

The Oneida Community Family

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THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY began during the 1830s in Putney, Vermont, at the homeplace of its founder and patriarch, John Humphrey Noyes (1811-96). At Putney Noyes converted his two sisters and younger brother, their spouses, and, eventually, a handful of neighbors to his vision of a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. The name of his radical religious theology was "Christian Perfectionism." Noyes developed his theology out of an intensely painful, personal search, and within the context of zealous revivalism, millennialism, and reform fervor characteristic of the period.

Following closely the biblical tale of human estrangement in the book of Genesis, Noyes reasoned that once believers entered into a state of perfection, they could reverse the human degradation suffered in the Garden and repair their rupture with God. Perfectionist believers would undergo, first, a reconciliation with God, and, second, a return to a state of heterosexual ecstasy, free from shame and exclusivity. They, would experience labor as joyful and sportive. Women would be delivered from the sufferings of too-frequent childbearing. Finally, believers would triumph (at least metaphorically) over death itself. Noyes attempted to institutionalize each of these Perfectionist steps into the actual practice of his holy family.¹

After almost a decade in Putney, the members of the Community

(Note: This article is adapted from an oral presentation delivered at the President's Symposium, Plenary Session, of the annual meeting of the Communal Studies Association, October 1994. No attempt has been made to give a comprehensive analysis of family in the Oneida Community. Rather, the purpose of the article is to suggest some new perspectives on the subject and to give recognition to recent scholarship on the Oneida Community.)

1. Oneida Association, *Bible Communism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Office of the *Circular*, 1853), 1-35.

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(twenty-one adults and ten children) migrated to Oneida, New York, carrying with them all of the core practices and institutions which they had slowly developed at Putney: a sharing of work and income; the practice of "complex marriage" and "male continence;" and communal childrearing. From 1848 to 1881 this core of believers built a remarkably cohesive and successful community which numbered almost three hundred people at its peak. Throughout its history the Oneida Community bore the ideological stamp of its unique and extraordinary leader, John Humphrey Noyes. When declining health and old age forced Noyes to retire from active management of the Community, it rapidly fell apart.

This article will concentrate on several aspects of family life as practiced at the Oneida Community: 1) Noyes's religious vision of the ideal communal family, including the practices of complex marriage and communal childrearing; 2) the persistence of traditional familialism; and 3), the patriarchal qualities of the Oneida Community family.

Noyes's Religious Vision of Family: Complex Marriage and Communal Childrearing

Central to an acceptance of Noyes's vision of the biblical, communal family was his insistence that all true believers love each other equally. They were exhorted to enlarge their feelings of love and loyalty from a small, traditional family unit to include several hundred family members. Once a system of birth control unique to the Oneida Community was developed (called "male continence" and actually a system of *coitus reservatus*), Community adults began the practice of complex marriage. John Humphrey Noyes initiated girls into sex, exercising the seigniorial right; thereafter girls had sexual relations with older men. Teenage boys began sexual experience with post-menopausal women until they learned to control ejaculation. Only after mastering male continence could young men encounter young women, all probably in their mid-twenties; they engaged in "horizontal fellowship" (meaning social and sexual relations within one's peer- or age-cohort).

Of the superiority of the collective family, Noyes was always certain. He took pleasure in pointing out that marriage and lonely old age decimated ordinary nuclear families, whereas in a holy community like Oneida one could enjoy a "perennial fount of childhood" and a constant sympathy of the generations which could "bid old age begone."² The Oneida communards were proud to boast in 1873 that

2. *Oneida Circular* (31 December 1866).

four biological families spanning four generations and ten families spanning three generations lived together in the Mansion House. One child had twenty-one blood relatives in the Community.³ An ailing eighty-six year old woman rejoiced at the birth of her great-granddaughter: "Dear little one! She is a new bud on an aged tree. I am eighty-six years and she is eight weeks, but we live under the same roof and belong to the same great family circle."⁴

The Oneida Communists stoutly defended themselves from critics who charged that they were "home-breakers." One woman wrote that "family groups [in the Community] can see each other daily; can love and serve one another in sickness and in health, and if faithful to Communism, may expect to live together, as the marriage service saith, 'till death do them part.' Where in the world can be found such unbroken families as here?"⁵ Many of these examples from Oneida Community writings illustrate the simultaneous recognition of both the nuclear and the communal family. In addition to these advantages of communal family living, some members noted the opportunities that childless persons had to express love and affection toward the children of others.

Noyes's most imaginative argument for communism of family was that human society already practiced communism on a small scale by uniting in marriage two unrelated persons and their children. He argued that communism with non-relatives was "the strongest proclivity in adult life," and that it was the Oneidans' mission to enlarge this concept of family in the "spirit of progress and of the Pentecost." To allow "science and inspiration" to organize the family under communism was, therefore, but "returning home," not by the one-horse carriage but by the "great railroad-train that carries a meeting house-full."⁶

As radical as the system of complex marriage was, in some ways the communal childrearing of the Oneida family was more unusual. Until the eugenics experiment of the last decade of the Community, the birth rate in the Oneida family was quite low. Mothers raised their babies until weaning and then relinquished them to communal child care where different sets of adults were responsible for the physical, educational, and spiritual care, respectively, of the children. Particularly in an age where middle-class white women were celebrated as "queens of the home" and as the guardians of children's moral

3. Ibid. (21 February 1870).

4. Ibid. (18 August 1873).

5. Ibid. (21 February 1870).

6. Alfred Barron and George Noyes Miller, eds., *Home-Talks by John Humphrey Noyes* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1875), 1: 282-83.

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development, it must have been painful for Oneida women to give up this consolation prize in an essentially male-dominated world. Judging from Community literature, mothers had considerable difficulty handing over their children to communal care; they were often criticized for "philoprogenitiveness," the Community term for sickly maternal attachment.⁷ There is less evidence that the children themselves suffered from this early separation from their mothers, although a recent anthropometric examination of these "stirpicult" children born in the 1870s (made possible by excellent recordkeeping of this birth cohort) suggests that these children did suffer a "failure to thrive" syndrome in the months after being placed in the children's house, away from their mothers' care.⁸

Even though John Humphrey Noyes and his followers were very self-conscious of their mission to the world—to usher in the New Eden—and of the necessity of transferring their vision to the succeeding generation, the Bible Communists at Oneida never sentimentalized or exalted children and childhood. Rather, children were valued because they would one day become adults and carry on their parents' spiritual legacy. One Community statement of "general principles" regarding the relationship of parents to children declared that love between adult men and women was a "superior passion" to love between adults and children. Parents "should not look so much to their children, as to the object of *pleasing God*."⁹

Some commentators have remarked that it is curious that such an intensely religious tribe never held distinct worship services in the Community. This is an important point to clarify. According to Noyes's theory, *everything the family did was worship*: work, sex, recreation, art, education, science, business, etc. There was allegedly no division between the religious and secular in the Oneida family's activities, and, therefore, there was no need for specific worship services. Further, Noyes's biographer, Robert Allerton Parker, has argued that sexual relations (i.e., complex marriage) constituted the central religious sacrament of the Community. According to Community literature,

7. Marlyn Klee-Hartzell, "Family Love, True Womanliness, Motherhood, and the Socialization of Girls in the Oneida Community, 1848-1880," in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*, eds. Wendy E. Chmielewski, Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 185-89.

8. John E. Murray, "A New Anthropometric Look at the Status of Women and Children in Oneida Community, 1848-1881," in *The Biological Standard of Living on Three Continents: Further Explorations in Anthropometric History*, ed. John Komlos (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 105-22.

9. *Oneida Circular* (29 January 1863).

"here the Church is the family, and the family is the Church, and the child that is born into the family is born into the Church" ¹⁰

Actually, this professed doctrine tended to obscure the fact that many members, even some among the original "joiners," developed enthusiasms for other things like business and science, and so, for some, the strictly religious inspiration of the Community yielded to the practical requirements of building a communal life. By the time the second generation came along, the Community was prosperous but the young people seemed less devoted to Mr. Noyes's principles than their parents had been.

Traditional Familialism

The belief that all Oneida Community members were brothers and sisters to each other in Christian faith and that they should love each other equally was the ideological bedrock of Noyes's holy family. Yet surprisingly, members were permitted to acknowledge and sometimes even to celebrate their traditional nuclear family ties. For example, women who were already married when they entered the Community (and who, upon membership, theoretically became the "wives" of all Community men) nevertheless continued to be called "Mrs. _____ (husband's surname)" by both adults and children in the Community. If two people were granted permission to conceive a child together, after its birth they presented the child to the Community in a christening ceremony. The parents also named the child. These practices certainly gave recognition to the biological parents.

Noyes never sought to suppress completely the familial ties of husband and wife, children and parents, aunts, uncles, etc. Indeed, one can make a good case that the biological family was extremely important to the Oneida Community's existence, because the Noyes family dominated the Community from start to finish. John Humphrey Noyes was very fortunate to have been able to convert his brother and sisters and their spouses into loyal devotion to his vision of a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. He relied on this initial core of converts to lay the foundation for the Community. Throughout the Community's existence his immediate family members held positions of leadership and authority. Without their considerable support and talents, it is doubtful if he could have been successful. The second generation born to the four Noyes siblings completed their near monopoly of Oneida Community power and influence.

Furthermore, Oneida Community members were encouraged to

10. Ibid. (7 August 1865).

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admire the superior qualities of the Noyes family members. When the Community undertook the scientific breeding (stirpiculture) experiment, it was understood that the extended Noyes family members would figure prominently among the approved mothers and fathers of the stirpicults. Noyes himself fathered nine stirpicults and his grown son, Theodore, sired three. Given the prominence Noyes allocated to his own family in the Oneida Community, it would have been counterproductive for him to have attempted to stamp out a recognition of the biological family. He relied on his own family's pride, solidarity, and alleged spiritual superiority to help him secure authority and obedience from his followers.

Other family constellations were also acknowledged in the Community, especially if there was trouble with one recalcitrant member. For example, Harriet Worden, an exceptionally capable and intelligent younger woman with "woman's rights" sympathies,¹¹ was often criticized by the Community for her "Cook spirit," Cook being her mother's family name. (Apparently the term "Cook spirit" was shorthand for "independent thinking.") Worden's mother could not defend herself from this criticism, because she had died before her widowed husband and young daughters joined the Community! In another instance, the Hawley family was called together to try to deal with one of its own, Victor Hawley, who persisted in clinging to a special, exclusive relationship with his beloved during the stirpiculture experiment.¹² These are but two examples of how familial ties and traits could get people into trouble in the Oneida Community.

It is striking to note the extent to which a recognition of the nuclear family persisted throughout the Oneida Community's history. In the last decade of its existence, as the communal fabric began to unravel, Community members staged mock weddings and younger members competed to get permission to have stirpicult children with their secret, favored lovers. Eventually, some young women refused to have sex with men, and expressed their desire for monogamous marriages and nuclear families. Although the communal family was the ideal at Oneida, the reality fell far short.

The Patriarchal Qualities of the Oneida Community

Scholars and descendants of the Oneida Community have long debated the substance of power relations in Noyes's communal family.

11. Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1993), 135.

12. Robert S. Fogarty, *Special Love /Special Sex: An Oneida Diary* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

Oneida can be considered an excellent example of a patriarchal community. Patriarchy describes a set of hierarchial social and power relationships in which older people control younger people, men dominate women, and elder brothers have sway over younger brothers. The Oneida Community qualifies as a patriarchy on all three grounds.

Certainly, members of the older generation at Oneida strictly regulated the younger generation for as long as they could. The elders dictated, for example, the content of their spiritual and secular education, supervised their work, and held tightly to the reins of ideological power. The grownups also kept the sexual and social desires of the young in check, and required the young to partner sexually only with older members for about the first decade of sexual activity. A mentor to the girls who were approaching initiation into complex marriage explained: "We are all brothers and sisters, and the wiser [older] ones lead the less wise [younger] through 'Ascending Fellowship' into love."¹³ Many commentators argue that this system was especially ingenuous, as it guaranteed the middle-aged and older folks a steady supply of lovers.

Oneida men exerted power over women in several ways. First, by explicit Community ideology, adult men were more spiritually developed than women and, therefore, men were in the ascendant position in any relationship, including sexual ones. In fact, this rationale was used to justify male initiatives in proposing sex. It can be argued that the Community systems of complex marriage and male continence were successful attempts by men to organize and contain female sexuality and women's reproductive powers. In addition, the Oneida Community maintained a conventional, domestic system of women's labor that kept women focused on men and men's needs, rather than on children's needs or on the needs of women themselves. This last characteristic placed the Community at odds with the "Cult of True Womanliness" of nineteenth-century, white, middle-class Americans. Whereas their female counterparts in the "outside world" were gaining *more* power over their children and over men's sexual expression, women at Oneida were unable to exercise much power in either domain.

Scholars have argued that women had considerable informal power at Oneida, or that at the very least Oneida women were fortunate because they were protected from repeated childbirth and had much opportunity for prolonged and presumably orgasmic heterosexual relations. These points may be doubted. For the record, it

13. Jane Kinsley Rich, ed., *A Lasting Spring: Jessie Catherine Kinsley, Daughter of the Oneida Community* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 32-40.

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appears that Oneida women had *fewer* children than they wanted. They wanted to be mothers and to have mainstream maternal experiences. As for the fulfillment of female sexuality, how can it be known what Oneida women might have chosen for their sexual experiences, had they been able to choose? The point is, they were not able to do so. Therefore, it may be concluded that John Humphrey Noyes deliberately crafted the Oneida Community to embody patriarchal power. At the same time it can be granted that this was not the worst of all possible worlds for women. The Oneida family clearly offered women some advantages (such as lighter work days and more leisure and educational experiences), which most of them said they appreciated.

Conclusions

The historical record of the Oneida Community family shows a mixture of both the biological and the transcendent religious family, co-existing side-by-side and sometimes in contradiction to each other. Although Moyes argued persuasively for his vision of a holy communal family, when it suited his purposes he could also praise the biological family (particularly his own) or punish people for their alleged familial tendencies. When the Community broke up in January 1881, husbands and wives reunited in conventional marriage, and many other couples tied the knot. Some children were adopted by new stepfathers, and some women, including the mothers, remained unmarried, whether by choice or by necessity.

The more one examines the Community experience and the new materials which descendants have donated to the Syracuse University Library, the more one is impressed with the extent to which traditional familial assumptions persisted at Oneida. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that Noyes institutionalized social and sexual systems at the Community that enhanced patriarchal power, at the same time that patriarchy was undergoing challenges in the outside world.

One might even suggest that the Oneida Community itself was an attempt by John Humphrey Noyes to shore up the vanishing world of his forefathers, and to preserve the patriarchal power of an essentially agricultural, small-town, Protestant culture in which men like himself could be undisputed leaders in both the family and in the wider society. Despite his talents and conviction, however, Noyes failed to make his communal family permanent beyond his own lifetime.