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Sinless Stability: Religion as a Stabilizing force in the Oneida commune

Introduction

The Oneida Commune, founded in 1844 by John Humphrey Noyes, was a paragon of stability for over thirty years. Even in a time of religious social experiments, Oneida was radical. They shared everything—including spouses—and followed a version of christianity that to every other sect was the highest level of blasphemy. Why then, did the Oneida Community last as long as it did?

John Humphrey Noyes was able to create an exemplary and long-lasting community of the Oneida Commune because a confluence of religious factors. First, the religious time period made it easier for others to acclimate to Noyes's radical ideas. At the same time, contemporary ideals, such as those present in the enlightenment, informed Noyes's perfectionistic philosophy, distinguishing the commune from the many other experiments of the time and attracting professionals who were, in turn, important to the commune's stability. Second, Noyes's religious philosophy and beliefs selected for and encouraged stable interactions within the community. Finally, some of the spiritual practices of the Oneida Community encouraged long-term stability. Complex marriage created an in-group mentality, mutual criticism helped the community self-

regulate, and a progressive religious approach to gender-dynamics and child rearing meant the community attracted and retained strong, independent women. All these factors were vital to making Noyes's commune strong and stable

Good Timing

The Oneida Commune was founded during a time of radical reform known as the second great awakening. The second great awakening was a protestant reform movement that occurred in the early 1800s.¹ In this revival, many new christian sects began, each preaching their own way of thinking. This revival was uniquely american. A new generation of children born under a constitution that guaranteed religious freedom came of age and began to explore the repercussions of this constitutional right (Johnson 1).² Not only were the reformers themselves open to experimenting with radical new ideas, but the entire american populace was more open to joining these radical sects for religious purposes than ever before.

Noyes was able to gather a cohort of followers because he created a religion at this optimal time. His followers followed to him because the early nineteenth century was a time of messiahs (Jenkins 7). They tried new and socially abnormal practices because looking for salvation in unusual ways was the norm (Edmonds 15). At any other time in american history, the Oneida Commune would have flailed and fallen much earlier, but because of the way people thought of religion at the time, the Oneida Commune lasted for almost forty years.

¹ While not as relevant to the present essay as I had hoped, Philip Jenkins's *Mystics and Messiahs*, offers a fascinating read on this constant push and pull of religious orthodoxy and radical reformers in american society, while also explaining why the current panic over cults is perhaps not as new as cable media would have us think.

² Interestingly, so many new religions and sects were founded in Western New York State during this period of reform that it came to be known as 'The Burned Over District' as it had been 'burned over' by so many new sects including the Mormons.

The Enlightenment

To any new religious experiment, the hyper-saturated religious environment could be a curse as well as a blessing. In a competitive free-market-like religious economy, new prophets had to come up with a way to distinguish themselves from the mass of new ways to worship and interact with god. Even when a new branch on the religious family tree did succeed in distinguishing itself from the tangle of other branches, it often attracted people of lower classes (Kephart & Zellner 66). While these people frequently aided in establishing critical mass for a community, they often failed to provide the necessary stability to enable the group to endure. Noyes both distinguished himself, and attracted upper-middle class professionals, thus providing his commune with stability by incorporating late enlightenment ideals into his religious philosophy.

The enlightenment began in the late 1600s with the great discoveries made by Newton and others that began the steady march of scientific progress still present in our modern era. The enlightenment was a patchwork of many premises, but several were central to Noyes's ideas on religion and life.

Creating Agency

The Enlightenment gave humans agency as thinking, changing beings. So too did Noyes with his philosophy of perfectionism. The concept that man could be without sin was not an entirely original idea, (Kephart & Zellner 54) but the way Noyes implemented his breed of perfectionism was unique because it integrated enlightenment ideals. It gave community members the ability to live without sin. This attracted people of all walks of life (Kephart & Zellner 66), but especially professionals who wanted to expand the newfound agency granted to

them by the enlightenment, their economic mobility, and the American constitution to the way they practiced and acted as religious beings. Noyes used enlightenment concepts to give his followers agency, attracting searchers, those from other sects, and those in the American upper classes.

Abandoning the Old

The second way Noyes incorporated enlightenment ideals into his religious philosophy, thus distinguishing himself from the numerous other cults and sects that had sprung up during the second great awakening was through the dispassion with which Noyes razed traditional practices from his community. Man had advanced by research and observing reality, not by blind faith to past traditions. If Noyes thought that something didn't make sense, for instance the capitalist system or women's skirts (Kephart & Zelner 64), he would change them. This, too attracted upwardly mobile working class professionals, who were the product of broken traditions.

Valuing Education

Like enlightenment thinkers, the Oneida Commune valued education The Oneida Handbook says, "The Communists think much of integral education, and consider a knowledge of the practical arts not less important than the wisdom gained from books, and the culture of the heart and social character as most essential." (Hand-Book of the Oneida Commune) Education for children born in the commune was a given, and the community provided continuing education for the adults. Many nights classes were held in advanced topics from philosophy to Darwinism. (Klaw 98) Indeed, the Oneidas considered starting a college (Kephart & Zellner 64),

and while the proposal never succeeded,³ it demonstrates how much the community valued education. This pro-education outlook attracted those unhappy with the anti-education sentiments of some evangelical strains. It also invited upper middle-class professionals, who during the enlightenment, gained access to education that would have otherwise been unavailable to them, enabling their success in the new era.

Freedom of Thought

For what some might consider a cult, Noyes and the commune were Shockingly open to freedom of thought and discussion. They often discussed secular and controversial topics such as darwinism and rationalism (Klaw 6). This unusual practice had two practical for the stability of the Oneida Commune. First, it attracted free thinkers, especially those who were wealthier professionals, and second it prevented community members from leaving due to intellectual stifling.⁴

The Importance of Professionals

Economic success was vital to the spiritual success and stability of the commune. Professionals, attracted by the former factors, were important to the Oneida Commune in this respect because they acted as economic stabilizers for the community. Upper middle class people worked to make the community better and were generally industrious. Professionals were also generally better educated, more used to stability, and better suited to the social constructs present within the commune.

³ Sources differ, with Kephart & Zellner claiming the college didn't get past the ideas phase, and Klaw claiming it was a 'short lived experiment.'

⁴ This is not to say that the Oneidans were *entirely* open to other philosophies, Nordhoff shows this in his recording of a mutual criticism session where a young man is admonished for 'a leaning especially towards positivism and a lack of faith.' (290)

John Humphrey Noyes created the Oneida Commune at the ideal religious time period. Starting the commune during the second great awakening when people were seeking God in new ways meant Noyes was able to gain a cohort of followers who were willing to listen to his unusual ideology. By incorporating enlightenment ideals that had, by the 1800s, been firmly engrained in mainstream thinking, Noyes was able to attract upper-middle class professionals who increased the stability of the subculture. The religious time period, however was not the only factor that enabled the long term stability of the Oneida Commune.

Spiritual Beliefs

The Oneidans had several unusual spiritual beliefs that, despite, or perhaps because of their unorthodoxy, played a role in the enduring nature of the commune. First, the Oneidans shared the belief, unusual for the time, that God wanted them to be happy. This unusual idea made members less likely to leave the community and more likely to participate in otherwise socially unconventional activities. As a corollary to their happiness philosophy, the Oneidans believed seeking happiness hard work and community were God's will. This made people more likely to be content with the communal nature of work on the Commune. Another spiritual belief that provided stability to the community was the faith that all members had in Noyes himself. When he created the commune, Noyes proclaimed he had a direct link to God, as a result, his flock was less likely to question his decisions. Finally when choosing new applicants, Noyes was careful to select for people who shared all these philosophies (Kephart & Zellner, 66), which meant that the Community was full of people who already shared a set of beliefs that made the commune 'work.'

Seeking Happiness

The people of the Oneida Commune believed, according to Noyes's philosophy, that God wanted them to be happy. Noyes said that God wanted people to find as much value in eating strawberries as in picking them (Klaw 92). This was an unusual view for the time, as many churches continued to teach that Christians must frown on pleasure as a holdover from original sin. Noyes's alternative was beneficial to his community in a number of ways. First, like many of Noyes's ideas, it attracted those unhappy with the mainstream views, but, more importantly, it made community members more willing to participate in unorthodox practices, such as communal living and complex marriage, and made community members more likely to be satisfied with the results of said activities and thus stay in the community.

Work Ethic

Work was vital to the survival of the Oneida Commune. The economic stability of the community relied in no small part on the economic success of their ventures. It was thus beneficial to the community that the Oneidans held specific views on work that led to optimal efficiency in the work of the community. Noyes and the Oneida Community believed that God wanted each of his children to participate in communal work (Kephart & Zellner 74), and that each member of the community should find joy in the doing, as Noyes said, work should "become a sport" (Klaw 99). This led to several unusual practices that enabled the long-term sustenance of the Oneida Commune.

As a result of their belief in finding joy in living, the Oneidans created a unique work paradigm that optimized satisfaction with jobs and the community as a whole. Noyes and his community wanted to increase happiness, and because they were also willing to look at traditions

with a religiously enlightened eye, they crafted and continually re-crafted the program for work.

Each person was assigned a task, but those tasks could easily change. The Oneidans system was designed to prevent boredom and job fatigue. If someone was unhappy they could change jobs (P. Noyes 16), and did so frequently. For many people, this was an improvement over the capitalist society of the outside, and thus they stayed. The system also led to more productive workers which was a boon for the stability of the commune, especially after they started making traps and flatware.

The Oneidans believed in happiness. This in itself was valuable to the stability of the commune, but the way the Oneidans integrated this desire for happiness into their work program was vital to the long-term viability of the community.

The Great Leader

The final spiritual conviction that helped hold the Oneida Commune together was the belief that John Humphrey Noyes bore the will of God. Noyes founded his Commune claiming to have bidirectional communication with God, and indeed, believing Noyes was the mouthpiece of God was a requirement for joining the community (Kephart & Zellner 62). Ensuring that all community members believed in Noyes's philosophy was important to the stability of the commune because the community was more likely to follow him. Noyes was able to lay out a singular vision for the community and intercede when problems arose without having his flock question his authority. Because Noyes's vision was a stabilizing one, the community benefited from his strong leadership.

The religious beliefs of the Oneida Commune played an important role in the long-term survival of the community. The spiritual emphasis on happiness made community members more

likely to come to the commune and to stay, and the belief system surrounding work made the community highly productive. Noyes's relationship with God and the way he interacted with the community also, worked towards the stability of the commune. These spiritual beliefs of the members of the Oneida Commune came together to help make a stunningly stable system.

Spiritual Practices

The final theological tenants that gave the Oneida Commune a rock solid foundation were their spiritual practices. The Oneidans are perhaps best known for their unusual sexual practice of complex marriage. This practice enhanced the stability of the commune by creating an in group mentality without completely isolating the them. Another unusual Oneidan religious practice that played a role in stabilizing the commune was mutual criticism, which acted as both an emotional normalizer and a mechanism for self regulation. Finally the Oneidans were quite progressive in the way they treated women, which made women more likely to join and remain a part of the commune.

Complex Marriage

The Perfectionists started sharing spouses in 1846 (Kephart & Zellner 55). The unusual practice caused an angry mob to drive the early perfectionists out of their original home in Putney, Vermont (Kephart & Zellner 55-56), but, despite this negative first experience, complex marriage was vital to the success of the Oneida Commune. In complex marriage every sexually mature person was expected to have sexual relations with multiple partners. Both the practice of complex marriage and the spiritual foundation upon which it was built were important components of the stability of the commune.

The Placebo Effect

The spiritual tenants of complex marriage were an important part of the longevity of the Oneida Commune. The Oneidans believed that complex marriage was important to the cohesion of the community. They thought that normal marriage or ‘special love,’ was an outdated model which encouraged jealousy and unhappiness (Klaw 171). This idea may have been true, but more can be said about the placebo effect inherent to the beliefs surrounding complex marriage.

If a person believes that a treatment will have an effect, than it probably will, at least to some extent, regardless of the actual efficacy of said treatment. This concept, called the placebo effect could be applied to the Oneida Commune and complex marriage. The reason for the effectiveness of complex marriage as a cure for jealousy and individualism, and thus, a boon for the stability of the commune, might have been the placebo effect. That is to say, that complex marriage was a cure for jealousy and individualism for the Oneidans because they thought of it as such.

In-Group Mentality

None of this is to say that that complex marriage was not at all efficacious.⁵ Indeed, complex marriage played an important practical role of creating an in-group mentality in the Oneida Community without making the group entirely isolationist. As mentioned earlier, many cults and communes struggle to distinguish themselves to attract new community members, and then keep them there. Many new religious movements do so by offering a hook to the outside, but then completely isolating and indoctrinating their members on the inside.⁶ Aside from the obvious ethical problems with this approach, practically, if members are conditioned to

⁵ The etymological difference between effective and efficacious is small, but in this case vital. Efficacious is the effectiveness of a treatment or action regardless of external factors such as the placebo effect

⁶ See, for example, Jonestown and Waco

unquestioningly follow their leader regardless of common sense, it can cause mildly destabilizing events to have a disproportionate effect on the community. The Oneida Commune had a different solution. They were open with their unusual practices, and they made themselves into a tourist destination (Kephart and Zellner 65) Instead of completely isolating their members to keep them from leaving, they freely exposed themselves to the outside, and relied on complex marriage to keep people in. This is to say, that those few who were selected to join the community stayed not because they were brainwashed to be clueless about the outside, but because they had something that made them unique from the outside that they didn't want to lose.

Mutual Criticism

Another unique spiritual practice that stabilized the Oneida Community was mutual criticism. Noyes described mutual criticism a "system that takes the place of backbiting in ordinary society." (Nordhoff 289) Criticism offered a way for the community to self-regulate as well as for individual members to let out pent up frustration at others in a safe and societally condoned way. This self-regulation made the community more stable and every person more able to live with one another.

Self-Regulation

Noyes was often not present in the commune (Kephart & Zellner 62), and left much of the governance of the commune to senior members, much to the benefit of the community as a whole. To prevent being a divisive figure in his flock, Noyes only stepped in when major issues occurred, thus, for smaller interpersonal issues the Oneida Commune members needed a way to

regulate themselves.⁷ Mutual criticism provided a communitarian method of self regulation for when Noyes was not present or chose not to intercede, as Pierrepont Noyes said, it was “relied upon as a restraining and coordinating influence” (12). If at any time a community member, especially a senior community member felt concerned that another member was ‘slipping through the cracks,’ and failing to live up to community standards, they could call that person before some or all of the community, and that person would receive a thorough deconstruction of their personality (Klaw 7). Often too, the community members would speculate on the causes of such personal defects and offer up solutions (Nordhoff 290).⁸ This process allowed the community as a whole, to admonish members, especially newer or younger members, for misbehavior in a sanctioned community context. This was ideal for the commune, because instead of a single person telling another member off, which could lead to animosity and thinking that certain individuals ‘had it out’ for an individual, impressed upon the accused member an appearance of consensus and peer pressure, thus encouraging them to change.

Emotional Normalization

As mentioned earlier Noyes viewed mutual criticism as an alternative to backbiting. While surely some backbiting occurred in the community, by and large, the community was peaceful. As Pierrepont Noyes said in his memoir, “The Community religion was one hundred percent pacifistic” (60). More than a simple religious belief kept the community tranquil, however. Because community members had a channel to express their frustrations with other

⁷ It’s worth noting that Noyes used mutual criticism for the large issues as well, in fact participating when he felt the issue merited his attention. This was most likely to lend a sense of consensus to Noyes’s religious mandate, as well as perhaps to provide an example to his flock for smaller-scale mutual criticism

⁸ Though the Oneidans did not pray, they did have the moral equivalent to prayer cures in mutual criticism. Often, they believed diseases of the body were the result of moral failing, and thus, if they deconstructed a person’s flaws, that person could be cured (Nordhoff 295)

community members, the expressers didn't feel they had to suppress or suffer from a buildup of anger and resentment (Nordhoff 293) and the receiver of the expression could feel secure that he or she was not being attacked behind their back, and that any suffering they received through criticism was God's will for their self improvement. In this way, mutual criticism acted as an emotional normalizer in the Oneida Commune, preventing extreme instances of fear and anger.

Mutual criticism was an important spiritual practice for the stability of the Oneida Commune. It acted as an emotional normalizer by providing a way to let off steam without creating a negative environment for frustrated members. It also enabled the self regulation of the Oneida Commune by provide a method for sanctioned admonition via peer pressure. Mutual criticism played a role in the stability of the community both as an emotional normalizer, and as the primary means of self regulation in the Commune.

Practices Surrounding Women

The final group of spiritual practices that both attracted people to the Oneida Commune and helped keep them there, thus stabilizing the commune, was the way the group treated women. Oneida existed in a time when women were not empowered. Women were expected to give birth, to look after the children and the home, and nothing else. Churches offered little respite from this oppressive atmosphere: according to most contemporary interpretations of the Bible, women were inherently inferior. The practices of the Oneida Commune and John Humphrey Noyes attracted and kept smart, strong women by fighting, in large part, against this narrative. The very basis of communism demanded equality for women, and Noyes, in large part, provided it. The Oneidan's unusual sexual rules meant that women only became pregnant if they wished to, were respected for wanting pleasure from sex, and accepted as moral and physical

independents both before and after they bore children.

The Importance of Women

When the Oneida Commune's practices benefited women, they benefited the stability of the community. Unlike many cults, the commune couldn't rely upon feeding off of teen angst to reel women in and then keep them there with coercion, brainwashing and isolation. The Oneidan's rigorous work ethic and philosophy of self-governance meant that the community needed to attract intellectually mature women of many ages. To remain stable, it was ideal for the commune to support a lifestyle that respected women.

Sexual Regulations

Early life events influenced Noyes to develop a religious doctrine that rejected the idea that a woman's role in life was to give birth to as many children as she could⁹ (Kephart & Zellner 55). Noyes thought that women should be able to live without the burden of children if they so chose, and even when they chose to give birth, it should be on their own terms. From this ideal, Noyes advocated a form of birth control known as Coitus Reservatus, in which men would cease intercourse before what Noyes called "The final crisis emission" (Kephart & Zellner 55).¹⁰ The system was designed to allow women to find pleasure in sex without getting pregnant.

The set of rules for sexual relations in the Oneida Commune also made women more comfortable. A male who wanted to initiate sexual relations would proposition a woman using an older female go-between (Kephart & Zellner 78),¹¹ who would then pass the request onto the

⁹ Specifically that his wife (before he started the commune) carried four stillborn children to term.

¹⁰ This policy probably also aided in the viability of complex marriage, as it prevented children from unknown fathers

¹¹ At first the males would proposition directly, but it was discovered that this made the women uncomfortable, and so was changed.

woman, who could then accept or reject the man. This method respected women more as compared to the outside because it gave them a say in their sexual relations. In traditional marriage at the time, women were expected to provide sexual gratification for their husbands, whom they were often forced to marry for reasons other than love, regardless of their own needs (Klaw 131). The Oneida Commune provided an alternative method with respected both women and their partners and allowed sex to be a joyous practice that grew out of mutual attraction.

The Housewife Trap

Outside of the commune, women, especially middle class women, were locked in to the role of housewife. They were expected to do naught but mind the children, and live in a cycle of tedious drudgery looking after their home. The Oneida Commune, as a feature of its religious communism, broke this cycle. First, women were not required to have children. Women only had as many children as they wanted,¹² and were limited to one or, at most two (Kephart & Zellner 86), and if a woman had a child, the commune would distribute work for her. After the child was weaned, the mother could go back to working at the tasks she enjoyed participating in, safe in the knowledge that her child, and the cooking and cleaning were cared for by a group of men and women who wanted to do that task (Klaw 132).

John Humphrey Noyes made his commune an ideal location for empowered women by freeing them from the social constraints of the day. He equalized the way they work, and empowered them to have sex in the way they wanted. The commune freed women from the tedium of nineteenth century social norms. This liberation of women benefited the community by attracting and retaining the kind of women best suited to life on the commune in a way that made

¹² The reproductive program of the Oneida Commune was called stirpiuculture and was an early example of eugenics.

her happy to be there.

Conclusion

The Oneida Commune lasted an unusually long time for one of the most radical social experiments of its day. It was able to do so because of a combination of religious factors. Noyes, the commune's founder created a commune at the ideal religious time period, with the ideal contemporary fusion ideas. The commune's spiritual beliefs, chief among them that God wanted his children to be happy, created an environment that attracted upper-middle class members that helped stabilize the community and also made sure everybody felt secure. The combination of practices that the Oneidans followed also allowed for a steady commune. Ultimately, the Oneida Commune was a paragon of stability for over forty years, and can give interesting insights into religion and life in the time period.

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