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Author(s): Lawrence Foster

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FREE LOVE AND FEMINISM: JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES AND THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY

Lawrence Foster

John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community which he founded in central New York state in the mid-nineteenth century have been the subject of intense controversy and widely varying interpretations during the past century and a quarter. As one of the very few examples in human history of a long-lived system of group marriage (somewhat misleadingly described both by Noyes and his critics as “free love”), the Oneida experiment has understandably provoked curiosity and lively discussion among journalists, historians, sociologists, psychologists, and popular writers. Certainly no question has been more hotly debated than Noyes’s attitudes toward sexual expression and women’s role.

One popular approach has been to view Noyes as part of the vanguard of sexual liberation and woman’s rights — a man ahead of his time whose efforts have much to say to us today. This approach seems plausible at first view. Oneida did represent one of the most radical institutional efforts to change relations between the sexes and improve women’s status in America. Women at Oneida were freed from the fear of unwanted pregnancies through elaborate birth control practices called “male continence,” and they were liberated from the strains of child care through a system of communal childrearing. They wore a functional, Bloomer-type outfit, cut their hair short, and were able to engage in virtually any type of community work they wished. They participated in the

Mr. Foster teaches in the School of Social Sciences at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

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daily religious-and-business meetings at Oneida and actively helped shape communal policy. And through a system of "complex" or group marriage, they were freed from the double standard and given basic equality in sexual expression with men of the community. From such a perspective, Oneida appears as a sort of idyllic utopia which successfully solved many of the problems of women's role and relations between the sexes that still trouble us today.¹

In contrast to this highly positive view, much of the literature on Oneida has seen Noyes as a seriously disturbed individual who vacillated between extreme license and excessive concerns for sexual control. The community at Oneida, far from being part of the vanguard of sexual liberation, was repressive and definitely unfree. Important but seriously flawed recent studies of Oneida from contemporary feminist perspectives conclude that, in the last analysis, Noyes was a male chauvinist and his community a disappointment to those seeking true equality.²

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference on Utopias and Communes in Omaha, Nebraska on October 13, 1978. For a fuller discussion of the development of Noyes's beliefs and how they were reflected in practice in his communal experiments, see the chapter on Oneida in Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London 1981). Portions of that chapter have been used here by special arrangement with the copyright holder, Oxford University Press, Inc.

Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York 1935) is the classic positive account and still the best overall introduction to Noyes and his communal experiments. Many scholarly and popular writers have treated Noyes as a prototype for the future. For three of the more interesting examples of this genre, see Victor F. Calverton, "Oneida: The Love Colony," in his *Where Angels Dared to Tread: Socialist and Communist Utopian Colonies in the United States* (Indianapolis 1941), 245-287; Mulford Q. Sibley, "Oneida's Challenge to American Culture," in Joseph J. Kwiatt and Mary C. Turpie, eds., *Studies in American Culture* (Minneapolis 1959), 41-62; and Richard A. Hoehn, "The Kingdom Goes Joint Stock: Learning from Oneida 100 Years Later," *Christian Century*, January 28, 1981, 77-80.

² Marlyn Hartzell Dalsimer, "Women and Family in the Oneida Community, 1837-1881" (Ph.D. diss., New York University 1975), presents an analysis of the Oneida community from a contemporary feminist perspective. Although the account is well written, it is flawed by numerous factual inaccuracies and by a failure adequately to consider the overall context of Noyes's efforts. For example, in arguing that women at Oneida were far from "liberated," Dalsimer says that they must have found the method of birth control by "male continence" (*coitus*

This viewpoint, too, has much to recommend it at first sight. While it is true that Noyes was concerned to improve relations between the sexes, he certainly was no feminist. On numerous occasions, he bluntly and unambiguously stated that he believed men were superior to women. Indeed, he went so far as to argue that the superiority of masculine to feminine principles was inherent in the nature of the universe. He declared, for example, that in his dual godhead, composed of the Father and the Son, the Son stood in a relation of cooperative subordination to the Father similar to the relationship that should exist between men and women.³ Noyes's Bloomer outfit was instituted, against the wishes of many community women, to "crucify the dress spirit," as he put

reservatus) oppressive at times, but she never alludes to the fact that men must have found that practice far more restrictive.

Another recent analysis of Oneida using contemporary feminist perspectives is found in Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias — the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill 1981), especially 256-279. Kern's basic argument is that despite some improvement in women's status at Oneida when compared with the larger society, the extent of the changes in women's status was not so great as some previous writers have argued. This part of Kern's argument is correct and not particularly surprising. His logic, however, leaves much to be desired. On the one hand, he is critical of Noyes and the Oneida Community for not going far enough in breaking down traditional sex role patterns; on the other hand, he is also critical of Noyes and the Oneida Community during the 1870s for opposing the desire of some young women to go back toward more traditional patterns. In short, Kern's analysis criticizes Noyes both for not going far enough and for going too far in changing sex roles. The underlying belief of many feminist critiques of the Oneida Community appears to be that unless Oneida gave its women full self-determination (which it did not give to its men either), then it must be viewed as having failed in reorganizing relations between the sexes. This is a shortsighted view which refuses to take seriously the underlying concerns of communitarian groups such as Oneida which were opposed to the disruptive individualism of their day and sought instead to establish a new basis of authority growing out of a mutual religious and communal commitment by both men and women.

Other critical accounts have ranged from that of Eric Achorn, "Mary Cragin: Perfectionist Saint," *New England Quarterly*, 28 (December 1955), 490-510, which compares Noyes to Hitler, to Ernest R. Sandeen, "John Humphrey Noyes as the New Adam," *Church History*, 40 (March 1971), 82-90, which suggests that Noyes suffered from serious emotional disturbances.

³ For the basic theological statement by Noyes on the superiority of the male to the female principles, see articles in his *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, Vt. 1847), particularly "Condensation of Life," 487-493. Since "spirituality" was the basis for authority at Oneida, Noyes reversed the popular Victorian notion and argued that *men* were

it, and to contribute to the realization of his ultimate ideal that woman would become “what she ought to be, a *female man*” (emphasis in original).⁴ Noyes’s eugenics experiment, involving selective breeding of members within his community, was justified in terms that would cause any feminist to cringe.⁵ And in his newspapers, Noyes clearly and articulately criticized the contemporary woman’s rights movement. Though he felt that the movement had identified real problems, he was convinced that its approach to changing relations between the sexes was wrong.⁶

more “spiritual” than women. “Woman’s Character,” *Circular*, January 14, 1854, 72. It is sometimes difficult to be certain whether or not Noyes himself was the author of a particular article in his newspaper, but in almost all cases, whether or not articles actually were written by Noyes, they represent his general viewpoint. In the rare instances in which something was printed with which Noyes disagreed, he would come back with a vigorous rejoinder in the next issue of his newspaper. With the exception of the five year period from 1846 to 1851 when he relinquished the editorship of his paper to his close associates while he worked to establish his complex marriage system, Noyes edited his paper and oversaw everything that went into it. When other community members contributed articles, their initials usually were placed at the end of their contribution.

⁴ *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y. 1849), 41. For the basic rationale underlying the institution of the Bloomer-style outfit, see *ibid.*, 8-10, 40-41. It is interesting that similar outfits were instituted for various reasons in several other antebellum groups, including the Strangite Mormons and the Brigham Young Mormons.

⁵ The original idea behind the eugenics experiment is described in *ibid.*, 33-34, and elaborated in Noyes’s *Essay on Scientific Propagation* (Oneida 1872). He argues, for example, that the existing marriage pattern “ignores the great difference between the reproductive powers of the sexes, and restricts each man, whatever may be his potency and value, to the amount of production which one woman, chosen blindly, may be capable.” Man’s natural superiority over women is suggested, Noyes declares, by the fact that a great man can sire children by any number of women at the same time, while a woman can bear only one child at a time. *Ibid.*, 18. For important secondary accounts of the “stirpiculture,” or eugenics, experiment, see Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, 254-264, and Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore 1969), 61-65.

⁶ Somewhat ironically, writers analyzing the Oneida Community from feminist perspectives almost never have dealt explicitly with Noyes’s *own* critique of antebellum feminism and the woman’s rights movement. An important exception is Kern’s *An Ordered Love* which, although flawed in other ways, raises many of the important issues that feminism posed for Noyes and the Oneida Community. A fuller analysis of Noyes’s critique of antebellum feminism is presented in this article.

How is one to account for such widely divergent interpretations of Noyes and his relationship to women's issues? Was Noyes a chauvinist, a liberator of women, or perhaps both? The frequent appearance of these two interpretations of Noyes in the literature suggests that there is probably some valid basis for each of them. On the other hand, the very existence of two such seemingly contradictory views also suggests that a vital element is being left out of each analysis. Both the interpretation of Noyes as liberator and as chauvinist fail because they take into account only a fragment of the evidence. They judge Noyes from external perspectives which do not fully apply to his experiment, instead of trying to understand what he himself was attempting to do and how well he succeeded in his own terms.

This study of Noyes began with the assumption that any community as unconventional as Oneida could not have survived and prospered for more than thirty years by accident. A functioning system of "complex marriage," which one journalist described as "a combination of polygamy and polyandry with certain religious and social restraints,"⁷ must have been based on some coherent philosophy and the ability to realize that philosophy in practice. A systematic reading of everything written in Noyes's newspapers between 1834 when he first began to publish his views and 1855 when the Oneida Community was becoming securely established reveals the basic outlines of Noyes's thoughtful and well formulated critique of his society, as well as his program for change, particularly in relations between the sexes. In the last analysis, Noyes was not a Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde character, but rather a man who eventually combined many contradictory elements of his culture into a new and effective synthesis. As Whitney Cross, foremost interpreter of turbulent western New York before the Civil War, has noted, the Oneida Community represents "the keystone in the arch of Burned-over District history, demonstrating the connection between enthusiasms of the right and those of the left."⁸

⁷ Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States; From Personal Visit and Observation* (New York 1875), 271.

⁸ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca 1950), 333. The fine social-psychological study by Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia 1977), describes

Underlying Noyes's whole life and sense of mission was a deep-seated concern to overcome the social and intellectual disorder that he experienced both in his own life and in the world around him. The areas of New England and western New York where Noyes had his formative emotional and intellectual experiences were undergoing rapid economic growth, unstable social conditions, and sharply conflicting religious movements. The region was repeatedly "burned over" by the fires of revivalistic enthusiasms and crusades to transform society, much as California today serves as both a source and a magnet for all manner of social and religious causes. The Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and his golden plates, Charles Grandison Finney and his "new measures" revivalism, William Miller and his dire predictions of the imminent end of the world, the Fox sisters and their spirit rappings, Theodore Dwight Weld and militant abolitionism, the Seneca Falls group and the woman's right crusade — these and many other movements all eventually found a home in the "Burned-over District." John Humphrey Noyes, a precocious and strong-willed yet socially maladapted and painfully shy child, was particularly jarred by the cacophony of ideas and causes which surrounded him. Ultimately he reached the extraordinary conclusion that he was uniquely responsible for achieving a new religious and social synthesis — both for himself and for others. As he declared in a letter in 1837, "God has set me to cast up a highway across this chaos, and I am gathering out the stones and grading the track as fast as possible."⁹

How was this new order to be achieved? Like many millennial revivalists of his day, Noyes felt that the old order was so radically

with great sophistication how Noyes managed successfully to fuse the conflicting elements of his time into a new synthesis.

⁹ George W. Noyes, ed., *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes, Founder of the Oneida Community* (New York 1923), 306. This was an unpublished portion of Noyes's famous letter which was excerpted in *The Battle-Axe and Weapons of War*, a sensational free love and antiestablishment newspaper published by Theophilous Gates. The best source for the social and religious disorder of western New York state remains Cross, *Burned-over District*. For a similar treatment of Vermont, see David Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York 1939). For an excellent, psychologically sophisticated analysis of Noyes's family background and how it influenced the development of his sense of mission, see Thomas, *The Man Who Would be Perfect*, *passim*. Thomas considers Noyes not as an aberrant case but as a young man whose experiences and concerns were in many ways strikingly similar to those of many of his contemporaries.

diseased and corrupt that no external social, economic, or political palliatives by themselves would suffice to set things straight. The underlying problem was a crisis in values. The first priority, therefore, was to establish a new set of common values, to achieve "right relations with God," as Noyes put it.¹⁰ Toward this end, Noyes developed a complex set of religious perfectionist principles and then wandered throughout New York and New England with the aim of eventually converting the entire world to his idiosyncratic and heretical views. The effort, predictably, was a failure. Noyes therefore decided to retrench. He returned to his home in Putney, Vermont, and there started first a Bible School, then a Society of Inquiry, and finally a full scale Community, which ultimately would become the Oneida Community.¹¹ Beginning at Putney, Noyes sought to get his followers to internalize his new values which stressed the subordination of the individual and his

¹⁰ The most succinct summary of this position is found in the *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association*, 27-28. This is part of the "Bible Argument Defining the Relations of the Sexes in the Kingdom of God," the basic summary of Noyes's social and sexual views, in *ibid.*, 18-42. Similar concerns are repeatedly expressed throughout Noyes's early writings.

¹¹ Noyes returned home to Putney, Vermont in 1836, where he started a Bible School. In 1838 he married Harriet Holton, a member of one of the most socially and financially prominent families of the state. After the division of the estate of Noyes's father in 1841, a Society of Inquiry was formed, and in 1844, a Contract of Partnership was signed among the group, which had become known as the Putney Community. Following the initial efforts to introduce complex marriage in 1846, relations between the Putney Community and the townspeople worsened, and in 1847 Noyes was indicted for adultery. He fled Vermont, forfeiting his \$2,000 bond, and eventually, with the core group of his followers, started over again at Oneida in 1848. The first five years at Oneida in central New York state were marked by considerable tensions and pressures, both within the community itself and with its neighbors, but by the mid-1850s the community, which numbered more than 200 members, had overcome most of its initial difficulties. For more than twenty years, the community was remarkably successful, achieving considerable wealth through the production of animal traps and other small manufactured products, and maintaining favorable relations with the outer society. Finally, due to the development of a combination of internal and external pressure, the community discontinued its controversial complex marriage practices in 1879, and in January 1881, the group formally dissolved itself as a communitarian venture, reorganizing itself instead as a joint-stock corporation. Today, Oneida, Ltd., the business enterprise which has grown from that initial corporation, has become highly successful as one of the world's leading silverware manufacturers. For an overview of these developments, see Carden, *Oneida*, and Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*.

or her private, selfish interests to the good of the larger community as interpreted by Noyes. The greed, individualism, and conflict which threatened to tear the broader society apart must be overcome by developing a cooperative, *Gemeinschaft*-type community, which Noyes envisioned as essentially an enlarged family. Only after establishing such basic communal harmony could other pressing social problems be addressed effectively.¹²

If reestablishing "right relations with God," or a sense of common values, was the first priority for Noyes, then a second, closely related goal was reestablishing "right relations between the sexes."¹³ As a painfully shy young adult, Noyes had struggled to understand his own impulses and to determine why so many of the perfectionists with whom he associated were engaged in such erratic and often self-destructive sexual experimentation. The existing marriage system was unsatisfactory, he concluded; "the law of marriage worketh wrath."¹⁴ Unrealistic and unnatural restrictions were being placed on relations between the sexes. In marriage, women were held in a form of slave-like domestic bondage, while their husbands toiled away in an uncertain and highly competitive external world.¹⁵ Romantic love and the monogamous family merely accentuated the disruptive individualism present in other areas of social life. In a sort of "egotism for two," monogamous family interests were pitted against those of the larger society.¹⁶ Most serious of all, men acted as though they owned their wives, as though their wives were a form of property. Noyes

¹² For a few of the numerous articles developing this position, see "Practical Communism," *Circular*, June 13, 1852, 121; "Industrial Marriage," *Circular*, March 18, 1854, 179; "Working Schools," *Circular*, March 23, 1854, 186; "Our Home," *Circular*, October 21, 1854, 550; and "The Moral Advantages of Combination," *Circular*, March 16, 1854, 176.

¹³ "Bible Argument," 27-28. Noyes observed: ". . . man's deepest experiences are those of religion and love; and these are just the experiences in respect to which he is most apt to be ashamed, and most inclined to be silent." *Male Continence; or Self-Control in Sexual Intercourse* (Oneida [1866]), 3.

¹⁴ "Bible Argument," 25. The final monographic summation of Noyes's basic social and sexual views is found in *Bible Communism: A Compilation of the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Branches* (Brooklyn 1853).

¹⁵ *Slavery and Marriage, A Dialogue: Conversation Between Judge North, Major South, and Mr. Free Church* (Oneida 1850); "The Family and Its Foil," *Circular*, November 16, 1854, 594; and *Bible Communism*, 79-80.

¹⁶ See "Becoming as Little Children," *Spiritual Magazine*, December 22, 1849, 339; "The Social Principle Primary," *Free Church Circular*, September 23, 1850,

felt, instead, that sexual and emotional exclusiveness between the sexes should be done away with. Cooperation should replace disruptive conflict. Within the ideal order which he was attempting to set up, sexual relations should be fundamentally restructured so that loyalty was raised to the level of the entire community.¹⁷

The details of this remarkable effort at reorganizing marriage and family relations have been treated in many accounts and need not concern us here. What does need to be stressed, however, is both the systematic and institutionally radical character of Noyes's innovations. Noyes first conceived the idea of complex marriage a full nine years before beginning to put it into practice in 1846.¹⁸ With a strong sense of responsibility for the social consequences of his ideas, he was unwilling to break down the old order until he was certain that he had something better to put in its place and that he stood a reasonable chance of getting the new ways adopted. Thus measures such as group criticism sessions¹⁹ and a system of birth control through *coitus reservatus*²⁰ were developed

249-250; "Egotism for Two," *Circular*, April 11, 1854, 219-220; and "The Family and Its Foil," *Circular*, November 16, 1854, 594.

¹⁷ See "Bible Argument," *passim*; *Bible Communism*, *passim*; *Handbook of the Oneida Community* (Wallingford, Conn. 1867), 64; *Handbook of the Oneida Community*, No. 2 (Oneida 1871), 56.

¹⁸ "The Battle-Axe Letter," *Witness*, January 23, 1839, 50; "Introduction," *Spiritual Moralist*, June 13, 1842, 1.

¹⁹ Under "mutual criticism," a special form of group feedback and character control, the person to receive criticism would be openly and honestly evaluated by other members of the group in order to encourage his or her character development. Usually criticism sessions at Oneida were conducted by groups of ten to fifteen members. The subject of the criticism would remain silent while other members of the group in turn would assess his or her strengths and weaknesses. In the absence of a formal governmental structure at Oneida, mutual criticism served as the chief means of informally establishing and sustaining community cohesion and norms.

For the development and function of mutual criticism at Oneida, see Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 98-100. Major Oneida sources on the practice include *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association*, 10-11; *Mutual Criticism* (Oneida 1876); and the column, "Criticism," which ran in the Community newspapers beginning with the *Spiritual Magazine*, December 22, 1849, 346. Valuable secondary accounts of criticism are found in Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, 215-226, and Carden, *Oneida*, 71-77.

²⁰ Under "male continence," a practice technically known as *coitus reservatus*, a couple would join together in sexual intercourse but the man was not supposed to ejaculate, either during or after that intercourse. Noyes initially developed this extraordinary technique in response to the fears that his wife Harriet had of

to insure that complex marriage, when it was instituted, would not lead to private experimentation and a reduction in loyalty to the community.²¹ Once basic community loyalty and the necessary institutional supports had been established, Noyes proceeded to introduce the practice of complex marriage and a variety of other radical changes which attempted to do away with all non-intrinsic distinctions between the sexes.²² Women were formally freed to

becoming pregnant and having additional painful miscarriages. The technique was apparently practiced as the sole sanctioned method of birth control at Oneida for twenty-one years between 1848 and 1869, during which time, according to Maren Lockwood Carden's figures, at most thirty-one accidental births took place in a community of some two hundred adults frequently exchanging sexual partners. Carden, *Oneida*, 51, based on Hilda Herrick Noyes and George Wallingford Noyes, "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture," *Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics*, 1921, in *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family* (Baltimore 1923), 386. As gradually introduced at Putney and Oneida, male continence served not only as an effective method of birth control but also as a means of discouraging exclusive psychological attachments between members of the community which might interfere with their loyalty to the group.

For a detailed analysis of the development of male continence and its function in the Oneida Community, see Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 93-98. Major Oneida sources relating to male continence include the "Bible Argument," 27-35; John Humphrey Noyes, *Male Continence*, and *Dixon and His Copyists: A Criticism of the Accounts of the Oneida Community in "New America," "Spiritual Wives," and Kindred Publications* (Wallingford, Conn. 1872); and Theodore E. Noyes, "Report on Nervous Diseases in the Oneida Community," in John Humphrey Noyes, *Essay on Scientific Propagation*, 25-32. The physiological mechanisms by which male continence was possible have been confirmed in Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and Clyde Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia 1948), 158-161.

²¹ "Complex marriage," a form of group marriage, was based on the idea that community members were married not to other individuals but to the entire group. Adults, therefore, were allowed to exchange sexual partners within the group with a high degree of freedom, subject always to various controls such as mutual criticism, male continence, and the approval of liaisons through an intermediary female third party. Any exclusive emotional attachments were broken up as "special love," selfish behavior antithetical to the community order.

Although the intellectual roots of complex marriage are discussed at length throughout Noyes's writings, the precise workings of the system are somewhat less clear. For some Oneida sources discussing complex marriage, see the "Bible Argument"; *Bible Communism*; and John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia 1870), 614-645. Valuable secondary perspectives are presented in Parker, *A Yankee Saint*; Carden, *Oneida*; and Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*.

²² For the best overview of the development of these new methods of social

participate in almost all aspects of community religious, economic, and social life, in contrast to the far greater restrictions that they faced in the outside world. Within the limits necessary to maintain the primary loyalty to the larger communal order, all individuals were encouraged to develop their highest capacities. Few societies in human history have done more to break down arbitrary distinctions between the sexes than did Oneida.²³

It might initially seem paradoxical that this significant revision of sex roles and rise in women's status at Oneida should have been accomplished in the face of John Humphrey Noyes's formal belief in the superiority of men over women. The chief reason this could occur was that Noyes's primary concern was not with male and female authority patterns per se, but rather with establishing his own personal authority over all his followers, both men and women. So long as Noyes's male and female followers unquestioningly acknowledged his paternalistic, God-like authority, he was prepared to be flexible in delegating that authority and making major changes in the interests of both sexes.²⁴ No one way of

control, see George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community* (Oneida 1931); Parker, *A Yankee Saint*; Carden, *Oneida*; and Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*.

²³ Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, Carden, *Oneida*, Kern, *An Ordered Love*, and Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, discuss the ways in which sex roles and daily activities were modified at Oneida. Even Dalsimer, "Women and the Family in the Oneida Community," 242-277, almost unwillingly shows that significant modifications were made in women's work at Oneida. Although a tendency eventually developed for individuals to return to more sex-stereotyped occupational roles, there were almost no formal institutional blocks to individuals pursuing any activities in which they were genuinely interested. As examples, some women worked in the machine shop while men often knitted in public meetings. Both sexes worked together and were repeatedly shifted from job to job so that they would not get into a rut. These changes were not accidental, but were supported by the explicit ideological rationale that was presented in the "Bible Argument" and other sources. Joseph Kirschner, "Women and the Communal Experience: The Oneida Community, 1849-1877" (prepublication draft of a paper, dated June 6, 1979, read through the courtesy of the author), further supports the conclusion that women at Oneida had greater occupational flexibility and chances for personal fulfillment than in the outer society. This analysis is one of the few recent studies based on extensive access to surviving manuscript materials.

²⁴ The overriding concern that Noyes had with his own personal authority and control is stressed in *Spiritual Magazine*, July 11, 1842, 57-59; and by G. W. Noyes, *Putney Community*, 25-33. I am grateful to Robert Thomas for pointing out to me the way in which Noyes logically extended this approach to relations between the sexes. Also see Thomas' observations in his *The Man Who Would Be*

organizing relations between the sexes was sacrosanct; the underlying spirit rather than any specific external forms was Noyes's concern.²⁵ In effect, therefore, both men and women at Oneida shared a common personal and religious commitment which radically undercut normal social restrictions. Woman's primary responsibility was not to her husband or to her children, but to God — and all souls were ultimately equal before God.²⁶ While it was true that St. Paul had said that wives should be subject to their husbands in this life, he had also said that there is "neither male nor female in the Lord."²⁷ Since the Oneida Community was attempting to realize a heavenly pattern on earth, the conventional juxtaposition of male superiority and female inferiority no longer had much significance for them. If some women were, in fact, spiritually superior to some men — as they recognizably were — then they should exercise more authority at Oneida than *those men*.

Perfect, and Richard DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Sexual Order* (New York 1978).

²⁵ A concern for the spirit not the letter of the law, faith not works, underlay Noyes's conversion to Perfectionism in 1834 and his entire subsequent career. This approach was most eloquently affirmed in 1852 when the Community temporarily discontinued complex marriage, declaring: "WE ARE NOT ATTACHED TO FORMS: and in no way could we express this victory so well as by our present movement. To substitute for the fashions of the world, cast-iron fashions of our own, would be no gain. To be able to conform to *any* circumstances, and *any* form of institutions and still preserve spiritual freedom, is Paul's standard and what we now claim." *Circular*, March 7, 1852, 66.

²⁶ "Woman's Slavery to Children," *Spiritual Magazine*, September 15, 1846, 109-110.

²⁷ Noyes's chief hero was St. Paul, but Noyes always followed the *spirit* of Paul's concerns rather than narrowly adopting particular *practices* that Paul had advocated in response to a particular time and context. In general, Noyes tended to interpret away Paul's more restrictive statements about women and emphasize instead his underlying flexibility of approach — that in Christ there was neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, man nor woman. For instance, see "Marriage Nailed to the Cross," *Witness*, December 10, 1841, 76-77. DeMaria notes that confusion arises in understanding Noyes's attitudes toward male/female power relationships because Noyes used the terms "male" and "female" in two different senses. On the one hand, humanity is divided into two sexes, male and female. On the other hand, every individual human being reflects both the active "male" principle and the receptive "female" principle. To be healthy, Noyes argued, was to achieve a balance within each individual between these two polarities. For an analysis of Noyes's argument for androgyny as the ultimate ideal, see DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida*, 96-103.

Thus, instead of stressing gender as the basis for authority at Oneida, life in the community gradually came to be governed by a philosophy of "ascending and descending fellowship," in which those of higher "spirituality" exercised more authority than those of lesser attainments. Noyes was at the top, along with a handful of the most spiritual men who oversaw most major decisions. These men cooperated closely with the most spiritual women, who in turn were above the less spiritual men, who were above the less spiritual women, and so forth. Since those who were seen as more spiritual generally were older than the less spiritual, there was an implicit age factor operating in determining community status. Because it was considered desirable to associate with those higher in the ascending fellowship, higher status individuals had access to a larger range of sexual contacts than did lower status members. Children appear to have entered into this hierarchy of ascending and descending fellowship at puberty and sexual initiation, and at least during their teens and twenties they were expected to associate sexually with older, more spiritual men and women.²⁸ "In these and other ways, authority relations between men and women were restructured at Oneida."

Even though Noyes may have succeeded in resolving problems that he and his followers faced by setting up an experimental community, the question still remains whether his activities had anything to say to the larger society and its concerns. Was the Oneida Community simply a "utopian retreat," a way of avoiding serious consideration of the complex problems of American society?²⁹ Noyes did not think so. In the first place, he was a com-

²⁸ The best secondary accounts of the system of ascending and descending fellowship are found in Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, Carden, *Oneida*, and DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida*. Noyes himself usually discussed this informal system obliquely, even while recognizing that it underlay the entire structure of Community government. For instance, see *Mutual Criticism*; "Socialism in Two Directions," *Circular*, April 29, 1854, 250; "Home Talk #24," *Circular*, September 19, 1854, 496; and Alfred Barron and George Noyes Miller, eds., *Home-talks by John Humphrey Noyes* (Oneida 1875).

²⁹ For a powerful presentation of this point of view, which sees not only the communitarian movement, but also the Victorian concern with the family, as a way of avoiding direct confrontation with pressing social issues, see Kirk Jeffrey, "The Family as a Utopian Retreat from the City: The Nineteenth Century Contribution," in Sallie Te Selle, ed., *The Family, Communes and Utopian Societies* (New York 1972), 21-41. Much of the literature on Victorian family ideals stresses

munitarian reformer, who viewed his efforts as a sort of pilot project which might provide a model for the regeneration of the larger society. "Great oaks from little acorns grow," and similarly a relatively small community like Oneida could well have an influence far larger than its size might indicate.³⁰ Moreover, even when Noyes began to realize that his specific community model would never be accepted by American society, he still felt that the *philosophy* underlying his approach to social change was the best one. Difficult social issues should be solved by cooperative means — by finding a synthesis that would serve the interests of all groups — rather than by seeking to further polarize class, sex, or political factions against each other. Although he recognized that both an inner change of attitude and an outer change of institutions were essential for successful reform, Noyes felt that a change of attitude, a restoration of mutual confidence in the basic good will of all parties must come first.³¹

Noyes reached out to the world with these ideas by means of his newspapers, which he viewed as even more important than his communal efforts. From his conversion to perfectionism in 1834 until his formal retirement as head of the Oneida Community in 1877, he was almost continually involved in publishing his views to the world. During the troubled early days at Oneida, Noyes

this sort of approach. For one of the classic statements, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151-174.

³⁰ Noyes did not accept the idea that his communities were "utopian" in the sense of engaging in impractical withdrawal from the larger society; in fact, he criticized other groups for many of the "utopian" characteristics which have commonly been imputed to his own efforts. For the best secondary account of the communitarian approach to social reform adopted by men like Noyes, and the reasons why it was so popular in the antebellum period, see Arthur E. Bestor, "Patent-Office Models of the Good Society: Some Relationships Between Social Reform and Westward Expansion," *American Historical Review*, 43 (April 1953), 505-526. Consider also the parallels between the philosophy of the nineteenth century communitarians and the New England Puritans who withdrew from English society — temporarily they thought — to set up an ideal Bible Commonwealth which they expected would eventually be reintroduced into England.

³¹ This viewpoint is most clearly articulated in Noyes's *History of American Socialisms*, 26, where he argues that the two great efforts at social reconstruction in the antebellum period came, on the one hand, from the religious revivalists, whose great idea was "the regeneration of the soul," and, on the other hand, from the secular associationists, whose great complementary idea was "the regeneration of society, which is the soul's environment."

made it clear that if he were forced to sacrifice either his newspaper or his community, he would sacrifice the latter so that he could continue to issue his paper.³² And when he finally gave up direct control over Oneida, Noyes chose to continue as editor of his all-important newspaper. Noyes always retained an avid and well-informed interest in the events of the outer world. He commented shrewdly and incisively on the many pressing issues of his day, including the woman's rights movement. The following paragraphs suggest how Noyes's overall approach to social reform was reflected in his attitudes toward antebellum feminism.

Two main points should be stressed about Noyes's response to the contemporary woman's rights movement. In the first place, Noyes was genuinely sympathetic to many of the basic goals of antebellum feminists. He not only agreed that relations between the sexes were out of joint, but he also felt that a major reason for that disruption was the restricted role assigned to women. As a former abolitionist with ties to William Lloyd Garrison, he explicitly compared a woman's status to that of a slave and used other language as vivid as that of the most militant feminists. Woman's rights concerns and activities, both before and after Seneca Falls, were reported in an essentially sympathetic fashion in his newspapers.³³ Such writing was more than mere rhetoric unsupported

³² The primary importance that the press had for Noyes has only recently begun to be realized by men such as Robert Fogarty. See his "Oneida: A Utopian Search for Religious Security," *Labor History*, 14 (Spring 1973), 202-227. For some of Noyes's statements on the extraordinary importance that the press had for him, see "Association," *Spiritual Magazine*, March 15, 1846, 6; and "Brooklyn and Oneida," *Circular*, November 23, 1851, 6. Over the course of its existence, the Oneida Community continued to pour thousands of dollars into its newspapers — which never came close to breaking even — because of the importance that it attached to getting out its ideas to the world.

³³ Although Noyes was sympathetic toward many of the concerns of activist women of his time, he typically did not devote much space in his newspapers to the feminist movement as such. When he did mention the antebellum woman's movement directly, it was usually as an informational item with appended comments. One noteworthy exception to this pattern was the entire issue of the *Free Church Circular* for December 2, 1850, which was devoted to woman's rights. For the idea that married women's status was similar to that of a slave, see *Slavery and Marriage; Bible Communism*, 123-128; and "Women and Slaves," *Circular*, December 17, 1853, 23. The important linkage between Noyes and Garrison is analyzed in John L. Thomas, *The Liberator: William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston 1963), 228-232. For the broader context of Noyes's attitudes toward women, see the *Spiritual Moralizer* for June 13 and June 25, 1842.

by action. Noyes saw himself as a figure with a mission to free women (as well as men) from servitude to stereotyped behaviors and attitudes, and he made specific and often highly controversial changes at every level of community life to end discrimination against women, encourage their participation, and reestablish harmonious relations between the sexes.

Yet while Noyes was in general agreement with much of the feminist diagnosis of the illness affecting relations between men and women, he was in sharp disagreement with its prescription for its cure. Feminist stridency and emphasis on conflict between the sexes as a method of social change particularly repelled him and his followers. A note in the community newspaper in 1850, for example, mentioned a woman's rights convention in Ohio at which Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke and compared married women's legal status to that of slaves. The paper editorialized: "There is an oblique pointing at the truth in this statement, but it is far from probing the real depths of the case. . . . What is really wanted is to be able to live under the government of God, to establish mutually satisfying relations between the sexes."³⁴ Elsewhere, in an article entitled "Woman-Suppression," Noyes made clear that he was as strongly opposed to the current legal restrictions on women as any feminist: "Woman needs surely to be emancipated — to be permitted to stand up as a responsible individual in society; and any statute or institution that denies this privilege cannot long stand before the scrutiny of the age."³⁵ The point was to achieve the necessary and desirable changes in the right manner, one which would contribute to restoring harmonious relations between all parties involved in the conflict.

Like conservatives such as Catherine Beecher who helped to articulate and establish the Victorian synthesis, with its emphasis on the family, domesticity, and women's power in the home sphere, Noyes felt that the whole social order was threatening to

³⁴ This line of argument is repeated on numerous occasions. A classic statement is that of Susan C. Hamilton, English-born convert to Noyes's perfectionism, in "Communism, Woman's Best Friend," *Circular*, March 18, 1854, 180.

³⁵ "Woman-Suppression," *Circular*, May 27, 1854, 298. This optimistic tone is also characteristic of many of Noyes's other statements on this topic. Noyes's chief reservations about antebellum feminists related to means, not ends. He was also disturbed by feminists such as the Grimké sisters who attacked St. Paul, his personal hero and model. See "Semi-Infidelity Among Reformers," *Perfectionist*, June 1, 1843, 30.

come apart. New and more satisfying roles for men and women must be established, but this should be done in such a way that the divisiveness and conflict which were already so rampant in society could be minimized. Noyes achieved such a new synthesis for himself and his followers by creating a communal family at Oneida. The larger society, in the meantime, achieved much the same effect by making use of the nuclear family in conjunction with larger institutional agencies for social control such as churches, schools, and asylums. The specifics of their programs might differ, but in a curious way both Noyes and the larger Victorian society were alike in seeking to use essentially conservative means to achieve ways of life that differed greatly from those which had come before.³⁶

Thus, although John Humphrey Noyes chose an unorthodox *form* for his new social order, the *methods* that he used had much in common with those of the larger society. Any functioning social order, Noyes declared, must seek to maintain a harmonious balance between “the two great principles of human existence” — “solidarity,” on the one hand, and “liberty,” on the other. Though at times these principles may appear antagonistic, “like the centripetal and centrifugal forces in nature,” they are, in fact, “designed to act upon human life in equilibrium.”³⁷ Put another way, a period of rapid social change leads to centrifugal tendencies — complaints and cries for reform by crusading minorities — yet, in a healthy society, such “useful fanatics” (as one writer recently described them) eventually find their main ideas absorbed and

³⁶ For a suggestion of the striking similarities between Noyes’s approach and that of conservatives such as Catherine Beecher, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven 1973), especially 151-167. Also highly suggestive for this paper were Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago 1964); John Higham, *From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1848-1860* (Ann Arbor 1969); and David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston 1971). A discussion of how sharply Victorian Americans differed from their predecessors in sexual attitudes and practices is found in John S. Haller, Jr. and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana 1974), and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, Conn. 1980). For a provocative analysis of male sexual attitudes, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York 1976).

³⁷ “The Liberty of Union,” *Circular*, January 4, 1852, 86.

integrated into a new social and intellectual consensus.³⁸ Depending on the sensitivity and skill of the leadership, fundamental social change thus can sometimes be achieved — either in small-scale communities or in the larger society — by individuals like Noyes who consider themselves essentially conservative.

What, then, was the larger significance of Noyes's effort to reorganize male and female sex roles at Oneida? To what extent did he succeed in embodying his ideals in practice? The problem with many recent feminist attempts to address these questions has not been due primarily to any lack of factual information, but rather to ambivalence among feminists about what, in fact, they really want. Is contemporary "liberation" for women to be achieved by women simply taking on the same roles and activities as men? Or does such "liberation" primarily involve freeing women to choose whatever they really want to do, including, in some cases, assume domestic roles? Or is "liberation" to be based on other criteria which either combine or go beyond these? Until feminists can consciously and consistently address such questions, any attempt to evaluate how successful Oneida was from a feminist perspective will continue to be ultimately unconvincing.

Perhaps the greatest value of Oneida for contemporary feminists is that it raises and highlights such difficult questions, without providing any definitive answers to them. For more than thirty years at Oneida, John Humphrey Noyes and his followers struggled with complex issues of social organization, not simply in theory but also in practice. Attempts were made to modify extremely deep-seated sexual attitudes and behavior patterns, and important (if ultimately temporary) changes did occur in the relations between men and women. On the other hand, Noyes and his followers certainly did not achieve an egalitarian millennium (nor was that their intention). Those historians who would treat the Oneida experiment as a "failure" simply because it did not achieve absolute perfection (in whatever sense perfection is being judged) are unrealistic in their expectations and in their understanding of the way in which social change takes place. Noyes was a doer as well as a thinker. He sought, as much as possible, to approximate his ideal community, but he was also aware of the limitations and

³⁸ Garry Wills, "Feminists and Other Useful Fanatics: The Politics of Crazy Jane," *Harper's*, June 1976, 35-42.

strengths of the human beings with whom he was working.

In conclusion, therefore, a full understanding of John Humphrey Noyes's attitudes toward women and the woman's movement must place those views within the larger context of his overall concerns for social order and the effective change of social institutions. Restoring right relations between the sexes was an important goal for Noyes, but it was always subsidiary to his broader concerns for achieving religious and social revitalization.³⁹ Perhaps Noyes's evaluation of his mission as that of a true conservative seeking fundamental social change may serve as a fitting summary of the significance of his work. He wrote:

The truth is, all present institutions are growths from an imperfect society and are adapted only to a transition state. This is true of religious as well as political institutions, marriage as well as slavery. The spirit of heaven in order to fulfill its full development in this world requires that we be ready to foresake all institutions adapted to the selfish state of society, and to expect something new and better. A truly conservative man therefore will be ready for change. He will not violently or unwisely attack any present institutions, but he will be ready and on the lookout for change.⁴⁰

John Humphrey Noyes, his communities, and his philosophy deserve the kind of serious scholarly attention that they have only recently begun to receive.

³⁹ It is worthy of note that in the final analysis even the Marxian socialists, who talked at greatest length about the "woman question" and who made the greatest protestations of their concern to "liberate" women, placed the first priority on their larger goal of radically changing the economic system. Only then would exploitative relations between the sexes cease. Noyes, in like measure, placed his primary stress on reestablishing common religious value premises. Only then did he feel that a true reconciliation of the sexes would be possible.

⁴⁰ "Liberty to Change," *Circular*, August 8, 1854, 422. The leading scholarly proponent of Noyes's basic conservative impulses is Robert Fogarty. See his "The Oneida Community, 1848-1880: A Study in Conservative Christian Utopianism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1968). Noyes himself repeatedly argued that he was a true conservative. By this he meant that he sought to reestablish a new order which would meet fundamental human needs and embody the best principles of the past in forms which were appropriate to the present. In specific terms, he sought to reestablish an organic community in which the good of all would be primary to, but also encompass, the good of the individual.