

"OPEN EXPOSURE TO A CARPING WORLD:"  
THE DOUBLE GAZE IN THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Sandy Dwayne Martin)

ABSTRACT

This project is an exploration of the themes of vision and self-presentation in the Oneida Community, a nineteenth-century communitarian religious group in central New York. Its central claim is that members and leaders of the community engaged in deliberate acts of self-presentation to and observation of the outside world, conscious of their dual positions as seer and seen. This double-consciousness, or double-gaze, grew out of the theology of Christian Perfectionism that the community embraced. The thesis provides background information on the community, including the context of the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening and a genealogy of the Perfectionist theology of Oneida's founder, John Humphrey Noyes. It explains the practices of complex marriage, Bible Communism, and mutual criticism, as outgrowths of the community's Perfectionist theology.

INDEX WORDS: Oneida, Complex marriage, Perfectionism, Mutual criticism, John H. Noyes, Double-consciousness

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The goal of this project is to explore the nature of the relationship between members of the Oneida Community, a religious community in central New York in the nineteenth century, and the larger American culture in which they lived. The central claim is that members and leaders of the community engaged in deliberate acts of self-presentation to and observation of the outside world, conscious of their dual positions as seer and seen. This double-consciousness, or double-gaze, was a direct outgrowth of the theology of Christian Perfectionism that the community embraced. If community members had already been perfected by their faith in Christ, then they could not be harmed by the gaze and criticisms of outsiders. And since they believed in the absolute righteousness of their lifestyles, they felt uniquely equipped to offer their perspectives on the outside world.

This notion of double-consciousness is not a new one; W.E.B. DuBois uses this term in his 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, to describe the conflicts of self-perception among African Americans. DuBois claims that always being subject to the perceptions of others, and forming one's own self-image

based principally on those perceptions, is an impediment to true self-consciousness. He writes that the African American man is . . . gifted with a second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.<sup>1</sup>

DuBois presents this "second sight" or double-consciousness as both blessing and curse; those who possess it have unique insight into the views of others, but they can never see themselves as they truly are. My intent is to show that the members of the Oneida Community possessed a modified form of this double-consciousness that DuBois cites in African Americans.<sup>2</sup> Instead of impeding true self-understanding, the double gaze bolstered Oneidans' claims to spiritual superiority

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 3.

<sup>2</sup> I realize that DuBois uses double-consciousness to describe a particular population. I do not mean to imply that he would recognize the same conditions of self-awareness (or compromised self-awareness) in the Oneida Community that he cited in African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century; however, this schema of double-consciousness, slightly modified, is useful as a starting point for discussing the community members' perceptions of themselves and the outside world.

over their onlookers; indeed, seeing themselves "through the revelation of the other world" convinced them that they had achieved perfection.<sup>3</sup>

"Our heresies are so confessed that we cannot be afraid of disclosures; and if there is anything in the Association that calls for criticism, we are glad to be under all the motives to good behavior which the most open exposure to a carping world can give us."<sup>4</sup> So read a collective statement of the Oneida Community in their publication, the *O. C. Journal*, in September of 1849. The members of Oneida had attracted the attention of the "carping world" with their unorthodox sexual and social arrangements. Under the leadership of their founder, John Humphrey Noyes, and espousing a Perfectionist brand of Christian theology, they held all property in common, a system they called "Bible Communism." They rejected traditional understandings of

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<sup>3</sup> For additional treatment of the seer/seen dyad, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 200-202. Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* to present manipulations of visibility as means of wielding power. In the *Panopticon*, Bentham's eighteenth-century proposed design for prisons, visibility necessarily works in only one direction: it "induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

For more on the *Panopticon*, see Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> *O. C. Journal*, September 23, 1849, quoted by George Wallingford Noyes in *Free Love in Utopia: John Humphrey Noyes and the Origin of the Oneida Community*, ed. by Lawrence Foster (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 67-68.

marriage, instead instituting a practice known as "complex marriage," in which all members were understood to be married to one another. No member had exclusive ownership of property or spouse; private property and exclusive marriage were remnants of a sinful humanity, and these people were committed to living sin-free lives.

When word spread of Oneida's unusual practices, Americans all over the country wanted to see for themselves how the community operated. The Oneidans, confident that close scrutiny would reveal the righteousness of their choices, welcomed visitors to the community. It officially became open to the public in 1850.<sup>5</sup> They held great feasts for their guests, accommodated them in their communal Mansion House, and invited them to witness community meetings and mutual criticism sessions.

Using visitors' accounts, John Humphrey Noyes's assessment of other "socialisms" and presentation of Oneida as a member of the socialist movement, and the practice of mutual criticism, this project will develop themes of double-consciousness and self-presentation as lenses for discussion of the community's practices and attitudes toward the world outside Oneida.

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<sup>5</sup> Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 81.

Other historians<sup>6</sup> have thoroughly mined the topics of the unorthodox practices of the Oneida Community. The authors give passing, if any, mention of visitors to the community, stating that people did visit but saying nothing of their reasons for coming or their reactions to the place. This project, therefore, is significant because it fills this gap in the historiography: focusing on outside perspectives and Oneida's own acts of self-presentation sheds light on issues of "inside and outside," how the Oneidans saw themselves in relation to the outside world and how they presented themselves to that world. This perspective allows the theological commitments of the community and its leaders to remain central, while also incorporating the voices of outsiders who observed life in the community.

### **Historical Background of the Oneida Community**

The Oneida Community was the brainchild of John Humphrey Noyes, "a descendant of New England Puritans," born and raised in Vermont.<sup>7</sup> He attended Yale Theological Seminary but lost his license to preach in 1834 when he began propagating his unconventional theological positions.

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<sup>6</sup> See "Historiography" in this chapter, 10-13.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Fogarty, *Special Love/Special Sex: An Oneida Community Diary* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 4-5.

Noyes, influenced by a movement within Protestant Christianity called "Perfectionism," declared that he was sinless<sup>8</sup> and argued that true Christianity had no room for sinfulness of any kind. According to Perfectionist theology, "Christianity, properly understood, was the call to a *sinless* life of union with Christ. Perfectionism maintained that to the extent to which the orthodox Churches tolerated sinfulness in the Christian life, they failed to preach Christianity."<sup>9</sup>

Noyes decided that the logical outgrowth of this notion of Perfectionism would be a close community of Perfectionist Christians. Noyes and his followers began a "loose confederation," the beginnings of a communistic experiment, in Putney, Vermont, in the early 1840s.<sup>10</sup> The community would practice "'Bible communism,' a fellowship of persons in which all selfish tendencies were overcome and no one claimed anything as belonging strictly and properly to himself or herself as an individual."<sup>11</sup>

Noyes understood this communism as a return to the practices of the earliest Christians as described in the book of

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<sup>8</sup> Michael J. McClymond, "John Humphrey Noyes, the Oneida Community, and Male Continence" in *Religions of the United States in Practice Vol. I*, ed. Colleen McDannell, 218 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Richard DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Sexual Order* (New York: Mellen, 1978), 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> McClymond, 219.

Acts: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common."<sup>12</sup>

Central to this experiment in community ownership was the connection to early Christian practices. Noyes emphasized that he and his followers were not attempting communism for its own sake, but because the Bible prescribed a communal lifestyle. He writes:

Understanding from the New Testament and from personal experience that in accepting Christ as a Savior they come individually into a heart-marriage to him, they found that the correlated New Testament fact followed, that all who are thus married to Christ come into the relation toward one another of mutual brotherhood.<sup>13</sup>

Instead of imposing written laws or constitutions, the community members depended on "the willing subordination of the members to the elders" for the regulation of their communal lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> The community understood this subordination as a natural result of living a life of perfect unity with Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 4:32-35, King James Version.

<sup>13</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *American Socialist*, 20 February 1879, p. 63, reprinted in *Communal Love at Oneida*, Richard DeMaria (New York: Mellen, 1978), 7.

<sup>14</sup> DeMaria, 8.

In addition to the members' subordination to the elders, the entire community's subordination to John Noyes himself was central to the community life at Putney: "Noyes made his followers acknowledge his divine authority by means of a formal vow of obedience. 'John H. Noyes,' it read, 'is the father and overseer whom the Holy Ghost has set over [us]. To John H. Noyes as such we submit ourselves in all things spiritual and temporal."<sup>15</sup> This agreement secured Noyes's supreme authority over the community from the very beginning.

John Humphrey Noyes's ideas of Perfectionism and Bible communism led him to re-evaluate the institution of marriage. He reached the conclusion that traditional marriage had no place in God's Kingdom; since Noyes saw himself as "the prophet of that unfolding kingdom,"<sup>16</sup> he was responsible for realizing a new vision of marriage. He instituted at Putney another unconventional practice, "complex marriage," in which all community members were understood to be married to one another, instead of in exclusive pairs. Noyes wrote in 1870:

In the Kingdom of Heaven, the institution of marriage, which assigns the exclusive possession of one woman to one man, does not exist... The intimate union of life

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<sup>15</sup> McClymond, 220.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Richards, "Perfecting People: Selective Breeding at the Oneida Community (1869-1879) and the Eugenics Movement," *New Genetics and Society* 23, no. 1 (2004): 48.

and interest, which in the world is limited to pairs, extends through the whole body of believers; i.e. complex marriage takes the place of simple.<sup>17</sup>

When this unusual (and illegal) arrangement came to light in October 1847, Noyes was arrested for adultery.<sup>18</sup> He and his followers left Putney "under a cloud of suspicion and disapproval" and began a new community in Oneida, New York, in 1848.<sup>19</sup>

The Oneida Community's *First Annual Report* describes the Community's unconventional notion of marriage: "The abolishment of sexual exclusiveness is involved in the love-relation required between all believers by the express injunction of Christ and the apostles, and by the whole tenor of the New Testament. 'The new commandment is, that we love one another,' and that not by pairs, as in the world, but *en masse*."<sup>20</sup>

The larger religious context out of which the Oneida Community and John Humphrey Noyes rose is important because it shows that although the practices of Bible Communism, complex marriage, and mutual criticism were certainly unusual relative to mainstream American culture in the mid-nineteenth century, a

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<sup>17</sup> J. H. Noyes (1870), quoted in Richards, 49.

<sup>18</sup> McClymond, 220.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>20</sup> *First Annual Report of Oneida Association: Exhibiting its History, Principles, and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849* (Oneida: Oneida Community, 1849), 21.

spirit of revivalist fervor in the United States had paved the way for Oneida and groups like it. In addition to the particular forms of Perfectionist theology that will be discussed later, the Second Great Awakening also served as a forerunner to communitarian experiments such as the United Society of Believers (or Shakers), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (or Mormons), and the Oneida Community.

The Second Great Awakening was a series of revivals in the Eastern and Midwestern United States, peaking in the 1790s and early 1800s. It marked a shift in the dominant theology of Christianity in the United States, from Calvinism to Arminianism. The Arminian theological position rejected the Calvinist notions of irresistible grace and limited atonement, insisting instead that God's grace was offered to everyone and that human beings were capable of accepting or rejecting it for themselves. This emphasis on individual agency served to democratize religion in the United States;<sup>21</sup> Americans felt freer to seek truth and revelation outside the typical avenues of their longstanding churches.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See also Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> For more on the Second Great Awakening and other periods of revival in the United States, see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

This revivalist fervor was particularly strong in central and western New York, where John Humphrey Noyes eventually established the Oneida Community. In nearby Palmyra, Joseph Smith, Jr., received direct revelations that led to his founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.<sup>23</sup> The Shakers also formed communal settlements in the region, which came to be known as the "Burned-Over District" because it was so often the site of "enthusiastic" religious revivals in the early nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

### **Historiography**

Historians' treatments of the Oneida Community have focused primarily on complex marriage, Bible communism, and Christian Perfectionism; they have ranged from sympathetic to condemnatory. Most accounts have placed Oneida in the context of other communitarian and sectarian religious movements of the nineteenth century, such as the Mormons, the Shakers, and the Millerites. Several community descendants have narrated the community's history from clearly sympathetic perspectives,

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<sup>23</sup> For more on Mormonism, see Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). For more on Joseph Smith, Jr., see Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York: Viking, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> For more on religious revival in Western New York, see Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950). See also Stephen J. Stein, *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

describing the community's philosophies on private property and marriage as misunderstood and lamenting the communal experiment's eventual dissolution into a joint stock corporation. Late twentieth-century historians such as Lawrence Foster, Robert Fogarty, and Spencer Klaw have attempted to balance community descendants' unapologetically pro-Oneida accounts with other scholars' blatantly anti-Oneida accounts.

Lawrence Foster's *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century*, discusses the Oneidans' complex marriage alongside the celibacy of Shaker communities and the polygamy of the Mormons.<sup>25</sup> In *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons*, Foster explores the family arrangements and gender relations of the same three communitarian groups.<sup>26</sup> In general, Foster's work does seem to be sympathetic toward communitarians. At times, though, he delves deeply into their psychology, rather than their theology; the result is that the leaders and the followers of these movements appear slightly misguided or unstable.

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<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>26</sup> Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

Spencer Klaw's *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* is a narrative of the community's history that is organized roughly chronologically and intended for a broad audience. Klaw's tone is more biographical than scholarly; he aims to reveal the intimate, everyday lives of Oneidans, their struggles with community leadership, and the theological claims that under-girded their unorthodox lifestyle. He uses primary documents such as the community's daily newspaper and letters written by members to uncover "the texture of life at Oneida."<sup>27</sup>

Robert S. Fogarty focuses on another aspect of the texture of life at Oneida by exploring the leadership of John Humphrey Noyes. The goal of his *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914* is to "throw some light on the nature of charismatic authority, on the relationship between leaders and followers, and on the tensions between ideology and utopia."<sup>28</sup> Noyes was undoubtedly an archetypal charismatic authority figure, and Fogarty's treatment of Oneida in his study of American communitarian movements investigates the character of Noyes's leadership.

Historians who have treated alternative or sectarian religious groups more generally, such as Stephen J. Stein and R.

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<sup>27</sup> Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 295.

<sup>28</sup> Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3.

Laurence Moore, have objected to the intolerance of the American public toward sectarian groups. Stein, in *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America*, points to an inconsistency in historians' treatment of dissenters in American history. Political dissenters such as Thomas Paine and Frederick Douglass are revered by historical accounts, while religious dissenters such as Mary Baker Eddy and Ann Lee continue to receive scorn.<sup>29</sup> Stein describes Oneida's leader, John Humphrey Noyes, as one such religious dissenter of whom most historians have failed to provide a balanced account.

Outlining a perspective similar to Stein's, Laurence Moore opposes the traditional view of religious outsiders. He writes, "Until we understand what has, in the historian's eye, separated 'mainline' churches from 'fringe' sects, we cannot appreciate fully those aspects of dissenting religious culture in the United States that have been historically trivialized."<sup>30</sup> Moore's contention is that groups, such as Oneida, that have been traditionally described as "outsiders" have had a larger role in shaping American religious life than mainline Protestant-centric narratives suggest.

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<sup>29</sup> Stephen J. Stein, *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), x.

<sup>30</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

## Overview

The next chapter will provide a genealogy of John Humphrey Noyes's own brand of Christian Perfectionism, showing how it grew out of the Perfectionist theologies of John Wesley and Charles G. Finney. Chapter 3 examines outsider perspectives on Oneida, relying primarily on accounts of journalists who visited the community and the Oneida Community scrapbook that collected these accounts. A research trip to the Oneida Community Collection at the Syracuse University Library enabled me to collect fascinating and essential visitors' accounts for this chapter. Next, in Chapter 4, an analysis of John Humphrey Noyes's *History of American Socialisms* will provide insight into the community's view of the outside world. Chapter 5 presents the practice of mutual criticism, central to life in the Oneida Community, as a microcosm of the seer/seen dyad. Finally, Chapter 6 provides concluding thoughts and examines overarching themes of visibility and self-presentation in the Oneida Community.

## Chapter 2

### "To Lay the Ax at the Root":

#### The Perfectionist Theology of John H. Noyes

The intent of this chapter is to trace the Perfectionist theology of John Humphrey Noyes to the holiness doctrines of John Wesley and Charles G. Finney, showing that while Noyes and his followers took the doctrine of Christian Perfectionism to extreme lengths, the ideas themselves were by no means unprecedented for American Christianity. Since the concept of striving toward total sanctification has largely fallen out of mainstream Christian consciousness (and is now relegated almost exclusively to Holiness and Pentecostal groups), Noyes's insistence upon total perfection might appear bizarre to twenty-first century observers; indeed, what Noyes saw as logical conclusions of his doctrine of Christian Perfection appeared bizarre to his own contemporaries. For Noyes and his followers, however, this doctrine of Perfectionism was firmly rooted in the traditions of two quite mainstream theologians, John Wesley and Charles Grandison Finney.

On February 20, 1834, John Humphrey Noyes declared before the congregation of the New Haven Free Church that he had achieved spiritual perfection—total freedom from sin. With this

declaration, which shocked and offended many of his listeners, Noyes formally affirmed his commitment to the doctrine of Christian Perfectionism, the idea that a true understanding of Christianity entails a life without sin. In the decades that followed, John Humphrey Noyes founded several communities of Christians who were committed to living sinless lives. The most notable of these communities was the Oneida Community, founded in 1848 in central New York. Noyes' Perfectionist ideas were influenced by the earlier theologies of John Wesley and Charles G. Finney, but he insisted that his own brand of Perfectionism was more complete, sound, and firmly based in scripture than the ideas of Wesley and Finney. This chapter will show how John Humphrey Noyes modified Wesley and Finney's theological claims to render a new doctrine of Christian Perfectionism.

### **John Wesley and Total Sanctification**

John Wesley (1703-1791), an Anglican priest who is best known as the founder of Methodism, is usually credited with introducing the theology of Christian Perfectionism to the North American context. Wesley, through his interpretation of Scripture, argued that beginning at the moment of salvation, the believer enters into a process of sanctification, whereby the believer would become more and more perfect through constant diligence. The ideal end of this process is "entire sanctification," a condition in which the believer no longer has

the will to sin. Peter Williams describes Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification as a gradual modification of the Christian's will: "This state of holiness pertained to the will of the believer, which was now free from voluntary sinful impulses and behavior, but was not necessarily permanent; continual discipline and vigilance were needed to sustain it indefinitely."<sup>31</sup>

Wesley encouraged his followers to assist one another in their quests for holiness by holding each other accountable. He believed that, in addition to "continual discipline and vigilance," the attainment of Christian perfection required the grace of God, since humans were sinful and incapable of choosing to follow God or entering into the process of sanctification without the intervention of grace. His *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, published in 1765, explains what entire sanctification entails:

We wait for entire sanctification, for a full salvation from all our sins—from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief—or, as the apostle expresses it, "go on unto perfection" [Heb. 6:1]. But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin, love filling

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<sup>31</sup> Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 271.

the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love "rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks" [cf. 1 Thess. 5:16-18]...<sup>32</sup>

In his essay "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection," Wesley describes "the manner and time of receiving" total sanctification, or Christian perfection:

1. By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbour, ruling our tempers, words, and actions. I do not include an impossibility of falling from it, either in part or in whole...
2. As to the manner. I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith; consequently in an instant. But I believe in a gradual work both preceding and following that time.
3. As to the time. I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within

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<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (1765), reprinted in William C. Placher, ed., *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Volume 2: From the Reformation to the Present* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 96.

five years or five months after it, I know of no conclusive argument to the contrary.<sup>33</sup>

This explanation from Wesley shows that sanctification is a constant process that can last the entire lifetime of the believer, but it is marked by a discrete moment, the "instant" when the believer commits an "act of faith" and allows God's grace to shape his or her will. A distinctive characteristic of Wesley's theology of sanctification is the possibility of the believer's *losing* salvation. Without constantly working (with the help of God) to maintain one's holiness, one can fall from grace.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Charles Finney's Perfectionist Theology**

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), was a key player in the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening in nineteenth-century America.<sup>35</sup> Despite being ordained a Presbyterian minister,

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<sup>33</sup> Wesley, "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection," in James H. Potts, ed., *Living Thoughts of John Wesley* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1891), 305.

<sup>34</sup> For more on Wesley's life and theology, see Stanley E. Ayling, *John Wesley* (London: Collins, 1979). For a collected volume of Wesley's own works, see Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). On Methodism in America, see Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon, 1964). On Methodism more broadly, see James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Row, *The Methodists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> For more on the life and theological positions of Charles G. Finney, see Keith Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987). See also Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney*

"Finney was never very firmly grounded in Reformed theology, and in his later years became converted to a 'perfectionist' position similar to that developed by John Wesley."<sup>36</sup> His affinity for Wesley's theology of entire sanctification caused him to adopt a firmly Perfectionist perspective, though he modified Wesley's position in subtle but important ways, placing more emphasis on human agency than on divine intervention:

In his theology, Finney was yet more Arminian than John Wesley: Wesley maintained that the human will is incapable of choosing God apart from God's preparatory grace, but Finney rejected this requirement. He was a perfectionist who believed that a permanent stage of higher spiritual life was possible for anyone who sought it wholeheartedly.<sup>37</sup>

Wesley's version of perfectionism also required this wholehearted seeking, but for Finney, humans *could* choose God, accept grace, and strive toward perfection without God's intervening to *change* the human will.

In *Systematic Theology*, published in 1851, Finney emphasizes human agency in his discussion of sanctification:

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*and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Williams, 270.

<sup>37</sup> Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 177.

All the promises of sanctification in the Bible, from their very nature, necessarily imply the exercise of our own agency in receiving the thing promised. As sanctification consists in the right exercise of our own agency, or in obedience to the law of God, a promise of sanctification must necessarily be conditioned upon the exercise of faith in the promise. And its fulfilment [*sic*] implies the exercise of our own powers in receiving it.<sup>38</sup>

Because he was more Arminian than Calvinist in his theology, rejecting the notion of irresistible grace and placing the burden of salvation on humans to choose God and willfully accept grace, Finney was extremely eager to reach the masses on behalf of the Gospel. Hearing and believing the message of Christ, not being chosen unconditionally by God, were required for salvation; therefore, Finney saw it as his job to ensure that as many people as possible had the opportunity to hear and believe his message. This conviction made Finney "the leading advocate of the 'new measures' of simple, emotional preaching and the calculated planning of revivals."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Charles G. Finney, "Lecture LIX: Sanctification," in *Systematic Theology* (1851), reprinted in 2000 by Gospel Truth Ministries, [http://www.gospeltruth.net/1851Sys\\_Theo/st59.htm](http://www.gospeltruth.net/1851Sys_Theo/st59.htm).

<sup>39</sup> Placher, 117.

Finney's notion of Christian perfection is similar to Wesley's in that it requires constant effort on the behalf of the believer, but Finney takes this concept of human effort a step beyond Wesley's position by placing human effort at the center of his schema. Also, unlike people who espoused Wesley's views of total sanctification, Finney and his followers were the first Christians to append to themselves the formal title of "Perfectionists." Perfectionism was never an official denomination; rather, it was a strain of Christian theology that attracted many followers across denominational lines in the early- to mid-nineteenth century United States.

#### **Felling the Tree of Sin: John H. Noyes**

A twenty-year-old John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886) was in the congregation of one of Charles G. Finney's celebrated revivals, held in Putney, Vermont, in September of 1831.<sup>40</sup> Finney's sermon moved Noyes deeply, and this moment marked the beginning of his earnest religious exploration.

As Noyes developed his own theological positions, he determined that neither Wesley nor Finney had taken Perfectionism to its logical and Biblically mandated conclusions. He was, however, undoubtedly influenced by the Perfectionist ideas of Finney, Wesley, and others, despite the

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<sup>40</sup> Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane, 1993), 21,

fact that he “rarely acknowledged any such debt” to these earlier thinkers.<sup>41</sup> His unique brand of Perfectionism echoes the sentiment of both Wesley and Finney that believers can achieve sanctification during their lifetimes. His emphasis on this-worldly soteriology, expressed in *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church*, does not represent a significant break from Wesley or Finney:

We must be permitted...to say boldly, that the same rule which allows men to *hope* for heaven without presumption, allows us to *receive* heaven here without self-righteousness: and the charge of arrogance is due to those who hope for the gift, while they daily displease the Giver. The same Christ who will be the believer’s portion in heaven, is our righteousness and sanctification here.<sup>42</sup>

Another point on which Noyes would agree with Wesley, if not Finney, is the question of agency. For both Noyes and Wesley, the credit for human salvation goes solely to God—God’s grace is required for the molding of the human will toward holiness and away from sinfulness. Noyes makes this position clear in *The Berean*:

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<sup>41</sup> DeMaria, 17 note 40.

<sup>42</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *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), 180.

Is it imagined that the man to whom God in truth has given perfect holiness, has done some great thing? He has done nothing. The great achievement of his will which, be it remembered, the grace of God has secured is the cessation of his own works, and the commencement of an everlasting repose on the energy of the living God, as the basis and hope of his righteousness.<sup>43</sup>

Noyes continues this explanation of God's role in sanctifying believers by employing a metaphor of death; the sinner dies so that the believer might live a more perfect life in God: "He has simply died—and with his dying breath bequeathed his body, soul and spirit to his Maker, rolling the responsibility of his future and eternal obedience upon the everlasting arm."<sup>44</sup>

J. H. Noyes' this-worldly soteriological position—the insistence that believers can receive salvation from God in their earthly lives—and his emphasis on the role of God (over the agency of the human will) in sanctification represent Noyes' affinity with the earlier Perfectionist positions of John Wesley and Charles Finney. Beyond these similarities, though, he departs from these thinkers. Richard DeMaria describes Noyes' objection to the Wesleyan position:

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

Wesley had concluded after much consideration that even the trace of entire sanctification could be lost...Here, according to Noyes, he failed... Noyes argued that, although according to Scripture the salvation of the *sinful disciple* is uncertain, this statement does not apply to the *perfect disciple* whose salvation is assured.<sup>45</sup>

For Noyes, at the moment of salvation the sinner necessarily renounces his or her sin—otherwise, true salvation has not occurred—and can therefore be guaranteed redemption through God's grace. In a pamphlet entitled *Salvation from Sin: The End of Christian Faith*, Noyes explains this requirement of renouncing one's sinfulness in order to receive the gift of salvation and be certain of it:

[T]he glad tidings that came by Jesus Christ, presented to the world actual salvation from sin, and were so understood and realized by the primitive church. If this is the gospel, sinners are not *Christian* believers, for the faith which corresponds to this revelation of the good will of God, must be inconsistent with the commission of sin. If God sent his Son into the world for the purpose of saving his

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<sup>45</sup> DeMaria, 23.

people from their sins, they who trust him are saved from their sins, or God is defeated in his purpose.<sup>46</sup>

While Wesley and Finney acknowledge the *possibility* of entire sanctification, reaching a completely sinless state, for Christians, this state is a *requirement* of Christian faith for Noyes. He sees any trace of sin as a sign that the sinner is not actually a Christian.

For Noyes, the message of Christianity entails a complete eradication of sinfulness from one's nature; diligent effort to avoid committing individual sins, the kind of effort that both Wesley and Finney encourage in the pursuit of holiness, is not sufficient. Noyes makes this point by comparing the sinfulness of human nature to a tree, with individual sins as its branches:

Pride, envy, anger, sensuality, &c., are but limbs of the tree of sin, the stock of which is that *unbelief which rejects the righteousness of God*. The man who commences the work of exterminating sin at the top of the tree, or among any of the branches, will soon be disheartened by the discovery that the branches he has once lopped off, soon grow again, or send their juice into other limbs. We say, therefore, it is easier to

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<sup>46</sup> Noyes, *Salvation from Sin: The End of Christian Faith* (Wallingford, CT: Oneida Community, 1866), 38-39.

lay the ax at the root and fell the whole tree at once, than to exterminate a single limb.<sup>47</sup>

With this tree metaphor, Noyes again insists that the complete eradication of sin is a requirement, not simply a possibility, for the Christian life. To live a sinful life is to embrace "that *unbelief which rejects the righteousness of God.*"

A major, related, point where Noyes departs from Finney is on the centrality of the role of Perfection in the Christian message: Finney and his followers "made perfection but a secondary appendage to the message of Christianity, instead of seeing that it is the central concept which was revealed by Christ."<sup>48</sup> Again, for Finney, perfection was a possibility, not a requirement; Noyes saw the Bible demanding, not simply offering, total sanctification. For Noyes sanctification is the principal role of Christ's work: "Dividing salvation into two great parts, viz., forgiveness of past sin, and purification from present sin, it is plainly implied in nearly all the declarations of the Bible touching the subject, that the latter part is the *primary*, and the former the *secondary* object of the work of Christ."<sup>49</sup> While the forgiveness of past sins must chronologically precede elimination of past and present sin,

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<sup>47</sup> Noyes, *The Berean*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> DeMaria, 23-34.

<sup>49</sup> Noyes, *Salvation from Sin*, 3-4.

Noyes understands this forgiveness as a "means to an end," the end being total sanctification.<sup>50</sup>

Insisting that their faith in Christ had made them perfect, the members of the Oneida Community felt prepared for any observations or criticisms that outsiders could level toward them. Of course they felt that most harsh criticism could be dismissed as founded in misunderstandings or misguided faith—all the more reason for the Oneidans to make their practices visible to the world as examples of the upright Christian life. Criticisms made in good faith would serve to urge community members onward in their pursuit of total sanctification. The next chapter deals with some outside perspectives on the Oneida Community, particularly those that community members themselves collected in a scrapbook of news clippings.

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<sup>50</sup> Noyes, *Salvation from Sin*, 4.

### Chapter 3

#### "Peering into the Queer Life of a Queer Community:"

##### Outsiders Looking In

The previous chapter showed how Oneida's unique strain of Perfectionist Christianity had antecedents in the theologies of Wesley and Finney; this Perfectionism also heightened the Oneida Community members' consciousness of their own visibility to the outside world. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the community's collection of visitors' accounts as a moment of double-consciousness: each visitor provided an opportunity for self-presentation, and each published account provided an opportunity for self-examination. The Oneidans saw these opportunities as driving them closer toward the goal of total perfection.

Though their theology and social arrangements necessarily set Oneidans apart from "the world," members of the Oneida Community were not completely isolated. Indeed, they were acutely aware that they were being watched, and they were keenly interested in knowing outsiders' impressions of their organization. The artifact that attests most strongly to this claim is a scrapbook, kept by anonymous community members, of hundreds of pages of news clippings detailing outsiders'

experiences and impressions of Oneida from 1869 to 1879. The opinions expressed in the articles range from admiration to disgust to mockery; the community members who collected the clippings apparently saw no need to filter out negative views of the community.

The Oneidans' desire for an accurate assessment of outsiders' opinions of them was religiously motivated. They did not operate in secret; while their enclave was geographically isolated, they welcomed visitors, including journalists, to observe their lives. They conducted their business in full view of the public. Community members believed that observations and criticisms from outsiders would serve only to drive them nearer to the goal of perfection. Since this striving for perfection underpinned their every behavior, they could defend their practices, unorthodox as they were, against any assailant. They had nothing to hide.

### **Visitors from Near and Far**

Accounts of visits to Oneida comprise the bulk of the Oneida Community scrapbook. The community officially opened to the public in 1850,<sup>51</sup> and visitors came near and far to witness community life. A community visitors' register shows that most people traveled from nearby towns such as Chittenango, Oneida,

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<sup>51</sup>Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 81.

Oswego, and Auburn, but it also indicates visits from more remote locales: Chicago, Illinois; Boston, Massachusetts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Denver, Colorado; Washington, D.C.; and even London, England.<sup>52</sup>

A journalist from the *New York Standard* writes:

Naturally, it would seem that this was an unusual or curious people peering into the queer life of a queer community; but I was assured it was not. There is a constant stream of strangers, mostly women, passing in and out, and I should not wonder if they are not a nuisance to those upon whom they ungenerously thrust themselves. Indeed, I asked if this was not the case, but was only answered with a meaning smile, and the avowal that all who came were treated with kindness and courtesy.<sup>53</sup>

This report attests to the community's attitude toward visitors. Flooded by curious onlookers, the Oneidans were careful to make outsiders feel welcome in their midst.

They came for various reasons. The community hosted lavish feasts, mostly vegetarian, culminating in an annual Fourth of

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<sup>52</sup> "1862-1868 Visitor's Register," Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY).

<sup>53</sup> "The Oneida Community: Mormonism Excelled in the Atrocity of its Practices," *New York Standard*, August 1, 1870, collected in *Oneida Community Scrapbook, 1869-79*, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY), n.p.

July festival. A "Synopsis of Community Activity/Progress" reports that the community had about two thousand visitors on July 4, 1863.<sup>54</sup> In addition to sampling the famed fruits and vegetables from the community's farms, other visitors traveled to Oneida more explicitly to witness the strange behaviors of the members and to understand better the religious beliefs of the community. Marcus Mills "Brick" Pomeroy, editor of the *New York Democrat*, writes of his motivations for visiting:

We have heard considerable concerning your society—here hear your Community very highly spoken of. You have the reputation of minding your own business, living happily, prospering in your worldly affairs, and we have made a visit here for the purpose of inquiring into these things, with a view to imparting information to the public through the columns of *The Democrat*. This, gentlemen, is the object of our visit, and if you are disposed to answer, we should like to ask you a great many questions.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> "Synopsis of Community Activity/Progress 1863," Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY).

<sup>55</sup> Marcus Mills "Brick" Pomeroy, "Editorial Correspondence: Oneida Community," *New York Democrat*, February 24, 1870, collected in *Oneida Community Scrapbook, 1869-79*, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY), n.p.

Pomeroy, whose account pokes fun at the system of complex marriage but finally grants that the people of Oneida are in fact happy with their lot, clearly addresses a readership of people who are at least superficially aware of life at Oneida. His goal, then, is to provide his readers with a closer look that goes beyond hearsay; he sets out to write somewhat of an exposé. The *Democrat* for the week preceding Pomeroy's full account contains a teaser pointing to this "exposé" motive:

Mr. Pomeroy has been to Oneida, interviewing the nest of Free-Love, Fanatical, Religious Adulterers there, and his account of the visit is about the warmest specimen of literature the pen of man ever wrote!

Mr. Pomeroy is the only editor in the country who dare tell the truth concerning this mammoth "Hotel de Concubinage." So the public may look for a lively page of correspondence from his pen. News agents will do well to order largely in addition to their usual supply.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Pomeroy, "Red Hot for Next Week—Important to News Agents," *New York Democrat*, February 18, 1870, collected in *Oneida Community Scrapbook, 1869-79*, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY), n.p..

An account by Jane Cunningham "Jennie June" Croly<sup>57</sup> in the *New York World* describes motives for visiting Oneida in somewhat more subdued tones: "This visit was not one of mere curiosity. Advancing civilization is developing new forms of social evil, to remedy which everybody has a theory. The Oneida Communists have in certain ways proved themselves a great success."<sup>58</sup>

Croly's explanation of her reason for visiting Oneida shows a desire to examine the community as an experiment in socialism, a response to what she calls "new forms of social evil." Her assessment that the Oneidans "have in certain ways proved themselves a great success" indicates that her interest goes beyond sheer voyeurism.

### **Communism**

Jennie June is not alone in her approval of the communal lifestyle at Oneida. In general, accounts in the scrapbook applaud the community's successes in their socialistic endeavor, but they stop short of expressing a desire to join the cause of

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<sup>57</sup> Karen J. Blair, "Croly, Jane Cunningham," *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000, <http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-00385.html>, Accessed on 7 April 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Jane Cunningham "Jennie June" Croly, "The Oneida Community: Description of a Visit to the Strange Society of Central New York—Their Habits, Manner of Living, Characteristics, &c., &c.," *New York World*, August 30, 1868(?), collected in *Oneida Community Scrapbook, 1869-79*, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY), n.p.

socialism or endorsing it for general practice. The *Courant* of Hartford, Connecticut, gives a detailed account of John Humphrey Noyes's ideas on economic reform, indicating the opinion that Noyes's socialism is at least well-founded and -intentioned, even if it is not a feasible system for the entire country to adopt:

Mr. J. H. Noyes is admirable in one respect; he never attempts to shirk, or even soften, the logical conclusions which follow from his premises. He believes that communism is right, and the best thing for the world, and he does not shrink from avowing his conviction that the present fashion of marrying and raising a family is all wrong. He thinks the early American Socialists failed because they were too timid in carrying out their principles, but he thinks it a little too early yet to cite his own community at Oneida as a conclusive demonstration that those principles are correct. To be sure it is making money year by year, but he did not found it to be merely a successful business enterprise, and if it does not

grow to be something more than that, he shall regard it as a substantial failure.<sup>59</sup>

This description in the *Courant* indicates that Oneida is not simply a business enterprise; instead, it is a community based upon a complex ideology of social and economic cooperation.

The most notable exception to the press's approval of socialism in Oneida comes from "Brick" Pomeroy. Pomeroy takes issue with the loss of individuality that accompanies one's joining a communal experiment. He also argues that instead of truly standing for the common good, Oneida and communities like it simply work for the benefit of their own members; for Pomeroy, this priority of community members represents somewhat of an inconsistency in ideology:

A man loses his identity by this means, and becomes but a small cog in a large wheel, with no mind of his own, no great object in life, no continuous work to fit him for the accomplishment of a great purpose. He simply becomes one of a community which has for its object exclusiveness and withdrawing from the world rather than working among the millions for the greatest good to the greatest number.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> [No Title], *The Courant*, February 26, 1869, collected in *Oneida Community Scrapbook, 1869-79*, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY), n.p.

<sup>60</sup> Pomeroy, n.p.

Though Pomeroy takes pains to express his disapproval of the system of communism, he does grant that Oneida is most successful among communist groups: "The Oneida Community is without a doubt the most successful association of this kind ever established."<sup>61</sup>

### **Complex Marriage**

While the economic system in operation at Oneida met with almost universal appreciation, complex marriage fared less well in the press. Journalists who observed the sexual politics of the community responded with bewilderment, condemnation, and ridicule.

The *Daily of Lever* of New Haven, Connecticut, offers one such disapproving appraisal of complex marriage at Wallingford, one of Oneida's satellite communities: "These 200 people live together in promiscuous sexual intercourse. Every female is prostituted to the use of every man in the crowd, and is as much the property of one man as another."<sup>62</sup>

In the *World*, "Jennie June" Croly echoes this attitude toward complex marriage, despite her approval of the system of

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>62</sup> "The Wallingford Communists: A Protest Against Their Encouragement by Religious Societies," *The Daily Lever*, August 16, 1868, collected in *Oneida Community Scrapbook, 1869-79*, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library (Syracuse, NY), n.p.

communism at Oneida: "all these prostrating practices [of complex marriage] are known to physicians to be always injurious to all parties concerned, and a fruitful cause of local and constitutional disease."<sup>63</sup>

"Brick" Pomeroy writes that he "had rather bury a sister than thus see her become the property of everybody;"<sup>64</sup> like the writer of the *Daily Lever*, he compares the system of complex marriage to prostitution:

We can see no difference between a woman at the Oneida Community who knows no singleness of love, of heart, of affection, but who is the same to every one, time, place, and inclination controlling, and the woman who is the same to others outside, or living in a house of ill-fame, with the exception that the one lives a life in accordance with a religious fallacy or belief, and the other for profit or excitement.<sup>65</sup>

### **Community Responses**

The journalists whose reflections are collected in the scrapbook make positive comments about the system of Bible Communism, but they are unanimous in their disapproval of complex marriage. Still, the Oneidans saw fit to document this disapproval. Convicted in the absolute correctness of their way

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<sup>63</sup> Croly, n.p.

<sup>64</sup> Pomeroy, n.p.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

of life, community members probably saved these artifacts of public scorn as evidence that the general populace was misguided, not yet ready for the revolution in social organization that the Bible mandated.

Journalists' approval of the communistic system probably provided the Oneidans with some hope that the American public would eventually come around on complex marriage as well. For John Humphrey Noyes and his followers, Bible Communism and complex marriage were inseparable; doing away with traditional marriage (as a form of private property) was simply the next logical step in instituting a system of total cooperation. The contempt of journalists and their readers was no reason to abandon a practice that the members of the Oneida Community saw as morally correct.

Community members collected the published outsiders' observations because they were perpetually engaged in acts of self-presentation and self-examination. The crucible of public opinion could only help them in their pursuit of total sanctification. They could dismiss journalists' mockeries of their social arrangements as evidence of religious confusion or ignorance; they could hone their explanations of community

practices to respond better to earnest, well-meaning criticisms.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> For one such careful presentation of community practices and beliefs intended for the edification of outsiders, see *Handbook of the Oneida Community with a Sketch of its Founder and an Outline of its Constitution and Doctrines* (Wallingford, CT: Office of the Circular, 1867).

## Chapter 4

### **The Gaze Returned: Oneida Viewing Other Socialisms**

The Oneida Community's opportunities for self-presentation were not limited to direct encounters with curious tourists and visiting journalists. By 1870, nearly twenty-two years after John Humphrey Noyes and his followers had made their home in Oneida, the community had established itself as one of the most successful communitarian experiments in the country. The nineteenth century had seen an enormous increase in socialistic communities; with Brook Farm in Massachusetts, New Harmony in Indiana, and Shaker communities across the Midwest most prominent among these experiments. Some were more prosperous and long-lived than others; these communities had attracted the acute attention of scholars, journalists, and the general public.

Noyes had a keen interest in accounting for his own community's success and placing Oneida firmly within the tradition of American "socialisms." In his *History of American Socialisms*, published in 1870, Noyes turns his own gaze toward the socialism trend in the United States, presenting Oneida as an extraordinary member of this group of socialistic experiments and offering an interpretation of the virtues and shortcomings

of these "socialisms," including Oneida. He broadly defines the concept or ideology of socialism as "*the enlargement of home—the extension of family union beyond the little man-and-wife circle to large corporations,*"<sup>67</sup> and, consequently, the "socialisms" that he studies are groups that have organized themselves around this ideal of an extended family.

### **Motives**

Noyes, ever the scholar, had very specific reasons for writing a history of socialism in the United States. He had a religious and moral commitment to communal living, in a form he called Bible Communism, and he believed that it was the correct, Biblically mandated, way for people to organize themselves. As the founder and leader of a socialistic community, he was invested in the survival of socialism. His goal in publishing *History of American Socialisms* was for proponents of this system to learn from the successes and failures of those who had gone before. In short, he saw his book as a way of helping others make socialism work.

In addition to seeing socialism as a desirable and morally correct way of life, Noyes also saw it as a central element of American culture and, as such, worthy of close observation. He

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<sup>67</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1870), rpt. 1961 by Hillary House (New York), 23.

regarded early experiments in socialism<sup>68</sup> in the United States as failures, but he argued that the impetus for socialism lived on in the American psyche. Further, the failures of these early socialisms could be instructive, rather than discouraging. However futile, the attempts at communal living that Noyes set out to describe had irreversibly changed the American social landscape:

As a man who has passed through a series of passional excitements, is never the same being afterward, so we insist that these socialistic paroxysms have changed the heart of the nation; and that a yearning toward social reconstruction has become a part of the continuous, permanent, inner experience of the American people. The Communities and Phalanxes died almost as soon as they were born, and are now almost forgotten. But the spirit of Socialism remains in the life of the nation.<sup>69</sup>

By claiming that "the spirit of Socialism remains in the life of the nation," Noyes attempts to establish the study of socialism as a matter of national interest. He seems confident that the

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<sup>68</sup> Noyes focuses on the followers of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, two Europeans whose ideas inspired the founding of many socialist communities in the United States. The specifics of Owenism and Fourierism are outside the scope of this paper, except to say that Noyes saw them as "secular" forms of socialism and therefore doomed to fail.

<sup>69</sup> J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 28.

desire for communal living in the United States is an abiding feature of American culture.

Noyes argues in his preface that socialists must turn from theories of social cooperation and instead focus on facts. What had accounted for the early demise of so many communities with such lofty ideals? What had the successful communities done differently? He writes, "It is certainly high time that Socialists should begin to take lessons from experience; and for this purpose, that they should chasten their confidence in flattering theories, and turn their attention to actual events."<sup>70</sup>

If Noyes saw it as a crucial task to analyze and share the lessons of prosperous and failed communitarian groups, he also saw himself as unusually, if not uniquely, fit for such a task. He writes, "The author, having had unusual advantages for observing the Socialistic movements, and especial good fortune in obtaining collections of observations made by others, has deemed it his duty to devote a year to the preparation of this history."<sup>71</sup>

Most notable among the "collections of observations" to which Noyes refers are the notes of A. J. Macdonald, a researcher who, in the 1850s, conducted extensive research on

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

communistic associations and apparently planned to publish his own account of those associations. Noyes recalls Macdonald's several visits to the Oneida Community and its precursor, Willow Place in Brooklyn, describing Macdonald as "a somber pilgrim" who "had a benevolent air, but seemed a little sad."<sup>72</sup> He attributes Macdonald's sadness to his experience of the many dying communities that he visited for his research, "wandering from grave to grave, patiently deciphering the epitaphs of defunct 'Phalanxes.'" <sup>73</sup>

Macdonald died of cholera before he could complete his study,<sup>74</sup> but Noyes, already aware of Macdonald's work from his numerous visits to the Oneida Community, set out to find his notes and eventually secured the collections from the home of Macdonald's brother-in-law, "who was willing we should take them and use them as we pleased."<sup>75</sup> He adds that before he acquired them, the extensive collections were "lying useless except as mementos." Noyes calls his acquisition of Macdonald's research notes a "joyful surprise," and these notes form much of the source material for Noyes's own book.

Noyes speculates that Macdonald's aim in composing a history of American communities was similar to his own;

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

according to Noyes, Macdonald hoped to "give future generations the benefit of the lessons taught by these attempts and failures."<sup>76</sup> Macdonald's own preface, which Noyes discovered among his research notes, states another purpose. If Macdonald hoped to give aspiring socialists the benefit of the lessons of failed experiments, he also hoped to inspire tolerance of socialistic ideas in the general public. His book, had it been completed, might have been aimed more toward the edification of "outsiders" than toward the instruction of actual socialists. He writes:

It may help to waken dreamers, to guide lost wanderers, to convince skeptics, to re-assure the hopeful; it may serve the uses of Statesmen and Philosophers, and interest the general reader; but it is most desirable that it should increase the charity of all those who may please to examine it, when they see that it was for Humanity, in nearly all instances, that these things were done.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the failure of Macdonald's attempt at a comprehensive history of American socialisms, his work survives as a major contribution to Noyes's account. Macdonald, disheartened by the failures of so many communities that he

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>77</sup> A. J. Macdonald, quoted in J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 8.

visited, apparently would have composed a history whose goal was to increase the toleration of the general public toward socialistic thought. Noyes seems to focus more on the future of socialism in the United States: he uses the data from Macdonald and others' collections, along with his own research, as case studies for advising future generations of socialists. He acknowledges "a large debt of gratitude to [Macdonald] and to the Providence that gave us his collections," but stops short of claiming continuity with Macdonald's project: "The plan and theory of this history are our own, and widely different from any that Macdonald would have been willing to indorse [*sic*]." <sup>78</sup>

Noyes, drawing from data gathered by Macdonald and others, begins his *History of American Socialisms* by claiming his own special fitness for the task of describing and analyzing American experiments in socialism. His goal, he claims, is to provide a straightforward, factual presentation of the communities; he hopes that the experiences of successful and failed communities will serve to instruct aspiring socialists. He writes that his book "is, first and chiefly, a collection of facts; and the attempts at interpretation and generalization which are interspersed, are secondary and not intentionally dogmatic." <sup>79</sup> Noyes does largely succeed in presenting his

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<sup>78</sup> J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

findings in a non-dogmatic fashion. Of course, however, his own position as the leader of a socialist group and his perspectives on how best to pursue the ideal communal life do amount to a unique interpretation of the information he presents. His assessments of these communities, as well as his prescriptions for optimal social arrangements (and the philosophies that back them) provide an opportunity for viewing the "outside" world of socialisms as the Oneidans—their leader in particular—viewed them.

### **Revivalism and Socialism Reconciled**

*History of American Socialisms* is putatively "a collection of facts," but Noyes does depart from the facts and venture into interpretation in some important ways. First, he points to a deep chasm between two major movements in nineteenth-century America: revivalism and socialism. He posits that both have failed in their efforts at changing the hearts of Americans and that the central reason for their respective failures is that proponents of each have refused to see the merits of the other.

Noyes acknowledges the contributions of both socialism and revivalism to a general increase in optimism and hope among the American people. Next, he predicts that each will truly succeed only when the two movements are reconciled and work together for the common goal of uplifting Americans:

Working apart and in enmity, perhaps they have accomplished more for final harmony than they could have done together. Even their failures when rightly interpreted, may turn to good account. They have both helped to plant in the heart of the nation an unfailing hope of the "good time coming." Their lines of labor, though we have called them parallel, must really be convergent, and we may hope that the next phase of national history will be that of revivalism and socialism harmonized, and working together for the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>80</sup>

We have already seen that Noyes believed that socialism was a matter of national interest, given the hold that it had on the American mindset; even people who did not join socialist communities were compelled by its ideals. Noyes saw the groundswell of religious revival in the first half of the nineteenth century as an equally, if not more, national phenomenon. No one was unaffected by the revivalist fervor of the time. He describes this fervor as having a similar *telos* and spirit as that of socialism: "They are to each other as inner to outer—as soul to body—as life to its surroundings. The Revivalists had for their great idea the regeneration of the

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

soul. The great idea of the Socialists was the regeneration of society, which is the soul's environment."

Despite this shared goal of regeneration that Noyes cites for both revivalism and socialism, Noyes also maintains that the two movements *have* been "working apart and in enmity" and must at some point be reconciled. Noyes envisions in his *History* an ideal of cooperation between religious revival and the communal impulse. Indeed, he argues that both movements have largely failed because each lacks something that the other can provide:

Doubtless the Revivalists and Socialists despise each other, and perhaps both will despise us for imagining that they can be reconciled. But we will say what we believe; and that is, that they have both failed in their attempts to bring heaven on earth, *because* they despised each other, and would not put their two great ideas together. The Revivalists failed for want of regeneration of society, and the Socialists failed for want of regeneration of the heart.<sup>81</sup>

The strengths of each movement, Noyes claims, are well suited to the shortcomings of the other. The "regeneration of the heart" to which revivalists aspire calls for a radical restructuring of society, starting with the family unit. According to Noyes, "What [the revivalists] needed was to

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

convert their churches into unitary families, and put them into unitary homes, where daily meetings and continuous criticism are possible;—and behold, this is Socialism!"<sup>82</sup>

The "regeneration of society," which socialists claim as their *telos*, requires an overcoming of selfishness, an improvement of basic human nature. Noyes argues that a strong dose of religious devotion might provide this improvement: "as often as they came together in actual attempts to realize their ideals, found that they were too selfish for close organization... Socialism needed for its complement, regeneration of the heart;—and behold, this is Revivalism!"<sup>83</sup>

Of course, Noyes had a very specific arrangement in mind when he called for a system that would combine socialism and revivalism. He believed that a communal society, rooted firmly in biblical principles, had the best chance of succeeding and bringing about the kingdom of Heaven on earth. This earthly realization of a heavenly kingdom was, after all, what Noyes saw as the goal of both socialism and revivalism. The system that he envisioned was Bible Communism, already in practice in his own Oneida Community. He alludes to this arrangement and its connection to early Christianity as he describes the ideal reconciliation of socialism and revivalism:

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

In fact these two ideas, which in modern times are so wide apart, were present together in original Christianity. When the Spirit of truth pricked three thousand men to the heart and converted them on the day of Pentecost, its next effect was to resolve them into one family and introduce Communism of property. Thus the greatest of all Revivals was also the great inauguration of Socialism.<sup>84</sup>

Noyes does not mention Oneida by name in this discussion of a biblically-based form of communism, but he certainly seems to be pointing in this direction; his explanations of Oneida's Bible Communism in other works draw heavily on Pentecost imagery and descriptions of the apostles' communal lifestyle in *Acts*. His allusion to Bible Communism in *History of American Socialisms* is a subtle form of Oneida's self-presentation. He slowly and carefully leads his readers to the conclusion that Bible Communism is both practical and morally sound, with the implicit claim that Oneida has implemented the ideal system.

#### **Religious Communities and the Subversion of Marriage**

Presenting Oneida as the ideal combination of revivalism and socialism, Noyes agrees with other observers that religion is the element that separates successful communities from failed

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

ones. He quotes Horace Greeley's<sup>85</sup> "Reflections of a Busy Life:"  
 "Religion often makes practicable that which were else  
 impossible, and divine love triumphs where human science is  
 baffled. Thus I interpret the past successes and failures of  
 Socialism."<sup>86</sup>

Noyes allows that "American experience certainly tends to  
 the conclusion that religious men can hold together longer and  
 accomplish more in close Association, than men without  
 religion."<sup>87</sup> He is quick to point out, however, that a religious  
 foundation is not sufficient to ensure a community's success.<sup>88</sup>  
 The major factor that, according to Noyes, separated successful  
 communities from failed ones was a radical rearrangement of  
 marriage and family. The needs of the community must take  
 precedence over one's own spouse or family, or else the  
 experiment in communal living was futile.

Noyes argues that the Shaker communities, living communally  
 and practicing celibacy, provide the most striking example of  
 this subversion of marriage in the name of religious communism.

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<sup>85</sup> Horace Greeley (1811-1872) was the editor of the *New York Tribune*, a newspaper devoted to political and social reform. He also ran for President in 1872 on the Liberal Republican Party ticket, but was defeated by Ulysses S. Grant.

<sup>86</sup> Horace Greeley, "Reflections of a Busy Life," quoted by J. H. Noyes in *History of American Socialisms*, 138.

<sup>87</sup> J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 139.

<sup>88</sup> Noyes cites the failures of Brook Farm and Hopedale, two communities practicing religiously based socialism in Massachusetts, as evidence for this claim (139).

He also points to the Shakers as the most successful "socialism" on the American landscape and attributes their success to this rejection of marriage: "The Shakers evidently stand highest on the list of successful Communities. Religion is their first principle; what is their second? Clearly the exclusion of marriage, or in other words, the subjection of the sexual relation to the Communistic principle."<sup>89</sup>

When *History of American Socialisms* was published in 1870, the Shakers certainly stood as the most successful communitarian group in the United States. Mother Ann Lee, the movement's founder, had arrived in New York from England in 1774, and the United Society of Believers (as they were officially known) had been gaining adherents ever since that time. In addition to holding all of their possessions in common, the Shakers practiced total celibacy, abstinence from all sexual activity. This commitment to celibacy made the Believers "a spiritual family with the elders and eldresses functioning as their parents, making all men and women brothers and sisters."<sup>90</sup> Stephen J. Stein, a twenty-first century historian of alternative religious groups in America, attributes the Shakers'

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<sup>89</sup> J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 139.

<sup>90</sup> Stephen J. Stein, *Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 55.

celibacy to "[Ann] Lee's assault on the flesh,"<sup>91</sup> a belief that desires and behaviors "of the flesh," including sexuality, bore the stain of sin and should therefore be avoided. For John Humphrey Noyes, viewing the Shakers at the high tide of their popularity, celibacy made for flourishing communities not because it was an "assault on the flesh," but because it constituted "the subjection of the sexual relation to the Communistic principle."<sup>92</sup> For Noyes, communism is religiously mandated, and the "subjection of marriage" is appropriate because it serves the cause of communal living.

In *History of American Socialisms*, Noyes presents this subjection of marriage to the spirit of communism as necessary for the success of socialism. The implicit conclusion is that while the Shaker practice of celibacy has made for a successful experiment, celibacy is not the only option: sexual exclusiveness, not simply sex, was the problem with traditional marriage. The Oneidans, by extending the marriage relationship to their entire community, had overcome exclusiveness in sexual relationships and formed the best possible communal experiment. When Noyes published *History of American Socialisms* in 1870, the community had existed for twenty-two years. Noyes apparently did

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>92</sup> J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 139.

"not consider it old enough to be pronounced successful,"<sup>93</sup> but his arguments for combining revivalism and socialism and subjecting marriage to the common good implicitly place Oneida as the optimal example of an American socialism.

The preceding chapters have examined Oneidans' perceptions of and presentations to the outside world, including visitors and other socialistic communities. The next chapter presents mutual criticism, a practice central to the regulation of community behavior and to individual members' pursuits of Perfection, as a microcosm of the seer/seen relationship, which had been developed with the outside world via these interactions with visitors and examinations of other socialisms. With the practice of mutual criticism, individual members subjected themselves to the criticisms of their peers in an effort to see themselves more clearly and, consequently, become more perfect.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

## Chapter 5

### **"As Perfect a Mirror as Possible:"**

#### **Mutual Criticism in Oneida**

The intent of this chapter is to show how the practice of mutual criticism functioned as a microcosm of the Oneidans' interactions with the outside world. While the community as a whole paid close attention to outsiders' observations on life at Oneida and worked to present its theological positions clearly and compellingly, individual members participated in a similar seer/seen relationship with their peers within the community when they volunteered for mutual criticism sessions. If community members could see themselves as their peers saw them, they could come nearer to total perfection.

In 1846, John Humphrey Noyes instituted a practice among his Perfectionist followers in Putney, Vermont. The practice was called "mutual criticism," in which a community member would volunteer to stand silently before the entire community or a small committee of members and listen as the group listed his or her faults. The goal of mutual criticism was for community members to become more perfect under the close examination of their peers. The Perfectionist followers of John Humphrey Noyes continued to engage in this practice after they moved from

Putney to Oneida, New York, and mutual criticism became the primary form of governance and discipline at Oneida.

Noyes himself wrote extensively on the benefits and methods of giving and receiving mutual criticism, and Oneida Community members affirmed its effectiveness, both for individual improvement and for community governance. Criticism was helpful because it allowed recipients "to see themselves as others see them."<sup>94</sup> This theme of vision, mutual criticism presented as a mirror held up to the recipient so that she can see more clearly the error of her ways, pervades Community writings about the practice. This essay will provide a brief history of the practice of mutual criticism and its relation to Noyes's particular brand of Perfectionist Christian theology, detailing the Oneida Community's prescribed methods for giving and receiving Criticism and the benefits to the community and the individual, exploring this theme of vision and its importance in a community so conscious of its visibility.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Hand-book of the Oneida Community with a Sketch of its Founder and an Outline of its Constitution and Doctrines* (Wallingford, CT: Office of the Circular, 1867), 12.

<sup>95</sup> This paper is heavy with quotations from primary Oneida Community documents; I quote liberally from the Community's own words because I want to show that I am not reading these themes of vision and sight *into* the Community's methodology and teleology. Rather, these motifs are prevalent throughout their writings, and I hope to illustrate their centrality to the Community's purpose.

### **Background: Noyes and the Brethren at Andover**

John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community certainly nuanced the practice of mutual criticism; they stated its objectives and methods more clearly than anyone had before. They were not, however, the first people to engage in it. John Humphrey Noyes himself first encountered the practice while he was a student at Andover Seminary in the 1830s; he became involved in a secret society called "The Brethren,"<sup>96</sup> which was started at Williams College in 1808.<sup>97</sup> The stated goal of the Brethren was "to effect, in the person of its members, a mission or missions to the heathen."<sup>98</sup> The organization was kept secret, one former member writes, because "[t]he whole affair of missions to the heathen was then regarded as savoring of infatuation, as the supreme of folly. Very few thought otherwise."<sup>99</sup>

One method that this secret society used to develop in its members a spirit of individual improvement and an enthusiasm for missions was mutual criticism. John Humphrey Noyes was a member of the Brethren at Andover, but the organization actually began

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<sup>96</sup> This organization is not to be confused with the Church of the Brethren, a denomination that has its roots in the Anabaptist tradition.

<sup>97</sup> John A. Vinton, quoted in *Mutual Criticism* (Oneida, NY: Office of the *American Socialist*, 1876; reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

at Williams College in 1808.<sup>100</sup> In his *Confession of Religious Experience*, Noyes describes his introduction to mutual criticism in the society:

One of the weekly exercises of this society was a frank criticism of each other's character, for the purpose of improvement. The mode of proceeding was this: At each meeting, the member whose turn it was according to the alphabetical order of his name, to submit to criticism, held his peace, while the other members, one by one, told him his faults in the plainest way possible. This exercise sometimes cruelly crucified self-complacency, but it was contrary to the regulations of the society for any one to be provoked or to complain. I found much benefit in submitting to this ordeal, both while I was at Andover and afterward.<sup>101</sup>

Noyes, after the formation of the Perfectionist Community at Oneida, gave credit to the Brethren and the Congregational tradition as the "inventors" of the practice of mutual criticism. He writes, "the honor of the invention belongs to the missionary spirit of the Congregational Church, and I would as

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>101</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *Confessions of John H. Noyes: Part I. Confession of Religious Experience: Including a History of Modern Perfectionism* (Oneida: Leonard & Company, 1849), 4.

soon rob the grave of my mother as take credit to myself for what that church has done for me."<sup>102</sup> The Oneida Community's book *Mutual Criticism* does claim, though, that while the practice had its birth in Congregationalism, it remained an isolated practice within the secret society of the Brethren; it only reached a larger audience (and therefore its full potential) when Noyes introduced it to his followers at Putney and Oneida "as a standing ordinance of family culture."<sup>103</sup>

Despite being convinced of the benefit of mutual criticism during his time at Andover, Noyes did not initially institute the practice among his community at Putney, Vermont. Instead, according to a pamphlet published by the Oneida Community in 1876, "The little school at Putney went through a long discipleship before the system of mutual criticism was instituted."<sup>104</sup> The pamphlet describes the characteristics this "long discipleship" that paved the way for the practice of mutual criticism:

The process was perfectly natural. Love for the truth and for one another had been nurtured and strengthened till it could bear any strain. We could receive

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<sup>102</sup>John H. Noyes, quoted in *Mutual Criticism* (Oneida, NY: Office of the *American Socialist*, 1876; reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975), 13.

<sup>103</sup> *Mutual Criticism*, 14.

<sup>104</sup> "Mutual Criticism," (Oneida: Oneida Community, 1876; Reprinted in *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, ed. George Wallingford Noyes, Oneida: n.p., 1931), 100.

criticism kindly and give it without fear of offending. Association had ripened acquaintance so that we knew one another's faults.<sup>105</sup>

Finally in 1846, Noyes decided that the community's "love for the truth and for one another" were strong enough to be tested and refined by the fire of mutual criticism. One member volunteered to be first to undergo the procedure, and the rest of the community resolved "to hold up to him as perfect a mirror as possible" with their comments.<sup>106</sup>

After that first session, mutual criticism became a regular custom in Putney, and the Perfectionists took it with them when they relocated to Oneida. This theme of vision, of holding up a mirror to the subject so that he may see his faults more clearly, pervades Community literature on the practice of criticism. Mutual criticism improved the vision of the subject, and clearer vision meant increased closeness to perfection, the ultimate goal of John Humphrey Noyes and his followers.

### **Methods for Giving Criticism**

The Oneidans hailed the practice of mutual criticism as a method for achieving Christian Perfection, total freedom from sin. They were aware, though, that the methods by which criticism was given and received were extremely important to

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<sup>105</sup> "Mutual Criticism," 100.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

ensure that it was beneficial and not harmful to the recipient. The Community's instructions on giving criticism again employed the theme of seeing clearly: mutual criticism sought "only to destroy the husk which *conceals* [the recipient's] inward goodness;"<sup>107</sup> therefore, *revealing* the subject's faults would in turn reveal his or her inward goodness.

The persons giving the criticism must have clear vision, an eye toward improving the subject, not demeaning or belittling him or her. Above all, the Community must approach the subject of criticism with love, respect, sincerity, patience, wisdom, tenderness, and geniality.<sup>108</sup> Seeing clearly the shortcomings of the other did not require perfection in the givers of criticism; on the contrary, members who saw their own sins reflected in the subject of criticism might be apt to make helpful observations:

The feeling is natural that it would be hypocrisy to criticise an evil in others unless we are free from it ourselves. This is wrong. If we are [troubled] with a particular fault, that may be a reason for showing it no favor in others. Let giver and receiver look simply at the evil under criticism and demolish it.

It is plain that, if I have a mote in my eye and you have one in yours, I can see to get yours out better

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 101 (emphasis mine).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

than I can to get out my own. Each can help the other.<sup>109</sup>

This passage does not include all levels of imperfection in licensing people to engage freely in criticism. According to the Community's instructions on giving mutual criticism, to have a mote of dust in one's eye does not preclude helpful criticism, but "to have a beam in [one's] eye is another thing. If I have something in my eye that stops my sight altogether, I must first pull that out before I can see to cast the mote out of your eye. When one is blind he should not criticise."<sup>110</sup> If a person's own imperfection were so great as to be "blinding," then he or she would be in no position to bring others closer to perfection. Faults that impeded a person's vision to this extent might include a grudge against or desire to condemn (rather than to purify) the subject of the criticism, excessive pride, or combativeness. The spirit of the persons giving the criticism was exceedingly important to ensure that the criticism had its desired end: personal improvement.

#### **Methods for Receiving Criticism**

Mutual criticism sought to clear the sight of the person being criticized, but it also required a certain kind of sight

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

in order to work effectively. A person cannot submit effectually to criticism "if [his or her] eyes are full of tears."<sup>111</sup>

The Community's pamphlet also warns against a "childish spirit" when entering into a criticism session: if the spirit is childish, "its eye is on escape from suffering rather than on improvement."<sup>112</sup> The eye of a "manly spirit," conversely, is on improving the self and the course that leads toward that improvement; it "not only takes pleasure in the accomplishment of a good change in himself but in the process by which it is brought about. He not Only likes the meat, but likes to crack the nut."<sup>113</sup>

In addition to having one's eye on the prize of personal improvement, the subject of mutual criticism was also expected to turn her sight *inward*. The mirror that the criticizers held up was meant to facilitate a truer self-image. This self-perception helped to make the experience of criticism less unpleasant: "The secret of going through the judgment comfortably is to help judge ourselves."<sup>114</sup> This method of helping to judge oneself must occur silently and inwardly, though; the subject, of course, was expected to endure the criticism without responding.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

In addition to an inward-turned vision, the correct spirit for submitting to mutual criticism also required a determined eye. The Community used the example of a cat on the hunt to describe this patient determination and keen sight:

Look at the cat lying in wait for the mouse. Not a muscle stirs, but her eyes are shining with a keen flame. The flame shows her purpose, the stillness her patience. Nothing pleases God more than to see us lie in wait for improvement with a bright eye and without flurry.<sup>115</sup>

## **Results**

Each member of Oneida was expected to undertake the practice of mutual criticism with the patience and determination of a cat: the "mouse" being hunted was perfection before God, the "keen flame" in her eye the sheer will to pursue perfection unceasingly. A well-executed criticism would only serve to brighten and warm that flame; Community members spoke fondly of the positive effects of mutual criticism upon their characters.

In a survey conducted just one year after the formation of the Community at Oneida, many members describe the benefits of mutual criticism in terms of improved sight. Sarah A. Bradley claims, "It seemed to remove a veil that had existed between me and those who criticised me. I feel very much indebted to those

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

who have proved their love and patriotism by faithful criticism. I consider it a mark of love when a person tells me of my faults."<sup>116</sup>

Another member, Fanny M. Leonard, also points to the importance of criticism for revealing faults that might otherwise be invisible to her:

I think criticism one of the best means to improve character. Its effect on me has been to cause me to feel thankful that I have been placed in such a school, where I could have my most subtle faults searched out and *told me in love*, and that too by those I love and have perfect confidence in—for we cannot see our own faults, so well as others can see them for us.<sup>117</sup>

For John Skinner, mutual criticism, examination of members by their peers and spiritual guides, served to bring about *self-examination*. And since the members engaged in the practice with eyes toward love and patience, they reaped the benefits of *increased* love for one another. He writes,

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<sup>116</sup> Sarah A. Bradley, quoted in "Testimony of the Members," First Annual Report of Oneida Association: Exhibiting its History, Principles, and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849 (Oneida: Oneida Community, 1849), 47.

<sup>117</sup> Fanny M. Leonard, quoted in "Testimony of the Members," 47.

I am persuaded that the spirit of wisdom and of judgment has been given of God for this work, and also that it has been performed in the spirit of love. The secrets of many hearts have thus been revealed. Self-examination has been produced among believers, and godly sorrow for faults has wrought a clearing of themselves from those things that were offensive. <sup>118</sup>

Since the members engaged in the practice with eyes toward love and patience, they reaped the benefits of *increased* love for one another. Skinner's testimony continues, "I am confident moreover, that instead of producing enmity and grudging, the criticisms that have been performed have increased the love and confidence of the members towards each other."<sup>119</sup>

### **Analogous Practices in Other Traditions**

John Humphrey Noyes and his followers at Oneida certainly took the practice of mutual criticism to a new level and employed it in ways previously unheard of, but they were not alone in their desire to place individuals under the scrutinizing gaze of the entire community as a means of perfecting the spirit. Other Christian groups have employed similar methods for bringing about spiritual improvement in their members. Exploring practices analogous to mutual criticism

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<sup>118</sup> John L. Skinner, quoted in "Testimony of the Members," 48.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

serves to problematize the notion that mutual criticism was a bizarre or outlandish practice.

In the Anabaptist tradition, the ban (also known as "shunning") was not meant to separate a sinner from the community permanently, but instead to bring about a spirit of repentance. The ban sent a message that a person's sin *had been seen* and was unacceptable; the individual, ideally, would then turn his gaze inward and renounce the sin so as to rejoin the community. "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," a document written by moderate Anabaptists in Switzerland in 1527, describes the methods for employing the ban so as to push the sinner toward introspection and repentance: the sinner "shall be admonished twice in secret and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to the command of Christ."<sup>120</sup>

Closer to home for the Oneidans than the Anabaptists' ban was another set of practices intended to clear the sinner's vision so that he or she would turn toward Christ. These practices were known as the "new measures" of revivalism, and Charles Grandison Finney popularized them during the Second Great Awakening of the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. Finney, whose own doctrines of Christian Perfection

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<sup>120</sup> "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," trans. John C. Wenger (*The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19:4, 1947; reprint, William C. Placher, ed., *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, Vol. 2, Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1988), 31.

influenced John Humphrey Noyes's Perfectionist theology, employed measures such as the anxious bench, "a seat placed near the revivalist on which those who appeared to be on the brink of conversion could be placed and worked on intensively."<sup>121</sup>

Just as John Humphrey Noyes, in introducing mutual criticism to his followers, sought to improve their sight and thereby perfect their spirits, Charles G. Finney and the Anabaptists instituted practices that would purify the vision of their followers. The ban and the anxious bench are two such purifying methods.

### **The Inward Gaze**

John Humphrey Noyes, who had encountered a system of mutual criticism as a member of a secret missionary society at Andover Seminary, nuanced and expanded the system, introducing it to his followers at Putney and Oneida. For Noyes, this practice served two purposes: first, it was a means of Community governance and discipline; second, it made the faults of individual members visible to the entire Community so that these faults could then be made visible to the individuals under examination.

This notion of visibility was central to the members and leaders of Oneida, as is evident in their explanations of and reflections on the practice of mutual criticism. Making a

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<sup>121</sup> Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 187.

person's faults more visible to the individual and to the Community at large helped to eliminate the faults, and the Perfectionist theology of Noyes and his Oneida Community dictated the total elimination of sin.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

This project has examined notions of visibility and projection in the Oneida Community. The insistence upon absolute perfection as a necessary principle of Christianity, as well as the practice of complex marriage, a system of social relations in which all women were understood to be married to all men, made Oneida unique among nineteenth-century socialisms and religious communes. Oneida was also unusual in the success that it achieved: the community existed in central New York from 1848 to 1880, while only four of the thirty-two "socialisms" whose lifespans John Humphrey Noyes reports in *History of American Socialisms* lasted five years or more.<sup>122</sup>

John Humphrey Noyes's brand of Perfectionist theology, despite being informed by the works of prominent theologians John Wesley and Charles G. Finney, was unique in its practical implications. Noyes argued that the pursuit of perfection was not only Biblically required; it also demanded that Christians dispense with the "worldly" practices of private property and traditional marriage. Noyes and his followers at the Oneida

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<sup>122</sup> J. H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 20.

Community were intent on establishing a perfect Kingdom of Heaven on in central New York.

Themes of vision and projection pervade documents produced by and about the Oneida Community. The members of this most unusual socialistic experiment were clearly interested in the images that they presented to the general public. Their collection of news clippings indicates that they were acutely aware of their visibility; they wanted to be seen clearly, even if outsiders' visions of them were not always positive. Negative views of community life only served to indicate an ignorance of the theological principles at stake.

Aware that they were the objects of a public gaze, the Oneidans also returned the gaze of the outside world. John Humphrey Noyes's *History of American Socialisms* offers a look at what the members of Oneida thought of outsiders, specifically those involved in the socialist movement of the nineteenth century. Conversely, Noyes's presentation of the successes and failures of American socialisms provides him with another opportunity to present the system at work in Oneida in light of these other communitarian experiments.

Finally, the practice of mutual criticism, central to community members' constant pursuit of Christian Perfection, serves as an example of the Oneida Community's turning its gaze inward. Discussed in terms of showing community members "as

perfect a mirror as possible,"<sup>123</sup> mutual criticism provided individuals in Oneida with the most valued gaze of all: that of their peers and spiritual superiors.

Insights offered during criticism sessions were more highly prized than the observations of outsiders precisely because the participants in mutual criticism had all professed a common commitment to Perfection. According to Perfectionist theology, the Oneidans had been made sinless by God's grace through Jesus Christ, so their earnest criticisms of each other could serve only to purify each member further.

Historians have described the beliefs and practices of the Oneida Community in detail; they have speculated about the causes of the community's demise and the psychological profiles of leaders and community members. They have treated community practices as bizarre, pitiable, humorous, and fascinating.

This project is significant because it seeks to look beyond the social and sexual politics of the Oneidans, instead using the theme of double-consciousness, a modified version of W.E.B. DuBois's theory, as a lens through which to view the community's behaviors. Community members' acts of self-presentation and self-examination, as well as their collecting evidence of outside perspectives on their own community, all point to the Oneidans' acute awareness of their visibility and their concern

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<sup>123</sup> "Mutual Criticism," 101.

for seeing themselves as others saw them. My claim is that this concern for clear vision was a direct outgrowth of the community's constant pursuit of perfection.

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