



Fashion and Anti-Fashion among Holdeman Mennonite Women

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Since their origin in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, most Mennonite sects historically favored plain dress as a form of anti-fashion (Scott, 1986, Graybill, 2002), although that is less important for the more liberal Mennonite groups today. It is still vitally important to the Holdeman Mennonites, who are among the most conservative of the Mennonite groups. Documenting and analyzing the changes from 1926-2016 is the focus of this paper. Formally known as the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (CGCM), this Mennonite sect originated in 1859 when John Holdeman and his followers broke off from the Old Order Mennonites who they felt had strayed from the right path. They wanted to live apart from 'the world'. Separation from outsiders was accomplished through social boundary markers, including physical, auditory, educational, economic, political markers and visual boundaries (dress). By the end of the twentieth century few boundary markers remained as the Holdemans had slowly assimilated into American and Canadian cultures. One of the remaining symbols is the dress code that prohibits the wearing of fashionable dress. The Holdemans refer to this as 'plain dress,' a form of anti-fashion. Historically, Holdeman women were expected to wear basic shirtwaist dresses that were loose and long, with sleeves, matching belts, high necklines, and buttons up the front bodice. By 1926 that expectation became codified by the CDCM as a formal requirement. Adherence to the dress code was enforced through the social control system that disciplined them to restrain the temptation toward fashionability. Women who did not comply were expelled and shunned. However by the end of the twentieth century numerous changes occurred and a greater variety of style options became acceptable, resulting in the weakening of the anti-fashion dress code. As one of the most conservative Mennonite sects remaining, The Holdemans still try to avoid involvement with non-Mennonites, and as a result only a handful of scholars have been allowed access to this group. Only a few studies have been published (Hiebert, 1973, 2010; Mainwaring, 1995; XXXX 1986, 1997, 1999). For this research project, ethnographic fieldwork, participant-observation and interviews occurred in CDCM communities in the US and Canada from 2014-2016. Interviews (N=62) were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Primary data included analysis of photos (N = 1005 dated 1900-2015) and garments. Content analysis was used to examine the official newsletters of the CDCM; 30% of the entries focused on the need to avoid fashionable dress and 26% related to women's changing roles. Over time these issues surfaced in the photos of dress. In the 1970s the CDCM was worried about assimilation; fashionable dress was seen as symbolic of a loss of spirituality. At this time only 5% of men were in plain dress, and 63% were wearing mainstream fashion, while 20% of the women were wearing anti-fashion, 40% were wearing fashionable dress and 40% wore a mix. By 1979, CDCM ministers, all

male, expelled over 10,000 members for not following rules. For the next three decades, 48% of the women wore anti-fashion, 41% fashion and 35% wore a mix. Massive changes in women's roles and dress occurred from the 1990s forward, and currently 20% wear anti-fashion, 20% wear fashion, and 60% mix both types. Today 96% of the men dress in mainstream fashions. While in the 1980s, three basic dress styles were worn, (XXXX, 1997), at present two of those styles are still worn by older women, but there are six acceptable styles today. Ironically, plain dress now allows for fashionable elements. It was younger women who introduced fashionable accessories in the 1990s then went on to making changes in the dress itself. This is directly tied to women working outside the home and then slowly altering their plain dress to adapt to the world. A relationship was found, and made clear in the interviews, that working outside the home is related to the more frequent acceptance of fashionable dress and increasing levels of female agency within the CGCM. This change in the dress code observed is analyzed by using Bush and London's (1960) theory that when a long-standing mode of dress changes, there is often a change in the culture itself regarding underlying social roles. The eroding of anti-fashion as a social boundary marker was found to be symptomatic of significant role changes and increasing assimilation of the Holdeman Mennonite women into the larger American culture.

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