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Rituals, Communication, and Social Systems:
The Case of Old Order Mennonites

As used in Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, the concept of medium refers to a specific difference between a medial substrate and a form constructed within that substrate. For example, one may observe that a "vessel" is different from the clay of which it is made. Seeing the difference between the clay and the vessel, the medium and form, requires a taste for recognizing both familiarity and difference. For the sake of its own reproduction, the medium must be recognized as familiar, something that can take on various forms under certain conditions. Observing the form entails recognizing (and getting beyond) the difference between one possible form of a medium and all other possibilities: this vessel is a cup and not an ashtray. Luhmann suggests that "The medial substrate is comprised of a great number of only loosely connected, coupled elements" (2000:40). This is an important theoretical observation for at least two reasons. To meet the changing needs of a potter, clay must be "loose" and soft, ready to take on almost any number of forms. In this sense, form follows function, or else the medium "won't work." In addition, whatever the *actual* form of a medium, recognition of the medium may only happen if the difference of the form can be reconciled with all of the medium's expected *possibilities*. Deciding which of a medium's possible forms can best serve a particular function, and recognizing the "same" medium in different forms are both operations that can be made only by an observer. Luhmann notes that "A form comes into being when elements of a medium are tightly coupled." Once formed, the vessel takes on a temporary shape, according to the intentions of the potter. As long as that form is preserved, another shape cannot be formed. As forms come and go, the medium itself is maintained.

Clay cannot decide for itself what form to take, of course, so the potter's contribution is a vital operation. In systems theory, the medium is always the medium of an observer; one who can discriminate among possible forms, pulling forms out, and thereby producing the medium, the other side of the form (Luhmann 2000:41). The potter can look at all of his creations and see clay—as well as different forms of clay (ashtrays, cups, bowls, balls, etc.). This ability to identify a medium within different forms is what we may call "making meaning." The form of *meaning (Sinn)*, as Luhmann defined it, is the difference between the actual and the possible (1997:50).The potter, one who molds clay into different forms of his choice, is a meaning-making, meaning-reproducing, autopoietic system who works within a specific medium, regenerating the medium with each form he chooses to make.

Working within a certain medium, one may find that certain forms are worth preserving and reproducing. Along these lines, one might repeatedly select preferred forms, while restricting other possibilities. As Luhmann suggests, "Using familiar forms, one may observe repetitions and notice deviations; that is, variety may arise in the form of surprise, deviation, and innovation. Depending on the complexity of the system, the relationship between variety and redundancy can shift." For Luhmann, the evolution of a religious social system from rites to confessions and from cult-centeredness to text-centeredness provides a good example of such a shift (2000:40).

In this paper, I describe the Old Order Mennonite Community[1] as a self-production within the medium of ritual. If participants in Mennonite ritual deviate from the established forms of ritual, they will either lose their social address, their place of participation, or the form itself will lose its identity within the medium of Mennonite ritual. Mennonite men wear a wide brimmed black hat to church, not white bonnets. Men sit here and not there. Men lead singing, not women. Women wash the feet of other women, not those of men. If a ritual is to be

[1] This paper describes rituals that are commonly observed by different Old Order Mennonite communities in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Belize, and other countries. The Old Order Mennonites are Anabaptists, as are the Amish. For a more encompassing sociological analysis of Mennonite rituals and beliefs, see Lee 2000.

recognized as a Mennonite one, actors must conform to the established expectations and rules which are structurally preserved in print and memory. Familiarity and conformity with the rules of ritual enables observers to participate in the Mennonite Community and to recognize the difference between Mennonites and the World.

I conceive of ritual as a form of communication, and will emphasize this below. Rituals are orchestrated interactions that attempt to eliminate or restrict spontaneity, surprises, mistakes, and misunderstandings. In general, the "orchestrated" character of ritual produces the difference that defines the medium. In rituals, insider-participants restrict their behavior to expected forms established by communication: spoken or written commands, rules, instruction manuals, codes, etc. The medium of ritual allows observers to distinguish unexpected utterances or spontaneous actions, including mistakes, from all of the "predictable" possibilities that culture and memory might suggest. The selected elements of a ritual must be prescribed in communication, but individual participants (at their own risk) can always deviate from or choose to negate each prescription. Commands are necessary prerequisites for ritual, but they inherently open up possibilities for deviance. This paper concerns itself with religious ritual, though the medium of ritual may typically guide other kinds of systems: political, educational, military, familial, personal, and others.

Rituals of the Old Order Mennonites

The social life of Old Order Mennonites is strictly regulated by a normative code known as the "Discipline," which is intended to protect the rural religious community's fundamental values. The Discipline, sometimes called the "Conference Rules," explicitly lays out standardized behaviors, prescriptive and proscriptive norms, with which members must conform or be expelled from the group. The Discipline, for example, prescribes what kind of buggy, vehicle, hat, bonnet, or tractor one may have. For the Weaverland Conference Old Order Mennonites, for instance, all vehicles must be "in black color, (have) no stripes, nor (have) flashy trimmings" (Hoover

1982:698). Because of their black vehicles, members of this church have been called "Black Bumper Mennonites." For the Groffdale Mennonites, horse-drawn carriages must be black and free from conspicuous or fashionable details. Old Order Mennonites claim that adherence to the behavioral regulations of the church keeps them from becoming integrated with "the world." Working on Sundays, using a radio, watching television, joining political parties, wearing cosmetics, purchasing insurance policies, and driving sports cars are other things prohibited by the Discipline. As long as members of the group abide by the Discipline, they may claim a "valid address" within the community, a right to participate in Mennonite rituals. Maintaining a valid address is a prerequisite for participation in Mennonite religious rituals. Those who have been expelled for transgressing the Discipline forfeit their right to participate in the "Ordinances."

Old Order groups occasionally modify their Discipline so that new forms of behavior (for example, drug use, water skiing, riding three wheelers, and computers) may be regulated. However, Old Order disciplines tend to change their general character very little over long periods of time.

Holy Kissing. One of the most important rituals practiced by Mennonites is exchanging the "kiss of peace" after observing communion and footwashing. The Confession of Faith of the Mennonite (COF), a little black book given to all members at the time of baptism, precisely describes how the kiss ought to be performed:

> Then both shake hands with each other and give each other the kiss of peace, whereupon the one says: "The Lord will preserve and strengthen us in love"; the other says "Amen." (COF 1996:56)

After watching Mennonites perform this ritual for the first time, I was curious to know what they were whispering to each other. After church I asked an older man what was said after the kiss. He said, "We always say the same thing: one of us gives a greeting and the other says 'amen.' The words of the greeting are important, they are: 'May the Lord guard, guide, and direct you.'" I inquired how the two decide who will give the greeting and who will say "amen." "That's easy," the man replied, "the one who had his feet washed first says the amen."

I walked over to another member and inquired about the words exchanged. Once again, it was claimed that "everyone says the same thing, a greeting and an amen." However, this time the words of the greeting were different: "May the Lord love and protect you."

"Amen."

After I interviewed a third member of the church about the words used in the greeting, the reason for the different responses became clearer:

> Author: After members exchanged the "kiss of peace," I saw them lean over and whisper into each other's ears. Can you tell me what was said?
>
> Member: Well, one says the greeting and the other says "amen."
>
> A: What kind of greeting is it? Does everybody say the same thing?
>
> M: Everyone says the same thing.
>
> A: Can you tell me what words are used?
>
> M: Yes... We say, "May the Lord... (mumbles something)." Like that, then the other says "Amen."
>
> A: I'm sorry, I didn't hear the words of the greeting. What are they again?
>
> M: You just have to say "May the Lord... (mumbles)," you know. Then the other says "Amen."
>
> A: But, David, what are the exact words used in the greeting?
>
> M: I'll tell you the truth (smiling). We are supposed to say the same thing, but I don't really know the exact words. I just say "May the Lord..." and

> mumble something. I know most of the guys don't really know what to say. They never told us exactly what to say. The important thing is to make it look right.

Since members are supposed to study their personal copy of the Confession of Faith of the Mennonite, they should all know the exact wording of the "correct" greeting. Yet they do not know. The important thing, it seems, is to "make it look right." When asked about the religious significance of the "kiss of peace," members of the church were almost always prepared to give an explanation, but an explanation tainted with idiosyncrasy:

> -Our ancestors brought the kiss with them from Germany and Switzerland. We want to hold on to those traditions.
> -The kiss was established by the early leaders of the church. Mennonites just believe in doing it.
> -It's from the Bible. The disciples did it.
> -It's something we have always done.
> -I don't know why we do it.

Mennonites and Amish will actually give one another the Holy Kiss even if they have strong personal feelings against the practice. The following letter to the editor of an Old Order periodical is illuminating. This letter was published in Family Life, a journal widely read among the Mennonites I observed. The author of the letter complains about having to give the kiss to his brethren and confesses that he attaches no spiritual significance to the kiss:

> Holy kissing makes many miserable... It's so repulsive! That spit spot on the lips and that irresistible urge to wipe off one's mouth with the back of your hand first chance he's not looking, is anything but a feeling of

> holiness. It's so germy and unsanitary. Glasses often clack together. Often on cold days it's not just spit on the lips but catarrh or nose drip on the cheek. I'm not trying to be sarcastic! (Family Life Feb. 1984:3)

The letter's writer concludes by arguing that the church should do away with the holy kiss as traditionally practiced. Until this happens, however, we may be certain that members will continue to exchange the kiss of peace whether or not they "believe" in the custom.

Baptism. When they are about fifteen years of age, girls and boys in the Mennonite community usually request to be baptized. Even if one was born into the community, membership in the church begins with the ritual of baptism. The girls and boys tend to go through the baptismal process as a group or "class." It would be irregular for a person to not be baptized along with his or her age cohort.

Baptisms generally occur during the "Fall Preparatory Service," after the young people have attended "Instruction Meetings." During these meetings, which "begin the last Sunday afternoon in July at two o'clock," the young people "study" the First Part of the Confession of Faith booklet. The First Part of the little black paperback contains the "Eighteen Articles of the Dortrecht Confession of Faith," adopted by Anabaptist ministers in 1632. At each meeting for instruction, three of the Articles are read aloud to the "applicants." The Confession of Faith booklet clearly indicates how the instructional meetings are to proceed:

> Applicants will sit near the preachers' table, with the boys on the men's side and the girls on the women's side. The ministry come in the same door as the others. Services begin by singing two hymns, followed by a short, opening message by a minister, and then a kneeling, silent prayer. Three ministers will

> each teach one of the eighteen articles, followed by testimonies. The minister who taught last will lead in a kneeling, audible prayer, closing with two hymns and a benediction. (COF 1996:45)

After the Ninth Article has been explained, and once again at the last instruction meeting, the bishop asks the class "if they are satisfied with the teaching they have received." The last three Articles of the Dortrecht Confession are read "on a Friday afternoon at two o'clock," with only the applicants and the ministry in attendance. At this last meeting, the boys wear dark suits and the girls wear dark dresses, preferably navy blue.

In order to be baptized during the Preparatory Service, each individual applicant must have attended all of the Instruction Meetings and been approved by the congregation at the Counsel Meeting.

> Baptism is an outward testimony of an inner New Birth experience, and Baptism shall be administered upon a confession of one's faith and repentance toward God. (COF 1996:47)

Wearing dark clothing, the applicants bow on their knees in front of the membership to make their three "baptismal vows." The applicant is expected to acknowledge that he believes in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; that he renounces sin and Satan; and that he will submit to the Discipline of the Church, including the sanction of excommunication (COF 1996:49-50).

After the applicants have affirmed these vows, the bishop kneels with them in prayer, closing with a solo recital of the Lord's Prayer. The bishop then rises and steps before each kneeling convert, one at a time, with his hands laid upon their uncovered heads he says:

> Upon thy confession of faith, which thou hast confessed before God and

> many witnesses, thou art baptized with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. (COF 1996:51)

When the bishop says the words, "baptized with water," to each convert, the deacon pours a small amount of water on top of the new member's head.

> When all are baptized, the bishop then approaches the first baptized person and extends him the right hand of fellowship and says, "In the name of the Lord, in the name of the church, I offer thee my hand; arise, to a new beginning, to a new life. The Lord strengthen you that you may be able to finish your newly started work, and be his disciple; acknowledge the truth and the truth shall make you free." (COF 1996:51)

As a conclusive sign of acceptance, the bishop exchanges the "kiss of peace" with each of his new brethren. The bishop's wife greets each of the new sisters with the same sign. The new members are then asked to be seated and the service continues to the end.

Immediately before joining their church through baptism, as I have already related, the applicants for baptism participate in a mandatory program of "instruction." For nine weeks, they meet after Sunday services with members of the ministry. During each session, two articles of faith from the Confession of Faith of the Mennonite (1996) are read aloud. There is very little discussion about the meaning of each article of faith and no formal attempt is made by the ministry to test whether or not students have understood or memorized the articles of belief. It is assumed, however, that the young adults who join the church have adopted the confession that Mennonites are expected to share.

Calvin Redekop (1969) conducted an investigation of Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico and observed how young people were "taught" what members of the church ought to believe.

Redekop also intimates that young people who desire to join an Old Colony congregation must study their group's beliefs well enough to pass a ceremonial review:

> When the applicants have successfully "understood" the catechism, they are presented to the congregation on a Sunday morning. The minister asks them to rise and answer in order the questions studied in class.
>
> The object of the ceremony is to recite his answers flawlessly. For the congregation, the object is to see how well the applicants have learned their catechism. 'The saying of the catechism is the very important event. It is the thing the young people dread most. Most young people memorize it by rote, not knowing what is going on as far as meaning is concerned.' (58)

Among both the Weaverland and Old Colony Mennonites, each baptismal applicant is expected to openly confirm his or her willingness to accept their group's religious doctrine. Through the ritual of baptism, each individual communicates his or her willingness to accept the collective "Confession of Faith." Even if members do not understand the meaning of the articles that comprise the official confession, they publicly affirm that they accept the collective beliefs of their congregation.

Expulsion and Reconciliation. Members who transgress against the rules established in the "gospel and the regulations of the church" and who do no not repent of their sins are "expelled" from the Weaverland Church until they do so. Members believe that the Bible teaches them to separate themselves from "disorderly" people:

> If a member falls into gross sin or is not willing to be admonished in

> errors in his way of life, he shall be excommunicated from the church. When he shows repentance and amendment of life, and wishes to be reinstated again in the church, he will make his desire known by coming into the minister's room on a Sunday morning and presenting his application to the ministry, who then presents it to the congregation. The bishop will take counsel with the church concerning reinstating him. (COF 1996:60)

The Weaverland manner of excommunication is not as complete as the "shunning" performed by the Old Order Amish. Regarding the Amish practice, Kephart and Zellner (1994) reported the following:

> The ultimate sanction is the imposition of the *Meidung*, also known as the "shunning" or "ban," but because of its severity, it is only used as a last resort. The followers of Jacob Amman have a strong religious orientation and a finely honed conscience--and the Amish community relies on this fact... The ban is total. No one is permitted to associate with the errant party, including members of his or her own family... Should any member of the community ignore the *Meidung*, that person would also be placed under the ban. (27)

In contrast, "expelled" Weaverland Mennonites are permitted to attend worship services with their families and may even participate in the social activities of members. It is, nonetheless, strictly forbidden to allow expelled members to participate in the religious "ordinances" (foot washing, holy kissing, communion, council). It is not uncommon for officially excommunicated members to continue to passively attend church services.

If a member must be expelled, the Bishop announces his or her name and the practice that is considered intolerable in front of the assembled congregation. From that moment on, it is hoped that the experience of expulsion will encourage the detached person to find his or her own way back into the realm of authentic membership. If the expelled person decides to mend their ways and rejoin the church, he or she must ask the bishop for the opportunity to ask forgiveness in front of the assembled congregation.

At the end of a normal Sunday worship service, I observed this ritual of reconciliation to proceed as follows. After leading the congregation in prayer, the bishop announced that an expelled person, mentioned by name, desired to confess his sins and request membership in the church. He then exchanged glances with a man standing in the back of the men's section. This man came forward and met the bishop in the center of the building, in front of the entire congregation. The expelled man stood directly in front of the bishop with his hands clasped tightly at the waist and eyes cast to the floor. The bishop inquired in a loud voice, "Do you answer with yes that you have repented of your sin?" With a very brief look upward, the man whispered "yes." "Do you answer with yes that you have asked God to forgive you and that He has done so?" "Yes."

The bishop seemed to refrain from looking directly at the man, preferring instead to observe the congregation. Most of the members had their heads bowed. The bishop continued, "Because you have repented and been forgiven you are once again a member of the church. The rights of communion, foot washing, and council are restored to you."

The bishop then clasped the other man's hand and gave him the kiss of peace on the lips. After this ceremony, the two men sat down and the songleaders led the church in singing two hymns about forgiveness and mercy.

The procedural rules dictating how the congregation must receive an expelled member who repents of breaking the Discipline are codified in the Confession of Faith (1996). It is

essentially the same procedure that bishop Jonas Martin, the first leader of the Weaverland Conference, followed nearly one hundred years ago (see "Martin's Personal Handbook," in Hoover 1982:701-709).

After observing the church perform this ritual of reconciliation for the first time, I asked members after the service what the expelled man had done. I was startled by the variety of answers received. One member replied, "Oh, he was a drinker." Another reported, "Henry cheated on his wife." A third informant answered with, "That man went with women for money." Still another member simply replied that she did not remember what the man had done, "After all, he was expelled almost a year ago." Each time a member is expelled, the bishop is required to make the reason for expulsion completely clear, revealing the nature of the sin in front of everyone present. Even though he must do this, it seems evident that members do not feel it is important to specifically know what a "disorderly person" did. In fact, during the ritual of reconciliation, nobody seems to demonstrate much interest in the interaction between the bishop and the one repenting. Apparently, the important thing is that all members remain aware of the Regulations of the Church and conform to them.

Ritual as a Medium of Communication

The Old Order Mennonite community, as a social system, operates using communication, a synthetic unity of three separate selections. According to Luhmann, communication takes place only when a difference of *utterance* and *information* is *understood* (Luhmann 2002:157). One utters something or is mute, one recognizes new information in an utterance or experiences only noise, and one understands or misunderstands an utterance. If it happens, communication emerges form this active synthesis. Mennonite ritual is one form of communication. Ritual emerges when individuals selectively display their bodies in expected ways, when participants do or say only what they are expected to do, restricting their utterances to anticipated, predictable, previously defined forms. Rituals may take on "form" through language, as when participants choose to

orient themselves to the verbal instructions of a speaker. With the writing and printing of texts, such as the Confession of Faith booklet, the forms of ritual gain more lasting structure and transportability.

Rituals are programmed events that unfold, if all goes according to the plan, without surprises, mistakes, or misunderstandings. The probability of making mistakes is reduced by specifying the possible forms of expected utterances, but such restriction also opens up the possibility for making mistakes. What if someone did not learn the "correct" hand movement or nod? To avoid mistakes, ritual participants imitate models, memorize scripts, monitor one another's utterances, and protect devices that disseminate selected restrictions. One of the most important aspects of the form of ritual is the restriction of participants. Only prepared members of the community are permitted to engage in ritual communication. Outsiders, uninitiated and uninhibited, would certainly make mistakes.

Luhmann argues that humans cannot communicate, only communication communicates (Luhmann 2002:169). If communication is to succeed, if it is to offer meaning, it must yield a recognizable unity in difference. Along the same lines, participants in Mennonite ritual "make meaning" by selecting available forms of behavior within the medium of ritual. *The meaning of a ritual is produced when its form is recognized as the medium of ritual; when its difference is reigned in by its identity*. The thoughts or beliefs of participants cannot make a ritual meaningful; they can only (in a completely different kind of operation) make one's own participation in ritual meaningful. The distinction between perception and communication is of profound importance for ritual: participants cannot perceive one another's thoughts. In a naïve and impossible sense, the ritual permits participants to "show" what they believe and think, as if one's thoughts could be demonstrated. According to Luhmann, "Whatever the participants in their own respective self-referential, closed consciousnesses may think, the communication system works out its own understanding and creates processes of self-observation and self-inspection for this purpose" (Luhmann 2002:158). Ritual makes its own meaning in the difference between what is expected

and what is not. This partially explains why outsiders should not see certain forms of ritual: if they are allowed to watch insiders perform, outsiders can make their own meanings for the ritual.

While rituals such as baptism, expulsion, and reconciliation are actual rituals that can be observed, the beliefs that participating actors attach to such practices are not. The leadership of the church makes no concerted effort to instruct members as to why they should adhere to the Church's rules. They do not attempt to monitor whether or not members of the church hold "correct and proper" Mennonite beliefs, not even as a preliminary test before baptism. For the Mennonites, maintaining correct and uniform ritual order and outward discipline appears to be more important than maintaining correct and uniform beliefs and doctrine. Mennonites learn *how* to follow the church Discipline and what happens to those who do not; but members are not taught *why* they ought to conform to the rules or participate in rituals. Members are also not culturally prepared to explain the historical or theological significance of ritual forms. The cult and its rites alone have adequately reproduced the community.

Mennonites seem to demonstrate that participation in a "religious" ritual seems not to require that all of the actors define the situation in the same manner, share a world view, adopt a formal confession, or that actors attach the same meaning to an action. In fact, ritual interaction can occur even when one or more of the participants does not understand the significance of the action or is thinking about a mundane, completely unrelated matter. Orchestrated religious action, *orthopraxis*, as when members of a congregation appear to follow church regulations or engage in rituals, does not depend on the existence of a shared set of religious beliefs, *orthodoxis*, but on a shared understanding of and conformity to established rules of behavior. As long as they adhere to such rules and contribute to a "good show," the personal beliefs of members are socially insignificant. If members of a community never discuss alternative beliefs or other religious possibilities, they will not need a confession or text to center and restrict the flow of "acceptable" communication.

My observations of Mennonite rituals, such as holy kissing, baptism, expulsion, and

reconciliation lead me to reject the commonsensical notion that members of a religious group are integrated *because they share beliefs*. The religious conduct of Mennonites is governed--directed, guided, and regulated--by the official Confession of Faith and the Rules of the Church. The ritual forms of Mennonites sustain unity in the group because they completely *transcend the individual beliefs of members*.

The religious beliefs or thoughts of individual members do not play a significant role in creating congregational solidarity because they cannot enter the flow of communication. Every form of Mennonite ritual has only two possible sides: a side for expected possibilities and a side for surprises. To participate in a Mennonite ritual, one must remain on the side of expected possibilities. The rules of behavior have been selected and members of the group are culturally prepared to expect and recognize them. Crossing over to the other side of the form will communicate that one is not a recognizable member of the Mennonite community. The forms of religious ritual unite the expectations of cultured participants even when individuals do not attach the same personal significance to them.

According to A.P. Cohen (1985:16), "When we speak of people acquiring culture, or learning to be social, we mean that they acquire the symbols which will equip them to be social." Symbols, Cohen maintains, "do not tell us *what* to mean, but give us the capacity to make meaning." For the construction of community, members depend on rituals and symbols for the simple reason that their own personal beliefs, because they are socially without meaning, cannot "equip them to be social."

In the mind and heart of an individual person, religious rituals and beliefs may "mean" a great deal. It is easy to accept that a person may feel strongly about the significance or meaning of a particular ritual. Nonetheless, religious beliefs are socially meaningless because a human community, having no spirit or mind, cannot possibly hold them. Ritual forms, as elements of communication, are socially meaningful because they have the power to associate individuals in a visible, external, and unquestionable manner: either you're in or you're out.

Conclusion

For nearly three centuries, Mennonites and Amish farm families have lived apart from the North American mainstream, self-segregated from the World. Isolated and relatively self-sufficient, Old Order Anabaptist communities have attempted to preserve a homogenous culture, strong communal boundaries, and a simple lifestyle governed by religious distinctions. Individuals either belong or they are excluded from the Mennonite community: with the boundary well established in language, written rules, and ritual performances. As long as one belongs, one may expect to be included in all available forms of the collective life.

Historically speaking, Old Order communities, with their large extended families, uniform behavioral norms, cooperative agricultural economy, anti-intellectualism, and self-segregation, have succeeded in limiting their internal differentiation and complexity. In general, innovators were banished and outsiders were kept at a distance. Mennonite strategies for preserving the internal simplicity and external insularity of the community have included: using the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, preaching in High German, moving further away from expanding cities, curtailing education to the elementary grades, limiting means of transportation and personal mobility, exhibiting "Plain" dress, and splitting away from "modernizing" Mennonite organizations.

Old Order Mennonites, however, have not been able to control increasing population density, urban sprawl, highway construction, the value of farm land for commercial development, and the declining profitability of the small farm. These forces have thrown themselves into the environment of the Old Order system and have forced Old Order Mennonites to take notice. Outsiders are watching and Mennonites are watching outsiders. Despite the establishment of new, more removed settlements, the World and its communicative possibilities are closing in on Old Order people. There is no escaping society.

Individual Mennonites must cope with enough complexity to recognize and participate in forms of communication that are not Mennonite. In church, practicing rituals with other Mennonites, members of the community may attempt to create a plausible boundary around themselves, as if they could remove the possibility for surprises, mistakes, and misunderstandings—effectively purging "Mennonite society" from the rest of society. Mennonites may believe that the boundary is firm and protected by ritual performances, but they cannot make meaning outside of communication and communication cannot be controlled or limited according to the interests of people. Even the Confession of Faith booklet itself, written to preserve the special forms of Mennonite ritual, is a text and, therefore, freely available to non-Mennonite readers. Mennonites might attempt to hide the book, but they cannot hide communication or restrict its possibilities.

Individual Mennonites drive on public roads, spend money in stores, vacation in Florida, receive medical treatment in hospitals, get arrested, greet the mailman, and read newspapers. They are full participants in a functionally differentiated society. Individual Mennonites are increasingly aware that they can and must participate in communication outside of their community. This is why some Old Order Mennonite women now put on their bonnets before leaving for church, even though they no longer wear them around town. It is also why some Mennonite men now kiss each other inside the church building, but choose not to do so when they meet each other at the market. Such code "switching" requires an increased level of complexity; the capacity to recognize both Mennonite and non-Mennonite forms of communication. Sunday school, seminaries, advanced education, and revised confessions of beliefs also accompany the withdrawal from insularism. As Luhmann might suggest, the Mennonite community appears to be evolving from "rites to confessions and from cult-centeredness to text-centeredness." As Mennonites attempt to re-center themselves and protect their boundaries, they must increasingly rely on forms of communication that are also open to the World.

Since the time of the colonial Anabaptist immigrants, Mennonites have protected the simplicity of their social system with self-segregation (*Aussonderung*), maintaining distance from the World. The rural zone has more or less protected and hidden the Old Order community, keeping it at a relatively safe distance from "outsiders." As the population density increased and farmland grew scarce in historically Mennonite regions (in Lancaster County, PA, for example), Old Order communities were established in more remote areas of Ohio, Indiana, Ontario, and elsewhere.

The difference between rural and urban territory is no longer clear enough to insulate Old Order Mennonites and their communicative forms from the World. The sociologically relevant question is: can the Old Order Mennonite community gain enough internal complexity to recognize a greater variety of forms? Mennonites can only communicate in the world, and the world is changing. The Old Order Mennonite community is under pressure to make room for more individuality, cultural diversity, intellectualism, occupational diversity, and religious beliefs. Can the Old Order community make Old Order rituals using New Order people? Or will the potter have to look for a new medium?

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Abstract

Rituals, Communication, and Social Systems:
The Case of Old Order Mennonites

The author uses the general distinction between medium and form to analyze the specific form of Old Order Mennonite ritual. From the perspective of systems theory, Mennonite rituals may be seen as a form of communication that does not include the sending or receiving of psychological, theological, or any other kind of intellectual message or "information." The established forms of Mennonite ritual are preserved by semantic and structural instruments such as tradition and written rules of conduct, not by the expressed opinions of members or by their private thoughts. To participate in Mennonite ritual communication, a speaker must gain and keep an "address." Members keep their addresses only as long as they conform to the communicative forms of the Mennonite community. Members are excommunicated—denied an address—when they transgress the norms of the community. Consequently, participation in the community appears to depend on orthopraxis, conformity to established forms of acceptable behavior, not on orthodoxis, conformity to established forms of belief. The author suggests that insular co-presence has historically been an important attribute of Mennonite society and that the declining difference between rural and urban territory may place the future of the Old Order community in jeopardy.