

Sex and Prophetic Power: A Comparison of John Humphrey Noyes, Founder of the Oneida Community, with Joseph Smith, Jr., the Mormon Prophet

Lawrence Foster

THE EXTRAORDINARILY CLOSE yet often highly conflicted connection between religious and sexual impulses and expression has long been noted by scholars.¹ Dynamically expansive new religious movements, in particular, often experience sharp polarities between efforts to control, curtail, or redirect sexual energies, on the one hand, and impulses to open up, broaden, and extend sexual expression in new directions, on the other. Such tensions can be intense within a single individual, as is vividly sug-

1. Although this relationship has frequently been noted, it has far less frequently been analyzed systematically. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions* (Oxford: One World, 1996), provides an overview of the role of sexuality in the major religions of the world. Revealing analyses of such impulses in new and charismatic religious movements include I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971); William Sargant, *The Mind Possessed: A Physiology of Possession, Mysticism and Faith Healing* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973); and Susan Jean Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994). My own study *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), which serves as the basis for much of the following discussion, was very concerned with such issues, as the title indicates.

gested in Somerset Maugham's short story "Rain," in which a sexually rigid missionary ultimately succumbs to the temptations of the flesh.² Charismatic religious prophets, in particular, often embody within themselves conflicting tendencies toward extremes of sexual control or license.

The complexities and ambiguities of such tendencies first became apparent to me nearly thirty years ago when I began studying the Shakers, who introduced and required strict celibacy in their semi-monastic communities in antebellum America, and the Oneida Perfectionists, who introduced within their communities a form of group marriage or "free love" that the journalist Charles Nordhoff once colorfully characterized as a "seemingly unprecedented combination of polygamy and polyandry, with certain religious and social restraints."³

On the surface, it might seem hard to imagine two more diametrically opposed groups. Yet, in a whole host of ways, the two groups were strikingly similar. John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the free-love Oneida Community, developed a theological system that was essentially a mirror image of that of the celibate Shakers and admired them as the only group other than his own which even approached a correct understanding of the heavenly model of religious and social order.⁴

Elsewhere the extraordinary and ambiguous kinship between the two seemingly polar opposite movements of the Shakers and Oneida Community is developed more fully.⁵ This essay, instead, will compare the efforts of John Humphrey Noyes and his followers at Oneida in the late 1840s to develop a system of complex marriage and the efforts of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., earlier that same decade to introduce a form of plural marriage among his closest followers in Nauvoo, Illinois. The essay will begin with some reflections on the relationship between religious and sexual impulses in such new religious movements. Then it will explore the religious and sexual dynamics at Oneida, presenting some important new material that suggests the extraordinary importance of Oneida's sexual system in maintaining loyalty to the religious community there. Finally, the essay will suggest how this new understanding of the religious and sexual dynamics at Oneida may help in understanding puzzling aspects of why and how Joseph Smith may have felt compelled, as by "an angel with a drawn sword," to institute plural marriage or lose his prophetic powers.

2. W. Somerset Maugham, "Rain," in *The Complete Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham*, Vol. 1 (London: Heinemann), 1-38.

3. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper, 1875), 271.

4. *Handbook of the Oneida Community* (Wallingford, CT: Office of the Circular, 1867), 60.

5. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 88-90. Also see Stow Persons, "Christian Communitarianism in America," in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 1:125-51.

I

As a starting point for these reflections, let us turn to a powerful statement by a Viennese doctor whose work remains influential and controversial, Sigmund Freud. His great study *Civilization and Its Discontents* begins with this electrifying statement: "The impression forces itself upon one that men measure by false standards, that everyone seeks power, success, riches for himself and admires others who attain them, while undervaluing the truly precious things in life."⁶ Freud goes on, in a rare instance of willingness to admit his own fallibility, to discuss how his dear friend Romaine Rolland had taken issue with Freud's argument in *The Future of an Illusion* that religion was nothing more than a projection of childish recollections of an all-powerful father figure. Rolland, while admitting that this could well be the primary basis for popular religious belief, argued that a deeper source of religion was an emotion that he called "a sensation of 'eternity,' a feeling of something limitless, unbounded, something 'oceanic'"—"a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole."⁷

Freud, while admitting that he had never himself experienced such a feeling, speculated that it might well be related to the emotions experienced in sexual union. As he put it: "At its height the state of being in love threatens to obliterate the boundaries between ego and object. Against all the evidence of his senses the man in love declares that he and his beloved are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact."⁸ While one need not accept Freud's speculations as to the sources of the sense of oceanic boundlessness in sexual—or religious—experiences, the apparent similarities between the accounts of many mystics describing their sense of oneness with God and of lovers describing their sense of union with each other is nevertheless striking. As only one case in point, many of St. Teresa of Avila's ecstatic effusions could easily be read as descriptive of the emotions associated with sexual union.⁹

Further insights into this complex relationship is suggested in a brilliant recent book which may well do for our understanding of the psychology of charismatic religious personalities what William James's study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* did a century ago for the

6. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Joan Riviere, trans. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, n.d.; originally published, 1930), 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

8. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

9. For instance, she describes her vision of an angel as follows: "In his hand I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God." Quoted in Parinder, *Sexual Morality*, 218.

broadier topic of religious experience as a whole. Written by Len Oakes, for eleven years the participant-observer historian of a New Zealand religious commune that could be viewed as a cross between the Esalen Institute, the Rajneeshees, and the Oneida Community, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* presents a solid qualitative and quantitative analysis of the characteristics and process of psychological development of prophetic leaders in eighteen contemporary New Zealand communal groups.¹⁰

Most relevant for this analysis is Oakes's chapter on "The Charismatic Moment," which focuses on what Charles Lindholm has described as an "ecstatic transcendent experience opposed to the alienation and isolation of the mundane world."¹¹ This emotionally transformative "ritual process" is described by anthropologist Victor Turner and others in terms of an "electrifying blurring of boundaries."¹² In this context, Oakes reflects on the "blurred line between sexuality and mysticism" and the "amoral nature of the charismatic experience" that sometimes provides individuals with "the sense of a truth so great, some ecstasy so powerful, that it takes the group beyond normal morality and into the supra-divine realm."¹³ "Such total dissolution of the personality produces an eternal 'moment' wherein but One Thing is needful: to dissolve one's being into the Being of God as mediated by the prophet—the master of the techniques of ecstasy."¹⁴

But perhaps the most incisive analytical approach to such phenomena and their interrelation is provided by John Humphrey Noyes himself, who was not only an astute community organizer but a brilliant, if highly idiosyncratic, social theorist.¹⁵ Noyes summarized the relationship between religious and sexual impulses in antebellum revivalism as follows:

Revivals are in their nature theocratic; and a theocracy has an inexpugnable tendency to enter the domain of society and revolutionize the relations of man and wife. The resulting new forms of society will differ as the civilization and inspiration of the revolutionists differ.¹⁶

10. Len Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997). Oakes's key argument is that certain childhood experiences may influence prophetic figures to view the world in narcissistic terms, convinced that their own personal experience provides a universally valid paradigm for the world. Oakes's typology of the stages of development of prophetic leadership throughout an individual's life is as suggestive for such figures as Erik Erikson's theory of the developmental stages is for normal personalities.

11. *Ibid.*, 144.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 149.

14. *Ibid.*, 150.

15. Excerpts from the letter are printed in William Hepworth Dixon's *Spiritual Wives* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), 347-53.

16. *Ibid.*, 350.

The course of things may be re-stated thus: Revivals lead to religious love; religious love excites the passions; the converts, finding themselves in theocratic liberty, begin to look about for their mates and their paradise. Here begins divergence. If women have the lead, the feminine idea that ordinary wedded love is carnal and unholy rises and becomes a ruling principle. Mating on the Spiritual plan, with all the heights and depths of sentimental love, becomes the order of the day. Then, if a prudent Mother Ann is at the head of affairs, the sexes are fenced off from each other, and carry on their Platonic intercourse through the grating. ... On the other hand, if the leaders are men, the theocratic impulse takes the opposite direction, and polygamy in some form is the result. Thus Mormonism is the masculine form, as Shakerism is the feminine form, of the more morbid products of Revivals.

Our Oneida Socialism, too, is a masculine product of the great Revival.¹⁷

It is notable that all the socialisms that have sprung from revivals have prospered. They are all utterly opposed to each other; some of them must be false and bad; yet they all make the wilderness blossom around them like the rose. ... however false and mutually repugnant the religious socialisms may be in their details, they are all based on the *theocratic* principle—they all recognize the right of religious inspiration to shape society and dictate the form of family life.¹⁸

II

With the foregoing perspectives in mind, how might the relationship between religious and sexual impulses in the life and prophetic leadership of John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community he founded best be understood? Noyes, despite his great interest in sexuality and proper forms of sexual expression, always emphasized the primacy of *religious* over sexual issues. As he put it in his 1848 "Bible Argument" manifesto,¹⁹ the first necessity was a restoration of "right relations with God." Only then could "right relations between the sexes" be reestablished. As he put it: "any attempt to revolutionize sexual morality before settlement with God, is out of order."²⁰

Since Noyes had already securely established the religious foundations for himself and his followers by 1848, the "Bible Argument" primarily addresses the second issue that would be the key to the Oneida

17. *Ibid.*, 351.

18. *Ibid.*, 352-53.

19. For the full text of the "Bible Argument Defining the Relations of the Sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven," see *The First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (Oneida Reserve, NY: Leonard, 1849), 18-42, reprinted in *Bible Communism: A Compilation of the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Branches* (Brooklyn, NY: Office of the Circular, 1853), 24-64.

20. "Bible Argument," 28.

Community he was founding—how right relations between the sexes should be restored within a holy community. These ideas went back to Noyes's own background as an extremely shy and compulsive young adult who had struggled to understand his own impulses and to determine why so many of the Perfectionists with whom he associated were engaged in such erratic and often self-destructive sexual experimentation. He concluded that the existing marriage system was unsatisfactory: "The law of marriage worketh wrath."²¹ Unrealistic and unnatural restrictions were being placed on relations between the sexes. In marriage, women were held in a form of slave-like bondage, while their husbands toiled away in an uncertain and highly competitive external world. Romantic love and the monogamous family merely accentuated the disruptive individualism present in other areas of society.

How were such problems to be overcome? Further individualistic fragmentation—for instance, free love outside a community context—was no solution. Instead of causing community disruption, powerful sexual forces should be given natural channels and harnessed to provide a vital bond within society. Noyes wanted all believers to be unified and to share a perfect community of interests, to replace the "I-spirit" with the "we-spirit." If believers were to love each other fully while living in close communal association, they must be allowed to love each other fervently and physically, "not by pairs, as in the world, but *en masse*." The necessary restrictions of the earthly period, governed by arbitrary human law, would eventually have to give way to the final heavenly free state, governed by the spirit in which "hostile surroundings and powers of bondage cease" and "all restrictions also will cease." A perfect unity in all respects would result. Each should be married to all—heart, mind, and body—in a complex marriage.²²

This would be achieved by enlarging the home. Loyalty to the selfish nuclear family unit would be replaced by loyalty to the entire community. The fascinating ways in which this was achieved at Oneida and sustained for more than thirty years of close-knit communal living have been discussed extensively elsewhere and will be only briefly summarized here before focusing on the charismatic/sexual issues raised by this experiment.²³ As the group of more than two hundred adults eventually

21. *Ibid.*, 25.

22. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

23. For major studies that discuss the theory and practice of the Oneida Community, see Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935); Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969); Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*; and Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1993).

developed, individuals considered themselves married to each other and exchanged heterosexual partners frequently within the community, while breaking up all exclusive romantic attachments, which were described as "special love," antisocial behavior threatening communal order. All members lived together in one large communal Mansion House, ate together, worked together, had a system of communal child rearing, and shared all but the most basic property in common. Community government was achieved by having daily religious-and-business meetings which all adults attended, by using an informal method of group feedback and control known as "mutual criticism," and by developing an informal status hierarchy known as "ascending and descending fellowship." A difficult system of birth control based on self-restraint known as "male continence" was used exclusively until the final decade of the community's life, when a "stirpiculture" or eugenics experiment was introduced for some members.

How was Noyes's prophetic leadership and sexual charisma associated with the development of this system? Absolutely core to Oneida was the complete acceptance by Noyes's followers of his special religious commission and his ultimate authority over all areas of their lives, including sexual expression. Once that God-like authority was firmly established, Noyes acted as a quintessential patriarchal figure toward both his male and female followers, benevolently allowing them great flexibility in implementing his ideals in practice.²⁴

In this system, there was candid and open discussion of a variety of sexual issues. As one vivid example, Noyes once made the following reflections toward the end of one of his published theological articles:

Most of the difficulties which have arisen in respects to our social [i.e., sexual] theory, have been based on the idea that woman is a perishable article—that after her first experience in love, she is like an old newspaper, good for nothing. A virgin is considered better than a married woman who has had experience. But the reverse of this should be the case, and when things come to their right hearing, it will be seen that the reverse of the common idea is the truth. It is a scandal to God, and man, and woman, that in the estimation of men, a virgin is better than a married woman. It is true they are so universally preferred, but why? It is because woman has yielded to the worldly idea, and lost her self-respect. She supposes the enigma is solved, and does not carry about with her that fresh consciousness of mystery and worth, that a virgin does. The married settle into the feeling that the enigma is solved,

24. George Wallingford Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community* (Oneida, NY: by the author, 1931), 33, notes: "The dogma of Noyes's divine commission became a touchstone in the Putney and Oneida Communities. Those who rejected it were turned away; those who accepted it were bound together in a brotherhood of self-sacrificing quest for the Kingdom of God."

and that makes them less attractive. The principle operates, in the same way, in both sexes.²⁵

While many have commented on the important role that sexual concerns and issues played in the life and development of the Oneida Community, the key to understanding the way Noyes's prophetic leadership and sexual charisma allowed the system there to work so long may well be found in fascinating correspondence from the 1890s, about a decade after the breakup of the community, between Noyes's son Theodore, who had been groomed unsuccessfully by his father to succeed him as head of Oneida, and a perceptive young medical student, Anita Newcomb McGee.

After receiving an unusually detailed thirteen-page letter from Theodore Noyes responding to her questions, McGee responded with her own four-page follow-up in which she continued to press for more clarity on the breakup of the community.²⁶ Essentially, her explanation for the community's dissolution was the same as Constance Noyes Robertson would later develop in her study *Oneida Community: The Breakup*, namely: the tensions associated with John Humphrey Noyes's age and declining ability to lead, the increased community prosperity and associated lessened tendencies toward cohesion, the admission of new and disruptive individuals, and jealousies associated with the stirpiculture or eugenics experiment.²⁷

In his remarkable response to that analysis, which he never sent her, Theodore Noyes praised McGee's "very shrewd summary" of the causes of the breakup but said that all of them were secondary to the most important underlying cause. The power to regulate or withdraw sexual privileges, "inherent in the community at large and by common consent delegated to father [John Humphrey Noyes] and his subordinates, constituted by far the most effectual means of government. Father possessed in a remarkable degree the faculty of convincing people that the use of this arbitrary power was exercised for their own good, and for many years there was very little dissatisfaction and no envy of his prerogative. ..."

But now to come closer, and take the bull fairly by the horns. In a society like the Community, the young and attractive women form the focus toward which all the social rays converge; and the arbiter to be truly one, must possess the confidence and to a certain extent the obedience of this circle of at-

25. *Circular 1* (30 Nov. 1851): 16.

26. Theodore E. Noyes to Anita Newcomb McGee, 13 Sept. 1891; Anita Newcomb McGee to Theodore E. Noyes, 12 Nov. 1892. Copies of letters in my possession, provided courtesy of Geoffrey Noyes.

27. Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: The Breakup* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1972).

tractions and moreover, he must exercise his power by genuine sexual attraction to a large extent. To quite a late period father filled this situation perfectly. He was a man of quite extraordinary attractiveness to women, and he dominated them by his intellectual power and social "magnetism" super-added to intense religious convictions to which young women are very susceptible. The circle of young women whom he trained when he was between 40 and 50 years of age, were by a large majority his devoted friends throughout the trouble which led to the dissolution.

... I must suppose that as he grew older he lost some of his attractiveness, and I know that he delegated the function [of initiating young women into sexual intercourse] to younger men in several cases, but you can see that this matter was of prime importance in the question of succession and that the lack of a suitable successor obliged him to continue as the social center longer than would have otherwise been the case and so gave more occasion for dissatisfaction.²⁸

In short, Oneida throughout its existence was not only the lengthened shadow of John Humphrey Noyes in its intellectual and organizational aspects, but also in the way it integrated sexual relations as a means of tightly linking the community together in the pursuit of a comprehensive set of religious and social goals.

III

How may this Oneida perspective be relevant to understanding the controversial dynamics of that other great and ultimately far more influential "masculine product of the great Revivals," the Mormons, who, under their remarkable prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., moved during the early 1840s to introduce a form of plural marriage as an integral part of their larger religious and social effort to prepare for the Millennium? As in the case of John Humphrey Noyes, Joseph Smith's first goal was to set up a new religious world view and commitment. Yet he also struggled to understand and cope with what the proper role should be for the expression of human sexuality within that new order.

Like Noyes, who was attempting to "enlarge the family" in order to overcome the disruptive individualism of his day in favor of a larger communal order, Joseph Smith was distressed by the social disruption within the "burned-over district" of western New York State and sought with an acute millenarian sense to "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" in the religious and communal order he was setting up. Such efforts came to a head, both theologically and in practice, during the five years Smith spent in Nauvoo, Illinois, between 1839 and his murder in

28. Copy of letter from Theodore E. Noyes to Anita Newcomb McGee, 15 Apr. 1892, which was never sent, in my possession, provided courtesy of Geoffrey Noyes.

1844. Theologically, such concerns were reflected in the new sealing ceremonies that Smith introduced to link indissolubly the living and the dead, not only in this life but throughout eternity. Practically, they were reflected in various efforts to achieve closer social ties on earth, most controversially by enlarging conventional monogamous marriage to include a form of patriarchal polygamy based on Old Testament Hebrew models.²⁹

As with Noyes, sexual impulses and drives certainly played an important part in Smith's efforts to introduce polygamous practice for himself and for about thirty of his closest associates in Nauvoo whom George D. Smith has identified.³⁰ Joseph Smith was a handsome, dynamic, and intellectually compelling figure who clearly saw sexuality in a positive light, even while recognizing that its expression had to be kept under appropriate controls. He also faced a host of problems acting as leader of his church, mayor of his city, chief economic planner for a community that within five years surpassed Chicago in size and appeared to hold the balance of political power in Illinois. And with large numbers of his closest and most trusted associates on lengthy missionary ventures, leaving wives and children behind, he had to struggle with efforts to deal with the many complex human problems that emerged. It is within this context, rather than as just an expression of or rationalization for personal impulses, that his introduction of plural marriage may best be understood, both for himself and his close followers.

A vivid expression of these attitudes and concerns is found in the remarkable letter Joseph Smith wrote as part of his attempt to secure as a plural wife Nancy Rigdon, daughter of one of his closest associates, after his initial effort to get her to marry him had been rebuffed. The letter asserts that: "Happiness is the object and design of our existence," but this can only be achieved through "virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness and keeping all the commandments of God."

But we cannot keep all the commandments without first knowing them. That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. A parent may whip a child, and justly too, because he stole an apple; whereas if the child had asked for the apple, and the parent had given it, the child would have eaten it with a better appetite; there would have been no stripes; all the pleasure of the apple would have been secured, all the misery of stealing lost.

This principle will justly apply to all of God's dealings with his children.

29. For the full analysis of these developments, upon which the following summary is based, see Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 123-80.

30. George D. Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46: A Preliminary Demographic Report," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Spring 1994): 1-72.

Everything that God gives us is lawful and right; and it is proper that we should enjoy his gifts and blessings whenever and wherever he is disposed to bestow; but if we should seize upon those same blessings and enjoyments without law, without revelation, without commandment, those blessings and enjoyments would prove cursings in the end. ...

Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive ... He says, "Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find;" ... no good thing will I withhold from them who walk uprightly before me, and do my will in all things—who will listen to my voice and to the voice of the servant whom I have sent; ... for all things shall be made known to them in mine own due time, and in the end they shall have joy.³¹

This letter suggests important perspectives for understanding Joseph Smith's sexual attitudes and motivations for introducing plural marriage in Nauvoo, and it also provides a basis for comparison with Theodore Noyes's assessment of the way control over sexual expression provided the chief cohesive force holding the Oneida Community together. Although numerous head counts of Smith's possible or probable plural wives have been made—both by pioneering scholars in Mormon history such as Stanley Snow Ivins, Vesta Crawford, and Fawn Brodie, and by incredibly thorough recent Mormon scholars such as Daniel Bachman, D. Michael Quinn, George D. Smith, and Todd Compton³²—those lists typically have not addressed sufficiently the *qualitative* questions about those relationships and the larger *social* functions that such relationships may have served or been intended to serve.³³

31. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period 1*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts, 6 vols., 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948), 5:136.

32. For some of the most important of the lists of possible plural wives of Joseph Smith, see Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record* 6 (May 1887): 219-34; Stanley Snow Ivins's compendium, printed in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith and Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, n.d.), 41-47; Vesta P. Crawford Papers, University of Utah Special Collections; Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Knopf, 1971), 335-36, 457-88; Daniel Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith," M.A. thesis, Purdue University, 1975; D. Michael Quinn, "Organizational Development and Social Origins of the Mormon Hierarchy, 1832-1932: A Prosopographical Study," M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1973; Smith, "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy"; Todd Compton, "A Trajectory of Plurality: An Overview of Joseph Smith's Thirty-three Plural Wives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Summer 1996): 1-38; and Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997).

33. Compton's *In Sacred Loneliness* is the first major study to focus broadly on the full range of Joseph Smith's likely plural wives as individuals in their own right, though he tends to assume that any apparent sexual relationship with Joseph Smith was a "marriage." For this approach to Fanny Alger, see his "Fanny Alger Smith Custer: Mormonism's First Plural Wife?" *Journal of Mormon History* 22 (Spring 1996): 174-207; the critical letter by Janet Ellington in *Journal of Mormon History* 23 (Spring 1997): vi-vii; and Compton's response in *Journal of Mormon History* 23 (Fall 1997): xvii-xix.

Joseph Smith's marriage proposal to Nancy Rigdon highlights both the positive valuation he placed on human sexuality and the necessity he felt for placing it under proper controls. Marriage and sexual expression were described as a "gift and a blessing" that could be compared to a desired apple, but they should only be experienced under proper authority. When proper authority was established, "no good thing will I withhold from those who walk uprightly before me, and do my will in all things."³⁴ It appears that during the turbulent last three years of his life, Smith applied this approach both to his own relationships and to the relationships of the core group of about thirty of his closest male followers who began to practice a form of sanctioned polygamy during that period in Nauvoo. One of the most common code ways of referring to plural marriage in Nauvoo was to talk about men receiving their "privileges," and in his conversation introducing his scribe William Clayton to the idea of polygamy and authorizing him to take as a plural wife a young convert to whom he had become attracted in England, Smith also added: "It is your privilege to have all the wives you want."³⁵

A major reason Joseph Smith sanctioned such an expansion of marriage relationships for himself and his closest male and female followers appears to have been to bind the core Mormon group more closely together. Smith saw himself as trying to create a "new Israel," an almost tribal group indissolubly linked both by blood and by various forms of adoption and sealing of both men and women. Women who were approached by Smith or his closest associates to become plural wives were usually of proven personal and family loyalty to the church. Many of them, especially the daughters of Joseph Smith's close followers whom he took as wives, reported being told that such relationships would insure their salvation and link their families indissolubly to Smith and the faith to which they were so committed. And once such relationships had been established, neither the men nor the women so involved could readily break with their faith. Not only their own emotional commitments but also their reputations would be at stake if they were not to retain total commitment to the Mormon cause.³⁶

Perhaps the most puzzling and difficult-to-interpret behavior of Joseph Smith during this period is the evidence that he asked some of his closest associates to give their wives to him and that he may well have sustained full sexual relations with some women who were at the same

34. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:136.

35. Jenson, "Plural Marriage," 225.

36. Especially striking in this respect is the handwritten statement by Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, dated 30 Mar. 1881, in archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter LDS archives), reproduced in Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 137-38.

time legally the wives of other men.³⁷ This phenomenon has been misleadingly labeled "polyandry" by a number of Mormon scholars, including Danel Bachman, Richard S. Van Wagoner, and Todd Compton.³⁸ Compton, for example, in his massive and thoughtful apologetic study *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* asserts that

fully one-third of his plural wives, eleven of them, were married civilly to other men when he married them. ...

Polyandry might be easier to understand if one viewed these marriages to Smith as a sort of *de facto* divorce with the first husband. However, none of these women divorced their "first husbands" while Smith was alive and all of them continued to live with their civil spouses while married to Smith.³⁹

Contrary to almost all other scholars who have looked closely at this phenomenon, with the notable exception of Andrew Ehat,⁴⁰ I am convinced that the behavior in which Smith apparently engaged could *not* have been viewed, either by himself or by his loyal followers at the time, as a form of "polyandry." Although outsiders, including contemporary Mormon scholars, may use this term, given the intensely patriarchal emphasis in early Mormon plural marriage it is hard to imagine that Joseph Smith himself considered the practice to be "polyandrous." Let me, therefore, briefly restate here the comprehensive argument I presented in my 1981 MHA award-winning study *Religion and Sexuality*, which has never been fully addressed by subsequent scholarship, and then tie that argument to the larger comparison between John Humphrey Noyes's and Joseph Smith's marital experimentation of the 1840s.⁴¹

The first two of my three arguments about Joseph Smith's supposed "polyandry" have been widely echoed in later scholarship on this point.

37. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 159-66.

38. Bachman, "Plural Marriage," 124-36; Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Fall 1985): 67-83; and Compton, "Trajectory of Polygamy," 20-31. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 301-304, 335-37, was one of the first to use and develop the concept of "polyandry" in reference to Joseph Smith's alleged relationships with wives of his associates.

39. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 15-16.

40. Andrew F. Ehat, "Pseudo-Polyandry: Explaining Mormon Polygyny's Paradoxical Companion," paper presented at the Sunstone Theological Symposium, 22 Aug. 1986, Salt Lake City, Utah.

41. Ehat's argument is that Joseph Smith's "pseudo-polyandrous" marriages to women who were already married were for "eternity only" and did not include physical relations on earth. *Ibid.*, 15, 19-25. Thus, he sees no need to consider my attempt to explain how physical relations between Joseph Smith and wives of his associates might have been justified. It is far from clear whether Ehat is right that "pseudo-polyandrous" marriages were unconsummated or whether, as I and most other scholars of Mormon history who have closely analyzed the evidence believe, some of them probably were consummated.

In the first place, the 1843 revelation on plural and celestial marriage makes clear that conventional marriages based on the standards of the external world were not considered valid for eternity. The revelation states: "All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into, and sealed, by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed, both as well for time and for eternity ... are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead."⁴²

Later Mormon theology has taken this statement as referring to the afterlife, but in the millenarian context of Nauvoo and early Utah, Mormon leaders attempted to apply presumptive heavenly standards directly on earth. Earthly and heavenly standards were seen as inextricably intertwined; an imminent earthly millennium was to be realized. This meant that existing marriage standards were invalid and that the only valid marriages were those sanctioned under the "new and everlasting covenant" as sealed and practiced on earth. Mormon initiatory ceremonies, from baptism to the more elaborate temple rites, involved a rebirth into a new and different world that was in the process of being created on earth by the church. Prior to the initiation into the new standards, however, there was a brief but disruptive interregnum when neither set of standards was operative and the basis of social authority was unclear.

A former member of Smith's secret Council of Fifty, which helped to regulate this transition, recalled:

About the same time [1842] the doctrine of "sealing" for an eternal state was introduced, and the Saints were given to understand that their marriage relations with each other were not valid. ... That they were married to each other only by their own covenants, and that if their marriage relations had not been productive of blessings and peace, and they felt it oppressive to remain together, they were at liberty to make their own choice, as much as if they had not been married. That it was a sin for people to live together, and raise or beget children, in alienation from each other.⁴³

In addition to this larger argument that the revelation on plural and celestial marriage superseded all earthly bonds and covenants, a second argument also suggests why Joseph Smith might have asked for the wives of other men. In a public speech on 6 October 1861, Brigham Young discussed the ways "in which a woman might leave a man lawfully." The primary valid cause for divorce was: "When a woman becomes alienated in her feelings & affections from her husband." In addition, "if the woman Preferred—another man higher in authority & he is willing to

42. *Deseret News Extra*, 14 Sept. 1852, cited in full in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 249-55.

43. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled; Including the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee* (Hartford, CT: Park, 1881), 146-47.

take her & her husband gives her up—there is no Bill of divorce required. ...”⁴⁴ Such a practice of “moving up” in the hierarchy without a formal divorce may well have originated with Joseph Smith.

There is a third, more speculative explanation developed in *Religion and Sexuality*, and which apparently has never been addressed directly by subsequent Mormon scholarship,⁴⁵ that could further help account, within a patriarchal marriage system, for cases in which Smith appears to have taken married women as plural wives while they remained wives of their first husbands as well. According to a number of sources, including an internal Mormon document discussed below, it may have been possible in some cases for a proxy husband to be assigned by the president of the Mormon church, through the power of the holy anointing, to serve the part of a temporary husband for wives of men absent on long missionary assignments or otherwise unable to have children. The children born under such arrangements could be viewed as belonging to the original husband, who was considered in some sense to have been temporarily “dead.” Thus, while a man was absent in the service of his church, his patriarchal “kingdom,” which was heavily dependent on the number of his children, would not suffer loss.⁴⁶

44. James Beck Notebooks, 1859-65, vol. 1, in LDS archives. In the original stenographic report of Brigham Young’s speech of 8 October 1861, he states that he and a few others learned this belief from Joseph Smith himself. For an unauthorized transcription of this speech, see Dennis R. Short, *For Women Only: The Lord’s Law of Obedience* (Salt Lake City: Dennis R. Short, 1977), 85-90.

45. Of all the scholars known to me who wrote subsequent to the appearance of *Religion and Sexuality*, only Ehat, “Pseudo-polyandry,” clearly shows an awareness of my “proxy husband” argument. He discounts it without directly mentioning it, however, since he is convinced that Joseph Smith’s marriages to already-married women in Nauvoo were “for eternity only” and did not include a temporal component. Ehat’s work is a distinct step forward from that of Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Mormon Polyandry,” which never even acknowledges my work on the issue of Joseph Smith’s marriages with already-married women, even though my treatment provided a more comprehensive explanation of this issue than did his later article on the subject.

46. The fullest source for this argument is John Hyde, who rose rapidly in the LDS church and then apostatized during the troubled period of the Reformation of 1856-57. Though Hyde frequently exaggerates or fails to understand the deeper spirit underlying Mormon actions, his specific factual allegations often are surprisingly accurate. He stated:

As a man’s family constitutes his glory, to go on a mission for several years, leaving from two to a dozen wives at home, necessarily causes some loss of family, and consequently, according to Mormon notions, much sacrifice of salvation. This difficulty is however obviated by the appointment of an agent or proxy, who shall stand to themward [sic] in their husband’s stead. ... This is one of the secret principles that as yet is only privately talked of in select circles, and darkly hinted at from their pulpits and in their works. They argue that the old Mosaic law of a “brother raising up seed to his dead brother” is now in force; and as death is only a temporary absence, so they contend a temporary absence is equivalent to death; and if in the case of death it is not only no crime, but proper; so also in this case it is equally lawful and extremely advantageous! This practice, commended by such sophistry, and commanded by such a Prophet was adopted as early as Nauvoo.

This hypothesized arrangement, which could explain within a consistent patriarchal framework many, if not all, of Joseph Smith's apparent sexual relationships with wives of his close associates, is supported by a remarkable letter Brigham Young wrote on 5 March 1857 to a Mormon woman in Manti, Utah. In that letter, responding to an earlier letter from the woman on 22 February, Young declared: "... if I was imperfect and had a good wife I would call on some good bror. to help me. that we might have increase; that a man of this character will have a place in the Temple, receive his endowments and in eternity will be as tho' nothing had happened to him in time."⁴⁷

An astute early leader of the RLDS movement, Jason Briggs, also criticized what he saw as an apparent "proxy" authorization in the revelation on plural and celestial marriage itself. That passage states: "And as ye have asked concerning adultery, verily, verily I say unto you, if a man receiveth a wife in the new and everlasting covenant, and if she be with *another* man, and if I have not appointed unto her by the holy anointing, she hath committed adultery and shall be destroyed" (emphasis added).⁴⁸

Following the publication of *Religion and Sexuality*, I received an unsolicited call from a Mormon in Arizona recounting a family history of such a practice. According to my informant, one of his missionary ancestors who was sent out in 1852 at the time of the public announcement of plural marriage, returned home to find that the ancestor's wife, unknown to him, had participated in such a "proxy" relationship in his absence. Although he retained the woman as a wife, he considered her "polluted" and never subsequently had sexual relations with her.

If such an extraordinary millenarian version of the Hebrew practice of the levirate ever existed, it was only practiced on a very limited scale during the emotionally superheated fervor of the transition from the old

Much scandal was caused by others than Smith attempting to carry out this doctrine. Several, who thought that what was good for the Prophet should be good for the people, were crushed down by Smith's heavy hand. Several of those have spoken out to the practices of the "Saints." Much discussion occurred at Salt Lake as to the advisability of revealing the doctrine of polygamy in 1852, and that has caused Brigham to defer the public enunciation of this "proxy doctrine," as it is familiarly called. Many have expected it repeatedly at the late conferences. Reasoning out their premises to their natural and necessary consequences, this licentious and infamous dogma is their inevitable result (Hyde, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* [New York: Fetridge, 1857], 87-88).

47. This letter, in the Brigham Young Letterbooks in the LDS archives, was kindly called to my attention by D. Michael Quinn. This letter and its context are more fully discussed in Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, n132, 312-14.

48. In the current Utah Mormon versions of the Doctrine and Covenants, this is verse 41 in section 132.

order to the new in Mormon Nauvoo and in early Utah.⁴⁹ Such a practice would be of interest, however, because it could provide an explanation for Joseph Smith's relations with wives of his associates other than the "polyandrous" one, which cannot be squared with patriarchal marriage and simply suggests that his libido had gone wild. Along with other polygamous practices, this could only plausibly have been introduced and justified in response to a sense of intense inner compulsion, what Smith articulated as the command of "an angel with a drawn sword." Such practices would also be of interest in comparison to the Oneida practices of John Humphrey Noyes, which similarly linked him sexually as well as in other ways with the wives of his associates.⁵⁰

49. Perhaps the most judicious assessment of this issue was made by the knowledgeable apostate T. B. H. Stenhouse. He stated:

The Author has no personal knowledge, from the present leaders of the Church, of this teaching; but he has often heard that something yet would be taught which "would test the brethren as much as polygamy had tried the sisters." By many elders it has been believed that there was some foundation for the accusation that Joseph had taught some sisters in Nauvoo that it was their privilege to entertain other brethren as "proxy husbands" during the absence of their liege lords on mission. One lady has informed the Author that Joseph so taught her. All such teaching has never been made public, and it is doubtful if it ever extended very far, if, indeed, at all beyond a momentary combination of passion and fanaticism (Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints; A Full and Complete History of the Mormons* [New York: Appleton, 1873], 301).

50. There is a related argument that at least is worthy of reference since it could provide an even closer parallel between Oneida under John Humphrey Noyes and certain purported practices of Joseph Smith, Jr. The most stark presentation of this argument is in a bitter but carefully researched account by "Dr. W. Wyl" [Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal]. He argues that Joseph Smith demanded total loyalty of his closest followers in all things and that this test of loyalty included insisting on their willingness to relinquish their wives to him as well. As Wyl put it: "Joseph Smith finally demanded the wives of *all* the twelve apostles that were at home then in Nauvoo." He cites as his source Mrs. Leonora Taylor, wife of John Taylor, then president of the LDS church. Dr. W. Wyl [Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Joseph Smith, the Prophet, His Family, and Friends: A Study Based on Facts and Documents* (Salt Lake City: Tribune, 1886), 70-72.

Wyl also cites an extraordinary sermon by Jedediah M. Grant, one of Brigham Young's closest counselors in the late 1850s: "Do you think that the prophet Joseph wanted the wives of the Twelve that he asked for, merely to gratify himself? No; he did it to try the brethren. But if President Young wants my wives, or any of them, he can have them." *Ibid.*, 70. He also quotes a similar statement by Grant from the official collection of nineteenth-century Mormon sermons, the *Journal of Discourses* 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng., 1854-86), 1:14, and another sermon by Orson Pratt in which he said, "Consecrate everything to the Lord that you have. ... The wives have given themselves to their husband, and he has to consecrate them. They are the Lord's. He has only lent them to us" (*Journal of Discourses* 1:98).

That such demands, when they occurred, did not necessarily result in a liaison is clear from Orson F. Whitney's biography of his grandfather, Heber C. Kimball. Whitney states that Joseph had asked Heber to give Vilate to him to be his wife, saying that this was a requirement. When, after enormous inner turmoil, Heber presented his wife Vilate to Joseph, Joseph wept, embraced Heber, and said that he had only been determining if Heber's loyalty to him were absolute! Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family 1888), 333-35.

Clearly there are important parallels between what happened at Oneida and among the early Mormons. Yet there were important differences, as well, based especially on the widely different size and complexity of the two groups. The Oneida Community never had more than several hundred adults at its peak, whereas the Mormon movement by the time of Nauvoo numbered in the tens of thousands. Even in the small Oneida group, dissention over complex marriage temporarily led to the discontinuance of their unorthodox sexual practices and the near-disbandment of the group in 1852, just four years after the community had been founded. In the case of the Mormons, conflicts and irregularities were far more complex and difficult to manage, leading with almost tragic inevitability to the martyrdom of the prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum on 27 June 1844. Only under Brigham Young's leadership in the relative isolation of the Great Basin region during the mid-nineteenth century were the Mormons able fully to implement their system of plural marriage as part of their Zion in the West.

IV

What larger conclusions can we draw from this brief, exploratory comparison of the prophetic expansion of marital and sexual relationships in the Oneida and Mormon communities in nineteenth-century America? The main point is that while personal and sexual impulses undoubtedly play an important part in what frequently appears as a sort of sexual hyperactivity by charismatic leaders, in cases where that activity is extended beyond the prophet himself to an important portion of his followers as well, it may be more useful to analyze how such activity serves larger social functions to bind the loyalty of the prophet's followers to the prophet and his cause.

Two world-significant cases in point might be mentioned in this regard. The first involves the Muslim prophet Muhammad, founder of what is now the second largest and one of the most rapidly expanding religious movements in the world. Although hostile stereotypes about the prophet Muhammad are legion in the West, it is worthy of note that he remained monogamous until the death of his beloved first wife, Khadijah, and that almost all of the eleven other women whom he eventually took as wives served to link him with his closest followers and with the various tribal groups with which he was developing alliances. Except for his first wife, Khadijah, and for Maria, none of Muhammad's wives bore him children.⁵¹

A different case that is also instructive here is that of Hong Xiuquan,

51. Rafiq Zakaria, *Muhammad and the Quran* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 43-60.

the millenarian leader of the mid-nineteenth-century Chinese Taiping Rebellion, the largest civil war in world history, which cost at least 20 million lives in the course of its fifteen-year duration. During the flush period of Taiping success which came close to bringing the movement into control of all China, Hong developed an extensive group of consorts and allowed his senior associates similar privileges prohibited to ordinary Taiping followers.⁵² While personal pleasure almost surely played a part in these developments, cementing the loyalty of his closest associates was at least as important a factor.

In conclusion, perhaps anthropologist Kenelm Burridge in his fine study *New Heaven, New Earth* best summarizes the sexual dynamics of charismatic leadership in his cameo essay, "The Prophet," when he asks:

What is the significance of the commonly reported sexual attractions of prophets? Until recently there were few communities in which women were not simply home-makers and child-bearers. Apart from a privileged few, usually elderly and past the flushes of sexual enjoyment, women have played little part in the management of political affairs. They have been in the main uneducated in intellectual matters, untrained in public and managerial techniques. Exchanged or bought in marriage, they have been regarded as chattels who followed their men and did what they were told. Interacting most significantly in the sexual act, the relations between men and women have been largely determined by the overt ordering of different kinds of sexual access. Even if she understood him, of what interest to a Sudanese peasant woman were the Mahdi's dreams of glory, the Caliphate and empire if not, surely, the privileged luxury and influence of being a member of his harem? And much the same may be said of the ladies of New Guinea, whose aspirations are largely realized in being the wife of a rich and important man. On the whole, therefore, the sexual attractiveness of male prophets is to be accounted for less in the amatory skills of the prophet, and more in the conditions of being a woman. Not for nothing did Jupiter come to Danae in a shower of coins. A prophet offers both sexes a wider and more satisfying redemption, and his sexual attractions and virility suggest an awareness of new babies as well as new men: total rebirth, a new community.⁵³

52. Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: Norton, 1996), 250-51.

53. Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 161.

