

# The Status and Self-Perception of Women in the Oneida Community

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## *John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community: Introduction*

IN 1848 JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES led some 45 religious followers to Oneida, New York and, over the next thirty-three years, this small band, along with other recruits who soon brought the community's membership to over two hundred adults, created one of the most famous and successful socialist experiments in American history. The Oneida Community was based upon two key doctrines articulated by Noyes: "Bible Communism," an attempt to recover the spirit of early Christian community in which "all who believed were one," and the Perfectionist belief that people could become "perfect followers of Christ." In pursuit of its Utopian ends, the Community not only collectivized all property but attempted to eradicate the possessive spirit of traditional monogamous marriage by ushering in a controversial system of "complex marriage" between men and women.

These very same practices, however, have made the Oneida Community the subject of countless scholarly analyses over the past several decades. Perhaps nowhere has this scholarship been more evident than in the broad area of women's studies, where the singular position of women within the Community has piqued the interest of researchers. The areas of community life that had particular bearing on the position and potential liberation of women were those involving complex marriage, "ascending" and "descending" fellowship, and the community practice of selective breeding ("stirpiculture"). Under complex marriage, whose goal was to effect a more complete unity of all God's children, theoretically any man and woman could engage in sexual relations. However, the reality was not the free love state it would seem to suggest. Men initiated

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all sexual encounters, going through an older Community woman or "mediator" who would approach the requested woman, and return with her answer. This system served a double purpose: first, it allowed a woman to decline without embarrassment, and secondly, it allowed the Community to keep track of the relations of its members. If any one couple showed a special preference for one another, or "special love" as they termed it, they were severely reprimanded and separated. In the breaking up of special love relations, the Community's major system of government—"mutual criticism"—was instrumental. All members were required to submit to criticism, in which a team of elders critiqued the person's character, detailing both faults and virtues. Though extremely humbling, the criticism was always taken to heart and seen as vital for attainment of perfection.

Also central to the ordering of interpersonal relations was the Community's theory of a spiritual "Ascending Fellowship." Under this doctrine, members were loosely ranked in order of increasing spirituality or "purity," with Noyes at the top of the hierarchy. In sexual relations, one was always to associate with one's spiritual superiors, thus moving in an "ascending" direction. This, of course, meant that some would have to associate in the descending direction, but this task was taken on by members deemed strong or spiritual enough to do so without endangering their own spirituality.

While Noyes believed in the ultimate attainment of perfection for all humans, in which an "ascending and descending" order would be made obsolete, his followers had not yet attained that state. Far from being spiritually equal, Oneidans occupied varying levels of spirituality. While some stood near the top of the spiritual ladder, others, in need of much more improvement and refinement, were still on the bottom rungs. Noyes firmly believed that qualities of spirit or levels of perfection were genetically transmitted. To hurry along the perfection of the human condition, Noyes thus initiated a type of eugenics, entitled "stirpiculture," in which the most spiritual men and women were chosen to reproduce. The economic instability of the Community in the early years militated against members having children and led them to adopt a surprisingly effective method of birth control Noyes termed "male continence" (*coitus reservatus*). Once the Community had securely established itself, however, the careful selection process of potential parents began. A total of 58 stirpicultural children were born to Community couples during the period of 1869-1878. In keeping with their injunction against exclusive, "selfish" attachments, children did not remain with their parents but were raised communally soon after being weaned. Excessive mother-child attachment—"philoprogenitive love"—was especially distasteful to the communists, and transgressors faced sharp criticism.

*The Nature of the Study*

I wish to add two dimensions to previous studies done about women in the Oneida Community. First, I believe that researchers who have tried to assess the degree of emancipation women enjoyed have employed an unconsciously masculine definition of the term. Their construction of the "liberated human being" rests upon traditions so engrained in Western thought that they are no longer visible as biases; the nature of "liberation" is not seriously questioned or critiqued. For example, in his book *An Ordered Love*, Louis J. Kern astutely suggests that we suspend our own values and prejudices in determining the "success" of these communities:

We must not apply modern standards external to them. We must ask not whether they were successful in our terms, but whether in their own terms they provided individuals a choice, an alternative organization to the common value heritage of their culture.<sup>1</sup>

And yet even Kern seems to have accepted at face value the conception of liberation which our society has inherited and built upon. Specifically, his analysis implies that human freedom depends upon the ability to separate, to individuate, to be freed from external constraints in forging a positive identity. According to a new feminist study conducted by Carol Gilligan, this almost reflexive equation of "development" or "maturity" with separation is a masculine conception and, as such, is culturally constructed. Gilligan writes:

[T]he conception of development ... depends on the contexts in which it is framed, and the vision of maturity can be seen to shift when adulthood is portrayed by women rather than men. While women construct the adult domain, the world of relationships emerges and becomes the focus of attention and concern.<sup>2</sup>

Considering personality development as it is linked to moral decision-making, Gilligan posits that women "impose a distinctive construction on moral problems" and notes "... the centrality of the concepts of responsibility and care in women's constructions of the moral domain...."<sup>3</sup> Women thus equate maturity and development, not with separation as males are wont to do, but rather with connection and relationship. Their conception of morality is not a separation-based "morality of rights," but a connection-based "morality of responsibility."

1. Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias —the Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 311.

2. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 167.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

The unique feminine construction of the moral, in turn, influences those situations and activities which women equate with power or strength. Referring to a study of power fantasies, Gilligan states that:

While men represent powerful activity as assertion and aggression, women in contrast portray acts of nurturance as acts of strength. Considering his [McClelland's] research on power to deal 'in particular with the characteristics of maturity/ he suggests that mature women and men may relate to the world in a different style.<sup>4</sup>

I recognize that I am employing the terms "liberation" and "emancipation" where Gilligan speaks of "morality" and "development," and that I am applying a contemporary theoretical model to a nineteenth-century social movement. However, the concepts of liberation and development, as they have been articulated by a broad range of authors, seem to me to be closely related, and I believe that theoretical models can be used in describing and helping us to understand historical phenomena even if the historical "fit" is not perfect. Thus my purpose is not to argue for the existence of an exclusively feminine morality or definition of liberation. Rather, using Gilligan's insights into the process of moral development, I hope to bring into clearer relief an aspect of Community experience which I feel has been undervalued by most commentators. As I will detail below, the structure of the Oneida Community and its emphasis on relationships and mutual responsibilities may have helped to liberate both men and women from the need to judge themselves by conventional masculine standards.

Secondly, I am utilizing several primary sources not previously considered by Oneida researchers, as they have not been open to the public. More specifically, I have examined letters between Beulah Hendee and Annie Hatch, letters between Beulah Hendee and her future husband Alfred Barron, and the journals of Tirzah C. Miller and Frank Wayland-Smith.<sup>5</sup> While Community ideology dictated how the Community should be organized, specifically regarding the proper relation

4. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

5. A brief biography of each of the Oneida members whose personal papers were used in this study will be helpful to the reader. Beulah Foster Hendee was born on February 18, 1847 and raised by an aunt, Candace Bushnell, until later adopted by the Hendee family. She was converted to Perfectionism and joined the Community in 1864 at the age of seventeen. She had one child in community, a daughter Dorothea, by John Humphrey Noyes. She married Alfred Barron at the break-up on December 7, 1879. Anna Maria Hatch was born on May 24, 1842, and joined the Community with her parents and three brothers in 1848 at the age of five. Annie had no community children and never married. Tirzah Crawford Miller, a niece of John Humphrey Noyes, was born on September 13, 1843, to John R. and Charlotte Noyes Miller. Her family was one of the original families forming the early Putney commune and moved along with Noyes to help found the Oneida Association in 1849. She had three children while in community and married James B.

of the sexes, the correlation between ideology and practice is often an imperfect one. These documents better indicate how, practically, Oneida women viewed themselves and their relations to men under Noyes' theology. Many other researchers have theorized about the probable way Oneida women viewed themselves, given the system under which they lived; in this study, I hope to illuminate how women—at least the three whom I studied—felt about their lives on a daily basis. One of the most important conclusions which came to light through the letters and journals, and which I believe has been obscured by the scrupulous attention paid to Noyes' official dogma, was the equal subjection of both men and women to the authority of Father Noyes.

*Different Voices: Carol Gilligan and John Humphrey Noyes*<sup>6</sup>

When we assess the degree of liberation enjoyed by Oneida women, we must recognize that the Community had begun to re-work the

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Herrick at the break-up in November 1879. The file of letters between Annie Hatch and Beulah Hendee, a total of 214, are concentrated mostly in a period of one year, between August of 1878 (when Annie left for Wallingford Community, Oneida's branch commune in Connecticut) and June of the following summer, 1879. In July and August of that year the correspondence begins to slow down, with only a handful of letters existing for 1880. In the period between 1881 and 1884, only a letter or two a year were written. The Hendee/Barron correspondence is concentrated in the 4-5 month period before their marriage at the break-up in December 1879 (July, 1879—December, 1879). Tirzah C. Miller's journal was kept from 1877 until 1880. Frank Wayland-Smith's journal was kept from 1877 until 1902. This and other biographical information is found in John Teeple, *The Oneida Family: Genealogy of a Nineteenth Century Perfectionist Commune*, (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community Historical Committee, 1985).

It should be remembered that the sources used in this study, especially the letters, deal most extensively with the period of the Community break-up, particularly the last year of complex marriage before its abandonment in August 1879. Fear and uncertainty about the future was certainly heightened for everyone, but the women, left to face a world which stigmatized them and their "bastard" children if the Community disintegrated, were especially vulnerable. In addition, the tension and infighting caused by ideological rifts in the Community may have prompted them to re-think and re-assess their lives; long-silent grievances may have emerged. In any case, the issues confronting women during this period certainly differed from those they would have faced had the letters been written during the struggling first years of the Community, or during the years of their greatest prosperity and religious cohesion. One must not, therefore, assume that these conclusions about women's self-perceptions could have been made at every point throughout the thirty-three years of the Community's life.

6. Carol Gilligan's research in the area of moral development has been an attempt to revise the mainstream theories of people such as Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg, since their writings seemed to project a masculine image. Her conclusions in *A Different Voice* were drawn from three major studies: 25 college students addressing a variety of moral choices; 29 women facing an abortion decision; and 144 men and women (matched for age,

traditional definition of freedom from the very beginning. Noyes made a strict distinction between what he called the "liberty of independence" and the "liberty of unity." The liberty of independence was "the liberty of an insect to fly off into darkness and isolation;... the liberty to be alone," whereas the liberty of unity was "the liberty of children of God to come into communism with him and one another—... the liberty that makes a happy home."<sup>7</sup> This second type of freedom, of which in American society Noyes noted "there is but little conception," is the vastly superior state, and one which we can achieve only by "all receiving Christ into our hearts, and each becoming, as he was, 'meek and lowly'<sup>7</sup> enough to live with others in peace and harmony."<sup>8</sup> When one has "his heart purged of all selfishness by Christ," then and only then will he realize perfect freedom.<sup>9</sup> Kern notes:

The very form of the societies [Oneida, the Shakers and the Mormons] and their emphasis on the closeness and durability of the social bond corresponded to a totally different conception of the self from that generally accepted in nineteenth-century America. The whole social mythology of the self-made man was... overturned...<sup>10</sup>

The concept of the self-made man, striving individualistically in the competitive capitalist world, was seen not only as an unsavory character, but as the absolute antithesis to a free man. In a strikingly Marxist vein, Noyes attacked the way society, with its separate, vigorously competing households had, under the guise of freedom, in truth imprisoned us: "Material pleasures, which should be means of holiness, become occasions of competition, envy, jealousy and pain when they are sought by men imbued with a sense of individualism and the consequent need to own and hoard the objects of pleasure."<sup>11</sup> For Noyes, egoism was

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education, and social class) who were asked to respond to a series of questions concerning rights and responsibilities. One must be cautious in drawing universal conclusions from

a small sample and, at the same time, in applying them to an earlier historical situation. However, Gilligan's delineation of a different feminine morality is derived from the generally accepted theory that a child's personality is largely formed by an early age, and it could be argued that key elements of child-rearing patterns (e.g., the mother's heavy responsibility in early child care) have remained broadly the same in the United States since the nineteenth century.

7. Alfred Barron and George Noyes Miller, eds., *Home Talks by John Humphrey Noyes* (Oneida, NY: Oneida Community, 1875), p. 347.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

10. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 295.

11. Richard DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property,*

*and Sexual Order* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979), p. 61.

analogous to traditional individualism; he taught that only by subverting egoism could humans hope to break their bonds and become free.

As Kern noted, "The self was not considered sufficient and competent to any substantial achievement alone, but found its value only in a social context."<sup>12</sup> A new conception of the ideal "self" as supremely self-sacrificing, as meek and lowly enough to live harmoniously in community, was held up by Noyes as a model of perfection to his followers. Traditional measures of achievement were stood on their head; self-denial was elevated as the supreme virtue, and one which required more strength than pursuing one's own individual goals: "It will be hard for people to imagine the amount of milling and refining a person has to undergo before he or she is willing to submit the planning of their social or sexual affairs to the good spirit."<sup>13</sup> What one must remember is where the Oneida communists deemed oppression to lie. For them, the greatest oppression of spirit came from strident individualism and the fatal, inevitable fracturing of harmony and community that resulted:

The grand distinction between the Christian and the unbeliever—between heaven and the world—is, that in one reigns the *we-spirit*, and in the other the *I-spirit*. From / comes *mine*, and from the *I-spirit* comes exclusive appropriation of money, women, etc. From *we* comes *ours* and from the *we-spirit* comes universal community of interests.<sup>14</sup>

In her study *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan argues that an ethic stressing harmony and community, such as that upheld at Oneida, is a distinctively feminine ethic. Referring to a study conducted by Nancy Chodorow, Gilligan argues that formation of gender identity for both sexes is completed by the age of three, and that the fundamentally different early childhood experiences for boys and girls will result in fundamentally different perspectives:

Because this early social environment differs for and is experienced differently by male and female children, basic sex differences recur in personality development. As a result, 'in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does.'<sup>15</sup>

Mothers see daughters as extensions of themselves; female children, then, are encouraged to maintain connection with the mother as a

12. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 295.

13. DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida*, p. 206.

14. Oneida Association, *Bible Communism: A Compilation from the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Branches. Presenting, In Connection with Their History, A Summary of Their Religious and Social Theories* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Office of the Circular, 1853. [New York: AMS Press, 1986]), p. 31. Emphasis in original.

15. Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, p. 7.

gender role model. Male children, by contrast, " 'in defining themselves as masculine, separate their mothers from themselves, ... [entailing a] more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries.' " <sup>16</sup> Thus, because women's development stresses connection, or an on-going relationship, while men's stresses increased individuation and separation, and because all theories of development up until this point have been written through male eyes, development is equated with separation and women's less strenuous individuation process has been characterized as a failure to develop.

This differing orientation, solidified in the early childhood years, has an interesting impact on the way males and females eventually view themselves and their relationships. Gilligan asserts that boys and girls will construct a moral dilemma in markedly different ways, the boys adhering to a doctrine of "individual rights" or non-interference, while the girls are more concerned with response and a preservation of connection. In her studies of adolescent boys and girls, Gilligan discovers some fundamentally different points of departure for the sexes when confronted with moral choice:

Proceeding from a premise of separation but recognizing that 'you have to live with other people/ [the boy] seeks rules to limit interference and thus minimize hurt. Responsibility in his construction pertains to a limitation of action \_\_\_\_ [To a girl] responsibility signifies response, an extension rather than a limitation of action \_\_\_\_ The interplay between these responses is clear in that she, assuming connection, begins to explore the parameters of separation, while he, assuming separation, begins to explore the parameters of connection. But the primacy of separation or connection leads to different images of self and of relationships. <sup>17</sup>

Thus, "the elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle. Woman's place in man's life cycle is to protect this recognition while the developmental litany intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights." <sup>18</sup>

Ironically, women's identity with connection and inclusion, with responsibility and an ethic which stresses care, has been pinpointed as both their strength and their weakness. The traditionally lauded "feminine virtues" of self-sacrifice and care are at the same time the very qualities which militate against women's development into adults by the world's (i.e. male) standards of separation. Women can move neither forward nor backward; their femininity—both as they and the world define it—is pitted against male-constructed definitions of adulthood.

16. Ibid., p. 8.

17. Ibid., p. 37.

18. Ibid., p. 23.

Gilligan characterizes women's conflict concisely:

[T]he exercise of... choice brings [the woman] privately into conflict with the conventions of femininity, particularly the moral equation of goodness with self-sacrifice. Although independent assertion in judgement and action is considered to be the hallmark of adulthood, it is rather in their care and concern for others that women have both judged themselves and been judged.<sup>19</sup>

Women experience a "tension between a morality of rights that dissolves 'natural bonds' in support of individual claims [male] and a morality of responsibility that knits such claims into a fabric of relationship, blurring the distinction between self and other through the representation of their interdependence [female]."<sup>20</sup>

Noyes' "liberty of unity," seen at Oneida as superior to the "liberty of independence," lauded the same virtues that women, by virtue of their early personality development, have come to value and associate with "morality." Noyes phrased the moral problem in feminine language; the ideal self he held up as a model to both his male and female followers was essentially a feminine self. Gilligan notes:

The notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women's development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and choice. In addition, the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the concept of rights that has... supported women's claim to a fair share of social justice.<sup>21</sup>

Nineteenth-century America was regulated by a system of rights and "individual liberties," but in Noyes' system the traditionally male ethic of "rights" disappeared. Indeed, when formulating his conception of liberty, Noyes had the utmost disdain for worldly notions of a "justice of rights:"

There is a great deal of talk about the right to freedom. What is that right? And to whom does it belong? \_ I answer, Only those who have the meek and lowly heart of Jesus Christ \_ I am certain that sooner or later, in the ages to come, it will be regarded as the very climax of absurdity to imagine that a sinner—a man governed by selfish passions—deserves liberty.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it is possible that Noyes' system helped resolve this conflict for women. By putting into practice a society revolving around an ethic of connection to maintain the good of the group, Noyes very likely bolstered Oneida women's self-perceptions. Kern has observed that the

19. Ibid., p. 70.

20. Ibid., p. 132.

21. Ibid.

22. Barren and Miller, *Home Talks*, p. 347.

"closeness... of the social bond," given primary emphasis at Oneida, "corresponded to a totally different conception of self from that more generally accepted in nineteenth-century America."<sup>23</sup> And indeed it did: outside society was built on the masculine ideal of selfhood while Oneida replaced this with a more feminine conception of identity. Gilligan writes: "For women, the developmental markers of separation and attachment, allocated sequentially to adolescence and adulthood, seem in some sense to be fused... [T] his fusion leaves women at risk in a society that rewards separation..."<sup>24</sup> Noyes reversed this traditional value system: the "self-made man," standing out and differentiating himself against a background of others, was severely criticized. Separation was no longer the hallowed virtue to be sought, but rather connection; standing out sharply from one's peers was no longer the ultimate goal, but rather the creation and maintenance of a web of relationships.

The past has been characterized by an exclusive listening to the male voice of interpretation of social experience; the woman's different voice has been eclipsed. Gilligan concludes that "... male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former of the role of separation as it defines and empowers the self, the latter of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community."<sup>25</sup>

#### *Women in the Oneida Community: Self and Other*

In light of Gilligan's theory, then, a social system which emphasized the importance of relationships is likely to have given women a positive self-perception, even if it did not completely satisfy them. At Oneida the tie between an "others-oriented" morality and a concept of the self as "good" was a strong tie, indeed, reinforced by every aspect of Community living. And, in fact, I found in the letters and diaries that those facets of their religion and communal lives which most emphasized an "enlarging of heart" so as to be selfless and open to the needs and feelings of others were the most highly valued by these women. One gets the distinct feeling that, although entirely subverting the self was difficult, the women felt strongest and most positive when they had managed to repress an "evil spirit" towards others in themselves, putting others' needs before their own.

The end of complex marriage and a return to traditional "worldly" marriage, coming in August of 1879, greatly unsettled the communists.

23. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 295.

24. Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, p. 156.

25. Ibid.

It is interesting to note that, though women were not completely satisfied with complex marriage, they feared its end for the serious partialities and splintering of the group they saw as its inevitable outcome. In complex marriage, a woman was not giving herself entirely to one person, but rather was given room to distribute herself more evenly over the group as a whole; she could effect an inclusion of others and an extension of her care.

Beulah Hendee, faced with the choice of marrying either Alfred Barron or John Sears, eventually chose Alfred but went through agonies in the rupture of feeling her move caused:

Poor John, his heart is wrung and almost broken at the thought of losing me. He feels that if I marry you he shall at once and forever lose me and Dorothea [her daughter] too. Alfred! Alfred! Must we give up all the heart love that has been in the community because of this marriage relation that is coming in? Do you feel so? Would you withdraw your friendship from me if I felt it was the best thing for me to marry John? If that is so how can we 'let brotherly love continue'? What is to become of communism and the true, unselfish community spirit—it seems like death to me. You and John and I are all communists and love God; why cannot we all together seek and find what [H] e wishes us to do?<sup>26</sup>

Evident in this letter are Beulah's vain attempts to maintain connection at a time when she sees community bonds increasingly weakened. She perceived—correctly—that the exclusive pairing of worldly marriage would bring death to the "unselfish community spirit." Apparently in a more reconciled state, Beulah wrote to Alfred a day later: "[John] says he shall always love me just the same, no matter what I do, and always be my friend and brother\_\_\_ Exclusive love is not going to be the thing gained, but enlargement of heart."<sup>27</sup> Impatient, in another letter, with the diversion of attention away from their true mission of salvation that the break-up caused, Beulah wrote, "We community folk haven't attained to a very high degree of culture in our daily contact with each other. I wish we might stop the war and turn our attention toward nobler things, toward gentleness and peace and helping one another."<sup>28</sup>

After her marriage to Barron, the couple continued to live at Oneida, and Beulah continued to maintain "the community spirit" in spite of the odds against her. Writing to her old friend Annie Hatch a few months after her marriage in December of 1879, Beulah claimed, "We don't find it necessary to behave exactly like married folks. Keep something in reserve for general distribution\_\_\_Dear Annie, the old spirit of communism is still alive and doing its work."<sup>29</sup> Annie, writing to Beulah

26. Beulah Hendee to Alfred Barron, September 9, 1879.

27. Hendee to Barron, September 10, 1879.

28. Hendee to Barron, September 23, 1879.

29. Hendee to Hatch, March 20, 1880.

after she had moved to Niagara Falls along with a small group of other Oneidans, expressed a sense of connection split asunder at the break-up. She deeply missed the feeling of always having someone who loved her, and longed for some point to attachment to a larger whole: "You that are married do not know what it is, after feeling that you have always been loved by someone, to suddenly have it all torn away from you, and others step in and take all that has been yours, and say, 'it is *mine* now'...."<sup>30</sup> In addition to communism of feeling, Beulah saw a chief benefit of the Community in its communism of property and detested images of the selfish striving and hoarding of the "outside world":

Don't feel \_\_\_ that there is to be an end to all communism. You are living in an atmosphere of pure marriage, but there is something beside all that yet \_\_\_ You and I will live together yet, see if we don't. There is an awful temptation to think the old good is gone, but it *isn't*, it *isn't*! ... Thank God, dear, that you don't live in a land of... general scramble for the most and the best things.<sup>31</sup>

In their dealings with others, Annie and Beulah tried to be charitable and attain a "soft heart." Entering into a relationship with "Jacques," Annie confided to Beulah:

I do not prize his friendship so much for the mere pleasure of loving and being loved... but for the effect it has had of awakening my heart anew to [the] Community's love \_ I found my heart warming and enlarging toward *all* the brothers and sisters here; and my heart has been filled with a desire to seek to unselfishly please those around me, even at the sacrifice of my own tastes and inclinations. I feel God has first-love of my heart.<sup>32</sup>

Beulah sympathized with this desire for an unselfish, serving spirit: "I have a good sense lately of how beautiful a life may be that is spent in making other people happy; that one may have a great career in that \_\_\_ I long to have the spirit that is unselfish and humble and loving and charitable."<sup>33</sup> In the inevitable "competitions" that arose in relationships, Annie, loathe to "press her own claims," rather strove to be reserved and selfless:

We are expecting Myron tonight. *Inside* I am very much pleased with the thought but don't show any delight externally, for [Eliza]... is very suspicious of me, and takes all the possession she can of him \_\_\_ I have made up my mind that I will not quarrel with her—and make *him* trouble.<sup>34</sup>

30. Hatch to Hendee, October 12, 1883. Emphasis in original.

31. Hendee to Hatch, November 26, 1880. Emphasis in original.

32. Hatch to Hendee, December 12, 1878. Emphasis in original.

33. Hendee to Hatch, February 5, 1879.

34. Hatch to Hendee, July 8, 1879. Emphasis in original.

At the break-up, when her favored Myron took Jessie Kinsley as his wife, she accepted it with a "good spirit": "I am quite happy \_\_\_\_ I have got above all my temptations... about Myron and Jessie and *enjoy* his and Jessie's prospects."<sup>35</sup>

Just as they consciously deferred their own wishes to the needs of others, these women also developed an almost reflexive self-criticism when they spoke and wrote, which picked up any trace of egoism or self-concern they might have expressed and then repented it. One feels that this un-remitting quest to exorcise the "I-spirit" was central to their sense of goodness and morality. After a depressed, somewhat complaining letter about her lonely state after the break-up, Annie in the end retracted her excessive self-concern: "I am lighthearted most of the time, and really enjoy working. But I have written as I have, so that you will know what a bad, unreconciled person I am at times."<sup>36</sup> A spirit of "un-reconciliation" — an excessive concern for the fate that befell one, rather than a benign acceptance of one's lot in God's plan—was extremely distasteful to these women. Beulah, writing to Alfred in a panic that she might lose him to another woman at the break-up, nonetheless recognized this was a self-centered instinct and, contrite, added: "I want to take the great view of it and not think only what I shall lose."<sup>37</sup>

The Community's equation of goodness with selflessness, and the women's heart-felt acceptance of such a construction of morality, emerges clearly when we examine Beulah's efforts to reconcile herself to the Community's return to worldly marriage in August 1879. She attempted to see a type of good in the "marriage departure" in that it entailed even more self-sacrifice than complex marriage did, thereby elevating Oneidans to an even higher moral plane: "This new departure calls indeed for more sacrifice and unselfishness than our system of complex marriage ever did."<sup>38</sup> In justifying herself against the Shakers, with whom the Oneidans always had a subtle rivalry, she maintained her group's relative virtue by reference to their greater spirit of selflessness:

The Shakers will have their I told you so/ won't they. But we can hold up our heads before those Shakers and tell them we shall still be on a higher plane than they, and know more about self-sacrifice than they do—a heap more.<sup>39</sup>

*Women in the Oneida Community: The Search for Transcendence*

The Community ideology, like that of most religions, elevated the principles of self-denial and self-control. The most spiritual among them

35. Hatch to Hendee, February 7, 1880. Emphasis in original.

36. Hatch to Hendee, October 12, 1883.

37. Hendee to Barren, August 28, 1879.

38. Hendee to Barren, September 9, 1879.

39. Hendee to Barren, August 28, 1879.

were those who could best contain or channel their emotions, harnessing them to work for God and the greater good of the Community. Community literature continually extolled the benefits of practicing self-limitation: "The great aim is to teach everyone self-control. This leads to the greatest happiness in love, and the greatest good to all."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, "[We] entirely reject the idea that love is an inevitable and uncontrollable fatality, which must have its own course \_\_\_\_ The whole matter of love and its expression should be subject to enlightened self-control, and should be managed for the greatest good."<sup>41</sup> The way to control one's emotions was to recognize that God was what one truly loves, and God could be found in all relations. True love did not concern itself with mere outward form, with the particulars, but was content to love the divine in each relation. Richard DeMaria has observed: "[The Christian's] love of another person should be the means whereby he contacts his creator. Anything short of this, Noyes protested, any love which stops in forms and in individualities, and fails to perceive the universal is blind, false love."<sup>42</sup> Loving particulars caused anxiety, jealousy and competition lest the cherished object be taken away; only when one had detached and purified himself sufficiently to love the "universal" could peace result.

Kern posits that in order to achieve salvation, it was imperative that "the female be controlled, and conversely that the male exert control over his own emotions to prevent being seduced into sin by her. Self control, or control of the will, thus became central to the theological system of Oneida."<sup>43</sup> Further, "self-denial was at once the essence of civilization and the source of male power and prestige." \*\* Kern suggests that towards the break-up, women "rejected the older communitarian ideology which excluded them from significant participation either in their own moral improvement or, more importantly, in a process of social reform whose agency was male perfection."<sup>45</sup>

Thus Kern, concentrating on the physical self-denial involved in the system of male continence, pinpoints this self-denial as the source of male power at Oneida; it was the means by which Oneida men exerted their superiority and control over women. If one agrees with Kern's statement that "[Oneida] had discovered the ancient mystical truth that freedom

40. Oneida Community, *Handbook of the Oneida Community: Containing a Brief Sketch of Its Present Condition, Internal Economy and Leading Principles*. No. 2. (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1871), p. 15.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

42. DeMaria, *Communal Love At Oneida*, p. 82.

43. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 224.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

45. Louis J. Kern, "Ideology and Reality: Sexuality and Women's Status in the Oneida Community," *Radical History Review*, Spring/Summer 1979, p. 202.

comes only with self-denial," then according to Kern's argument this was a freedom women were effectively cut off from in the Oneida system.<sup>46</sup> Kern presses further in his argument, positing that the system of self-sacrifice and self-limitation paradoxically was a means to a rather egocentric end, a state of detachment and ultimate autonomy:

Ironically, although the system inculcated a supra-romantic approach to love (love of love itself, not of the individual beloved), and though it emphasized social duties, the key to its functioning was not universal in compass, but rather ego-centric ... /I have learned/ [Noyes] wrote, 'that the love of God, self-love, and the love of mankind are all one; that perfection, that is enlightened self-love, is and ought to be the mainspring of the human machine; that in blessing and perfecting myself I glorify God, and bless mankind....' This emphasis on the autonomous, self-sufficient will... was concretely expressed in the system of male continence. [Male continence]... meant a reservation of a part of [the male] from the female; a certain sense of disinterestedness that preserved his own autonomy and his purity.<sup>47</sup>

Kern's observations are very astute in illuminating the transcendental and paradoxically individualistic core around which Oneida self-sacrifice was organized. However, I do not believe that self-denial, which was Oneida's main agency of perfection and transcendence, was relegated exclusively to the males. Women exercised self-denial as well, if not physical then emotional, and seem to have derived a true sense of power and spirituality from such a control of their wills. If the males' ultimate goal was a state of autonomy, or a reservation of a part of themselves in their relations with others, it was equally a goal of the women; they consciously strove to not give themselves completely, to retain a type of self-contained wholeness in relationships. The language of the letters expresses both a sense of elevated spirituality or moral power when the women successfully conquered their wills, or temptations, as well as a true desire to get God as the "first-love" of their hearts so as to become detached, in effect autonomous, and not emotionally dependent on anyone in the external world for happiness. While Kern argues self-denial from a physical point of view, the emotional self-control necessitated at Oneida deserves just as much consideration, and truly seems to have been a means of perfection utilized by both men and women.

The language of an ultimate transcendence, of a final release from all their "wrenchings of heart" that would result from perfect control of the will, is unmistakable in these letters. Beulah wrote candidly to Annie, after both had particularly hard bouts in conquering "special loves," that

I will join heartily with you in wishing that we may hence-forward be independent of men. We both know indeed what it is to suffer about them. Father Noyes says

46. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 287.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

the great thing for us to learn, is not to *give* our hearts to *any* men. He said they would surely abuse us so long as we did it—All my experience nowadays is teaching me... to be *independent and free*.<sup>48</sup>

Noyes gave similar advice to Tirzah Miller concerning her relations with men:

[Mr. Noyes] said I must get my affections into such a state of obedience to God that I should let my heart out to someone, and then take it in again instantly at the word of command, just as the dancers obey the call of the manager. I told him I had been tempted to think I must crush out of me all love, but he said if I could get this obedience to God, I could love more intensely than now.<sup>49</sup>

In trying to overcome her excessive attachment to James A. Towner, Beulah strove mightily for that transcendence that would relieve her heartache and bring her tranquility. She wrote to Annie:

I am finding my balance again and returning to faith. You don't know how I long for the love of God in my heart. Annie, do you realize, deep in your heart, that you love God? There is something, that when we get it, saves us from all this worry, all this anxiety and heartache about those we love — It [seems] to me if I could get where I could feel about love as I do about my child. I feel justified about her—I feel certain that my highest wish and ambition is to treat her wisely and consider always that she belongs to God— I pray that my heart may be purified and justified before God so that I *may go in and out in peace and assurance*.<sup>50</sup>

This image of being able to pull swiftly in and out of relationships without emotional pain, guided always by the inner voice of God, recurred in a letter from Tirzah to Noyes: "I feel the need everyday of a guide *within myself* which will make me do right in whatever circumstance, and place my justification beyond the *ups and downs of the external*."<sup>51</sup>

Beulah marvels at Father Noyes' ability to love purely, without "stickiness." She says that she can sense in his love for her the same feeling he has toward God, and indeed, ideally, the two should be one and the same at Oneida: "When I get that in my heart towards God, I shan't have anymore trouble about love. I shall think first of God, then will come perfect liberty. I long for that, and I am going to look and wait for it. See, this wringing... of our hearts only prepares us to take in God at last."<sup>52</sup> Tirzah Miller had a similar experience in battling her exclusive love for Edward Inslee, and related the epiphany of freedom she experienced when she no longer felt dependent on him:

48. Hendee to Hatch, February 1, 1879. Emphasis in original.

49. Tirzah C. Miller's Journal, March 18, 1877.

50. Hendee to Hatch, December 3, 1878. Emphasis added.

51. Tirzah C. Miller to John Humphrey Noyes, January 27, 1876. Emphasis added.

52. Hendee to Hatch, November 19, 1878.

You know how much I have loved [Edward]; how hard it has been to me to give him up \_\_ When I first read his letter I felt *awfully, awfully* — as though I were dying \_\_ yet I did not shed a tear. I went about my usual duties and when this bad feeling went off, I don't know, but about two hours afterward I found myself laughing and I asked myself, 'Why, where has my heartache gone?'.... And the words of Job, 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord,' kept ringing in my head \_\_ and I said over and over again with all my heart that God had a right to do with me as he chose \_\_ Whereas I was bound, *now I am free.*<sup>53</sup>

The women continually employed a spatial image in describing their spiritual growth: to be "outward" or "external" in one's affections was negative, while cultivating an inner spirituality or dependence was beneficial. Beulah wrote: "I am happier than I have been for many days. It's a happiness too [that] is not produced by external things or joys; it comes from within."<sup>54</sup> And in another letter, "The greater my heart is, the less other people will be able to annoy and distress me."<sup>55</sup> After submitting to a criticism for special love, Annie emerged determined to put into practice the advice of the committee:

... [T]wo points were touched upon... They were—that when I *did* feel well and happy, I must learn to keep near to God—and not let my good feeling make me outward and cause me to fall into temptation. The other, that I should... now assume that I am a spiritually minded woman, and that the devil had no right to tempt me with false fellowship \_\_ I never realized before so fully that 'the truth makes us free.'<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the notion of a "life of trial"—of a life spent continually battling unprofitable temptations, only to emerge stronger and sounder spiritually—was an image central to Oneida, and one from which the women drew a sense of strength and power. "Circumstance" and "Providence" were seen as continually shifting, unpredictable forces, but ones which truly spiritual persons—strong in their own inner peace and not dependent on their external environments, no matter how adverse—could weather and emerge with their spirituality and happiness intact. Thus, to conquer one's temptations (or one's will) and to rise above external circumstance, were strategies employed in the search for an ultimate transcendence and spirituality. Tirzah Miller said to Noyes: "It is true that I never had to endure so much temptation in my life as I have of late. I can see that God pinches us where it will hurt the hardest, and I don't wish to run away from any experience, however severe, which is

53. T.C. Miller to J.H. Noyes, November 19, 1878. Emphasis in original.

54. Hendee to Hatch, March 3, 1879.

55. Hendee to Hatch, March 19, 1879.

56. Hatch to T.C. Miller, May 14, 1869. Emphasis in original.

necessary for my salvation."<sup>57</sup> In her diary some years later, referring to her enforced separation from Edward Inslee, Tirzah confided that

... [T]he whole experience has been very necessary to me, and a number of times, instead of complaining 'O Lord! How much longer must I endure?' I have found myself praying that God would continue the discipline until he made of me what he wished. I realized that it is one thing to recognize the fact that God arranges our circumstances, but quite another to feel good about it...<sup>58</sup>

To accept—and be content with—the proverb that "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away" was of primary importance to Oneida women. Beulah, after relinquishing her beloved James Towner, wrote to Annie: "[Y]ou must not call me 'poor dear.' I am going to be happy now. The strong feeling is all gone from the middle of me, and though I have not what I hold dear, yet I know that peace, contentment and a clear conscience are better still."<sup>59</sup> Beulah again wrote:

This last week has been one of temptation to me, but my faith and my love for JHN has grown stronger—I say to myself—put yourself and your heart on one side, and these temptations on the other, don't for a moment identify the two. I begin to think that temptations are really excellent—to discover our foundations, to strengthen our faith, and to really improve and refine us.<sup>60</sup>

Marlyn Dalsimer, who sees in Oneida a regulated system of male control, quotes from a Community publication: "Instead of centering [her affections] on *any man*, [woman] should give them to God, wholly and unreservedly— God will teach women who abandon themselves to Him alone the secret of never being forsaken or heart-broken." Dalsimer takes this passage to mean that women "felt their male lovers were fickle and undependable."<sup>61</sup> Where Dalsimer identifies an unsatisfactory relation between the sexes in this passage, I would argue it is in perfect accord with the Oneida doctrine for both sexes. To stop at particulars—to love "any man or woman" rather than God—was false love; pure love involved a substantial removal of the self.

In light of this opinion—that women were encouraged and strove to achieve an autonomy or transcendence in relationships equal to men—I also question the view held by some critics that the break-up of the mother/child relation in Oneida was, at best, an especially cruel burden, and at worst, an insidious attempt by males to usurp the ethical authority

57. T.C. Miller to J.H. Noyes, January 27, 1875.

58. T.C. Miller's Journal, July 20, 1878.

59. Hendee to Hatch, December 28, 1878.

60. Hendee to Hatch, November 8, 1878.

61. Marlyn Hartzell Dalsimer, "Women and Family in the Oneida Community, 1837-1881" (PhD dissertation, New York University, 1975), p. 125.

invested in motherhood in the outside world. Dalsimer describes the weakening of the mother/child bond: "Oneida mothers... bore the brunt of Community criticism against philoprogenitiveness, and struggled valiantly to eradicate from their emotions this dangerous love for one's children which the patriarch prohibited."<sup>62</sup> In summing up both the positive and negative aspects of Community life for women, she lists the decree against philoprogenitiveness as a grave disadvantage:

After becoming mothers, Oneida women gave up their children to community guardians and had little subsequent access to their children. They were, furthermore, prohibited from displaying affection and love for their children. This prohibition was extremely hard on Oneida women, for they had few, if any, compensating controls in their lives.<sup>63</sup>

Kern sees the war waged against motherhood as yet another attempt by the males to root out any source of control women may have enjoyed, and annex it to themselves: "The attack on motherhood was clearly part of this male effort at control of women. It represented a further undermining on the social level of the ideology of feminine moral superiority."<sup>64</sup> By so doing, "The Utopian society usurped the functions of the ideal mother: her unselfishness, her moral guidance, her purity, her religious power. These communities became the objective correlative of the motherhood they subverted...."<sup>65</sup> These theories on the motivation behind the Oneidans' inveterate opposition to motherhood are plausible and are absolutely correct in pinpointing the ceaseless control of this relation as a source of great grief to Oneida women; maternal feeling did not die easily. But the fact remains that Oneida was a society obsessed with self-control and denial, that strove to achieve an inner contentment and a relative detachment from the "external world." Thus it seems more probable that the communists' principal concern in close supervision of the mother/child relation—as it was in their scrutiny of the male/female relation—was to ensure that a woman's attention was not unprofitably drawn away from God and salvation. "To be able to enjoy everything and yet be dependent on nothing but God for happiness,"<sup>66</sup> to never place one's faith in externals or particulars, was the ultimate goal at Oneida, and special love—whether it took the form of cherished lover or cherished child—caused a deviation from the path of the straight and narrow.

62. Ibid., p. 182.

63. Ibid., p. 241.

64. Kern, *An Ordered love*, p. 289.

65. Ibid., p. 290.

66. DeMaria, *Communal love at Oneida*, p. 82.

*Women in the Oneida Community: John Humphrey Noyes as Patriarch*

In examining the limits of women's liberation in the Oneida Community, researchers have stressed the constraint women must have felt living under a patriarchal ideology, impotent to choose the paths of their moral development. Kern, in noting the change women's moral and religious position underwent in the Community, comments that: "It was chiefly a question of the behavior to which men... wished deviant, potentially destructive women to conform; it was not a matter of women contributing... to the shaping of their own destinies."<sup>67</sup> He argues that "The system provided a channel for male attainment of perfection, but in its emphasis on female inferiority, and need of reform, it effectively shut women off from attaining an equal perfection."<sup>68</sup> And finally, Kern contends, the Oneidan theological system "excluded [women] from significant participation... in their own moral improvement...."<sup>69</sup> Dalsimer similarly sees women as denied opportunities to direct their own moral development, as being somehow shaped and coerced by the ideological system under which they lived. The theory of ascending fellowship, she writes, "which dictated the necessity of women's dependence upon men for spiritual inspiration... absolutely prevented Oneida women from defining and developing their own self-fulfillment ...."<sup>70</sup> She states further that "... women's exclusion from the possibilities of self-defined fulfillment, control and decision making over their collective lives, made it impossible for the community to continue after Noyes' demise."<sup>71</sup>

One problem which arises in determining how liberated Oneida women were is the fact that in Oneida, close community scrutiny and control over the lives of all the members to some degree was necessary to preserve the group, at times making it difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between female and male subjection. In a system which emphasized "walking in the light"—that is, in the light of Community scrutiny—the question of achieving a self-defined fulfillment is problematic, whatever one's sex. While Dalsimer contends that men were given certain "psychological" advantages over women, it appears that in practice the lives of men and women were fairly equally molded by the final word of Noyes. The direction that their moral improvement and self-fulfillment would take was always, in the end, referred to and dictated by their leader.

67. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 289.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

69. Kern, "Ideology and Reality," p. 202.

70. Dalsimer, "Women and Family," p. 309.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

In Frank Wayland-Smith's diary, we find copied Noyes' speech entitled "The Successorship," delivered in May of 1877. The content of the speech seems to characterize the extent of control Noyes exercised over his Community:

The question then arises, what right of government have I in the community? The history of the community must answer. The community did not form itself, like a township or other ordinary society, by getting together and choosing a president. I was the president from the beginning \_\_\_\_ That relation between me and the community has remained through its entire history. It is more similar to the relation of a father to the family and estate which he has created, than to that of an elected president \_\_\_\_ There has never been a time when I did not claim the prerogative of criticism and final decision over the whole community and over every member in it, and there has never been a time when the community as a whole did not concede me that prerogative. We have had free discussions, but those discussions on the one hand have been proposed and granted by me... and the final decision has been referred to me as judge after the debate.<sup>72</sup>

The clearly paternal nature of Father Noyes' rule over all of his followers, regardless of sex, is apparent in this speech and is corroborated by private letters and diaries. That Noyes' theology was sexist is quite true, but contentions that women were therefore denied a self-defined fulfillment granted to their male counterparts are misleading. Men could no more choose the path of their moral development, when it clashed with Noyes' interpretation of "the right," than could women. While the letters exhibit an extraordinary degree of loyalty and submission to Father Noyes, such submission cut across the lines of sex. John Humphrey treated his sons as well as his daughters as children in need of guidance.

A case in point is the tortured love affair of Edward Inslee and Tirzah Miller. Originally a pairing proposed by Noyes to separate Tirzah and her favored love, Homer Barron, Tirzah and Edward soon found themselves in the same "special love" predicament that their relationship had been intended to eradicate. Noyes' direction and manipulation of the entire affair demonstrates the amazing command he had over his followers. Given the news that Noyes had suggested Tirzah and Edward have a child together, the rejected Homer was despondent:

At first he was hopeless, discouraged, and somewhat hard—inclined to think his lot a harder one than ever man was called to bear \_\_\_\_ I told him I thought it time that we put aside our troubles, and helped Mr. Noyes \_\_\_\_ I appealed to the better nature in him, which I had known so well. He softened completely, and declared he never would give up his faith in God and loyalty to the community.<sup>73</sup>

72. Frank Wayland-Smith's Journal, May 17, 1877.

73. T.C. Miller's Journal, June 16, 1873.

While Homer was left to sort out his feelings for himself, Edward and Tirzah not only got muddled up in special love, but Edward, in his business travels to Newark, had made indiscreet visits to members of his family outside the Community that Noyes had apparently disallowed. Noyes took it upon himself to discipline the pair: "JHN was very much in earnest, and after making some remarks snowing how serious would have been the consequences of that Newark visit, he told Edward he must not come to my room or see me anymore, until that was thoroughly repented of. All right,' said E., looking as white as a sheet."<sup>74</sup> The docility and submission of a child when chastised by a parent is evoked in this passage. However, Edward was not so readily subdued:

[JHN] said he had just had a hard battle with Edward; that he came in bringing a letter written in a demanding spirit; thought he had done what JHN required of him about his relatives, and now he did not see why he could not return into communication with me. JHN told him he *never* should have me in that spirit, and showed him that it was special love in us that he was contending against \_\_\_\_Edward sent in a good, loyal, docile letter in the evening. This pleased JHN very much, and he seemed ready to give us some liberty right away \_\_\_\_ He said that he must manage some way so that I should not be drawn away from him again...<sup>75</sup>

No matter how convinced one was that he or she was following the right path, personal conviction always bowed to Father Noyes' better judgement. A steadfast faith that Noyes would govern in one's best interest was the only form of conviction to which members could unconditionally hold. Edward apparently had one more rebellion left in him, as one of Tirzah's later diary entries reads: "[Edward] seemed to be resisting JHN in an independent spirit, and was relying on his own strength to keep him right." The situation was resolved about two weeks later, as Tirzah wrote: "Thank God! Thank God! A letter of humble submission from E. to the family."<sup>76</sup>

Chastised and tortured as they both were, Homer and Edward strove in stoic Community fashion to see this temptation and the control of their wills that it required as working for the good of their souls:

Homer told Mother this morning that he and Edward had a long talk last night... about me, and Homer is feeling so well now that he was able to comfort him a good deal. E. said he thought his baby would be a rather expensive one, considering the suffering he and H. had both had over it, but H. told him he was getting so much out of the experience that he should consider it cheap. He said he had been in a sweat for a year or so over his experience about me, but it had done him a great deal of good.<sup>77</sup>

74. T.C. Miller's Journal, January 25, 1874.

75. Ibid. Emphasis in original.

76. T.C. Miller's Journal, February 16, 1874.

77. Ibid., January 28, 1874.

The entire Miller/Inslee affair apparently made a lasting impression on the Community. Alfred Barron, writing to Beulah in 1879, compared the discipline a Community man was currently undergoing to exorcise his "special love" spirit with the treatment Edward Inslee had received nearly five years earlier: "Well, his is a boy's grief and it is no real unsympathy that makes me see that it will do him good. I could not help thinking that Edward Inslee's long wrestle with his affection for Tirzah has softened him, humbled him and taught him to know a master in God and events."<sup>78</sup>

The issue of men submitting to Noyes is mentioned often in the private letters. Beulah wrote to Annie of the recalcitrant Towner, whose insubordinate spirit was beginning to split the Community: "Father esteems him highly and longs for his help. I wish, oh, how I wish he could lay his life down and be a little child: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light'—I *believe* that."<sup>79</sup> Alfred Barron similarly disapproved of Towner's "independent" spirit: "Yes, [Mr. Towner] works all the time to justify himself. He rejected Mr. Noyes' criticism and raised up a party to sustain himself — He came in here with his coarse lawyer notions of his right to debate his criticism and answer back. The truth must be argued away."<sup>80</sup> Clearly, Community men did not have a right to debate Noyes' final say; they had no chance to answer back and in this way had little more control over their spiritual improvement than women. In a similar vein, Beulah wrote of an unnamed Community man, criticizing his hard spirit and unwillingness to submit as the most arrogant sin of hubris:

Mr. [A] knows what it is after long years of high position and influence to lose both and submit to sharp and deep humiliation and criticism, from below as well as from above. *He* knows the beauty of true obedience and subordination — If Mr. [B] could only learn that — and really submit himself to Mr. Noyes and the judgement and not try to save himself. Every true man in the community has had to go through it..... [T]he end of all our dark experience is happiness and greater liberty. My own experience of the last eight months, though it has been agonizing a great deal of the time, has made me a happier woman than I ever dreamed of being and a *freer* woman. I gained freedom and liberty, not lost them. I fairly believe that our largest liberty will come to us through *submission* and *subordination*.<sup>81</sup>

Noyes' scrutiny of his followers' relations was indeed thorough. He invited Tirzah's reproach when he prohibited her from writing Edward at Wallingford Community: "I said I thought he dealt more severely with

78. Barron to Hendee, November 12, 1879.

79. Hendee to Barron, November 19, 1878. Emphasis in original.

80. Barron to Hendee, November 26, 1879.

81. Hendee to Hatch, July 7, 1879. Emphasis in original.

me than with others. We had quite an argument about it. 'It seems to me/ he said, 'that you take the liberty to judge me, and to think for yourself.' " <sup>82</sup> Edward, his differences with Noyes finally unreconcilable, left the Community for good, much to Tirzah's distress:

It had been so hard, so hard for me to believe that Edward is the wicked man that Mr. Noyes thinks him, but he said today I must make up my mind—must choose between him and E. I said I had done that but I asked him if he would be satisfied if I should suspend judgement, and banish the subject from my mind too. He said that would not be enough — [I] finally wrote to him, 'I am going to accept your judgement of E., cost me what it will.' He said that was right... <sup>83</sup>

Tirzah confessed in meeting her renunciation of Edward: "[I] made a few remarks showing that I am convinced that, judged by the true standard of righteousness, Edward is a wicked, unprincipled man — Horrible as it seems, I really felt light-hearted after thus committing myself...." <sup>84</sup> The final control of the relation came with Noyes' screening of Edward's incoming mail to Tirzah to "protect" her from temptation:

Edward wrote a letter to me a year ago which [JHN] kept from me. When he told me about this letter which came last summer, I was at first glad that he did not let me have it then... .Then after thinking of it a while, I was tempted to feel provoked that Mr. Noyes had dared to interfere with my rights so — I went through quite a struggle, but finally saw that my first feeling was the right one... <sup>85</sup>

Another somewhat lighter example of the equal submission of men and women to the ups and downs of Noyes' judgements came from Frank Wayland-Smith's journal. Apparently disturbed that a clique of musicians was forming, Noyes ordered Frank to give up his violin playing. Frank complied and then wrote ruefully in his diary:

... However many advantages Communism may offer in most departments of life, it certainly is a place of torture for violin players. To-day one is incited to practice, tomorrow he is exhorted to quit it, and criticized for drawing the young into superficialities; up and down, up and down. I presume I have been forbidden to play longer on the violin more than a dozen times since I first began. <sup>86</sup>

Like a dutiful boy, Frank wrote: "I delivered my violin, music books, sheet music, etc. to Mr. Noyes, and he stored the whole away in his closet." And so daily life went on in the Oneida Community. After reading the journals and letters, I find Lawrence Foster's delineation of the relation of the sexes at Oneida most apt:

82. T.C. Miller's Journal, December 22, 1874.

83. Ibid., May 25, 1877.

84. Ibid., May 28, 1877.

85. Ibid., July 10, 1878.

86. Frank Wayland-Smith Journal, December 4, 1878.

So long as Noyes' male and female followers unquestioningly acknowledged his paternalistic, God-like authority, he was prepared to be flexible in delegating that authority and making changes for the benefit of both sexes. No single way of organizing relations between men and women was sacrosanct; the underlying spirit rather than any specific external form was Noyes' concern — Women's primary responsibility was not to her husband or to her children but to God — This meant that the conventional juxtaposition of male superiority and female inferiority no longer had much significance within the Community.<sup>87</sup>

Tirzah's journal entry of April 10, 1877, referring to Theodore Noyes' proposition that Frank become Tirzah's "responsible head" in the stirpi-culture experiment, drew this reaction from Mr. Noyes:

Mr. Noyes seemed to be amused at the idea of F.'s exerting moral control over me — [H]e said he himself was my natural head — I told him... that I was learning that the way for me to keep out of trouble was to go to him with everything — Mr. Noyes criticized George Miller some yesterday for not consulting him more, and I told him I thought George was learning the same lesson.<sup>88</sup>

Community doctrine stressed the inability of women to go to God for themselves, their weakness making it impossible to achieve a direct connection. They therefore had to be satisfied with what spirituality they could acquire through their contact with men. Researchers have picked up on this point and cited it as a major source of female oppression; to be able to get to God only as mediated through another blocks self-defined spirituality. Dalsimer stresses women's spiritual dependence: "Woman, by her sex, was relegated to the bottom of the heap (along with children) and was, therefore, dependent upon man who held a position of greater accessibility to spirituality."<sup>89</sup> She concludes further that: "Woman served God only indirectly through man and received spiritual inspiration through her male partner."<sup>90</sup> However great the emphasis Community literature may have placed on such a figurative "chain of spirituality," it remained a metaphor more ideological than practical, and women truly seemed to feel that their first responsibility was to God. If women's relation to God had to be mediated through anyone higher up, it was Mr. Noyes, and to this type of second-hand inspiration the men were equally subject. As Tirzah wrote of the despondent Homer, discouraging him in his excessive love for her, "I dare not have him feel toward me as he seems to. He *must* give me up to *God*." <sup>91</sup>

87. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 106.

88. T.C. Miller Journal, April 11, 1877.

89. Dalsimer, "Women and Family," p. 72.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

91. T.C. Miller Journal, October 23, 1873. Emphasis in original.

I would argue both that the "advantage" of self-control as a means to moral and spiritual elevation, and the "disadvantage" (though they would not have viewed it as such) of submission to Mr. Noyes which entailed a loss of control over self-defined moral development fell equally on men and women. Thus, in the spiritual realm, which was beyond all else the most important sphere at Oneida, women did not seem to be as markedly unequal as previous accounts suggest. They were neither denied the basic advantages given their male counterparts, nor unduly suppressed in areas of moral improvement where men were free.

Dalsimer protests not only what she perceives to be woman's loss of control over her spirituality, but a loss of control over her own body: "... Oneida women did not define their own sexuality or choose their own sexual partners. Nor could they decide when, with whom, and how many children they would have."<sup>92</sup> While this is perfectly true, it is misleading to denote it as an exclusively female burden. With the exception of choosing partners, men were equally subject to these restrictions. They, too, relinquished control over how many, at what intervals, and by whom they would have children. Frank's diary exhibits a fond devotion to his child Gerard, and Tirzah's diary demonstrates that men disliked having no control over the mother of their children as much as women did:

After having the baby, [Frank] feels just as Edward and I did—that he would prefer to go on and have all his children by one woman... but he sees this as impossible in community \_\_\_ I told him I understood perfectly how he felt about having all his children by Cornelia, for it seemed to me as though I could not have one by anyone but Edward, and that was really one of the greatest causes of discontent with the community.<sup>93</sup>

Kern claims that men "controlled production" at Oneida: they made certain that the unreliable fertility of women was harnessed to carry on their line. He posits that the unique sexual and reproductive arrangements at Oneida represented

an insidious dehumanization of women as sex objects. When male continence was conjoined with the eugenic system of stirpiculture in 1867, the arrogation of the female reproductive capacity to males afforded an even more complete expression of the control of the will (male) over the body and its sexuality (female).<sup>94</sup>

This seems to be true, if at all, only in an abstract sense. If Frank was typical, men lamented the loss of control they experienced over their progeny, clearly preferring that "worldly" sense of continuity between

92. Dalsimer, "Women and Family," p. 310.

93. T.C. Miller Journal, August 11, 1877.

94. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p. 277.

their "wives" and their children which the special-love injunction rendered impossible.

*Women in the Oneida Community: Traditional vs. New Sex Roles*

Oneida was a curious mixture of the conservative and the radical; it blended an entrenchment of some sex stereotypes with a revision and re-thinking of others. While many of the letters cast men into characteristic roles as "protectors" of the weaker sex, emerging at the same time is the image of woman as self-possessed, as truly belonging to God and herself rather than entirely placing herself in the hands of a man. Perhaps it was to the credit of communism that women no longer felt obliged to turn themselves over unreservedly to any one person, but learned to search for justification and happiness within.

Beulah wrote to Alfred that she feared she might not be strong enough to resist the evil "Towner influence" so apparent in the Community: "When I think of the Towner spirit and what it may be able to inflict on me, I am sure that I want some *head* and *protector*; one who will be able to help me."<sup>95</sup> She put her case into Alfred's hands regarding their marriage, saying: "I'll trust your instincts in this matter. I've chosen you for my lover, head and protector, and now I shall be guided by you."<sup>96</sup> Alfred replied to this sentiment that, "If you want a 'head and protector' I guess my love will be allowed to be your brazen helmet."<sup>97</sup> When Alfred detailed the wedding vows they would take, and left out the promise "to obey" one's husband, Beulah objected: "' To love, cherish and comfort?' Don't I have to promise to love, cherish and obey? I think I shall want to promise that."<sup>98</sup> While continually referring to him as her "protector," she equally cast herself into the stereotyped role of "comforter." She wrote Alfred: "*You are my protector, but I want to be your comfort,*" and thereafter closed most of her letters with "Love, Your *comfort*." "

Notwithstanding the strength of these stereotypes within the community, Beulah and Alfred's discussion of how their marriage relation should be carried out revealed a strikingly modern and liberated view of the relation of the sexes. They wanted a mutually-helping commitment, while at the same time maintaining a sense of reserve or self-possession. The greatest evil was to succumb to the type of "double-egoism" or all-consuming devotion characteristic of worldly marriage. When Beulah and Alfred were separated for a while, she going to Mt.

95. Hendee to Barron, October 7, 1879. Emphasis in original.

96. Hendee to Barron, September 24, 1879.

97. Barron to Hendee, October 11, 1879.

98. Hendee to Barron, October 20, 1879.

99. Ibid. Emphasis in original.

Tom while he helped to quiet the turmoil at Oneida, he wished her to feel completely free in forming new relationships: "I give you my leave to substitute 'love' so far as you are concerned, and hope you know me well enough to do so."<sup>100</sup> He wrote further that "... If in your very reasonable efforts to strike some social and supporting roots where you are, you should open up to new impressions and new persons with your old abandon, I might find myself in competition with some man or woman and unwilling, if not unable, to hold you against opposing forces."<sup>101</sup> When referring to their marriage, Alfred assured her that "My chief hope of happiness in marriage to you, would be in my *devotion* to you, and not in what I could extract from you."<sup>102</sup> Worrying that he had not reciprocated her affection, he asked, "Have I, indeed, never told you how much I appreciate thy love? Your word or two on that point filled me with a strange sense... I have been absorbing thy life in dumb unthankfulness."<sup>103</sup>

Beulah, for her part, was faced with a choice between John Sears and Alfred for a husband, but infinitely preferred Alfred as he was not overly "sticky" and attached to her. She wrote, "I told John last night that setting you entirely aside, I should not want to marry him so long as he had such a claim on me—such possessive feeling toward me... The exclusive claim that the marriage of the world has in it is terrible to think of."<sup>104</sup> And later, "I shall not marry anyone else but you. I am sure that if I married John,... he would, all unconsciously to himself, want all of me, and we certainly should quarrel."<sup>105</sup> And finally, concerning their own marriage, she wrote to Alfred: "[John] feels that I am risking all my future happiness in marrying you... I told John that I did not expect to put my entire happiness into any man's keeping, but should have to have my heart anchored in God, and take the happiness he gives me."<sup>106</sup>

The Community, then, always pressed the ideal of reserving a part of oneself, of never making exclusive claims, or conversely allowing them to be made on one. Opportunities for a sort of removal and retreat into oneself and God seem to have been encouraged in the Community, eliciting images of Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own." Tirzah wrote, "At a criticism committee today of which I took notes, JHN talked about our taking an hour at least every day for spiritual practice—reflection, prayer, and communion with God."<sup>107</sup> The theory that woman was

100. Barron to Hendee, August 4, 1879.

101. Barron to Hendee, August 11, 1879.

102. Barron to Hendee, September 10, 1879. Emphasis in original.

103. Barron to Hendee, November 26, 1879.

104. Hendee to Barron, September 9, 1879.

105. Hendee to Barron, October 13, 1879.

106. Hendee to Barron, November 20, 1879.

107. T.C. Miller's Journal, April 13, 1873.

created "for herself and God" had certain advantages for women: having one's highest responsibility be to God in a sense made one's highest responsibility to oneself, as reflection to God was really a form of self-reflection and analysis. Beulah's letter to Alfred discussing their living arrangements after the marriage equally demonstrates the preciousness of this removal for women:

I sometimes wish for the quiet retirement of my room in the Tontine garret. When you and I are married we will preserve some of the sacred reserve which has always been one of the beautiful features of our community life, won't we? We shan't want to room together as some folks do, shall we?<sup>108</sup>

Because male/female relationships were so ruthlessly scrutinized, female friendships acquired a special space in the lives of Oneida women. The fact that women were able to form such close ties has previously been either overlooked or declared an impossibility in a society which emphasized the primacy of the male/female relation and discouraged exclusive attachment. Dalsimer suggests in her study that:

Noyes' 'equal-love-for-all' ideology and its reinforcement through mutual criticism made it possible for Oneida women to develop close affectional ties with one another on an individual basis. Instead, Oneida women were separated from one another emotionally and forced to rely on the entire community as a group for love, approval, and companionship.<sup>109</sup>

I would argue that far from separating women, community living gave women an opportunity to expand their attention beyond the family household and to incorporate female friendships that the marriage ties of the outside world may have restricted. If Annie and Beulah were at all typical, their relationship acted as a great source of emotional comfort to them in their trials. They continually turned to one another for solace and support, indicating a sense of solidarity among female members of the Community in dealing with the problems peculiar to their sex.

A forlorn Beulah wrote to Annie, who had left for Wallingford Community:

Where is Annie?... All gone... How do you think that Adam felt when he awoke and found he had lost one of his ribs? Guess he felt [the] same as I do this morning. Tirzah says —'Should think you would feel bereft without your Pythias—or Damon—whichever she was.' I do, said I.<sup>110</sup>

The two felt what indeed was a "special attachment" for each other. Both found themselves lonely when apart: "O, do come here and stay awhile;

108. Hendee to Barren, November 15, 1879.

109. Dalsimer, "Women and Family," p. 309.

110. Hendee to Hatch, August 3, 1878.

I want some friend very much to open my heart to once in a while. Nobody here that I can talk with," 111 Annie wrote to her dearest friend.

Beulah wrote that, "... I have had the most solid appreciation of what a friend you were to Dorothea [Beulah's daughter]\_\_\_ You are doubly endeared to me Annie, I realize it more every day that you are away\_\_\_ I must... remember that few people could be like you." 112 Using a term

the Community had coined to connote excessive "special" love, Beulah surprisingly applied it to her relationship with Annie: "It is so dreadfully hot\_\_\_ Everything is so sticky—I'm sticky, too, to *you*—everlastingly so."<sup>113</sup> At times the importance of their relationship even supplanted that of their relations to men, a fact indeed surprising in a community which stressed the primacy of the male-female relation. Annie's heart-felt love for Beulah was evident in this letter:

I am glad you wrote just how you felt—and am grateful to you for your deep, sincere love for me. *That* certainly is more gratifying to me than to know that any man loves me, and be assured that Jacques or any other man *shall not* separate our hearts. I prize your friendship and love more than I do Jacques' and you shall have my confidence and the *first love* of my heart—next to God and my superiors. Do you think, after you have been so unselfish about that darling girl of yours [Beulah's daughter Dorothea], and then so unselfish about 'him' too, that I am going to turn away from you... ? *Far from it*. If you could only see me you would know that I should be faithful. It seems cruel to have love of man come in and separate two women—and God helping me it shall never be\_\_\_ Be assured that 'our affection shall not be based now on any man.' I love you for *yourself* and always shall.<sup>114</sup>

More than two years after the break-up, living far apart, the women still felt a bond for one another: "Do you know—" wrote Annie, "and it isn't flattery nor imagination—that you seem nearer to my heart than anyone on earth, and I think I love you more than anyone else. Though we do not correspond, we are firmly united."<sup>115</sup> To which Beulah replied: "What do you suppose wove the sisterly bond so strongly between you and me? Nothing breaks or weakens it. There is no other woman I have ever loved as I do you."<sup>116</sup>

### Conclusions

Nineteenth century American society clearly leaned toward a masculine definition of morality and adulthood. However, Oneida refused

111. Hatch to Hendee, February 27, 1879.

112. Hendee to Hatch, August 22, 1878.

113. Hendee to Hatch, June 28, 1879. Emphasis in original.

114. Hatch to Hendee, December 12, 1878. Emphasis in original.

115. Hatch to Hendee, July 17, 1882.
116. Hendee to Hatch, July 23, 1882.

to accept the individualistic, egocentric core on which much of American culture was based, and attempted rather to shift the emphasis from the individual to the community. Noyes expressed his vision of a new world order of unity in a "home-talk" on communism:

Communism is the fundamental principle of every family. The man keeps no account with his wife, but cares for her as for himself. Man and wife keep no account with their children but regard them as their own flesh \_\_ Thus all children are born in communism and for the sweetest part of their lives are nourished in communism. They come in contact with the opposite principle of trading selfishness only when they begin to leave the family circle and mingle with the world \_\_ Family communism on the grandest scale... will be but returning home.<sup>117</sup>

Gilligan has written that the conflict between self and other constitutes the central moral problem for women. Noyes' dream was presented as the final resolution of this most ancient of societal conflicts.

Not only did women seem to identify closely with the Community's definition of moral and principled adult behavior, but in the Community the traditional binding of a person's ego to his or her occupation, prevalent in the outside world, was, if not broken apart, at least diluted. Where men in the outside world would tie their identities and their status to their jobs as banker, carpenter, or farmer, mere physical occupation meant little at Oneida. One's spiritual achievements—one's ability to be selfless and communally-oriented—were the achievements to which Oneidans tied their identities. For instance, being a skillful trap-maker, though important in that it contributed to the betterment of the Community, would not serve to "elevate" a person who was continually succumbing to special love, or in other ways failing to uphold the Community's spiritual dictates. Their social ability, their success in achieving peaceful co-existence with their brothers and sisters and preserving connection, was the yardstick by which Oneidans measured their worth.

It was this deliberate construction of a different system of "identity-formation" that would seem to have made the Oneida Community a particularly comfortable environment for many women. However, were women more liberated than men? Did women hold a unique position in the Community because of its more feminine-based value system? The answer would seem to be "no." In listening for a different voice and value system speaking through the letters and diaries, my main object was to supplement, and broaden the scope of, the traditional concept of liberation as discussed by critics such as Kern and Dalsimer. When our definitions of "liberation," "morality" and "identity"—traditionally articulated through a masculine voice—can be expanded to incorporate

117. Barron and Miller, *Home Talks*, p. 34.

other voices, then the Oneida woman's experience emerges in greater richness and complexity. The purpose of this study is to illuminate this greater complexity. However, even within this expanded framework, it appears that men and women were accorded roughly equal status in the Oneida Community. While I have argued that there did not exist the formidable male-female distinction posited by such authors as Kern and Dalsimer, it must be said that Noyes' "feminine" ideology did not elevate women's liberation over that of men.

Perhaps nowhere was this equality of status more evident than in the tendency of all Community members—men and women alike—to conflate God and John Humphrey Noyes and thereby to submit willingly to Noyes' temporal authority. In reviewing the spiritual aspirations expressed by Oneida members through these writings, the themes of "seeing a master in God and events" and of "accepting God's will" as the path to salvation resurface again and again. It is interesting to note, however, that these expressions are very nearly always of a symbolic nature: God they must obey, but in the absence of a materialized entity, able to give clear-cut, indisputable directions of right and wrong, Father Noyes filled in as a substitute. It was through Noyes that God's will was mediated; his interpretation was then forged throughout the Community and accepted as "the true standard of righteousness." "God," "the Community," and "Father Noyes" were in fact interchangeable terms at Oneida, and this fusion was central to the Community's stability and cohesion. Beulah, though she would later reverse some of her thinking, initially resisted the growing number of "independents" who were openly challenging Father Noyes. She wrote defiantly to Annie in April of 1879:

I have accepted my destiny and I am going to stick to the good medium through which my greatest good and happiness comes. Alice says she goes to God for herself—doesn't need to go to Mr. Noyes—Alice can do as she likes, but for myself I had rather go to Mr. Noyes.<sup>118</sup>

The fact that people were beginning to "go to God for themselves" meant that the absolute fusion of Noyes and God was disintegrating, and with it, as well, the Community.

For much of the Community's life, however, both men and women were subject to Noyes' authority. While present-day observers may wonder how the Oneidans withstood such an intricately mediated religion, I found it illuminating to examine how the ideological fusion of Noyes and God was treated in the private letters of actual members, how they mentally structured their position within the Community. It becomes clear that for the most part Noyes was viewed as an extension

118. Hendee to Hatch, April 17, 1879.

of God, the result being that when members recorded how they carefully obeyed the dictates of their leader, there is no hint of oppression or unrest about the language. In submitting to Noyes' dictates they declared themselves quite honestly to be submitting to God; there is an unconscious equation of the two evident in the use of the words "God" and "JHN" throughout the letters. Linguistically the two are kept very distinct and are represented as two separate agents: Tirzah, in renouncing Edward, is not submitting to Noyes but to "the true [God's] standard of righteousness"; Edward, in repressing his love for Tirzah, is not doing so at Noyes' orders but is "learning to know a master in God and events." But if the two are separated linguistically, in reality—and almost reflexively in the minds of the members—they are one.

This fusion of God and Noyes is best illustrated in the Oneidans' treatment of "special love." That battling special love was both one of the most taxing, and most common, problems of Community life emerges unmistakably in the letters. While the Oneidans seemed engaged perpetually in fending off one or another such "unprofitable" attachment, these same members never independently set out to erase the blot of special love from their lives; they had done so only because Noyes had ordered it. Noyes advised Tirzah that she get her affections into "obedience to God" so that she could let out her heart and then, "take it back again instantly at the word of command, just as the dancers obey the call of the manager."<sup>119</sup> The advice would seem to suggest that Tirzah become sufficiently disciplined to sense when she was "exclusive" or "outward" in her affections, and thus correct herself and keep close to God. But given the fact that members never declared themselves guilty of special love of their own accord, Noyes' definition of "obedience to God" is strangely hollow. Tirzah's description of her relationship with James Herrick seems to reveal what truly motivated members to detach themselves from special love: when she sensed Herrick's dangerously strong affection for her, Tirzah confided that "I should be afraid of this [turning into special love] did I not know that he loves Mr. Noyes far more than me and that he would instantly leave me at a word from him."<sup>120</sup> While Noyes' advice implies God is the one whom they must love and obey before any particular, and at whose command they must leave an unprofitable relationship, here it is obviously not God but Noyes who commands a love and loyalty from his followers which supercedes any other relationship, should the two come into conflict.

In summary, the evidence from the Community members' writings clearly indicates that women held neither a privileged nor a noticeably

119. T.C. Miller's Journal, February 2, 1877.

120. Ibid., April 26, 1879.

subordinate position within the Oneida Community. Men and women alike strove for the same spiritual goals and were subject to the same temporal authority. Yet, even though there did not seem to be a significant difference between the status of men and women, did that mean that all of those who belonged to the Community were liberated? Again, the answer must be a qualified "no." While I have attempted to show that women were not unduly oppressed, and may even have adapted especially well to Oneida's moral framework, the members' ultimate dependence upon the vision and will of John Humphrey Noyes created a significant barrier to a broader form of liberation.

The Oneida communists, as with those belonging to any religious community, undertook the task of subjecting their individual wills to the will of God. The concept of God is sufficiently subjective to allow freedom of interpretation in carrying out His will, and sufficiently distanced to avoid claims of oppression and envy in submitting to His will; submission to God will never inspire the resentment that submission to a human being will. One might argue that Oneidans were "liberated" to the extent that their linguistic representation of the Noyes/God fusion did not hint of oppression or man-worship, that the fusion was not an onerous burden placed upon them but was accepted unconsciously, naturally, willingly. They submitted to Noyes not as a man but as the closest thing to God to be found on earth. However, I believe that ultimately, if one takes seriously the fact that God's will was continually mediated through Noyes until the two became virtually indistinguishable, the eventual accusations of "man-worship" which hailed the downfall of the Community seem inevitable. Sadly enough, some letters written in retrospect in the years following the break-up convey just such suspicions and regrets. A sense of Noyes' omnipresence emerges, often with a bitter taste.

Annie, unmarried and living with a small group of Oneidans at Niagara Falls, wrote to Beulah:

Beulah, in all these thoughts about Mr. N[oyes] and the way things are going, I am tempted to think I am doing wrong in feeling as I do — and that I am losing my chances as to salvation. And yet the feeling that I have, that I shall not be saved if I do not think and feel just as Mr. N. does, seems like slavery to *man*. I want to do and feel as *God* does about all these things. *How* am I to know what is right? The fact the J.D.G. and Miss Story have asked Mr. N three times if he would sanction their uniting in marriage, and he says they can love each other without marrying, makes me feel that Mr. N. likes to rule and without *reason*. Why shouldn't they marry if they wish, as well as others?<sup>121</sup>

Two months later, Annie questions even more critically certain aspects of her life in community:

121. Hatch to Hendee, October 12, 1883. Emphasis in original.

[Mr. Noyes] said... once in one of my criticisms, because my hair was quite long, that it was really a question of salvation, whether I did as he wished in regard to my hair, or did as I wished — *Now* it seems like man-worship to me, to do things and think a certain way because Mr. N thinks it the only way to do and think. Why are all permitted to have brains, and not the liberty to exercise them; to have taste, judgement and opinions, and not feel a good conscience in using them? In the Community I never felt that I could have an opinion about anything and have it respected, and I do not feel free yet. I do not think everything in the past was bad—there was a great deal of good.<sup>122</sup>

Beulah, although not so vociferous as Annie, agreed with her basic conclusions about their past at Oneida:

If we feel differently about some things from what we used [to] — and I am sure I do—why should we be condemned for it. I am certain that God has released me from living any more in that manner, or under that pressure. There is no need to quarrel with the past; it was not all bad, but it was certainly not unmixed good.<sup>123</sup>

She went on to comment wistfully: "It would be nice to live in peace with everyone. I sometimes think that Mr. Noyes' idea of peace is for everyone else to keep still and let him say just what he likes."<sup>124</sup> The Scriptural basis for Oneida's complex marriage was the passage from the Bible stating that "the angels in heaven neither marry nor are given in marriage"; since Oneidans wished to create Heaven on earth, they followed this dictum. When Beulah asked her friend's opinion concerning a fellow-member's recent marriage, Annie offered one last note of bitter defiance by contradicting this most sacred of Perfectionist tenets: "What do I think of Mr. Pitt's marriage? Why, I *think* that the *angels in heaven* do *marry* and are *given in marriage*. Perhaps I shall have a chance when I get there."<sup>125</sup>

Kern has written that, " [Oneida's] emphasis on the autonomous, self-sufficient will provided a counter, centrifugal force that offset the centripetal force of communistic love and society."<sup>126</sup> The taxing, often emotionally exhausting claims for self-denial and submission which the Community made on its members held out as recompense, as it were, the promise of eventual liberation, of a completely internalized happiness and a state of perfect peace. But finally, the concept of "liberation through submission," when that submission is not to God but to a God minutely mediated through another human being, creates a system that is problematic at best. Self-denial that is self-motivated—self-denial that arises

122. Ibid., December 2, 1883. Emphasis in original.

123. Hendee to Hatch, November 27, 1883.

124. Ibid.

125. Hatch to Hendee, April 20, 1884. Emphasis in original.

126. Kern, *An Ordered Love*, p.278.

in response to principles that one has carefully articulated in one's own mind—may bring satisfaction, but self-denial at the demand of another, no matter how revered or respected that other may be, is much more questionable.

This may have been a fundamental contradiction that lay at the heart of the Oneida system. However, the purpose of this essay has been to suggest that the women under this system were not radically unequal to the men, that if women could not define their God, neither could their male counterparts. As Beulah expressed to Alfred on the eve of the break-up:

I admit without any hesitation that the men have had a heavy cross to bear—

I don't think women could say that their trials have been greater than those of the men—only different.<sup>127</sup>

127. Hendee to Barren, August 27, 1879.