

RACHEL WHITLEDGE

Saving Race:
Sex, Marriage, and Family in the Early
Mormon Faith and Oneida Community

Both those of the Mormon faith who practiced polygamy and the members of the community at Oneida who practiced complex marriage incurred widespread persecution for their sexual mores, beliefs, and practices. Although very different in doctrine, these sects have many similarities. This paper will explore the correlations and differences among the two faiths in the areas of sex, marriage, family, and reproduction, as well as delineating the persecution they endured.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormonism, as it would soon be known, was founded by the prophet-leader Joseph F. Smith Jr. on April 6, 1830. The new religion was based on a “translation” of some golden plates that Joseph had been shown in a vision and had later found. These translations were printed in the *Book of Mormon*, which sought to respond to all questions that the Bible left unanswered, especially about the development of America in prehistory. The fledgling faith began in New York, but because of adverse conditions and persecution moved to Ohio, then to Missouri, then to Illinois, and finally to Utah, which is the present day stronghold of the religion. Mormons never truly practiced community of goods, but did have several forms and degrees of economic union including the United Order of Enoch and their current economic system of church support through gifts, offerings, and tithing. Although the Mormons did not succeed in becoming truly communal for more than a few

years at a time, they have and have had several communities that have formed a close and cohesive culture distinct from the outside world.

MORMON SEX AND PRACTICES

The Mormon Church today does not consider sex a large issue. It officially does not even have a policy regulating issues such as birth control; however, in times past, sex was much more important to the church. Without sex, there could be no more members. Mormon mores about sex infused their practices and heavily influenced their way of life. Sex was connected to family life, marriage, polygamy, and birth rates, so naturally they held ideological views on the subject.

Nevertheless, the Mormon Church even today views sex in a rather Puritanical manner. Illegitimacy is considered one of the roots of all evil, so sex outside of marriage is tantamount to blasphemy. Historically, the Mormon Church also had views on the procedures of sex. The Law of Chastity bans sex, especially in cases of plural marriage, when it could be observed as “recreational,” such as when a woman is nursing, pregnant, menopausal, or does not want to conceive.¹ In short, recreational sex was “lustful . . . even a crime against God.”² In light of this view, it seems that had not large families been so important to the early Mormons, they may well have gone the way of the Shakers with complete celibacy.

Sex in practice was a different issue for Mormons, particularly polygamists. The idea was that the man was the aggressor and therefore should have many wives.³ Mormonism did not limit the number of wives that could be taken, which often resulted in rivalries and discord. Mormon ideology fortunately was able to help: “to the extent that it is practiced, the Law of Chastity keeps the fires of jealousy banked and also gives women some measure of choice about the use of their bodies.”⁴ For true Mormon polygamists, sex was a rarity for individual women and therefore usually welcome.

MORMON VIEWS ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Family was of utmost importance to early Mormons, particularly when settling in Utah. Marriage was also extremely important because it, along with having children, was the main building block of the extended family. Mormons had a clear picture of the perfect family

which began with marriage and ended with salvation for all family members, so that “the highest status and glory could be achieved in heaven.”⁵ There were two kinds of marriage: secular and eternal. Secular marriage was earthly and not binding, and thus the lesser form. Eternal marriage meant salvation for the entire family: “An eternal family starts with a husband and a wife, united in a family unit. It then goes out to our children—the spirits that God gives us to be members of our family—to our grandchildren and so on.”⁶ The concept of eternal marriage remains crucial to the Mormon belief system.

In the Mormon teachings marriage and family are inextricably linked: “marriage and family ties (including polygamy) were the basis for all social order and development.”⁷ Marriage and family also provided ideals which could be seen and followed by all others. Marriage was intended to bring out the best aspects of human relationships.⁸ The Mormon family is to beget children, lots of children, and then “raise them up into the righteous seed of seed unto the Lord” thus completing the cycle so that it may begin again.⁹

MORMON POLYGAMY

Polygamy (polygyny is the correct term) is the most notorious aspect of Mormon religion. Although the church abandoned polygamy in 1890, it is still practiced by some sectarian Mormons. “The first plural marriage sanctioned by a ceremony occurred [in Nauvoo, Ill.] on April, 5, 1841, between the church’s thirty-five-year-old prophet-founder Joseph Smith, Jr., and the twenty-six-year-old Louisa Beaman.”¹⁰ Joseph Smith had long been moving toward polygamy: “Though the revelation was first committed to writing on July 12, 1843, considerable evidence suggests that the principle of plural marriage was revealed to Joseph Smith more than a decade before.”¹¹

Many people had negative reactions to polygamy, even in the Mormon church. Indeed, “most who entered plural marriage in Nauvoo faced a crisis of faith.”¹² However, Joseph Smith and his successor Brigham Young were persistent in pushing the practice. The system of polygamy, or “celestial marriage,” was supposedly based on following the Old Testament.¹³ Similar to many other Mormon practices, polygamy was highly ordered through ceremonies and rituals:

These holy and sacred ordinances have . . . laws, limits, and bounds of the strictest kind, and none but the pure in heart, the strictly virtuous, or those who repent and become such, are worthy to partake of them.¹⁴

These restrictions, along with the promise of salvation and religious belief, were enough to convince many of the validity of polygamy.

One scholar calls the Mormon's polygamy movement "the largest, best organized, and most controversial venture in radically restructuring marriage and family."¹⁵ Indeed, polygamy resulted in a total upheaval of all family norms and forced a new culture to emerge. Eventually this form of organization formed its own small communities where plural families "ultimately became the family ideal."¹⁶ From 1850 to 1890, polygamy was essential to the Mormon way of life. It dominated the land on the American frontier still has a presence in practice and public knowledge.

SEED SPREADING, OR REPRODUCTION IN THE MORMON FAITH

Because of polygamy, most responsibilities concerning having, planning, and raising children fell to the women. It was considered extremely important to have a family, and "a woman's *raison de d'être* was to raise a righteous seed unto the Lord," which meant producing plenty of devout children.¹⁷ "The more righteous seeds raised up, the better."¹⁸ It was well established that the goal of these large families was to help fulfill God's promise to Abraham that his seed would be as numerous as the sand on the beach. Mormons still today are encouraged to have large families to help fulfill this promise.

One of the main ideas behind creating vast quantities of children was that they were waiting to be born. "Souls begin in a pre-existent, 'telestial' state before coming to earth . . . eager to be born into the second, 'terrestrial' state."¹⁹ Mormon theology teaches that eventually righteous Mormons will attain a Godlike state and that they will create these spirit children, thus completing the cycle of families in Heaven and on earth in a "teleological progression throughout eternities."²⁰ By not having children, members are in effect damaging the souls of their family—the past, present, and future "stars in a moth-

er's crown.”²¹ Such a phrase reveals the influence of the Bible. Any type of fertility limitation was considered the work of the devil unless there were extreme circumstances, to the point that “statements against polygamous marriage or favoring fertility limitation were treated as synonymous.”²² All of this led to a culture filled with huge family networks, a culture with the principle function of perpetuating themselves and their way of life.

POLYGAMIST PERSECUTION

When practicing polygamy, persecution is a factor. It is always present, and always has been. From Mormonism's start, persecution has been rampant. The prophet-founder Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered in 1844, a harbinger of the “the first serious anti-polygamy movement” of the 1850s.²³ The first government sanctioned persecution was the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Law of 1862.²⁴ Other persecutions followed with the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1882 and the institution of a “test oath” designed to root out polygamists by requiring them to swear an oath against polygamy before they were allowed to vote. The Republican Party slandered polygamy as early as 1856, stating that slavery and polygamy were “twin relics of barbarism.”²⁵ Campaigns were launched against polygamists, bills were passed, church leaders were harassed and arrested, and church assets were seized until 1890, when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a manifesto abolishing polygamy. This resulted in less persecution of those still practicing and allowed for the tradition to die out in the mainstream church.

ONEIDA COMMUNITY AND SEXUALITY

With Mormon ideology now sketched, we can move to considering the parallel aspects of the Oneida community. One such aspect is sexuality. In 1843, John Humphrey Noyes founded a religious movement that culminated in a communal utopia that lasted for thirty years and left a very successful joint stock company in Oneida, New York. The communitarians at Oneida had a complete economic union and held nearly all things in common, including spouses and children. The Oneida religious movement no longer exists today, but the grounds, buildings, and company are still thriving with many of the descendants

of the original members still living in the area and working for the company. Oneida was best known for its system of complex marriage, or free love, as it is often referred to. At one time the community boasted over 300 members and had five satellite communities.

From the outside, sexuality at the Oneida community was often assumed to be rampant and uncontrolled. Reports of orgies and wild lifestyles were not uncommon; however, the actual environment of Oneida was strictly controlled with rules, regulations, and procedures. The society maintained a strict code of sexual conduct based on Noyes' own ideas and also on the New Testament. Nonrestrictive sex (i.e. free love), male continence, and ascending fellowship were the governing principles, which were drawn from "the express injunction of Christ and the apostles, and by the whole tenor of the New Testament."²⁶ Thus, the entire system of sex at Oneida was based on the community and was treated as another facet of communal living.

The concept of free love gave participants a newfound freedom. This was very well received, as shown in a quote from a member: "I was to some extent addicted to the practice of masturbation. I can say with a thankful heart, that the influences of free love have cured me of that evil."²⁷ The sex act was seen as powerful, motivated by a spiritual love seeking a spiritual connection. "Sex produced spiritual power, energy, and magnetism."²⁸ Free love and the sex it fostered were important tools to the cohesion of the community.

The main governing standard with regards to sex other than male continence was ascending fellowship. Ascending fellowship outlined the idea of spiritual inequality among community members and even between the sexes. Along with many other concepts that ascending fellowship was based on, Noyes believed that men were superior to women in matters of fellowship.²⁹ Noyes began teaching the concept even before the community was founded at Oneida, arguing that a "close and exclusive association of believers would magnify their spiritual qualities and powers."³⁰ The practical application of ascending fellowship was that older members of each sex were paired with younger members of the opposite sex, and young men and women associated with "persons of 'mature character' and 'sound sense' who were well advanced in Perfectionism," even in sexual encounters.³¹ Noyes supposedly even initiated all of the young girls himself.

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REEVALUATION OF
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Noyes despised the conventional idea of marriage. According to him, it was responsible for many “unnecessary evils” such as adultery, binding unmatched natures, unfulfilled sexual appetites, poverty and contraction of taste, stinginess, and jealousy, ultimately making scientific breeding impossible.³² His strong anti-marital position may have been due in part to his strong attraction to another man’s wife, Mary Cragin, or simply a result of his religious revelations. In any case, his fervent stance against marriage also called for a modification of blood related family: “Familial relations would have to be altered, because they were expressions of exclusive love and emotional possessiveness.”³³

The followers of Noyes held a slightly less harsh view of marriage. In the *Oneida Handbook*, marriage is discussed in relation to the biblical view of the subject: “we believe the record of inspiration contemplates a more progressive philosophy of social relation.”³⁴ All in all, the members of Oneida rejected the conventional idea of monogamous marriage for their own version of complex marriage and community of family.

COMPLEX MARRIAGE

The concept of complex marriage started even before the colony at Oneida. Noyes began instituting complex marriage between himself and his wife and George and Mary Cragin. They were the first two couples to participate in this new arrangement. At Oneida, this new idea was implemented on a much grander scale: the entire adult group. “The new commandment is that we love one another and that not by pairs, as in the world, but en masse.”³⁵ Restrictions accompanied this new form of “marriage.” Romantic or “special love” and exclusive attachments even between members of the same sex were prohibited with one of the offenders often being sent to a satellite community so that “selfish, exclusive claims of every kind would be abolished.”³⁶ There were also rules about the approach to sexual conduct. Men were perceived to be the instigators and were encouraged to go through channels to save embarrassment and to keep tabs on the community: “If a man desired sexual intercourse with a particular woman, he was supposed to make his wish known to a Central Committee, who

would convey his desire to the woman in question. If the latter consented, the man would go to her room at bedtime and spend an hour or so with her before returning to his own room.”³⁷

REPRODUCTION AND EUGENICS AT ONEIDA

When studying Oneida, three ideals stand out very prominently: complex marriage, male continence, and stirpiculture or eugenics. Two of these three directly related to reproduction. Male continence and eugenics limit the number of children, resulting in a reproductive rate less than half of the general population. Male continence was the only form of birth control ever used in the Oneida community. Its basic principle was that of sex without ejaculation. The theory “consists in analyzing sexual intercourse, recognizing in it two distinct acts, the social and the propagative, which can be separated practically.”³⁸ This idea of preventing conception was created by Noyes in response to his wife’s four stillbirths. “Ejaculation drained a man’s vitality and led to disease. Conception was even more costly. Pregnancy, the agonies of childbirth, the cares of nursing levied a heavy tax on the vitality of women.”³⁹ Male continence was the preferred method of birth control and was very effective when compared to the birth rates of the general population. It also allowed for the selective breeding experiment known as stirpiculture or eugenics.

The idea of eugenics is based on selective breeding in order to improve the human race. John Humphrey Noyes invented his own version after reading Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* and Galton’s discussion of race improvement. “Noyes invented the word ‘stirpiculture,’ deriving it from the Latin ‘stirps,’ meaning stock, stem, or root.”⁴⁰ Stirpiculture was in many ways the logical progression from male continence. “Noyes believed that by scientific propagation good physical and spiritual qualities could be bred into humans in the same manner in which cattle were selectively bred.”⁴¹ Males were scrutinized much more heavily than females because Noyes believed that the father had more effect on the offspring. Also, “as a consequence of ascending fellowship, the older men were usually higher in spirituality and more likely to be chosen as fathers.”⁴² Because of this, the number of males was significantly less than that of the females. Those selected to be parents numbered 53 women and 38 men. Of these unions, 45 stirpi-

culture children were delivered in the ten years stirpiculture was in effect. There were also 13 accidental conceptions. The children created during the stirpiculture experiment were designed to be morally, physically, and spiritually superior. In fact, these children “led a healthy and vigorous life. Their death rate was reportedly lower than that of the surrounding community . . . [and] a number of the children achieved eminence in the business and professional world.”⁴³

ONEIDAN PERSECUTION

“On Saturday, June 21, 1879, John Humphrey Noyes read of his imminent arrest and trial for the community’s sexual practices in a Syracuse newspaper. The next evening he secretly fled to Canada.”⁴⁴ This was the second time that Noyes had been threatened with jail time. Within a month’s time the Oneidan community had given up the concept of complex marriage for the last and final time. “The external attacks began, in both instances, not primarily as an assault on Oneida but as part of a larger upwelling of hostility against sexual deviation, specifically that embodied in Mormon polygamy.”⁴⁵ Noyes was not the only member of the sect to incite persecution, as “children were jeered by outsiders as ‘bastards,’ and the established clergy denounced their sexual practices as ‘harlotry, free love, and licensed indulgence.’”⁴⁶ Outside persecution along with inner turmoil eventually led to the downfall of the community.

COMPARISON AND CONCLUSION

Both John Humphrey Noyes’ Oneida movement and Joseph Smith’s Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints were started in the 1830s in the New England area. Both sects had to move as a result of persecution and both leaders were jailed for their practices and beliefs. In many ways the ideologies of the two sects were similar, if not the same. Both sought perfection through religion and both sought to improve the world by having children. Many scholars have done side-by-side studies of these two groups, further emphasizing their similarities. Both groups engendered much ill will toward themselves by having sexual systems so far from the norm. Although the Oneidans lived communally for more than thirty years and the Mormons never really lived in total communion, when looked at from a broader perspective

including practices, doctrines, beliefs, and ideals, it seems as though they held much in common, like the two sides of the same coin.

NOTES

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- 3 Hastings, "Mormonism and Birth Planning," 24.
- 4 Solomon, *Predators, Prey and Other Kinsfolk* 35.
- 5 Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 145.
- 6 Daniel H. Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York : Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 858.
- 7 Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia* (Syracuse, N.Y. : Syracuse University Press, 1991), 205.
- 8 Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 196.
- 9 Solomon, *Predators, Prey and Other Kinsfolk*, 222.
- 10 Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 123.
- 11 Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1092.
- 12 Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1093.
- 13 Donald Pitzer, *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 137.
- 14 Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1094.
- 15 Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 182.
- 16 Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 182.
- 17 Solomon, *Predators, Prey and Other Kinsfolk*, 355.
- 18 Solomon, *Predators, Prey and Other Kinsfolk*, 51.
- 19 Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 201.
- 20 Hastings, "Mormonism and Birth Planning," 21.
- 21 Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 190-191.
- 22 Hastings, "Mormonism and Birth Planning," 20.
- 23 Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 220.
- 24 Solomon, *Predators, Prey and Other Kinsfolk*, 72.
- 25 Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 220.
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- 29 Hostetler, John Andrew, Eric Michaels, and Diane Levy Miller. *Communitarian Societies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 27.

- ³⁰ Whitworth, John McKelvie. *God's Blueprints: a sociological study of three utopian sects* (London: Routledge, 1975), 124.
- ³¹ Carden, Maren Lockwood. *Oneida: utopian community to modern corporation* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998) 52.
- ³² Mandelker, *Religion, society, and utopia in nineteenth-century America*. 116.
- ³³ Mandelker, *Religion, society, and utopia in nineteenth-century America*. 104.
- ³⁴ Oneida Community. *Handbook of the Oneida Community 1867 & 1871* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), 54.
- ³⁵ Hostetler, *Communitarian Societies*, 28.
- ³⁶ Whitworth, *God's Blueprints : a sociological study of three utopian sects*, 113.
- ³⁷ Gordon, Michael. *The Nuclear Family in Crisis: the search for an alternative* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 67.
- ³⁸ Noyes, John Humphrey. *Male Continence*. (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 8.
- ³⁹ Mandelker, *Religion, society, and utopia in nineteenth-century America*. 118.
- ⁴⁰ Carden, *Oneida: utopian community to modern corporation*, 61.
- ⁴¹ Hostetler, *Communitarian Societies*, 29.
- ⁴² Mandelker, *Religion, society, and utopia in nineteenth-century America*, 119-120.
- ⁴³ Gordon, *The Nuclear Family in Crisis: the search for an alternative*, 72.
- ⁴⁴ Mandelker, *Religion, society, and utopia in nineteenth-century America*, 145.
- ⁴⁵ Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 117.
- ⁴⁶ Hostetler, *Communitarian Societies*, 31.