

Three Communities—Two Views

Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century. By Lawrence Foster. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. 363 pp., notes, biblio., index. \$19.95.

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In his *History of American Socialisms* (1870) John Humphrey Noyes emphasized the equal importance of revivalism and socialism to the communitarian movement. "The Revivalists," he wrote,

had for their great idea the regeneration of the soul. The great idea of the Socialists was the regeneration of society, which is the soul's environment. These ideas belong together, and are the complements of each other. Neither can be successfully embodied by men whose minds are not wide enough to accept them both.

This perception provides the framework for Lawrence Foster's analysis of the Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community.

Foster argues that these millennial movements, guided by charismatic, pragmatic founders, provided a creative environment that made possible psychic and social regeneration. For individuals whose sense of religious security had been shattered by pervasive doubts and who were acutely affected by the disintegration of community and the ethical ambivalence that characterized the rise of industrialization, these communities

offered not a retreat from social order but a laboratory in which a new complex of religious and social values could be developed and tested. In short, they provided their adherents with "a new and more satisfying center around which to organize their lives."

Foster asserts that these communal movements represent serious attempts to restructure and reorder social life; they were not, either from an individual or a group point of view, negative, pathological responses to social and ethical alienation. In pursuing this line of argument, he aligns himself with a new generation of scholars who are reexamining and reevaluating the foundations, ideologies and social practices of the communitarian movement in America. Like Foster, these scholars (most of whom employ interdisciplinary methodology) are more sensitive to the serious commitment and idealistic aspirations embodied in these communities, and place their "success" in the social and personal rather than the political and economic realms, in the micro rather than the macro structure of the social order.

Foster's analysis provides a sound reading of the historical development of three evangelical communities based on a composite anthropological model emphasizing transition from social crisis and anomie to a new social order, and the process of growth in communal societies. Paradoxically, he finds that "... underlying these efforts at radical social change was an essentially conservative religious impulse . . .", that these communities were "'backing into the future.'" In the light of Foster's emphasis on self-denial and self-control as the essence of the

social and sexual behavior of these communities and their attempts to break down the code of romantic love so central to Victorian sentimentality, one wonders whether such radical change was not retrograde rather than progressive. Certainly, twentieth-century sexual sensibilities have arisen in a context of romantic love, and the progress of both societal and sexual ethics in the modern era has been toward less rather than more control and denial of the self and its velleities. The paradigm that most closely parallels the sensibilities of these nineteenth-century millenarians is that of the seventeenth-century New England Puritans who also insisted on the control of the will, the essential detachment from erotic life and the subordination of the individual to the communal interest.

In discussing changes in traditional sex roles and alterations in the sexual division of labor among these communal groups, Foster clearly distinguishes the subtle differences between them, but his perception of their fundamentally progressive nature renders his evaluation of changes in these areas somewhat too sanguine. As a consequence, his interpretation of their founders is too indulgent. While it is true, for example, that Ann Lee had "an intense concern to correct the imbalance that she perceived in the relations between the sexes," she also repeatedly admonished women to subordinate themselves to their husbands. She was deeply concerned about the sexual and maternal exploitation of women, but apart from this seems to have accepted the regnant patriarchal doctrines governing sex roles. Indeed, although she played a dominant role in the Shaker movement, she does not appear to have been concerned with expanding the religious authority of women. As Foster points out, the system of co-equal sexual "orders," which became characteristic of Shaker ecclesiastical polity, was instituted by Joseph Meacham after Lee's death. The dual "orders" maintained equality of authority in Shaker communities, but only in separation; women governed the female population and men the male. The rationale for this equal feminine power had perhaps more to do with insistence on strict separation of the sexes than it

did with any concern that women be granted equality in the religious realm.

Patriarchal Mormon polygamy, as Foster aptly notes, ironically provided a broader scope for women than has been traditionally assumed. Yet, when he points out that women voted earlier in Utah than in any other state or territory, he does not consider the political pressures which played a significant part in the granting of woman suffrage there. Mormons were concerned with the arrival of large numbers of Gentiles in the Territory and hoped by the enfranchisement of Mormon women to retain the political balance of power.

In terms of the essentially restrictive nature of communal sexual relations, it is no doubt true that "pleasure was not the primary goal of sexual intercourse." Nevertheless, for these communities the perception that eroticism characterized Victorian sexual sensibility provided the impetus for their various systems of sexual restraint. At Oneida, anxiety for sexual self-control issued in the system of "male continence." Paradoxically, that system insisted on restraining male orgasm while providing full erotic pleasure for the female. Female orgasm was not, as Foster suggests, an "unintended side effect" but rather an integral part of the system. The practice of *male* continence legitimized the ideological superordination of the male in the religious and social hierarchy of the Community. The rationale for changes in sex roles, then, may often be as important as the fact of change itself. A consideration of both is necessary for a fuller understanding of the nature of sexuality in communitarian societies.

Religion and Sexuality is an essentially sound interdisciplinary study of the social evolution and cultural dynamics of three sectarian communities. It quite properly emphasizes the intricate interrelationships between the development of religious doctrine, communal life and social change. The motivations and aspirations of both founders and members of these communal experiments are taken seriously and treated with dignity as manifestations of legitimate alternatives to dominant Victorian culture. Emphasis on the cultural creativity and religious

genius of charismatic prophets, however, obscures fundamental issues of their hierophantic and social power. For, as Vilfredo Pareto observed of utopian reformers (*The Mind and Society* [1935], IV: §2097¹): "The man who can do what he pleases with the sentiments [religious and erotic life in this instance] of human beings can also, within certain limits determined by other conditions, give society any form he pleases."

The author's response:

Louis Kern's thoughtful review of my book *Religion and Sexuality* captures many of the key themes of that work. My underlying concern was to understand at the deepest possible emotional and analytical levels why and how all three groups set up alternative systems which significantly restructured relations between men and women. Although aware of the disorder and excesses associated with these experiments, I was chiefly struck by their degree of success in creating a new order for their members. I believe that Kern's work in *An Ordered Love* and my own study reflect many common concerns. But our approaches were somewhat different, even as we dealt with similar materials. I tended to see the glass as half full, while he tended to see it as half empty.

Kern is correct in identifying my intellectual debt to John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida Community and the greatest contemporary historian of the communitarian movement of which he was a part. It is no accident that the quotations that introduce both the first and last chapters of my book were from Noyes. His dominant concern throughout his life was to achieve a balance between the seeming polarities of existence, both in his own life and in the lives of his followers. Writers have variously described these polarities as those between "male" and "female," "yang" and "yin," "apollonian" and "dionysian," "structure" and "anti-structure" and in a host of other ways. I agree with

Noyes that every society and every individual experiences dialectical tensions between these paradoxical polarities and must continually strive to keep them in some sort of creative, though ever fluctuating, balance if full health is to be maintained.

The great strength and the great weakness of Kern's own book is suggested in the opening paragraph of his review of my work. There he states that the framework for my analysis of these three groups can be found in John Humphrey Noyes's observation emphasizing the equal importance of the "Revivalists" and the "Socialists" to the antebellum communitarian movement. Although I do happen to agree that the religious revivalists and the secular associationists (or as Noyes called them, socialists) provided the key impetus for antebellum communitarianism, I was puzzled that Kern saw this as the key to my analysis. After all, I only alluded to the passage, in passing, on pages 86 and 87 of *Religion and Sexuality*, and then, specifically with regard to Noyes's own efforts, not those of the Shakers or the Mormons. Interestingly, however, that passage is highlighted on the first page of Kern's introduction to *An Ordered Love*. Could Kern be reading into my book his *own* insights, rather than understanding my book for what it is in itself? In this case, his point was well taken, but in some other instances the result is less convincing. As this example suggests, the strength of Kern's work lies in his often astute hunches about the materials he studies. His weakness is that even when the materials may indicate something else, he still tends to reinterpret them to fit his own prior perceptions.

In summary, *An Ordered Love* appears to be less a treatment of sex roles and sexuality in the Shaker, Mormon and Oneida communities, than a personal essay that uses these groups as a foil for Kern's own present-day concerns. Although *Religion and Sexuality* was also informed by present-day concerns, I believe that it comes closer to representing what these three groups really were trying to do and did in fact accomplish.