# Tacit Tribes and Soft Allegiances in American Life

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My primary focus this evening is those of us whom the Amish call "English." To set the stage for the conference theme, "The Amish and Their Neighbors," we must explore the question of who their neighbors actually are. What cultural values, family patterns, and faith understandings do the Amish encounter among their neighbors as they move off the farm and into the capitalist marketplace—into vocations and economic arenas that 50 years ago were very foreign to them, but now are quite familiar? The broader culture with which they are increasingly enmeshed impacts them in ways we are only beginning to understand. Culturally speaking, the Amish are no longer off-grid, but neither are they on-grid. The following remarks represent my initial attempt to examine their newfound situation.

Even though scholars today no longer describe the Amish as a traditional "folk society" clinging tightly to its heritage and avoiding the modern world, most analyses of the Amish do set up an explicit or implicit distinction between the resisting, negotiating, and accommodating Amish and something called *modernity*. Terms such as *modernity*, *postmodern*, and *liquid modernity* crop up in most if not all contemporary scholarship on the Amish. Modernity is sometimes depicted as the context and sometimes as a metaphorical actor—that is, as the great separator. It is frequently visualized in terms of the production and consumption technologies of the present age.

When I was young, for example, modernity was an assembly line in a factory. It was automatic transmission, electric turkey-carving knives, baby formula, stereophonic records, and color television. My first stereo was a truly "modern" quadrophonic 8-track system. When I bought it, it symbolized progress, the wave of the future. Little did I suspect that both quadrophonic and 8-track technology would die within a decade. But then, that's the way we commonly understand modernity: modernity means constant change.

That observation on the persistence of change raises a question: back then, not so long ago, how did "moderns" view the Amish? When I was young, the Amish had already outlived their prior popular imaginary. From the turn of the twentieth century through about the 1950s, they were seen from the outside as anti-modern relics, living the way everyone had once lived, and on their way to extinction. By the 1960s, however, it had become obvious that the Amish weren't going away. Even so, most Amish lived out their lives as farmers and were largely ignored by moderns who lived outside their immediate area. TV shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Mr. Ed*, and *Green Acres* marketed images of country bumpkins, or of bumpkins encountering city life for the first

time, but they ignored the Amish. Americans who lived near the Amish of course knew more about them, but even many of them understood the Amish story in a simplistic way: the Amish, they thought, lived the way everyone used to long after others had moved on. John Ruth's 1975 film, *The Amish: A People of Preservation*, disseminated this theme not only with its subtitle, but with its substance. At one point in the film, Ruth asserted, "So much of what seems different about the Amish is only their continuing to practice what everybody used to long after almost everybody else has stopped doing it."

So, the Amish in the popular imagination have been variously seen as relics, on their way to extinction, irrelevant throwbacks, preservers of ancient wisdom, and more recently, as active negotiators and celebrities. We now understand, however, that change, even strategic change, occurs regularly among the Amish. Yet curiously, the Amish themselves may not have changed as much as the stories we tell about them have changed. But that's a topic for another time.

Our primary focus this evening is the folks the Amish call "English" and scholars sometimes call mainstream Americans or moderns. In scholarship on the Amish, "modernity" is rarely unpacked. Instead, it is painted with sweeping references to technology, progress, change, discontinuity, mobility, transience, specialization, bureaucracy (as opposed to informality), and individualism. Modernity is fast, noisy, aggressive, violent, nationalistic, and pluralistic. These are the forces and qualities the Amish must contend with. So we are told.

But are they really? Survey data certainly has its limitations, but it can teach us a few things about the neighbors of the Amish. My primary source for what follows is the National Survey of Moral Formation conducted by the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and fielded by the Gallup Organization (Hunter & Bowman, 2021). The survey was delivered by internet or surface mail to a scientific sample of American parents of teenage children and separately to one of their teenage children. Each questionnaire contained over 300 questions. Just over 3,000 parents-teen dyads completed the survey, yielding a data file with approximately 2,000,000 data points. Data were collected from November 2017 through early 2019. We are still analyzing the data and sorting through the findings.[1]

Let's consider America's parents. What values do "moderns" hope to instill in their children? We explored this question by presenting parents with a list of aspirations for their children's future. What kind of adult do they want their children to become? The qualities ranged from wealthy, famous, physically attractive, powerful and influential, physically fit, patriotic, and creative to classical virtues such as loving, hard-working, humble, honest, forgiving, and reliable and dependable. Every parent rated the importance of each item.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of American parents who said that each quality was either "very important" or "absolutely essential" for the kind of person they want their child to become. Note that popular stereotypes of moderns as being highly concerned with image, physical beauty, wealth, attaining power and influence, and seeking their moment of fame receive little support in

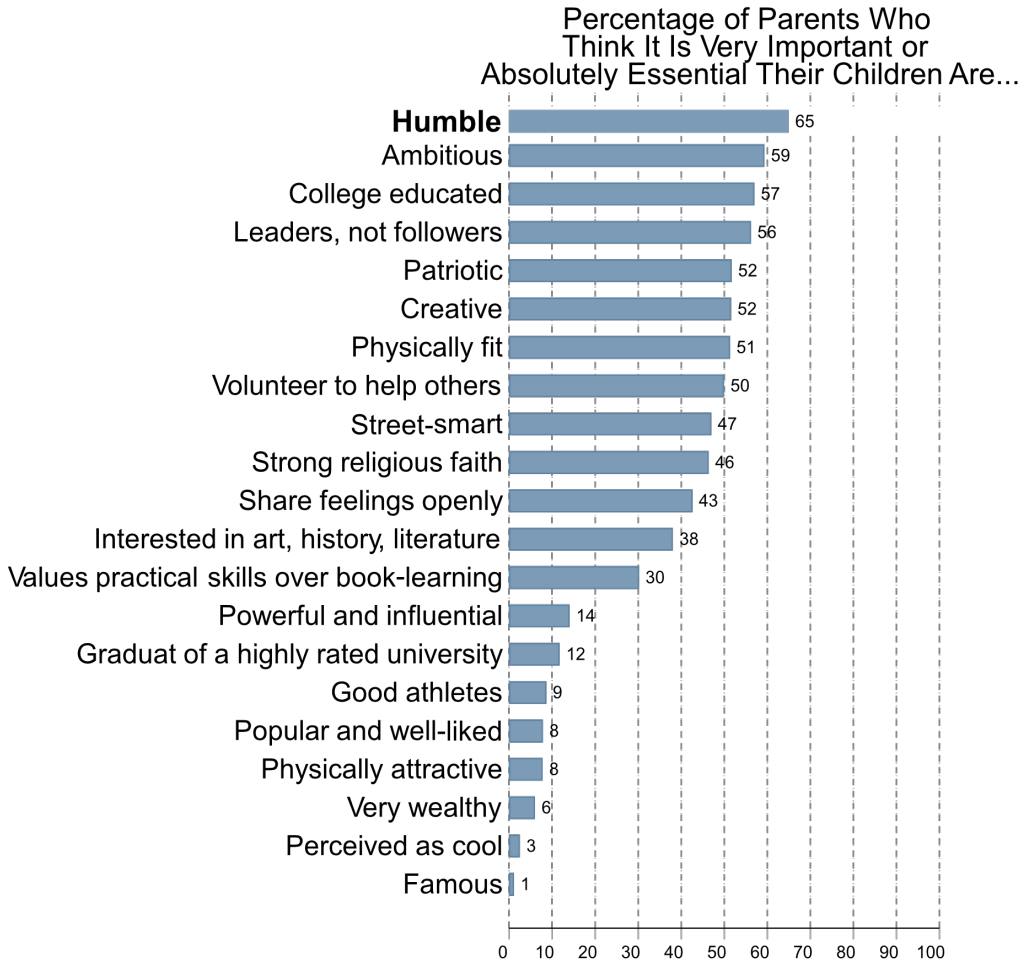
[1] The survey reported in this address was funded by the Kern Family Foundation. The data and charts are reported more fully in Hunter & Bowman (2021), which can be downloaded in PDF form from https://iasculture.org/research/publications/context-of-character.

our research. Instead, this subset of qualities suggests that American parents are much more concerned with their children's ambition to get ahead, their educational attainment, and whether they rise to some level of leadership in life. We could summarize the chart by saying that American parents prioritize the practical and utilitarian over the shallow and superficial.

Yet, surprisingly, moderns—the purported authors of *hochmut* (pride)—rated *humility* as more important for their children's future than any of these practical concerns. Humility is more important than ambition, education, patriotism, physical fitness, power, and wealth. Two-thirds of modern American parents consider it an absolutely essential or very important quality for their children's future.

**Figure 1**

*Selected Parental Perceptions of Important Characteristics for Their Children*

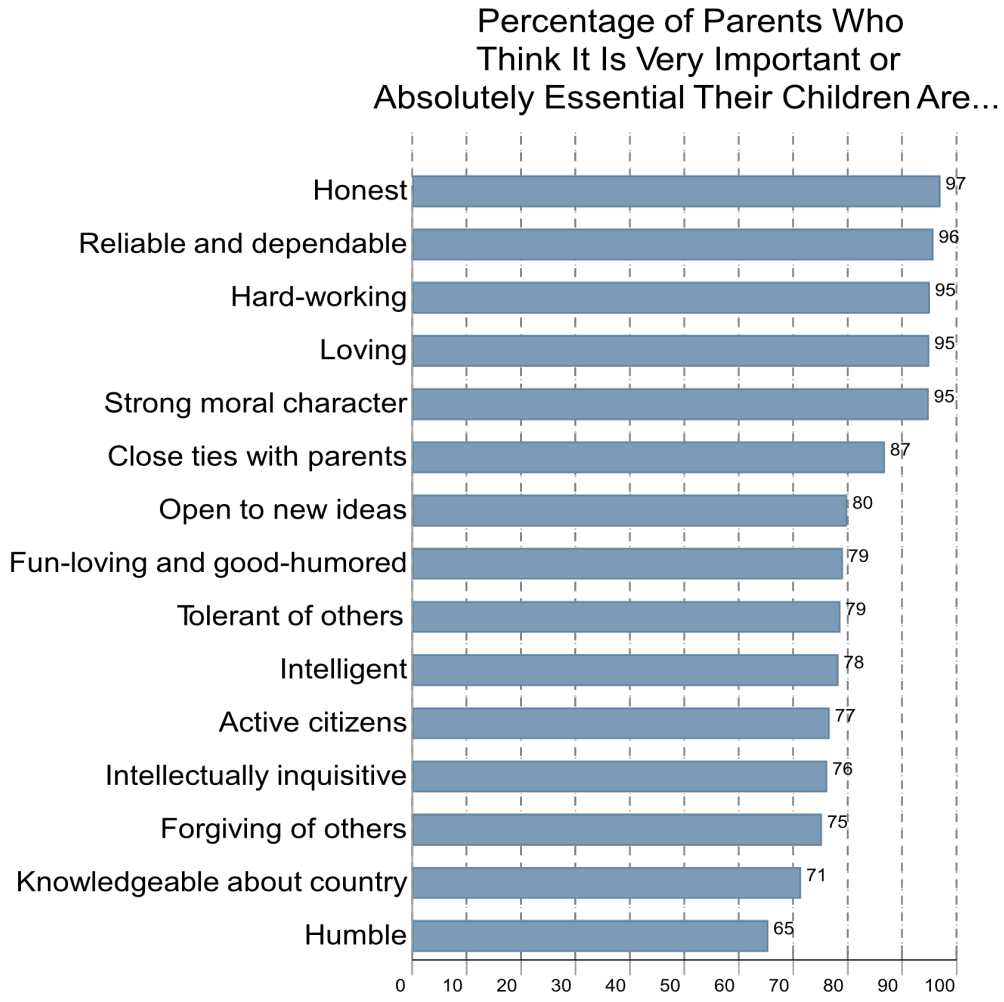



Even so, as highly as humility is rated by contemporary American parents, it is actually in the middle of the pack in terms of importance, as revealed in Figure 2. Even more dear to moderns than humility are the personal qualities of honesty, reliability and dependability, a work ethic, treating others in a loving fashion, and developing strong moral character. All of these come close

to receiving a universal endorsement by modern parents. Beyond that, preserving close ties with family is considered very important by nearly nine out of 10 parents. (They sound almost Amish, don't they?)

**Figure 2**

*Additional Parental Perceptions of Important Characteristics for Their Children*



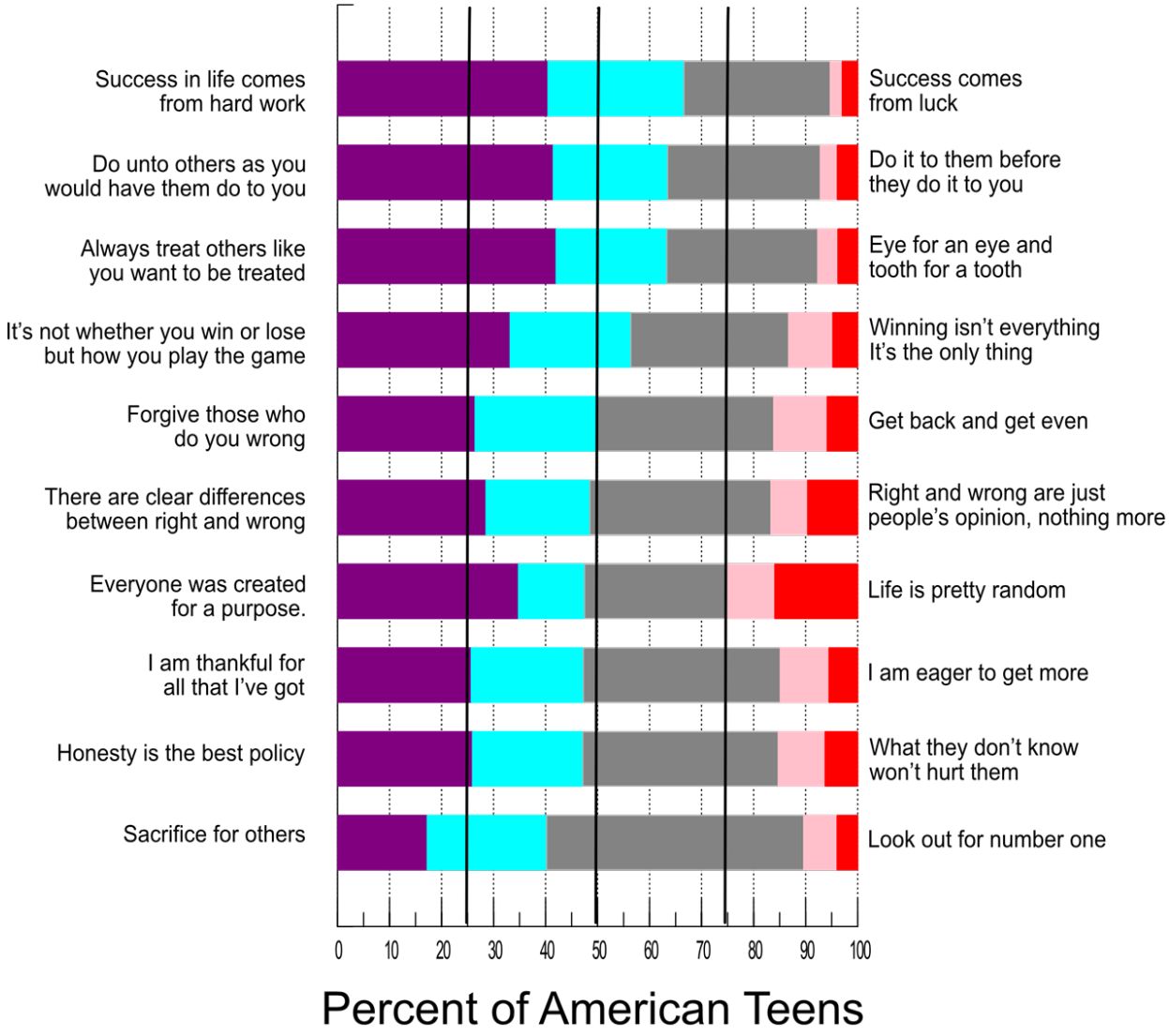

Of course, the aspirations that parents express for their children could be quite different than their children's own aspirations, but our data say they are not. Instead, teenage children's hopes largely mirror those of their parents.

There are many ways, of course, to consider the moral commitments endemic to modern American life. One approach that we took was to identify adages that would measure the sentiments of American parents and teens with respect to classical virtues. In each case, we attempted to identify moral oppositions, some of which I have included in Figure 3. Many of these statements have to do with altruism, sacrifice, and concern for the other. Others have to do with honesty, and still others touch upon hard work or a sense of purpose in life. The gray bars down the middle reflect the percentage of teens who remained neutral on each moral dichotomy. In

Spain, they might be called *pasotas*. Here among the "English," we might think of them as "whatever" teens. As you can see from the bottom item, the idea of sacrificing for others wins out over self-interest, but the big winner in this case is neutrality, as if teens were saying, "If you're making me choose between myself and others, I'll sit on the fence."

**Figure 3**

*Priorities of American Teenagers*




Based upon what we've seen thus far, and setting aside our technological differences with the Amish, I could almost be persuaded that modern American culture isn't all that different from Amish culture. Clearly, Americans at large are more concerned about helping and forgiving others, about kindness and deference, about right and wrong, even humility, than is often portrayed. These are moral touchstones or cultural bridges, so to speak, with the Amish.

This much noted, let's turn to the religious faith of modern Americans. First, half of American parents tell us their religious beliefs are either "very important" or "the most important thing in their lives." Two-thirds say their faith in God is at least "fairly important." But that leaves a third of parents who say either that their religious beliefs are "unimportant" or that they have no religious beliefs at all. We may also note that 20% of parents, many of whom identify as agnostic or atheist, say they are religiously unattached, and slightly more, about 25%, say they are evangelical (or "born again") Christians.

Second, four of every 10 American parents say they attend religious services at least two or three times a month, yet over half (55%) say either that they rarely attend services or they never do at all. It is interesting that more American parents say they never attend religious services (34%) than say they attend weekly (31%). The number of attenders is higher, of course, in the rural areas where the Amish tend to reside.

Third, personal spirituality as reflected in private prayer is more common than attendance at religious services. About a third of parents read scripture at least once a week, but more say they never do. Even though only a third read scripture on any regular basis, over half of modern parents (54%) say the Bible is the Word of God. But when confronted with a difficult moral situation in the course of daily living, only three of every 10 parents (32%) say the guidance of God or scripture is most important in deciding what to do, compared to half who say it is most important to do what's best for everyone involved.

We might conclude from this mixed bag of belief and unbelief, and belief unaccompanied by practice, that the faith of modern Americans is a mile wide, but not very deep. Many contemporary analysts refer to this phenomenon as a therapeutic faith, oriented primarily toward the positive feelings it evokes among believers. Christian Smith (2005) refers to the faith of American moderns as moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD), which distills down to:

1. God creating and ordering the world, and then watching from the sidelines;
2. God wanting people to be nice to each other;
3. The central goal of life being to feel happy and feel good about oneself;
4. God being turned to only when one really gets into a jam; and
5. Modern Americans, if they are good, go to heaven when they die.

Unlike some of the aspirations and ethics that we saw earlier, from which we could almost conclude that Amish culture looks a lot like that of their neighbors, it seems clear that Amish religious beliefs and the role of religion in their daily lives is a world apart from the faith of most other Americans.

Here are some additional moral ideas, 10 in all, that American parents (and teenagers) hold dear, based on finding from the National Survey of Moral Formation:

- "Everyone has a right to be treated with respect."
- "I am sure that my life has some larger purpose."

- "Deep down, people are basically good."
- "Divorce is better than staying in an unhappy marriage."
- "What people think of as absolutely true is really just their personal opinion."
- "You should follow your own passions wherever they lead you."
- "There is life after death."
- "God knows everything that will ever happen to me."
- "The greatest moral virtue is to be honest about your feelings and desires."
- "As long as we don't hurt others, we should all just live however we want."

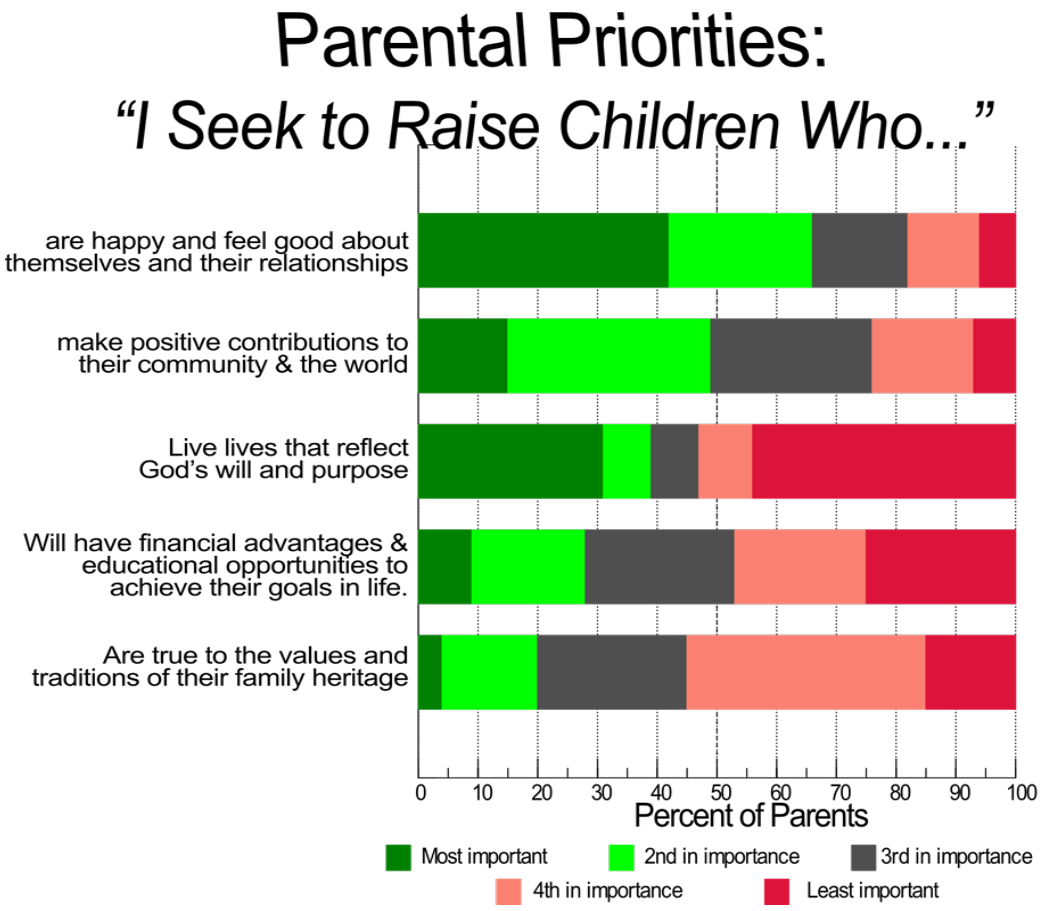
A final component of the broader cultural context within which the Amish increasingly move and operate has to do with family priorities, specifically the priority of faith in the process of raising a child. In a couple of our recent national surveys, we have asked parents to rank the importance of therapeutic, communitarian, religious, practical, and traditional priorities/goals for their parenting (Figure 4). The statements representing these priorities are:

1. *Therapeutic goal*: I seek to raise children who are happy and feeling good about themselves and their relationships.
2. *Communitarian goal*: I seek to raise children who will make positive contributions to their community and the world around them.
3. *Religious goal*: I seek to raise children whose lives will reflect God's will and purpose.
4. *Achievement goal*: I seek to provide every financial advantage and educational opportunity to my children so they have the best chance of being successful and achieving their goals in life.
5. *Family heritage goal*: I seek to raise children who are true to the values and traditions of their family heritage.

We found that Americans generally prioritize their children's happiness, followed by the contribution that their children might make to the world around them. The third item on this chart, the question of raising children who are faithful—whose lives will reflect God's will and purpose—stands apart from all of the others. For about a third of parents, it is their very top priority, but for even more—about 45%—it is their least important goal of all, falling below even the provision of opportunities for success and raising children who will follow the traditions of their family heritage. Interestingly, most of the parents for whom raising faithful children is their top goal rate raising happy children as second most important. But parents who rate happiness as their top child-raising goal rate raising faithful children as least important of all.

**Figure 4**

*Parental Priorities for Raising Children*




This finding has broader implications than is immediately apparent, for it underscores the cultural rift between moderns with religious and secular priorities. For their part, the Amish have historically viewed "the world" as a more or less monolithic threat to their faith and their way of life, but "the world" itself is highly divided today along religious and partisan lines. For us moderns, the neighbors of the Amish, our sources of information, understandings of reality, and the threats we perceive to our own modern ways of life diverge dramatically. In brief, we are worldly in very different ways. And this rift between religious and secular moderns has grown over the years.

Not only that, but our cosmologies increasingly align with our political identities and partisan affiliations. When I was young, there was a much more diverse mix of the religious and secular, conservatives and liberals, within each political party. That diversity has been supplanted by a greater degree of sameness within our political parties. Are you strongly pro-life? Do you feel that the American way of life is threatened by immigrants crossing our southern border? Does the word "socialism" make you cringe? Are you strongly opposed to gay marriage? Are you a Christian whose faith is the central guiding feature of your daily life? If your answer to these questions is yes, then you are probably a Republican who voted for Donald Trump. Do you think of yourself

as pro-choice? Are you deeply committed to justice for minorities? Are you deeply concerned about the threat posed by climate change and the presence of assault rifles on our streets? Are you uninvolved or only peripherally involved in a community of faith? If so, then you are likely a Democrat.

For many moderns, their personal faith has become tightly interwoven with political identity and partisan ideas on an entire spectrum of cultural issues. All I have to do is look in a survey at how often someone prays in order to confidently predict their political party identification. Setting Independents aside for the moment, modern parents who pray more than once a day are 10.5 times more likely to identify as Republicans than parents who say they never pray. And parents who say their religious beliefs are the most important thing in their life are 14.5 times more likely to identify as Republicans than those who say their religious beliefs are unimportant or nonexistent. Americans who self-identify as Evangelical Christians are even more partisan. In 2016, they were three times more likely to vote for Trump than non-evangelicals. Recently, it has been noted that Americans increasingly divide themselves into partisan tribes, living in information silos, all of which is impacted by their brand and degree of religiosity.

So, let's conclude by returning to the Amish. One reason Americans find the Amish fascinating is because they integrate nicely with the contemporary American narrative of *respect for diversity*. But unlike other minorities, they are doubly fascinating because they appear to reject the very technologies, and commodities that we hold most dear. In the popular American imagination, the Amish are today's Beverly Hillbillies: unsophisticated rural-dwellers, employing folk wisdom handed down through the generations, and comically ignorant of most of what happens in the world. Although they garner a certain respect in the American moral imaginary, their way of life isn't taken very seriously. The Amish are popular celebrities to be marveled at in brief visits to Amish country, returning home with Amish-labeled crafts and souvenirs. Like Bosch brand in home appliances and Tesla brand in cars, Amish is the brand of furniture to buy if you are interested in quality.

One of the things that moderns find most titillating is any story of an Amish person breaking free from community constraints, tasting freedom for the first time, or experiencing forbidden fruit or forbidden romance. *Rumspringa* narratives are such stories, as are stories about the Amish doing drugs or going to bed with someone as a courtship practice.

Visiting Amish country is an intriguing alternative to the beach or to Disney World. The more the Amish dress peculiarly Amish, the longer the beard, the more old-fashioned their technology, the quainter the buggy ride, the better "the Amish experience" seems to the modern tourist. Most moderns don't visit the Amish out of respect for their distinctive practices or a genuine interest in understanding their faith and their way of life. They are attracted by the Amish spectacle, and they buy an Amish t-shirt the same way they'd buy one from Hershey Park or a rock concert.

Where does all of this leave the Amish? In my estimation, it was less challenging for them to separate themselves from mid-twentieth-century Americans who wrote them off as relics from yesteryear, fading into oblivion. It is likely harder during these first decades of the twenty-first century for the Amish to oppose a surrounding culture that celebrates them as celebrities, that

thrills to the Amish spectacle. In such a cultural milieu, the expectations of moderns—of outsiders—may gradually mold and threaten Amish identities in imperceptible ways, subtly shaping (and crystallizing) their own definitions of what it means to be Amish by tacitly encouraging them to remain Amish in specifically "peculiar," economically advantageous ways. What is more, an American cultural milieu where faith and faith-driven values have become axes of polarization may tug at the Amish in new ways, encouraging them to align themselves with one "worldly tribe"—the politically conservative, religious one—rather than the more secular alternative. In a word, it is easier to practice nonconformity to an "English" world that seems coherently monolithic than to a culturally fluid world consisting of many tribes, each of which opposes the other.

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