

Proposal for:

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EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES for HIGHER EDUCATION
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The Quest for Religious Values and Sustainable Lifestyles. Contributions from Amish, Hutterite, Benedictine, and Franciscan Philosophy of Life.

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Crucial aspects of the global discussion on sustainable development, are behavioural choices and their underlying values in relation to prosperity, welfare and well-being. Often these values and (changes in) behaviour are being studied on the level of individuals. In my PhD study I point to communities and their social capital as being underestimated. The research focuses on critical values of four Western religious minority groups and the importance of their philosophy of life for their way of living, to find inspiring examples for the advance of sustainability in Western society. Research groups are the Amish, the Hutterites, the Benedictine Order and the Franciscan Order; four Western 'dissident' religious cultures, characterised by a specific philosophy of life and a modest way of living. These religious groups aim for a quality of life, resulting from religious and cultural values, currently under pressure in our society.

The interdisciplinary research has a qualitative aspect concerning the relationship between philosophies of life, values and environmental behaviour. Data are gathered from participating observation, literature, interviews and information from key people. In 2004 I spent three months in Pennsylvania and Ohio and lived with several Old Order Amish families. In 2005 I stayed in a Hutterite Colony for six weeks. Both Benedictine and Franciscan monasteries have been visited and studied in the Netherlands and in Italy. The fieldwork will be continued in 2007. The environmental impact is measured by a set of quantitative indicators, focusing on energy, space and biodiversity.

This paper will report the main findings from the study on whether and in what sense the Amish, Hutterite, Benedictine and Franciscan philosophy of life and values determine primary choices regarding transport, nutrition, energy use, and agriculture. One interesting example of Amish dealing with these basic values is the way they handle technological innovation. New technologies and its effects are confronted with salient values, on the basis of which an innovation is accepted, refused or adapted. Innovations that contribute to the preservation of Amish' culture and social capital are easily adopted. If such innovations do threaten Amish way of life, the technology will be refused or adapted. This process of reflective modernisation is a fascinating example of checking technology by weighing the effects on important values and maintaining a desired quality of life. Other values that will be elaborated are Hutterite communal living, Benedictine vows and vision on time, and Franciscan choice for poverty.