

Three Communities—Two Views

An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community. By Louis J. Kern. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981. 430 pp., notes, biblio., index. \$24.00, hardbound; \$12.50, softbound.

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This study seeks to look analytically at the reorganization of sex roles and sexual expression in three of the most controversial religious movements of nineteenth-century America—the Shakers, who practiced celibacy; the Mormons, who introduced a form of polygamy; and the Oneida Perfectionists, who developed a type of group marriage. Previous comparative accounts of these three groups have tended to be superficial and unsatisfactory, particularly in dealing with their sexual beliefs and practices. *An Ordered Love* is an attempt to provide a serious treatment of these much misunderstood experiments.

Although Kern's work and my own in *Religion and Sexuality* were conceived and written entirely independently of each other, they nevertheless deal with the same three groups and address similar issues. Both studies attempt to place these groups into their larger social and intellectual context. Both recognize the importance of religious and theological concerns as an underpinning for their sexual experimentation. And both pay much attention to the changing role of women in these movements. Topically, our works

are also in certain respects complementary. My analysis focuses on the origin, introduction and institutionalization of the alternative sexual and family systems, while Kern's is more concerned with the systems themselves and how they functioned after they had become established.

Yet there are significant differences between our two studies, both in philosophical approach and in the ways we researched and presented our evidence. My orientation was essentially anthropological, informed by comparative perspectives from other cross-cultural studies of millenarian movements such as those of Anthony F. C. Wallace, Kenelm Burridge and Victor Turner. Based on research in fifteen major collections across the country, including four months of the first intensive research on polygamy ever conducted by a non-Mormon in the central Latter-day Saint Church Library and Archives in Salt Lake City, I attempted to reconstruct what these three groups were trying to do and how well they succeeded in terms of their own objectives.

By contrast, Kern's study is essentially Freudian in orientation, modified by his strong commitment to ideological feminism and his work in American studies. Although Kern does make some effort to learn from these groups, he is primarily interested in evaluating their degree of success or failure in terms of his own analytical categories. His book is structured in three parts. The general introduction, drawing heavily on work in American studies, discusses the concerns about self, sexuality, and society which were reflected in nineteenth-century America. The sections on the three groups are then introduced by capsule psycho-

biographies of their founders, based on Freudian analytical categories, which argue that the emotional problems of the founders were the key factors leading them to introduce new forms of sexual organization among their followers. Finally, the longest and most important parts of the book deal with the alternative systems themselves, judging them in terms of the degree to which they did or did not achieve full equality between men and women.

Many of Kern's objectives in *An Ordered Love* are admirable; the weaknesses of the book stem from the degree to which those objectives are in fact realized. The study suffers from serious deficiencies in research, factual accuracy, and conceptualization which reduce its usefulness either to the scholar or to the general reader. Although Kern has done more research than most previous writers on these groups, he has not mastered the available literature on them. Research for the book was almost entirely conducted in four libraries, three of them in the greater New York City area. Kern's work on the Mormons, in particular, is inadequate by scholarly standards. No research was done in the extensive Mormon archival and printed collections in Utah, including the indispensable holdings of the LDS Church Archives which were fully open to non-Mormon scholars during the past decade. More disturbing, Kern appears unaware of many of the key secondary studies on the Latter-day Saints that relate to his work. Although the Mormon chapters concentrate primarily on the Utah period, the book does not even cite Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom*, the most important and influential study on Utah Mormonism in the nineteenth century. The treatment focuses on polygamy, yet does not even cite Kimball Young's *Isn't One Wife Enough?*, the major book-length analysis of that topic. Kern seems unaware of the basic Mormon historical periodicals, much less the proliferation of recent scholarly research that has been published on the social aspects of polygamy. His work on the Shakers similarly fails to take advantage of the two major Shaker manuscript collections at the Western

Reserve Historical Society and the Library of Congress, the holdings of which were both available on microfilm while he was writing the book. Only on the Oneida Community has Kern mastered the available primary literature, including the manuscript materials held at the Kinsey Institute, and it is no accident that this section constitutes the strongest part of the study.

Even when it is based on weaknesses in knowledge of sources, a book can have much merit. Kern does, indeed, present some interesting and provocative hypotheses on these communal experiments. Yet the numerous factual gaffes that appear throughout this book are nevertheless disturbing. Ann Lee, who founded the Shakers, had four pregnancies, not eight. She was not married "about 1753," but nine years later on January 5, 1762. The first anti-Shaker polemic was not published in 1783, but in 1781. The Mormons currently number not 2.5 million individuals, but closer to twice that number. Joseph Smith's vision of Moroni that Kern cites did not occur on September 21, 1830, but on September 21, 1823, seven years earlier. The Oneida Community was not established on land in Madison and Lennox counties, but rather on land in Madison and Oneida counties, with holdings in the towns of Vernon and Lenox (with one *n*). Particularly disturbing to the social historian is Kern's penchant for making flat pronouncements in the text on the sources of membership in these groups, when a close check of his notes often suggests that his assertions are based on tiny and unrepresentative samples. Such factual weaknesses are perhaps trivial in themselves, but they are unfortunately also reflected in serious misunderstandings and interpretive half-truths throughout the book.

The introductions to the core chapters on these three groups begin with highly reductionistic and poorly informed psychobiographies of their founders. The treatment of Joseph Smith, which is basically a warmed-over version of Fawn Brodie's interpretation, is characteristic of the venter of scholarly objectivity combined with self-righteous superiority that

is found in the three psychobiographies. Smith, in summary,

was a strange mixture of fiery Old Testament religious inspiration and frontier sharpness and chicanery. In his psyche a delicate balance was struck between a knowledge of his own guilt and the need to be considered innocent and saintly by his friends and neighbors. Years of experience had taught him that those whom he had duped and used would often be most vociferous in defending his innocence rather than risk the public derision that the exposure of their own folly might entail. The knowledge of his own guilt, however, necessitated some atonement, which he realized through his role of victim. And his church of Saints was created in his own image.

Any serious psychoanalyst today would hesitate to jump to conclusions about what was going on in the innermost recesses of a patient's mind, yet Kern is prepared, without even reading Smith's manuscript letters and writings or accounts of those who knew him most intimately, to pass a flat judgment on his motives that even Fawn Brodie ultimately shied away from making. Note the hostile and sensationalistic words which are used in the statement: "chicanery," "guilt," "duped," "folly," "victim." How does Kern know what Smith really thought and felt?

A similar style of analysis also characterizes the treatments of Ann Lee and John Humphrey Noyes. It is clear that an element of psychopathology was present in these individuals, but for Kern to criticize Ann Lee for her "voyeuristic obsession with the sexual irregularities of others" and then himself voyeuristically dwell on her most extreme statements to the exclusion of more tempered and reflective ones seems to be to reduce a very complex and remarkable woman to a psychological caricature. The analysis of John Humphrey Noyes is even more disturbing, in view of the authoritative psychoanalytically-oriented study by Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Be*

Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse. Based on prodigious research in the primary Oneida materials and in recent literature on ego psychology, Thomas has shown how Noyes, though riven by conflict and full of contradictions, was nevertheless able to find the strength to reconcile those contradictions and create a warm and loving community for himself and his followers. Such a complex and highly differentiated portrait is largely missing in the stick figure of Noyes that emerges in *An Ordered Love*. Indeed, I have often thought that a more interesting exercise than writing a Freudian analysis of John Humphrey Noyes would be to use Noyes's own sophisticated sexual theories to analyze Sigmund Freud's life and work! Truly original thinkers must be understood, at least in part, in their own terms, instead of being forced into some other mold in which they do not fit.

One of the most admirable features of this study is the attention it gives to the theological concerns and beliefs that underlay these movements. Few previous comparative treatments of these groups have recognized the fundamental importance that religion had for them. Even Mormonism often has been viewed simply as a bizarre product of its antebellum social milieu, with no inner integrity and coherence of its own. Yet although Kern correctly recognizes that religious concerns were closely linked with sexual experimentation in these groups, he often fails to understand fully the theological beliefs themselves. If he has difficulty grasping a belief such as the Mormon conception of the godhead, he conveniently dismisses it as "rudimentary, unsophisticated, and often contradictory." While it is true that early Mormonism, like almost all other millenarian movements including Christianity itself, was eclectic and highly syncretistic, the important point is that there is an internal logic in successful movements by which apparent contradictions are overcome or held in creative tension. Dismissing a belief one does not fully understand as "contradictory" does little to advance historical scholarship.

Occasionally, as in his statements that early Mormons were "not concerned with the problem of selfishness" and that "private property was at the very heart of Mormonism," Kern completely misrepresents the early Mormon emphasis. It unequivocally stressed that individual concerns and advancement were to be subordinated to those of the group. Mormons today may sometimes seem to be the ultimate advocates of "free enterprise," at least at the national level, but in the nineteenth century they were staunch opponents of the disruptive individualism which had increasingly come to prevail during the Jacksonian period. Not to understand this is to fail to grasp the heart of the early Mormon movement.

The most valuable and well-researched sections of this study deal with how the alternative systems set up by these three groups restructured relations between men and women. In these sections, especially on the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists, Kern provides an extremely detailed and generally reliable assessment of life in their post-Civil War communities. His work on Oneida is particularly explicit, even including information from the papers at the Kinsey Institute on acceptable sexual positions used in that community. Kern in these sections moves somewhat away from Freudianism toward ideological feminism. He stresses that all of these groups, even the Shakers, can be criticized for not giving women complete equality with men. He also points out that, contrary to popular opinion, Mormon polygamy was by no means uniformly degrading to women. These conclusions, though hardly surprising to anyone familiar with the primary materials, nevertheless provide a useful corrective to popular accounts which tend to idealize the role of women in the Shaker and Oneida Perfectionist communities and condemn the Mormon treatment of women.

Yet when Kern has shown by massive and well-researched evidence that a group such as the Oneida Community raised women's status by comparison with the larger society but failed to usher in a sexually egalitarian millennium, what has he demonstrated? None of these

groups made any pretense that they believed in total equality for women (or for men either). Instead they argued that the individual desires and activities of both men and women should be subordinated to the good of the larger community. One wonders how useful it is to criticize people of another age for failing to achieve our own, imperfectly realized, standards of absolute equality for men and women if they were, in fact, trying to accomplish something quite different.

When contrasted with most previous comparative treatments of these groups, *An Ordered Love* has important strengths, both in terms of the extent of its research and the quality of its arguments. Yet the study is frustrating because it could have been so much better than it is. Although Kern has sifted through large amounts of material, particularly on the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists, his use of that material is often unreliable and he writes in a diffuse and convoluted style. In analyzing the ways relations between men and women actually were restructured in these communal experiments and how such restructuring was related to the changing role of women in Victorian America, Kern has made an important contribution and raised provocative hypotheses for further investigation. Yet the study ultimately fails to pull together its evidence and insights into a fully coherent and convincing whole.

The author's response:

Lawrence Foster's reading of my book *An Ordered Love*, although apparently a detailed one, does not ultimately achieve a level of thoughtful, critical evaluation that might better have served the interests of his readers and contributed to a more thoroughgoing historical understanding of questions of religion and sexuality in communitarian movements. He has carefully identified several errors in the text of my work. Indeed, in some cases he has located legitimate typographical errors and editorial oversights, and I must stand in his debt for the consideration and time invested in the arduous process of ferreting them out. Unfortunately, he has not always exercised the same care and zeal in correcting them that went into their discovery.

Foster is correct in stating that the first edition of the earliest anti-Shaker polemic was not published in 1783, but neither was it published in 1781 as he maintains. The pamphlet in question, Valentine W. Rathbun's *Some Brief Hints of a Religious Scheme, etc.*, was published in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1782. The version I have used throughout, however, is the New York edition of 1783. Other questions are less clearly matters of fact but rather matters of sources and interpretation. It is true that Ann Lee bore four children, but that does not preclude her from having been, as Shaker tradition maintains, pregnant eight times. The estimate of the number of Mormon adherents, which appears in a footnote in my book, was derived from the *New York Times*. No doubt Foster's estimate, informed as it is by close contact with members of the Church, is more accurate. It remains true, however, that all estimates of total church membership are problematical. The current estimate of total membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints given in the most recent edition of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* gives a total of 2,706,000, a figure closer to mine than Foster's.

It is especially difficult to review a book closely paralleling one's own in the thematic concern. The problem of achieving a measure of openness about the subject is particularly taxing. While there will always be questions about sources consulted, interpretation and the underlying philosophical assumptions of any historical work, they appear more significant and may be weighed disproportionately the closer one is to the subject of the study in question. From this perspective, Foster's review was somewhat disturbing in its insistence on viewing my work through the prism of his own and in a perhaps over-zealous attempt to insure that certain aspects of his own work are not overlooked.

Foster attacks the psychobiographies of the founders which appear as brief introductions to the three major sections of my book as reductionist. He overlooks my caveat that "these biographies are not intended to be complete but rather suggestive of the relationship between the experiences of individuals and the

ideological and structural dimensions of the communities they founded." He also obscures the sociological dimension of my work in his concentration on psychological matters. My aim in this work was not, as Foster implies, to examine these communities as outgrowths of the psychopathology of their founders, but rather to investigate the ways in which their personal concerns and problems overlapped with those of nineteenth-century American culture as a whole and provided institutionalized solutions to problems of sexuality and sexual roles that other individuals who became members of these communities found sound and sensible.

These three religious communities arose in a context of nineteenth-century anxiety over the role of the self in society, the function and place of the family in American culture and the nature of proper sexual behavior for the individual as it developed in the consideration of the two preceding questions. I have attempted to view these voluntary societies throughout my book as representative of social and sexual alternatives to broader nineteenth-century American culture. As the title of my book indicates, I view these communities as attempting to reconstitute an orderly, stable relationship between the sexes that is grounded in a patriarchal vision of society. Foster's concentration on the psychobiographical thus misrepresents the overall concern of my book and provides an inadequate notion of the tendency of its analysis and interpretation.

Despite their similarities, *An Ordered Love* and *Religion and Society* are very different books. Foster is concerned with the history of the development of these three communities, and especially with the creative religious leadership of their founders. He discusses communal sexuality primarily as an outgrowth of religious and moral concern. My work focuses on questions of sexual ideology, sexual behavior and sex roles as central organizing principles in the development of the communal social structure. Theological and moral concerns provide an essential foundation out of which alternative visions of the relationship between the