

The Rise and Fall of Utopia: The Oneida Community Crises of 1852 and 1879

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ON MARCH 7, 1852, the four-year-old Oneida Community in central New York State made an unexpected announcement in response to internal and external pressure against its controversial "complex marriage" system. The community declared that it still believed that its system was vindicated "in reason and in conscience" but that in order to avoid giving offence to the surrounding society, the community and its branches "have receded from the practical assertion of their views, and formally resumed the marriage morality of the world, submitting themselves to all ordinances and restrictions of society and law on this subject." The community went on to say that it viewed this step as only a temporary one which would last until there was a "change of public feeling" which would gradually extend the "area of freedom tolerated." Yet the announcement also conveyed a sense that one chapter of the group's story had been completed; the community had let "its previous activities pass into history." Nevertheless, six months later, on August 29, 1852, the community announced that it was resuming all its distinctive practices, including complex marriage. For more than a quarter of a century the Oneida Community would successfully practice its extraordinary marriage system, which one journalist described as an apparently unprecedented "combination of polygamy and polyandry with certain religious and social restraints." *

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Twenty-seven years later, on August 28, 1879, the Oneida Community made an announcement which was remarkably similar to that of 1852. In the face of rising internal dissension and external pressure against complex marriage, the community declared once again that it would discontinue the practice of complex marriage, "not as renouncing belief in the principles and prospective finality of that institution, but in deference to the public sentiment which is evidently rising against it...." In a further statement on September 4, the community also declared that "its present social position and its future course, whatever they may be, have no power to change the facts of the past; and the more these are studied, the more remarkable they will appear."² Despite such announced uncertainty about the "future course" of the community's "social" (i.e. sexual) practices and the desire of many members to continue complex marriage, this second discontinuance of complex marriage proved permanent not temporary. Indeed, only sixteen months later, on January 1, 1881, the community underwent a total dissolution, giving up its system of communal living entirely and reorganizing as a joint-stock corporation.

The tone and substance of these two announcements in 1852 and 1879 were much alike, yet the results in practice were strikingly dissimilar. In the first case, the Oneida Community was able to reestablish its sense of mission and cohesion, going on to experience a distinguished career as one of the best-known and most controversial communal experiments in American history. In the second case, the announcement served primarily as an epitaph for this extraordinary venture in communal living. What accounts for these different outcomes in the same group twenty-seven years apart? Why did the community weather its crisis in one case and fail to do so in the other?

The issue of why so-called "Utopian" communities "succeed" or "fail" has long fascinated both scholars and the general public. John Humphrey Noyes, the founder of the Oneida Community, himself discussed this issue perceptively and at length in his 1870 *History of American Socialisms*. In the wake of the revival of interest in communal experimentation in

Future," *Circular* 1 (March 7, 1852): 66. The August 1852 statement appears in *Circular* 1 (August 29, 1852): 170. The characterization of complex marriage as "polygamy and polyandry" is found in Charles Nordhoff, *The Communist Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), p. 271. In this essay, references to the group's official title, the Oneida Community, are capitalized but other references to the group (except if they appear in quotations) are written in lower case to avoid overcapitalization. 2. *O.C. Journal*, August 28, 1879, and *American Socialist*, September 4, 1879, as quoted in Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: The Breakup, 1876-1881* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), pp. 160, 161.

the 1960s, Rosabeth Kanter and others put forward influential sociological explanations for the "success" and "failure" of ventures in communal living. Most recently, the anthropologist Jon Wagner has suggested in a provocative article that most scholarly attempts to determine the "success" or "failure" of communal experiments have been unconvincing, begging the most interesting philosophical questions about how such judgments can or should be made.³

This paper will not focus on the most common question raised by scholars—the differences *between* groups, why some groups last longer or are more "successful" than others. Instead, I shall highlight the factors *within* one group which allowed it to sustain its distinctive lifestyle in one instance but caused it to give up that lifestyle permanently in the other. I shall try to analyze these complex developments from the perspective of the Oneida Community itself, judging the degree of "success" or "failure" of the group primarily in terms of its own goals rather than the goals that scholars may argue the group *ought* to have pursued. More than most communal experimenters, members of the Oneida Community were exceptionally self-conscious about what they were trying to do and how well they were doing it. Far from seeing their efforts as a static, unchanging, "utopian" attempt to achieve embalmed perfection, the Oneida perfectionists always stressed the necessity for progressive change and a never-ending process of development to best achieve their goals. The experiences at Oneida thus suggest larger issues and concerns of significance to all those desiring to achieve radical social change or create a "permanent revolution."

I

Crisis was nothing new to John Humphrey Noyes or his followers at Oneida in 1852. Indeed, crisis had been an almost constant part of Noyes's life since his conversion in February 1834 to perfectionism, the belief that a progressive process of achieving "perfect holiness" was possible on earth. Faced with his inability to convince others of the truth of his new convictions, Noyes in May 1834 experienced three emotionally devastating weeks in New York City, during which he plumbed the depths of suffering and came to the verge of total mental collapse. Although he partially recovered from this psychic distress, Noyes found the succeeding three years exceptionally difficult as he wandered

3. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1870), esp. pp. 646-657; Rosabeth Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); and Jon Wagner, "Success in Intentional Communities: The Problem of Evaluation," *Communal Societies* 5 (1985): 89-100.

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hippy-like around New York State and New England, trying unsuccessfully to convert the world to his highly unorthodox religious beliefs. The unauthorized publication in 1837 of portions of a private letter in which Noyes advocated sexual freedom in the holy Christian community caused him temporarily to lose virtually all his remaining followers. Nevertheless, in the succeeding decade Noyes rebounded by publishing a series of newspapers defending his views and by establishing a small core group of nearly forty followers in his home town of Putney, Vermont.⁴ The Putney Community, as the group came to be known, experienced a modest degree of success, despite continuing internal and external tensions. By the mid-1840s, the group was moving toward communism of property—and of persons. The first recorded practice of complex marriage on a limited scale began in 1846. The formal announcement in 1847 of the group's sexual experimentation (even though that announcement was couched in veiled terms) outraged some members of the group and of the town of Putney. Noyes was indicted on two specific counts of adultery, and rather than face a possible lynching or a conviction, he left the state, forfeiting his \$2,000 bond. Early in 1848, Noyes and his Putney loyalists started over again on a farm owned by one of his supporters in Oneida, New York. Noyes, upbeat about the future despite the recent setbacks, also at that time wrote his extraordinary manifesto presenting his social and sexual theories, which he published and sent out to leading public figures in New York and New England. Despite all the turmoil, Oneida grew rapidly. By January 1849, the original nucleus of Putney perfectionists had expanded to 87; by February 1850, the number had risen to 172; and by February 1851, the total reached 205. No one at the time, however, could have predicted that this little group and its sister community founded at Wallingford, Connecticut, in 1851 would survive for nearly thirty more years with a core group of some 300 individuals practicing its controversial religious and social system.⁵

4. A summary of this early phase of Noyes's life is presented in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, pp. 72-82. More detailed treatments are found in George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *The Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes* (New York: Macmillan, 1923); Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935); and Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977).

5. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, pp. 82-102. Noyes's manifesto of his social views, entitled "Bible Argument Defining the Relations of the Sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven," initially appeared in the *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (Oneida Reserve, NY: Leonard, 1849), pp. 18-42. This "Bible Argument" was elaborated in final form in *Bible Communism: A Compilation of the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Branches* (Brooklyn, NY: Office of the Circular, 1853), and was presented in abridged form in Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, pp. 623-637. The membership information is derived from the first three annual reports of the Oneida Association.

Before we can understand the 1852 crisis which followed, we must first understand Noyes's key religious and social beliefs, the means by which he was attempting to spread those beliefs, and the initial controversies resulting from attempts to implement those beliefs in community living. Fundamentally, Noyes's religious and social experiments represented an attempt to overcome the religious and social disorder that he and his followers had experienced in the rapidly expanding America of his day. Noyes had three underlying objectives. They were to achieve: (1) "right relations with God," a common set of religious values for himself and for his followers; (2) "right relations between the sexes" which would allow men and women to live together harmoniously; and (3) "right economic relations" which would overcome the disruptive "dog-eat-dog" capitalism of early nineteenth-century America. The achievement of these three objectives, Noyes argued, was a precondition for the realization of a fourth goal, the full establishment of the Millennium, the literal kingdom of heaven on earth. The stages leading to that final goal were not static but progressive and ever-changing. Perfection of spirit, the correct inner attitude demanded by God, might be basically unchanging once one had achieved "salvation from sin," but the external social arrangements necessary to implement that perfection of attitude in practice were constantly changing and would continue to change, even after the establishment of the Millennium.⁶

How did Noyes hope to achieve these ambitious goals? He had two chief means. The first was to spread his ideas through the newspapers he published, and the second was to establish his ideas in practice among a community or communities of his followers. Although the communitarian side of Noyes's experimentation has attracted the greatest attention, he himself always gave primacy to the publication of his newspapers as a means of getting his ideas before the world. As the Oneida Community declared in its *Third Annual Report* in 1852, "the publication of truth shall be our central business objective around which all other industrial interests shall organize."⁷ Noyes's communities were thus in his mind chiefly important as the vehicle by which publication of truth as he understood it was possible. In addition, however, the communities were profoundly important in themselves. They provided a laboratory through which Noyes's ideals could be realized in practice and a core group of

6. "Bible Argument," pp. 27-28.

7. As quoted in Robertson, *The Breakup*, p. 10. For discussions of the crucial role played by the press at Oneida, see Lawrence Foster, "Free Love and Feminism: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community," *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Summer 1981): 165-183; and Robert Fogarty, "Oneida: A Utopian Search for Religious Security," *Labor History* 14 (Spring 1973): 202-227.

followers who directly affirmed Noyes's key role as God's chief spokesman on earth.⁸

Because the social practices implemented at Oneida were so controversial and demanding, a word must be said about them if we are to understand the 1852 crisis. As part of his effort to reestablish a holy community of Christians on earth, Noyes argued that such a community would eliminate exclusive sexual relations. Instead, his followers would consider themselves married to the entire group in a "complex marriage" in which love, including heterosexual love among adults, could be expressed freely among the entire community. The specific arrangements which made possible this complex marriage—including birth control by *coitus reservatus*, group criticism sessions, and an informal status hierarchy known as "ascending and descending fellowship" — were developed gradually during the decade at Putney and only began to be fully implemented in 1847, shortly before the departure for Oneida.⁹

The effort to implement these controversial new beliefs in practice caused many difficulties. That all was not well at Putney and Oneida between 1846 and 1852 is suggested by numerous exhortations in the community newspapers during these years to unquestioning obedience, unity, love, harmony, right devotion, and the like. Psychosomatic illnesses and faith cures were frequently discussed and several cases of temporary insanity and suicidal tendencies were mentioned. In 1849, about a year after the founding of the Oneida Community, Noyes—who typically tried to absent himself from conflict situations he could not handle—moved with the nucleus of his most loyal Putney followers to a small community outpost in Brooklyn, New York. He lived there for most of the time between 1849 and 1854, when John Miller, who had been the primary leader at Oneida, died. During those years, and particularly once he formally resumed editorship of his newspaper in 1851, Noyes wrote with a surprising degree of distance from his communal ventures. In his column "Ideas from the Communes," for instance, he seemed to write with an observer's detachment about his own "associated communities" at Oneida, New York; Wallingford, Connecticut; Newark, New Jersey; and Cambridge and Putney, Vermont.¹⁰

One has the sense that in this period, Noyes, deeply afraid of failure or loss of control, was hedging his bets. Faced with uncertainty in his communal ventures, he seemed to be returning to his first concern—

8. George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community* (Oneida, NY: By the Author, 1931).

9. For an overview of these practices, see Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Free Love in the Oneida Community," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 5 (December 1986): 14-26.

10. *Circular* 3 (January 17, 1854): 75.

getting his ideas before the public through his newspapers. He left the difficult task of translating those values into communal life to capable subordinates who had internalized his values. This pattern would persist throughout the life of the Oneida Community. Between 1842 and 1880, Noyes spent only about half his time at Putney and Oneida, and he typically left at times of major stress.¹¹ In retrospect, this appears to have been the best thing he could have done. Few prophets have sufficient wisdom to know when to step partially aside after they have established the value foundations of their communities, and leave the pragmatic problems of implementing their ideals to capable subordinates. As a distant figure above the battle, Noyes and his ideas could serve as a unifying force in times of conflict.

External pressures also contributed to community tensions during this period. In 1850 and 1851, grand juries in Oneida and Madison counties, on whose boundaries the community was located, heard complaints about the perfectionists from their enemies, probably including seceders. The exemplary deportment of community members, who answered highly personal questions freely and honestly, helped defuse the hostility, and influential local power figures also interceded on their behalf.¹² The success of the community in weathering this crisis was partly due to its circumspectness in not actively seeking new members at Oneida and thereby avoiding the explosive hostilities which the vigorous search for local members at Putney had entailed. The exigencies of successfully establishing as difficult a system as complex marriage thus necessitated a move away from Noyes's desire to convert the entire world toward a more restricted goal of establishing a tightly-knit, internally-unified community. Such an order could not be established if there were too many new people joining the community or leaving it all the time.¹³

Even in a small and tightly-knit community, however, establishing a radical alternative to monogamous marriage was no easy task. On October 3, 1850, a letter published from a perfectionist in Wisconsin bitterly asked "from the depths of my soul" why the Oneida Community should insist on maintaining unorthodox sexual practices which only alienated many potential converts to holiness. In reply, John Miller simply asserted that their sexual theory was a part of the demands of God; it could not be accepted or rejected on opportunistic grounds.¹⁴

11. Robert S. Fogarty, "The Oneida Community, 1848-1880: A Study in Conservative Christian Utopianism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver, 1968), p. 162.

12. Parker, *Yankee Saint*, pp. 187-189.

13. As early as 1850, the Oneida Community publicly stated that it was not actively seeking new members. "Plans and Prospects," *Free Church Circular* 3 (October 21, 1850): 281.

14. "A Complaint Answered," *Free Church Circular* 3 (October 3, 1850): 270.

This unprecedented newspaper airing of opposition to Noyes's sexual theories among his following suggests deep divisions within his community. It is quite possible that Noyes's decision to resume formal editorship of his newspaper in 1851 was in part an attempt to avoid losing control over *both* his newspaper and his communities in the face of deep-seated opposition to his policies.

II

The peak of the early difficulties over the institutionalization of complex marriage, and the beginning of the resolution of those problems, apparently came between March and August of 1852. There is compelling evidence that during those six months complex marriage was temporarily discontinued at Oneida. The obvious external reason for this abrupt change was an all-out newspaper crusade launched by a New York religious paper, *The Observer*, and supported by other papers. On March 7, 1852, evidently in response to this pressure, the Oneida *Circular* made the surprise announcement that despite their continuing commitment to their system, the community was temporarily discontinuing the practice of complex marriage until public feeling moderated. By this action, the community declared, it was graphically demonstrating that it was "not attached to forms," even to its own. "To be able to conform to *any* circumstances, and *any* institutions, and still preserve spiritual freedom" was the goal of the perfectionists. The community's new efforts would be devoted to the establishment of a free press and to what must appear a most puzzling objective indeed—the "abolition of death."¹⁵

What is one to make of this remarkable announcement? To begin with, there is every reason to believe that the practice of complex marriage was, in fact, discontinued during this period. Although "Bible Secretiveness" might sanction speaking in a sort of code language or not telling a hostile public the whole truth, Noyes and his followers were invariably honest when they made direct factual assertions. Furthermore, numerous articles over the next six months either directly or indirectly support the contention that complex marriage was temporarily discontinued at this time.¹⁶ Had it continued to be secretly practiced, community dissidents probably would have passed that information on to a hostile press. And it is significant that in looking back at the final discontinuance of complex marriage in 1879, which was said at the time to be only a temporary move as well, Abel Easton noted that "on more

15. "The Past, Present, and Future," *Circular* 1 (March 7, 1852): 66. Emphasis in original.

16. See "The Second Course," *Circular* 1 (April 4, 1852): 82; "Past Enjoyments," *Circular* 1 (April 4, 1852): 83; "Hints to the Peaceable," *Circular* 1 (May 2, 1852): 98; and "Things Proved," *Circular* 1 (May 23, 1852): 110.

than one occasion previously, in the presence of sickness in the family or of persecution or other causes, John H. Noyes proposed that the Community as a body consider itself under criticism, and proclaim a fast from conjugal freedom__ Such seasons of fasting sometimes lasted a few days or *six months*, and they were strictly observed by all."¹⁷ The six months between early March and late August 1852 is the only period when there is any indication of such a lengthy suspension of complex marriage at Oneida. And if a six-month suspension in fact took place in 1852, it would appear to have been both a response to external pressure and a reaction to a sense of internal malaise for which communal penance was necessary.

A further key to the motivation behind this apparent retreat from complex marriage is Noyes's enigmatic observation that for a time the primary efforts of the community would be devoted to the "abolition of death" rather than to marriage reform. A later article reasserts this primary concern, clearly indicating that "death" was being used in a special sense: If this attack on "death" be madness, yet there is a method to it.¹⁸ In fact, when Noyes speaks of trying to "abolish death," he usually is referring to his efforts to overcome sickness and ill-health, especially mental and emotional disorders. Such psychologically related ailments are the first which must be eliminated if the "King of Terrors" is eventually to lose his hold over the mind and spirit of man.¹⁹

Thus what Noyes may be saying here, in his own special code language to be understood by his followers but not by the outside world, is that for a time, the severe mental and emotional problems (many of them associated with the introduction of complex marriage) are to be the primary concern of the community. This interpretation also is supported by the number of articles appearing during this period on topics such as nervousness, faith and unbelief, insanity, spiritualist excesses, inattention, the uselessness of self-condemnation, problems of insubordination, and the like. The Oneida Community appears to have been deliberately retrenching, performing an internal and external penance which would prepare a solid foundation for a second and successful effort to reintroduce the practice of complex marriage later.

Noyes was also faced with the threat of internal insubordination and even apostasy during this period. The problems of "bridling sensuality"

17. Allan Estlake, *The Oneida Community: A Record of an Attempt to Carry Out the Principles of Christian Unselfishness and Scientific Race Improvement* (London: George Redway, 1900), pp. 40-41. Emphasis added.

18. "The Second Course," *Circular* 1 (April 4, 1854): 82.

19. It is significant that many of these articles coupled the terms "disease and death." For Noyes's basic statement on the topic, see "Abolition of Death" in *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, VT: Office of the *Spiritual Magazine*, 1847), pp. 476-486.

and placing such drives at the service of the larger purposes of the community are discussed in numerous articles. Noyes himself did not always appear to be contributing to the solution of such problems when he wrote in enthusiastic terms of God being "married to matter" and the like.²⁰ A concrete threat of outright apostasy also existed. In late March and early April 1852, two articles appeared on Judas Iscariot, who "was not merely an unprincipled traitor, but a positive rival of Christ." The articles make it clear that a high community member was seen as playing the role of Judas.²¹

In these articles, the community Judas is portrayed as one whose sin was that of "covetousness"—of affections. His character is contrasted to that of the Mary who impulsively anointed Christ with expensive ointment. This Mary, and her community counterpart, "had little worldly prudence. Her love exceeded her discretion. She was found at Jesus' feet, absorbed in his discoursing," abandoned

.. to the attractions of her heart—a dangerous susceptibility in the case of misplaced affections, but her glory as a follower of Christ. This led her, at the loss of dignity, into that wonderful gratitude and love, which Christ promised should be recorded of her as a memorial of praise to all generations.

But Judas, with his base, uncomprehending heart, could not appreciate Mary's "tribute of affection," and so betrayed Christ for a paltry thirty pieces of silver to the public authorities.

There can be little doubt as to the identity of the community members whose relationship was obliquely discussed in these articles. Almost certainly, George Cragin, a member of the central committee and one of Noyes's earliest followers, stood in the place of Judas; his wife, Mary Cragin, who first inspired Noyes in 1846 to begin the actual practice of complex marriage, was represented by the wayward Mary whose devotion to Christ brought her everlasting glory; and, of course, John Humphrey Noyes, God's special representative, served symbolically as Christ. Full documentation of this complex triangular relationship of Noyes and the Cragins, which apparently led to George Cragin's temporary estrangement from Noyes, will not be provided here. Some of the probable general outlines can be indicated, however.

John Humphrey Noyes's relationship with Mary Cragin had always had strong overtones of idolatry, the sort of selfish "special love" which he so discouraged in his followers. It must have been galling to George Cragin to be for all intents and purposes supplanted by Noyes in his

20. *Circular* 1 (February 1, 1852): 51.

21. "The Rival of Christ," *Circular* 1 (April 4, 1852): 82; "A Bible Contest," *Circular* 1 (April 11, 1852): 87. These articles were written by Noyes's sister Harriet.

wife's affections, especially when both the Noyeses and Cragins were living together in Brooklyn between 1849 and 1851. After Mary Cragin died in a boat accident in July 1851, Noyes proved almost inconsolable. For more than a year, nearly every issue of his newspaper contained fulsome tributes to her character, examples of her writing, and the like. In 1853, Noyes's *Bible Communism*, the final important summation of his sexual and marriage theories, was dedicated obliquely to her memory:

To Mary of Nazareth, the blessed of all generations, who so beautifully yielded to the will of heaven, though it contravened the fashion of this world, and, at the hazard of her good name, and of all earthly affections and interests, became the mother of Christ, and so the mother of Christianity, this work is respectfully and loyally dedicated.²²

The recognition that Noyes continued to be emotionally involved with Mary Cragin, even after her death, could certainly have disturbed George Cragin. Furthermore, there were also clear conflicts between the small, relatively comfortable, elite Brooklyn group which printed the newspaper, and the larger group of struggling perfectionists at Oneida which provided their financial support. The fact that Noyes apparently slipped his emotional moorings after Mary Cragin died did little to maintain community confidence in him or his ideas. It should be noted, however, that Noyes was extremely sensitive to external conditions and needed to validate the truth of his own ideas by seeing them accepted by his followers. Thus his emotional instability at this time could well be seen primarily as a reflection of the disorder then present in his communities, rather than as simply his individual problem.

In an attempt to overcome these personal and communal conflicts, Noyes launched a wholehearted effort to reestablish common values among his following—values that could provide a rationale for their existence. His newspaper printed repeated exhortations to unity, and also systematically reprinted articles from the mid-1840s which he had originally written to prepare the minds of his supporters for closer communal living and complex marriage at Putney. Individual and communal

22. *Bible Communism*, p. (4). Note that Noyes could use any of the various Marys in the New Testament in referring symbolically to Mary Cragin. No identity is being established here between a particular biblical character and a particular follower of Noyes, any more than Noyes's own self-identification with Christ in many of the articles is intended in a literal sense. The Bible stories are freely adapted to say important things about the present. The intense veneration for Mary Cragin at Oneida is suggested in "Community Journal," *Circular* 5 (October 19, 1868): 245, as quoted in Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), p. 70. As reported in that 1868 article, practical considerations made it appropriate to rebury Mary Cragin's remains. Looking at her skull, "all who knew her, recognized the contour—so beautifully feminine. (Her son George) expressed a wish that the skull might be retained. The wish was unanimous. It is to be varnished and preserved."

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purification was stressed as part of a larger effort to achieve God's objectives on earth.

These and other measures apparently proved effective. On August 1, 1852, an article by George Cragin reaffirmed his total submission to God's will (as mediated through Noyes).²³ In the next issue, an article on "The Character of Peter"²⁴ noted that although Peter's denial of Christ might appear culpable, Peter had nevertheless come back to become Christ's "devoted follower." Throughout August a new optimism was evident in the newspaper. The tone rose to a radiant crescendo in the August 29th issue, with articles such as "The Resurrection King," "The Light Shineneth in Darkness," and "The Heart Satisfied." Most important, that issue contained Noyes's "Theocratic Platform" which apparently served to announce to the world the reestablishment of complex marriage and close communal life at Oneida. Among the planks of the platform were: "Abandonment of the entire fashion of this world—especially marriage and involuntary propagation," "Cultivation of free love," and "Dwelling together in association or complex families."²⁵

Although emotional tensions within the group continued to exist, by the end of 1852 the worst was over, both for Noyes and for Oneida. With the basic value premises and marital forms established, the primary effort of the community was increasingly turned toward developing successful and satisfying economic arrangements. After the death of the overworked and exhausted John Miller in June 1854, Noyes returned to Oneida to take personal charge. Recognizing that he had overextended himself in attempting so many different communal ventures, Noyes consolidated the six associated groups into two communities at Oneida and Wallingford.

This action, and the development of a successful line of animal traps for sale, succeeded in putting Oneida firmly on its financial feet by 1857. An increasingly secular and relaxed tone prevailed in the community newspaper. In the place of the interminable abstruse theological essays of earlier years, the newspaper broadened its coverage to include numerous chatty articles on communal affairs; discussions of economic matters, including articles such as "Christ: A Business Character";²⁶ and accounts of Noyes's extraordinarily diversified interests, ranging from botany to world politics and social life. The transition process at Oneida was largely complete. Noyes and his followers had passed "from the

23. "The Message," *Circular* 1 (August 1, 1852): 150.

24. *Circular* 1 (August 1, 1852): 150.

25. *Circular* 1 (August 29, 1852): 170. The capitalization of the original has been eliminated in this quotation from the "Theocratic Platform."

26. *Circular* 3 (April 15, 1854): 226.

restrictions of martial law, to the conditions of permanent civilized life," and were now free to enjoy the fruits of their labors.

III

Despite more than a quarter century of successful communal living after 1852, the Oneida Community eventually experienced sufficient internal and external tension that it gave up complex marriage in 1879 and discontinued its communal form of economic life as well in 1881. What were the chief factors contributing to the end of complex marriage and to the breakup of the community? This complex and fascinating issue has been explored in many important studies, most notably Constance Noyes Robertson's model analysis, *Oneida Community: The Breakup, 1876-1881*.²⁷ The basic elements of this story are now well-known and need not be rehearsed at length. Here, therefore, I shall simply highlight a few key points.

The primary factor which brought individuals to Oneida and kept them there was loyalty to John Humphrey Noyes and his ideas. That loyalty—and the implementation of Oneida ideals in common life—was sufficiently strong that for more than two decades it convinced members to override personal desires in favor of larger group goals. By the 1870s, however, a series of subtle but significant changes were occurring which undercut community cohesiveness. The declining ability of the aging and increasingly deaf John Humphrey Noyes to lead the community set the stage for the breakup. No other leaders emerged who were able to fill Noyes's place. Noyes's efforts to appoint his agnostic and less socially skillful son Theodore to be his successor repeatedly failed to satisfy the community. Eventually, a faction challenging the old order and calling for reform coalesced around James William Towner, a capable leader who had joined Oneida along with a small group of his followers during the mid-1870s, but he too was unable to secure enough support to replace the still-present John Humphrey Noyes.

Associated with this leadership vacuum and underlying it was the decline in commitment of the group to its original religious ideals. A younger generation lacking direct experience of the early struggles of

27. Most of the studies which deal with the breakup of the Oneida Community tend toward

a monocausal approach. Fogarty, "Oneida Community," stresses the disruptive role of the stirpiculture, or eugenics, experiment; Carden, *Oneida*, highlights sexual conflicts over the question of which men should initiate virgins into sexual experience; Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, places considerable stress on external factors; Spencer C. Olin, Jr., "The Oneida Community and the Instability of Charismatic Authority," *Journal of American History* 67 (September 1980): 285-300, utilizes Weberian theories of leadership. Each of these studies provides useful perspectives for the analysis which follows, but the only comprehensive, multi-causal study

of the breakup with full documentation is Robertson's *The Breakup*.

the group on behalf of its ideals showed an ever more skeptical and secular bent. Without a strong commitment to common values, it became more and more difficult to justify the intense self-sacrifice necessary to make the community's distinctive organization work. Actions by the governing central committee members came to be viewed as arbitrary and lacking any other rationale than self-interest.

As leadership and common values broke down, specific sexual tensions that had always been present began to be very divisive. Young people and community members of lower status began to chafe under the system of ascending and descending fellowship which limited the sexual contacts of those with lower status. One issue which created special controversy among key leaders had to do with who should have the responsibility of initiating young women into the community's sexual system. A related concern, especially among young women who felt growing uncertainty about the stability of Oneida, was the increasing desire to form an exclusive, committed sexual relationship. Further complications were introduced by the "stirpiculture" or eugenics experiment which Noyes had initiated in 1868.²⁸ Only certain individuals were deemed good enough to have children. And once children were born, tendencies toward "special affection" began to emerge, even when children were reared communally. With a high degree of commitment to basic ideals, these and other tensions could perhaps have been minimized. In the absence of such commitment, however, factionalization resulted. When an external campaign against the community by Professor John W. Mears and others heated up in the mid-1870s, the weakened community was no longer confident of its mission and the loyalty of its members.

In the face of an increasingly uncertain internal and external situation, the community leaders in August 1879 acted gracefully to terminate their distinctive sexual arrangements while their venture could still be counted a success. In discontinuing more than thirty years of unorthodox marital practice, the community announced that it was placing itself "not on the platform of the Shakers, on the one hand, nor of the world on the other, but on Paul's platform which allows marriage but prefers celibacy." The community also stated, in what may well prove a fitting epitaph:

The past history of the Oneida Community is at least secure. Its present social position and its future course, whatever they may be, have no power to change the facts of the past; and the more these things are studied, the more remarkable they will appear. These things prove, as does also their present course in giving up that phase of their communal life which has caused offense, that the Communists have not been the reckless bacchanalians a few have represented

28. For a brief treatment of the stirpiculture experiment, see Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, pp. 118-120.

them. The truth is, as the world will one day see and acknowledge, that they have not been pleasure-seekers and sensualists but social architects, with high religious and moral aims, whose experiments and discoveries they have sincerely believed would prove of value to mankind.²⁹

As part of the process of ending complex marriage, a major effort was made to disentangle the complex web of relationships that had developed and to formalize new relationships between men and women of the community. Provision was also made for the care of children, even though some were unable to remain with both of their natural parents due to the marriage of their parents to different spouses. Although many Oneidans still hoped to continue communal living following the termination of complex marriage, the group had lost its focus. Increasingly individuals wanted to return to private property and the institutions of the world. Leaders of the group realized that a reorganization of the entire system would be necessary. After careful planning in consultation with the entire membership, on January 1, 1881 the Oneida Community was legally transformed into a joint-stock company, the Oneida Community, Limited, thus ending the communal phase of one of the most remarkable religious and social experiments in American history.

IV

What accounts for the success of the Oneida Community in sustaining its unorthodox sexual and communal system in 1852 but not in 1879? What larger significance does the experience of the Oneida Community have for understanding issues of "success" or "failure" of other experiments in close-knit communal living?

The 1852 and 1879 Oneida crises had both an external and an internal aspect. The external component was clearly less important. The external attacks began, in both instances, not primarily as an assault on Oneida but as part of a larger upwelling of hostility against sexual deviation, specifically that embodied in Mormon polygamy, which was a focus of widespread opprobrium in both years. In both cases, the external attacks by themselves posed little difficulty to Oneida because the community's immediate neighbors viewed the group as composed of responsible citizens who deserved to be let alone. External crusaders against Oneida in both years found frustratingly little public sympathy for their cause. In 1879, for example, the journal *Puck* printed a cartoon which skewered the critics of Oneida. It showed a band of self-righteous ministers pointing at Oneida and declaring "Oh, dreadful! They dwell in peace and harmony and have no church scandals. They must be wiped out!"³⁰ Such negative

29. Robertson, *The Breakup*, p. 160.

30. *Puck*, February 26, 1879, reprinted in Parker, *A Yankee Saint*, p. 280.

reactions to attacks on Oneida were common among those who had closest contact with the community and who were in the most direct position to aid or hurt the group. Thus, external attacks proved the occasion but not the cause of the Oneida crises of 1852 and 1879.

Internal tensions, instead, were the key to the Oneida crises in both years. In each case, a significant minority of the community's members were dissatisfied with the way the community was being run. In both cases, a major aspect of that dissatisfaction focused on the community's controversial sexual system. Both in 1852 and 1879 there was a possibility that community dissidents might go outside the group and "tell all" to the press or to legal authorities, thereby making possible direct external interference in the group's functioning. So long as the community remained strong, such external threats posed a minimal problem, a minor annoyance at worst. If internal and external opposition coalesced, however, the result would conceivably have brought about the termination of the community. Both in 1852 and 1879, Noyes and other politically astute community leaders headed off any such possible direct external action by themselves discontinuing the group's most vulnerable and externally objectionable feature, complex marriage.

The question still remains, however, why in 1852 the group was eventually able to regain its cohesion, whereas in 1879 it could not. Several considerations stand out. In 1852 Noyes and his leadership cadre were in their 30s and 40s, ready and able to take risks for a cause in which they profoundly believed. In 1879, many of those same leaders, who still dominated the community, were in their 50s and 60s, less energetic and less in touch with the younger generation which had not experienced the trial and triumphs of the early years. In any organization, one would expect problems of leadership transfer to arise at such a stage. In the case of Oneida, the stress was even more intense due to the unusual, highly demanding nature of the group's social system and to the fact that the community remained to a large extent part of the "lengthened shadow" of its founder and still-surviving patriarch, John Humphrey Noyes.

Noyes, an astute judge of character and a shrewd practical leader, even in his declining years, was well aware of the succession problem which he had in part created. So long as he lived and retained the loyalty of the preponderance of his followers, the group would not die but neither could it reorient itself to deal with the new conditions its members faced. The very influence of Noyes, who like a great tree shaded out any other great trees from growing up, thus limited the group's potential for change. James William Towner, a capable outsider who had the potential to lead the community in new directions, was unable to do so while Noyes was still present. At most, Towner and capable community dissidents such as William Hinds could have caused a schism within

the community which would have opened up the group to dissolution by outside forces.

Faced by this difficult "no win" situation, Noyes and his loyal lieutenants did the best thing they could do under the circumstances to salvage the lives of their followers. They first, in 1879, called for the dissolution of "complex marriage," thereby defusing external pressure on the group. Then, when that action merely accelerated rather than staunched the internal breakdown, they skillfully worked out a plan for the dissolution of the community itself and turned it into a joint-stock corporation in 1881. In taking those two steps, they were realistically assessing their circumstances and trying to work out the best possible arrangements to deal with the temporal and spiritual needs of the group. Eventually, after Noyes's death in 1886 and nearly a decade of further uncertainty, Noyes's son Pierrepont would return to Oneida, offering new guidance as the descendants of the community transformed their group into a primarily economic rather than spiritual enterprise.³¹

Did the dissolution of Oneida complex marriage in 1879 and the abandonment of the group's system of communal living in 1881 constitute the "failure" of the Oneida Community? I think not. Noyes himself had no notion that his communal experiments would produce static, unchanging, "utopian" perfection. Throughout his life, he stressed the need for flexibility in developing the changing forms through which his ideals would be expressed in practice. Noyes had a keen sense of the responsibility of the intellectual or creative person for the social consequences of his ideas. He tried to break down old and outmoded beliefs and ways of action, but he did not leave his followers to drift without guidelines. He provided new, if highly unconventional standards and practices, and he took responsibility for seeing that they worked or else that they were discarded or modified.³²

Viewed from such a perspective, the Oneida crises of 1852 and 1879 reflect a triumph of the human spirit rather than a failure. No human organization is or can be permanent or unchanging; ultimately there can be no "permanent revolutions," only imperfect and transitory triumphs. But "say not the struggle naught availeth."³³ There is inestimable value in the great game of life, with all its variety, richness, and struggle. And there is, I am convinced, continuing value in the pursuit of an impossible ideal.

31. On the changes following the end of the communal phase at Oneida, see Pierrepont B. Noyes, *A Godly Heritage* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), and Carden, *Oneida*.

32. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, pp. 120-122.

33. Arthur Hugh Clough, "Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth," quoted in Louis Untermeyer, *A Treasury of Great Poems: English and American*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 887. Also see Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, pp. 245-247.