The Amish reinforce this “ideal self” through basic community activities—a close, intense family life, regular patterns of visitation with opportunities to observe each other in home settings, worship gatherings, collective youth activities, and education in private schools.

Amish parents require honesty and obedience. In the May 2001 issue of Family Life, an Amish periodical, “Abner and His Cookies” tells about a boy stealing cookies from the cupboard and getting his finger caught in a mousetrap. His mother commiserates with Abner about his sore finger but tells him, “You will have to be punished. I’m sure that after this you will think twice before disobeying.”

Teen years can be troublesome times in many cultures. Mainstream teens struggle with many powerful and puzzling influences, intense hormonal changes, higher-level thoughts with accompanying intense self-reflection, and social pressures as they make life choices of career and mate. They struggle to discover “Who am I?” and “What do I stand for?” Amish youth encounter these same issues, but Amish teens’ identities are less diffuse because most accept their limited choices for education, work, marriage partners, and lifestyle. Wisely, Amish adults understand that certain Amish teenagers wrestle longer with identity issues. They allow teens some latitude to experiment during Rumspringa, a time period that has gained popular attention thanks to the well-publicized excesses of a few Amish youth. Still, most Amish youth freely choose to join the church as adults; currently, nearly 90% of Amish youth ultimately accept the Amish way and elect to be baptized, the highest rate since the 1930s.

According to psychologist Eric Erickson, identity formation in middle-aged and older adults is often characterized by generativity and integrity, with continuing growth and a sense of satisfaction of a life well-lived—or stagnation and despair, with a feeling of regret that life has passed them by. Although a few admit that they do not feel they fit well within their community, well-socialized Amish adults enjoy working, exchanging ideas, collaborating with their neighbors, and nurturing contented children and grandchildren. They feel a secure sense of fulfillment in their faithfulness to God and community.
Mutual Aid

Most likely, the feelings of security arise from the Amish emphasis on mutual reliance. The Amish reluctance to accept telephones without any restrictions rests on their insistence that face-to-face encounters increase mutual reliance and respect. They believe that people must care, support, and treat each other kindly and honestly as human beings and not objects. Further, they express that face-to-face interaction facilitates those relational qualities. Nevertheless, the increase in cell phone use in some of the affiliations attests to their growing use of technology in the last decade.

Because the Amish practice mutual support, they do not pay into the Social Security system, nor do they typically receive government aid. In the face of hardship, members of the community rally to help each other. The quintessential Amish barn raisings feature coordinated teams of men building a barn from start to finish in one day while women cook and serve the hungry workers hearty meals. If someone needs expensive surgery and extended hospitalization, members contribute. During one of my conversations with an Amish man, his neighbor’s cows escaped. The man stopped in the middle of our conversation, pulled on his high-topped rubber boots, and plodded across the field to herd them back without a backward glance.

The Amish not only raise funds to help a neighbor in need, but they also participate in general relief efforts. Some Amish construction teams helped with rebuilding after Florida’s Hurricane Andrew in 1996 and Louisiana’s Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In Wayne County, Ohio, one Amish group regularly builds a home for a working-class family in partnership with the local Habitat for Humanity. Groups of women sew quilts and send them to missions in developing countries. Youths visit non-Amish residents in nursing home facilities, jails, and hospitals or teach in Old Colony Mennonite schools in Mexico. The Amish are aware of the world outside their community and feel compelled to pitch in. “We are the light of the world,” one Amish person told me. “All Christians should live the godly life and testify by their ‘walk.’” 20 This caring and cooperation was learned in small rural schools.
Amish Schools

Many older Amish people have fond memories of the one-room public schools they attended. One great-grandfather talks about his non-Amish teacher, whose breadth and depth of knowledge inspired his classmates for all eight years of their schooling. The consolidation of public school districts changed this pattern. Rather than applauding the dominant culture’s plan to expand rural children’s educational opportunities, the Amish experienced distress as they realized that the loss of local control and busing their children to distant schools would undermine the ability of Amish parents to supervise their children’s education.

Even though the government required them to pay property taxes to support public schools, many Amish communities decided that they would open private parent-directed schools. The traditional one-room school suited their needs because it was local. In some areas of the country, Amish parents purchased one-room public schools that had closed. In other states, Amish parents were jailed for prohibiting their children from entering high school. Finally, in 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* determined that Amish children could terminate their formal education at eighth grade. By 2012, nearly two thousand one- or two-room Amish schools, funded, built, and maintained by parents without government aid, were functioning in North America. Currently, nearly all of the Amish children in Pennsylvania and Ohio attend private schools for their formal education, which consists of grades one to eight. In addition, a few public elementary schools, including some in Holmes County, serve Amish children almost exclusively.

To organize an Amish school, three to five fathers form a school board, which approves all school activities. It selects desired playground equipment, chooses schoolbooks, and hires or fires teachers. Keeping good, experienced teachers can be a problem. A survey of fifty Amish schools listed in *Blackboard Bulletin*, an Amish publication for educators, shows that many Amish teachers leave the occupation after two or three years to get married or to find an easier job. One young schoolteacher explained that teaching eight grades is too difficult, so she left to teach a single grade in a local Mennonite school; she married the next year. One middle-aged Amish man admits that his contract was not renewed when he was a young teacher because a parent caught him listening to a baseball game on
a transistor radio. He violated the expectation of being a good role model. Needless to say, parents keep close oversight over their school. Young teachers feel the pressure of fierce scrutiny by parents and church leaders.

Indeed, Amish schooling may have replaced the family farm as one of the most important factors in keeping Amish children within the community. Their schools limit children’s contact with outsiders while they develop friendships with cousins and neighbors that knit them tightly to the community. Within the simple confines of a school for twenty-five to thirty students, many things add up to an agreeable, informal pattern of socialization: simple pleasures of twice-daily games of baseball with a beloved and gloved teacher in the outfield, a massive chunk of cheese available to all on the back shelf in the classroom, the teacher’s full attention for a small group of two or three learners for fifteen minutes at a time throughout the day, and warming up around the potbelly stove while chatting with friends in Pennsylvania Dutch, their community’s language.

Language and Lifestyle

Many Amish children first learn English in school. Pennsylvania Dutch, the primary language Amish children use for family, church, and all intra-Amish conversation, fosters a distinctive ethnic identity. Maintaining that language solidifies the group and sharply sets the boundary of difference with the outside world. Andrea Fishman suggests, “Bilingualism cannot be supported without biculturalism, awareness of one’s heritage, identification with it and freedom to express this identification in a natural and uninhibited manner.”

Two languages, two cultures. Amish children learn that they owe allegiance to their group and must adopt their parents’ lifestyle choices. In addition to building identity, a language serves as a way of knowing the world. Some ideas and concepts resist translation from one language to another precisely because language is not just a way of communicating an experience but an orientation to a total way of life, a way of perceiving and interpreting the world. Ethnic communities in the United States find that when they drift away from speaking their native languages, their children blend into the mainstream society. The adherence to their language, paired with intentional community living, helps the Amish remain separate from the dominant American education, mass culture, politics, and economy.

The Amish also resist the forces of assimilation by maintaining common
dress, simple living, and the discipline of the Ordnung, the community’s agreed-upon rules for behavior. As applied to the Amish, “simple” means plain or unornamented, denoting an opposition to a fancy, ostentatious lifestyle. The Amish are not simple-minded or simplistic about their lifestyle and technological choices; they set limits, seek to be practical, and pay close attention to the stewardship of resources.

Publications

Amish presses that print periodicals and books to inform, encourage, and connect Amish households enrich Amish life. Three monthly magazines published by Pathway Publishers in Aylmer, Ontario, address various Amish concerns.24 Blackboard Bulletin shows teachers how to encourage student learning—“Go slowly and do your best”—how to maintain order and discipline, and why school singing is an important part of the school day. Young Companion, for teens and twenty-year-olds, talks about both finding a Christian partner and being happy while single. Contributors send opinion essays, short stories, and poetry to Family Life, a magazine with Bible puzzles, stories, recipes, and health information.

In Holmes County, Ohio, The Budget publishes news of Amish families, out-of-town visitors, marriages, and arrivals of new babies. Published in Walnut Creek, Ohio, Bird Enthusiast opens up the secrets and beauty of the natural world. Die Botschaft and The Diary, published in eastern Pennsylvania, are papers filled with news of friends and relatives written by hundreds of Amish scribes in local communities in many states. Additionally, some Amish read local newspapers, news magazines, and periodicals related to hunting and fishing or occupations such as furniture making. Amish people also take advantage of the opportunity to borrow books from public libraries and in some cases bookmobiles stocked with Amish preferences.

Singing

Most significantly for this study, the Amish accompany many aspects of their worship, work, and pleasure time with singing. Amish adults swaddle their children in music. Parents sing nursery songs to comfort their young, to accompany their work in the kitchen or garden with babies and toddlers nearby, and to relax on the porch after a long day. Older siblings
sing songs learned in school or sometimes harmonize on gospel songs. Babies attend bi-weekly, home-based worship services of more than three hours, with at least a third of the time spent in singing Ausbund songs from their premier hymnbook.

The quintessential music of the Amish, the Ausbund is a repository of sixteenth-century martyr’s sermons in song. These connect the Amish to founders of the faith who wrote and sang in prison cells as they awaited their deaths. Giving witness to individual sacrifice and suffering, hymns in the Ausbund have been set to pre-existing tunes, probably folksongs, and preserved without musical notation. We examine these Ausbund songs in more detail in chapter 8.

As a rule, parents who sing raise children who engage more frequently in singing, but nearly all Amish people relate that singing is a very important part of their lives. One Amish man tilts his head back and reminisces, “My parents, five brothers, two sisters, and I sat on the porch every evening singing gospel songs in harmony.” Another mentions rocking his baby boys hour upon hour and singing old church hymns. One woman became wistful as she remembered her mother’s singing while she performed household chores.

Even though the Amish only rarely discuss their singing, they value it as an important part of their culture. One Amish woman reports, “We sing while we work. Automatically children will sing, even before they can carry a tune. You just naturally sing with children. Since we don’t have radio or tapes, we just do a lot of singing.” In one survey, more than 80 percent of 56 Amish adults interviewed in Wayne and Holmes Counties said that singing was important in their families, and 30 percent said that they sing two or more hours a day.

Singing dovetails with the rest of Amish life to sustain culture, maintain identity, and resist or negotiate outside forces. It comforts, instructs, and unites. We will look at more ways that Amish singing functions in chapter 2, but we should first examine its connection to the spiritual and religious life of Amish communities.

Spirituality and Religion

For the Amish, all of life is a sacred journey. Even so, the rituals they perform set boundaries between everyday life and the more sacred. At home, they bless meals with prayer before and after eating. Many families engage
in daily family Bible reading and prayer from *Christenpflicht* (Christian Duty), a devotional book first published in 1787. Children silently pray a German blessing before going to sleep. Sunday worship occurs every other week. Other special worship occasions include baptism services, when young adults join the church. Twice-yearly communion services, ordinations, weddings, and funeral ceremonies are other important religious gatherings. The Amish neither baptize nor christen infants, but when new babies arrive, friends visit the family, welcoming the newborn and bringing practical gifts for the mother.

Preserving the tradition of holding worship services in the home, barn, or shop, families take turns hosting the gathering of 75 to 150 people once or twice a year. Each local district holds church services every other Sunday. On their “off” or “visiting” Sunday, families hitch up the horses, hop in the buggy, and call on their neighbors or go to another district’s worship service to hear a different preaching style. Members of New Order congregations often hold Sunday school meetings on their off Sundays. Regardless of their particular Amish affiliation, visiting is nearly as important as worshipping.

All human cultures have developed religious practices, generally paired with sung expression. Through symbols, religious practices offer, preach, and teach patience, endurance, and courage for negotiating life’s challenges. Symbol systems imbue ordinary events such as eating (in the Christian Holy Eucharist), sweating (in the Navajo Curing Ways), and breathing (in Buddhist practice) with supernatural meaning. These bring lucidity and a sense of order to the chaos inherent in life, thereby relieving human distress.

The Amish are no exception. They face the usual human trials and rely on their faith to help them cope and flourish. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes that life events that cause cognitive, physical, and moral discomfort or unease produce an existential anxiety, which pushes human societies to develop religion. Religion serves as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Reflecting on Geertz’s work, sociologist Patrick McNamara proposes that religion undergirds a social group by fulfilling four functions, the explanatory, validating, psychologically-reinforcing, and integrative functions (table 1.1).
Often-used Amish songs reflect each of these four functions. The hymn that Roman chose in the opening narrative of this chapter, “Bedenke Mensch, das Ende,” epitomizes the struggle of the Amish faith and the means, methods, and outcomes of the Amish socialization process. When Amish children sing “Bedenke Mensch, das Ende” in school, they are learning the basic tenets of their faith (Musical Example 1.2).

Table 1.1. McNamara’s four functions of religion

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory</td>
<td>Offers insight into worthy questions</td>
<td>“Why do children suffer?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validating</td>
<td>Confirms institutions, values, goals</td>
<td>“Contentment is my delight.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologically reinforcing</td>
<td>Provides security amid fear about random events</td>
<td>“God numbers the hairs on your head.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td>Unites customs in overall design</td>
<td>“I am created in God’s image and born to serve the Lord.”</td>
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In both this variation and the version provided at the opening of the chapter, “Bedenke Mensch” provides an excellent example of the link between religion and singing in an Amish context. We should look at the song through the lens of McNamara’s four functions of religion.
The explanatory function of religion. In its explanatory function, religion supplies insight into life’s toughest questions: “Why?” “Why do we live the way we do?” and “Why do we suffer?” Religion offers strength of purpose, the recognition that “events are not just there and happen, but they have meaning and happen because of that meaning.”

In “Bedenke Mensch, das Ende,” Amish children learn that their actions have consequences, and they gain insight into questions about suffering. Suffering is one way the Amish know they are on the right track. Rehearsing modern examples of persecution, such as conscientious objectors being exposed to hepatitis for medical studies or handcuffed to jail bars, continues this trend. If they are faithful to God now, despite harassment, God will care for them throughout eternity. The dominant themes of this song hold special importance in the Amish belief system. Being faithful in mundane matters, yielding to God, and preparing for the inevitability of death and prophesied judgment will result in rescue from eternal punishment and obtain for them an eternal home with God. Thus, the song assists in explaining the humanly inexplicable, a central function of religion itself.

The validating function of religion. Second, in its validating function, religion confirms a society’s basic institutions, values, and goals. Singing, in the case of the Amish, smoothly carries out that function. The Amish child sings about farming chores, staying on the narrow path, and relying on God for salvation. Amish song texts illustrate this point. In 1819, Daniel Schwartzentruber recorded these lyrics in his son’s ledger: “Contentment is my delight. / All else I leave behind / And love and love and love contentment. / When all misfortunes spring forth roaring / And all stars in heaven are rolling, / Still will I trust my God. / Oh, beloved soul, be content / With whatever heaven has granted / And love and love and love contentment.”

Amish schoolchildren in the twenty-first century sing, “I was made in His likeness. / I was born to serve the Lord.” The lifestyle that Amish parents choose facilitates an acceptance of the vagaries of human existence. Children learn from their parents to lean on God and the extended family. Moreover, their rural, mostly agrarian lifestyle thrives on cooperation and humility rather than on competition and pride of achievement. Singing “Bedenke Mensch, das Ende” reinforces this reality, as well as the reality of death, and expresses the goal of preparing children to be good community members of earth and heaven. In a wider society that considers many
aspects of Amish life old-fashioned or untenable, Amish singing helps to validate the specific values and goals of the community.

The psychologically-reinforcing function of religion. Third, religion offers security in an unpredictable, even arbitrary, world during times of upheaval. Religious beliefs prepare the worshipper for the eventuality of death and offer solace. “Bedenke Mensch,” while its words may sound bleak or foreboding to outsiders’ ears, provides a solid and even comforting reminder of eternal life past the grave.

Few events could be more difficult emotionally and psychologically than burying a child. Amish extended families may experience child death due to farming or buggy accidents, fires related to the use of kerosene lamps and wood stoves, and genetically inherited diseases as a result of patterns of endogamy. At a funeral for a child, the Amish repeat hymn texts that direct the community to recognize that God makes the decisions of life and death and emphasize that their children ultimately belong to God. One graveside hymn at the funeral of a child comforts the attendees, “Even though it is very painful to us, / We must yet call it good / When the Lord takes our children / Because they are his heirs.”

On a basic level, Amish children learn to live by the Ordnung. They become responsible to each other and understand that as adults they may be censored or even shunned if they do not live up to the Ordnung. Sociologist John Hostetler observes, “Secular man searches for patterns and meaning in history, religious man does not need to; he knows the world is orderly and is so ordered by God.” The order and predictability of the Amish faith offer safety and direction, and the songs of Amish life assist in building that sense of security, too.

The integrative function of religion. Last, religion integrates or unites customs and beliefs into a cohesive design. Like their singing, Amish religion is largely unselfconscious. In 1930, one Amish bishop, Daniel E. Mast, wrote a blessing of the faithful in “The Duty of Children and Parents, Salvation Full and Free”: “God’s word is read and revered, as a preserving balm of the soul. God is magnified with reading, song and prayer, and all the heavenly hosts rejoice over the spiritual prosperity of such a family, cleansed from her sins, and the souls washed in the blood of the Lamb. Hallelujah! Amen.” A hymn favorite, “Gott ist die Liebe,” reverberates with a blessing, insisting on the good will and love of God for each person (Musical Example 1.3).

While “Bedenke Mensch” emphasizes the sinfulness of each, “Gott ist
die Liebe” proclaims freedom from sin and guilt when one asks forgiveness. It celebrates the freedom to choose to comply with God’s will. The Amish rely on a simple, consistent religious system that integrates a range of practices and beliefs.

In summary, religious practices offer believers the comfort and security that their reliance on God’s promises will please God. Belief backed by appropriate, godly action enables the individual and community to endure trials and to celebrate triumphs. Moreover, Amish children learn through daily experience and human example the meaning of being Amish.

This circles us back to the core claim of this study: that singing plays a critical role in building and sustaining Amish identity. Corporate singing, in the many manifestations that we examine in this book, forms an essential transaction in the process of passing on religious and cultural goods to younger generations of Amish people. Amish singing is not simply the emblem of a static culture. To maintain their identity and integrity, cultures have to adapt. While remaining constant in several important ways, Amish singing has also changed throughout the years. These changes have, paradoxically, helped to retain the vitality, continuity, and flexibility of a culture set apart. While the Amish are by no means dying out, singing remains a central tool that regenerates their thriving and stable subculture.

This claim, which we will flesh out in coming chapters, leads us to several key questions for this study: In what ways does singing function to develop a sense of being Amish? How does it build and sustain Amish culture? What role does Amish singing play in worship and devotion, communal memory, instruction, and enjoyment? How does it nurture and socialize the singers, and how does it both maintain cultural consistency while also anticipating and managing change? To these questions we now turn.