

### Midterm: Plain Clothing

The purpose of dressing plain is to make a statement. Congregations of people in the Old Order and conservative groups of Mennonites, Brethren, and Amish all wear this plain clothing.<sup>1</sup> The sects in eastern Pennsylvania who dressed plain used to include Quakers, Moravians, Schwenckfelders, and Brethren or Dunkards, but now is only Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Dressing plain is a visible statement against the world's obsession with clothing as a status signifier. Wearing these clothes also serves as a political stance against rank reflecting military uniforms.<sup>3</sup> These people who dress plain are Christians, but they do not believe clothing is the essence of Christianity. They do believe if they are to carry out the will of God, they will be separated from the rest of the world in the way they dress.<sup>4</sup> The clothing parallels the values of their religion, humility, modesty, and nonconformity.<sup>5</sup> These values come from the teaching of the Scripture. They follow the words of I Peter 2:9,11, "Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed in humility: for God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble."<sup>6</sup> A Scripture specifically pertaining to women in I Timothy 2:2,10 wrote, "In like manner also that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works."<sup>7</sup>

The first people to dress plain were in Switzerland, from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement in 1525.<sup>8</sup> The Anabaptists church was founded with two distinct departures from Protestant and Roman Catholics.<sup>9</sup> The differences consisted of adult baptism and a commitment to nonviolence.<sup>10</sup> By the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were a few Dutch Mennonites wearing the distinctive garb.<sup>11</sup> These early participators did not leave behind much written documentation of the rules and regulations of dress. Since the 1920s and 30s, the conservative plain style has remained basically the same.<sup>12</sup> There are some more moderate groups who have replaced parts or entirely the distinguishing plain dress. These garments are typically handmade by the women of the community then sold to others. Some attire is bought from mass producers such as high, laced shoes, black stockings, metal eyeglass frames, long-sleeved shirts, and solid colored fabrics.<sup>13</sup> Men and women's clothing differed because the two sexes were not considered equal.<sup>14</sup> Wearing the clothing of the other sex was forbidden as well.<sup>15</sup>

The bonnet worn by eastern United States women has recently changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The bonnet brim gradually was reduced, and the neck curtain shrank until it was no longer there.<sup>16</sup> The ribbon ties were then replaced with a chin strap with a clasp on one side. Around 1940 to 1950, the entire bonnet was reduced down to look more like a beanie held with a hat pin to the back of the head. These began to be made out of crocheted yard in a variety of colors. Today, the only women who wear any type of bonnet are those over forty years old.<sup>17</sup> All plain women do not wear any jewelry or cosmetics.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Benowitz, "College Steeped in Religious Tradition of Nonviolence," *The Elizabethtown Advocate* 8, no. 19 (May 11 2017): 1, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://etownpa.com/college-steeped-religious-tradition-nonviolence/>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Benowitz, "Elizabethtown Store Was Longtime Regional Leader in Clothing for Plain-Dress Religions," *The Elizabethtown Advocate* 8, no. 2 (January 12, 2017): 1, accessed December 3, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Scott, *Why Do They Dress That Way* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1986), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, (Philadelphia: The Brethren Encyclopedia Inc., 1983), 401.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Benowitz, (January 12, 2017), 1.

The attire worn can signify distinction among the community. There are primary, secondary, and minor symbols. The Old Order Mennonite's have five primary symbols required of all men to wear. The plain frock coat and vest must be worn after marriage. Broadfall pants are to be worn at church. Black lace shoes will be worn for dress, suspenders, and a hat. These suspenders and shoes are bought by mass producers while the other items are custom made.<sup>19</sup> Conservative Mennonites have four primary symbols.<sup>20</sup> Again, they have the black shoes for dress. They also wear loose-fitting trousers and a long-sleeved shirt with the collar buttoned. All of these articles are bought from retailers. The plain sack coat is the only required clothing custom made. The Conservative Mennonite's also wear suspenders and a frock coat, but these fall under the category of minor symbols, only observed by the elderly and very conservative.<sup>21</sup> In between the primary and minor symbols are secondary symbols. These are not required for membership, but are worn by those wishing to be in good order.<sup>22</sup>

Black is a debatable color in plain dress. Now, black suits are common in plain communities, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, black was considered a fashionable or worldly color.<sup>23</sup> During this time, black was often worn as formal wear by those not in the plain community. Gradually brighter shades became more popular in the larger community, allowing plain people to consider wearing black a somber appearance.<sup>24</sup> The Old Colony Mennonites wear white head shawls until they are married and it is changed to black. Similarly, Old Order Mennonite single women wear white strings on a white cap, then the strings are changed to black after marriage.<sup>25</sup> The Old Order Mennonites wed in grey wedding dresses. A white gown is considered worldly and impractical, as it could only be worn once.<sup>26</sup> In some groups, a floor length wedding gown is prohibited.<sup>27</sup>

Once a woman is pregnant she typically does not wear maternity clothing. There are a few plain groups who allow special maternity clothing, but typically the regular clothing is just made larger. In 1980, the Mountain View Amish Mennonites of Somerset County, Pennsylvania claimed maternity clothing would be drawing attention to the pregnancy and their preselected clothing would "less conspicuously, and more consistently" conceal the abnormal body line.<sup>28</sup> Costumes for drama productions or masquerades were not allowed either.<sup>29</sup>

Underneath the seen clothing there are also restriction on under dressings. Traditional Old Orders insist on underpants with legs. Typically, this is made at home. Around 1920 the brassiere was introduced to society, but it has not found acceptance with the conservative groups.<sup>30</sup> Plain slips are made by Old Order women. More moderate groups have few to no regulations in this category.

Ministers do not have any special garb to wear, but they can often be identified by their clothing.<sup>31</sup> Ministers wear attire considered a good model for others. The others in the community rarely follow the ministers example exactly, making him stand out. In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, ministers have four inch brims on their hats, as the non-ordained have three and one fourth inches.<sup>32</sup> A minister's wife can be identified by her old style high shoes. Before 1960, wives of Lancaster Conference Mennonite ministers were expected to wear aprons on their dress.

Children's dress varies. Old order boy babies wear dresses. Boys would wear a dress until they were out of diapers, allows diaper changing to be easier. Now, these Old Order boy babies wear dresses for only a few months. The Amish stress children dress in the full order of the church.<sup>33</sup> In some of the larger communities, Amish children dress worldly until they decide to join the church. The Brethren, River Brethren, and most

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<sup>19</sup> Scott, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>27</sup> *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, 81.

<sup>29</sup> *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, 401.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, 81.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 83.

Mennonites do not emphasize dressing children in full uniform of adults.<sup>34</sup> Instead they are dressed modestly. In 1894, the Pennsylvania Garb Law forbid teachers from wearing “any dress, mark, emblem, or insignia indicating the fact that such a teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect, or denomination.”<sup>35</sup>

For burial, Old Order Mennonites, Old German Baptists and Old Order River Brethren dress the dead in shrouds, a long, loosely fit, white gown-like garment for men and women.<sup>36</sup> Lancaster County Amish dress their women in white dresses, with the white capes and aprons they wore at their wedding. The men are dressed in white shirts and specially made white vests and pants. Babies are also dressed in white. The Lancaster Amish have a code of how long to wear black for mourning a death: one year for a spouse, parents, child, or sibling; six months for a grandparents or grandchild; three months for an uncle, aunt, niece or nephew; and six weeks for a first cousin.<sup>37</sup>

Women’s clothing is designed to cover up the form of their body. A cape or “hals duch” (neck cloth) conceals the neckline and bosom.<sup>38</sup> This also provides privacy when nursing a baby. As another measure of modesty an apron is worn. A waistband apron is worn for dress and work. The conservative practice is to have the apron be shorter than the dress making it more apparent. Having the apron and the dress all the same length is a considered more progressive. A short gown, a two-piece dress with a jacket separate from the skirt is still worn by the Nebraska Amish, Old Order River Brethren and the Reformed Mennonites.<sup>39</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many plain groups changed to a one-piece dress. A long pleated or gathered skirt is was most plain women wear. Before the larger population gradually rose hemlines, dress-length was not an issue in plain churches.<sup>40</sup> The common length of a skirt is between ankle and knee.

A mantle or cloak is one of the oldest garments still worn by adult women in a few Amish groups in central and western Pennsylvania. This is a long cape fastened up the front with buttons, snaps or hooks.<sup>41</sup> Sweaters are forbidden in most Amish communities as they tend to be form fitting and made by the mass market making them influenced by stylish trends. Shoes are one piece not made within the community. An approved type of shoes comes to be recognized by each generation. Many churches require shoes be laced and black. For informal occasions, women may neither wear shoes nor stockings.<sup>42</sup> Children typically do not wear shoes to school or church in warm weather.

Scriptures say a woman’s head should be covered, symbolically showing her obedience to God’s order of creation: God-Christ-man-woman.<sup>43</sup> Because of this a plain woman is seldom seen in public without a head covering of some kind. In many churches, the covering is now a very small, net skullcap. A woman’s hair is considered a glory to her.<sup>44</sup> Women pin their hair up in buns, then cover them with their coverings. Some groups allow young girls to wear their hair in long braids as this was not considered a fashion statement.<sup>45</sup>

Men wear broad felt hats. Anabaptists were distinguished by these hats since the beginning of the movement in the 1520s, previous to the popularity of the broad brims in the 1960s.<sup>46</sup> The dimensions of a hat can tell of a man’s age and status. Old Order Amish comb their hair down in every direction, claiming this is the natural way it grows. The Amish, Brethren, and Hutterites all encourage or require a man to grow his beard, but the Mennonites, Quakers, and Shakers have fluctuating views on the issue.<sup>47</sup> Some groups use the beard as a mark of a married man, while others do not require it until their first child is born.

The first suit coats were knee-length with no collar or lapels, buttoning at the neck. Men wear pants, but there must not be any creases down the legs, hip pockets, or cuffs. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a flap or fall was provided

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Benowitz, (January 12, 2017), 2.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 102-103.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 108.

on the front of men's trousers or breeches.<sup>48</sup> Suspenders are worn, but the style of the straps varies by group. The Renno and Byler Amish of Pennsylvania allow only one strap worn diagonally across the right shoulder.<sup>49</sup> A man's shirt was considered underwear originally. Because of this a man never worn a shirt alone for formal occasions. Many groups do not permit short sleeves. In conservative groups, vests are worn. Most plain groups feel a necktie is a useless ornament, some calling it a piece of cloth jewelry.<sup>50</sup> In the last century, some groups have permitted a dark bow tie to be worn.<sup>51</sup>

The Pennsylvania Garb Law of 1894 states, "students enrolled in state normal schools could not wear the plain clothing required by Anabaptist churches."<sup>52</sup> This caused Brethren churches to lose members. Elizabethtown college allowed the required clothing to be worn to school. Melchoir Brenneman was the first Mennonite to immigrate to Elizabethtown from Canton Berne Switzerland in 1709.<sup>53</sup> In 1895, David H. Martin, who was a Mennonite then later Brethren in Christ, opened a clothing store in the 1792 Samuel Grimes residence on 21-23 and 25 Diamond Square.<sup>54</sup> In 1911, Martin relocated his store across the square on the corner of South Market Street and East High Street, advertised as "The Store for Plain Folks."<sup>55</sup> During the nineteenth and twentieth century, those who wanted to join these plain dressing communities had to agree to refrain from dressing in worldly fashions at their baptism.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>51</sup> Benowitz, (January 12, 2017), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Paul Benowitz and Peter J. Depuydt, Elizabethtown College (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 34.

<sup>53</sup> Jean-Paul Benowitz, Historic Elizabethtown Pennsylvania A Walking Tour (Elizabethtown, PA: Elizabethtown College, 2017), 51.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>56</sup> *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, 401.