

# **Making the Bible Argument: John H. Noyes’ Mission Statement for the Oneida Community**

*By Anthony Wonderley*

In February of 1848, the man about to found one of America’s most successful utopias composed a plan to bring Christ and social reform to upstate New York entitled *Bible Argument: Defining the Relations of the Sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven*. The communitarian venture envisioned by John Humphrey Noyes aimed to duplicate life in Christ’s kingdom—a place of communal ownership and group marriage—in order to bring that kingdom to earth. At the same time, the community’s unconventional sexual practices would transform society and correct its ills. As a prospectus for an intentional community, the *Bible Argument* contains “almost every important idea for the revision of relations between the sexes that Noyes would implement during the subsequent thirty years at Oneida.”<sup>1</sup> It explains why the Oneida Community (1848-1880) was to come into being and what it is meant to accomplish.

The *Bible Argument* also provides Noyes’ first public defense of the practice of group marriage initiated a short time before in Putney, Vermont, as well as his first substantive explanation of a free-love doctrine advocated a decade earlier. In looking back, it is a “pivotal formulation”<sup>2</sup> linking past to future. This diachronic quality attracted my historical curiosity and led to an examination of Noyes’ writings in chronological order. Noting content and context at different moments in time, I hoped to understand how Noyes’ ideas changed over the years. In effect, I charted his intellectual development from revivalist in the 1830s to social architect in 1848.

What I found is that Noyes’ theology was influenced—far more profoundly than commonly supposed—by Millerism and Fourierism, two mass movements especially popular in the early 1840s.<sup>3</sup> Millerism, a belief that the world was about to end with the return of Christ, affected Noyes’ theology in two respects. It forced him to abandon the conviction that Christ’s return would be heralded by cataclysm and destruction. It also caused him to reconsider the role of human agency in the Millennium.

In contrast to the Millerite posture of waiting, Noyes began to speak of human action helping to cause its advent and bring heaven to earth.

Fourierism, though not a religion, preached a new tomorrow attainable through cooperative labor and common residence. It was the Fourierists who “pushed the Putney group toward embodying Perfectionism as a communitarian experiment.”<sup>4</sup> The specific example of the Fourierist Brook Farm commune near Boston inspired Noyes to venture beyond redemption into utopianism in 1846. When Noyes came to write the *Bible Argument*, he envisioned the Oneida Community as a Fourierist phalanx or association in which amorous attraction replaced Fourier’s “passional attraction” as the motivating power.

Much of Noyes’ 1848 plan for a new form of society, therefore, resulted from his dialogue with Millerism and Fourierism, a conclusion I believe clarifies the nature of the *Bible Argument* and casts new light on the origin of the Oneida Community. This article, accordingly, analyzes the *Bible Argument* as the outcome of developing thought. After outlining Noyes’ initial theological position as a young prophet of Perfectionism, I indicate how it changed in response to events in the outside world during the years Noyes ministered to a small flock in Putney. Noyes’ philosophical evolution culminated in a sudden turn to sexual communism in 1846 and, a year later, in the announcement that the kingdom of heaven had arrived. In the ensuing uproar, Noyes fled to upstate New York where he composed the *Bible Argument* to explain his actions and to propose a new utopia.

### **The Young Revivalist, 1834-1837**

Noyes was born in 1811 to a locally prominent family in Vermont. Following graduation from Dartmouth College, he experienced a religious reawakening (1831) that stimulated him to attend divinity schools at Andover and Yale. Any ambition to become a Congregationalist minister went by the wayside when he took up Perfectionism, a non-denominational brand of Protestantism rejecting predetermination in the outcome of human life. Perfectionists challenged the individual to experience saving grace—and then to cut down on sinning. A person choosing not to sin could, in theory, approach a state of perfection.

Beginning in 1834, Noyes took the extreme view on this matter in asserting that salvation in the here and now was a matter of individual faith. The person reborn in Christ literally became one with Christ, dying on the cross and rising from the grave. In accordance with the promise of



Fig. 1. John H. Noyes, from an undated daguerreotype made about 1840.  
(Oncida Community Mansion House)

redemption, salvation was an accomplished fact. The true believer was free of sin—theologically perfect. Once attained, such a state was complete and eternally secure.<sup>5</sup>

However absolute that may sound, Noyes' Perfectionism was a progressive condition. For one thing, a sanctified person would display "an energetic ambition for improvement," "an unquenchable desire of progress." More importantly, complete sanctification would be hard work for most because "the spiritual apprehension of the atonement is not attained (ordinarily at least) in the first stages of discipleship."<sup>6</sup>

Noyes also harbored radical notions about sexual relations. He briefly proposed in 1837 that a condition of complete heterosexual availability reigned in Christ's spiritual kingdom. Ideally, the sanctified on earth should take up the heavenly lifestyle in which "there is no more reason why sexual intercourse should be restrained by law, than why eating and drinking should be."<sup>7</sup> While Noyes denied he practiced what he preached, he also insisted that perfect holiness brought with it perfect freedom from human law. This was not antinomianism because, as Noyes explained in one passage, those expecting to be saved "should be put in the way of doing good works."<sup>8</sup> He neither elaborated the concept nor advanced a program for doing good deeds.

Like many of his day, Noyes was obsessed with the Millennium as foretold in the last section of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. A common interpretation of the Millennium is that our times will end in upheaval and destruction, after or during which Christ will return to rule with the righteous over a united heaven and earth. Resurrection of the Dead and the Final Judgment take place after Christ has reigned a thousand years.

Noyes' reading of the Bible convinced him that Jesus had already returned, the Second Coming having occurred in A.D. 70. At that time, Christ established a new order with mortal Christians but quickly transformed that congregation (the "primitive church") into the spiritual realm. Now invisible, the primitive church is the kingdom of heaven referenced as a place above us. The Jews had been God's chosen people for about 1800 years but their time ended when the Romans destroyed

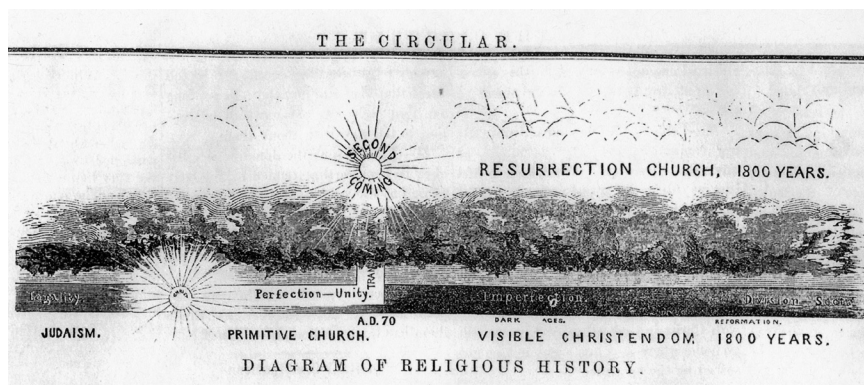


Fig. 2. Noyes' religious time line.  
(*Circular*, July 13, 1853)

Jerusalem. That bloody event, Noyes thought, terminated Jewish national existence and demonstrated God's judgment on the Jews. Now, after about the same passage of time, the Gentiles—God's post-Jewish chosen people—could expect *their* judgment to be near with Christ's reappearance in our physical realm. In one apocalyptic vision, Noyes saw that:

judgment was to take place immediately. It was a terrible moment, when the red canopy above seemed just bursting for the descent of Christ with his mighty angels in flaming fire to take vengeance on the world. In that moment I thought of the millions who were unprepared for the impending scene, and involuntarily prayed that mercy might restrain judgment.<sup>9</sup>

Between this present time and the establishment of God's kingdom over the earth lies a chaos of confusion, tribulation and war such as must attend the destruction of the fashion of this world and the introduction of the will of God as it is done in heaven. God has set me to cast up a highway across this chaos, and I am gathering out the stones and grading the track as fast as possible.<sup>10</sup>

During the years 1834-1837, Noyes wandered through New England and upstate New York seeking converts, publicity, and standing as a Perfectionist spokesperson.

### **Putney Bible School (1838-1845)**

Noyes married in 1838 and settled down in his hometown of Putney, Vermont, with a newly purchased printing press. Over the next several years, he attracted about two dozen followers who comprised a Bible study group devoted to publishing.

An indifferent public speaker, Noyes had always been drawn to the printed word as the most effective means of proselytizing. His faith in the power of the press was confirmed by two popular movements propagated and spread by printed material. The message of Millerism was conveyed in millions of copies of books, pamphlets, periodicals, and tracts including 600,000 copies of their publication, *The Midnight Cry*, in the year 1842 alone. Likewise, the dissemination of Fourierism resulted, in large measure, from Albert Brisbane's columns on the subject in the *New York Herald* in 1842-43.<sup>11</sup>





Millerism was a movement loosely organized around the belief that Christ would return in 1843 or 1844 and render judgment on humankind. Millerites saw this as the end of the world and, for most that meant the destruction of the world. The movement numbered roughly fifty thousand in New England and upstate New York with perhaps another million or so inclined to take it seriously. The craze evaporated when the final prediction for the end of the world (October 20, 1844, the “Great Disappointment”) proved to be an uneventful day.

The movement originated from the millennial predictions of William Miller, farmer and Baptist minister of Hampton, New York. His arguments were clear, simple, decisive, and accessible. The Bible was literally true and, almost literally, provided the world’s termination time. Armed with a few simple rules of interpretation provided by Miller, any person could consult and decode the primary text. Miller’s doctrines of imminent advent and world-ending were in tune with orthodox Protestantism of the day. The apparent escalation of calamity in the world lent further credence to his perspective.<sup>12</sup>

Noyes’ views were broadly similar to Miller’s in imagining a return of Christ and the world’s imminent end. In contrast to Miller, however, Noyes advanced a theology that often seemed murky and filled with special pleading. The Bible also was true for Noyes, of course, but since it did not clearly state many of the doctrines Noyes imputed to it, he had to explain why such things were hidden and why only he could see them. Although Noyes authored about eighteen anti-Miller articles between 1840 and 1845, it is difficult to imagine he swayed many Adventists.<sup>13</sup> Millerism on the other hand, obviously was appealing and attracted about a third of Noyes’ followers.<sup>14</sup>

Noyes’ reaction to Millerism is discernible in his retreat from the notion of a calamitous end time. Since this was highly figurative material, Noyes began to say at this time, we should “allow prophecy a wider field of fulfillment than this world.” Simultaneously, he emphasized that the coming change might be more in the nature of, say, a gorgeous temple of everlasting peace or a spiritual development.<sup>15</sup> In conceding violent apocalypse to the Millerites, he differentiated his position from theirs, presumably to distance himself from them.

Noyes sharpened the contrast by defining human participation as meaningful to the preordained outcome. In Millerism, people were passive recipients of divine action. One sought redemption, of course, but Christ

was coming whatever one thought or did. Noyes, in contrast, began to see humans as active agents. People, in fact, were God's colleagues helping God to effect an outcome.

As the Bible is the great manual of Spiritual Philosophy, our main business as co-workers with him, is to serve as doorkeepers to the Bible—to do what we can to make all men 'meditate therein day and night,' and especially to bring forth into due prominence the spiritual doctrines of the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporaneous with Millerism was the enthusiasm of Fourierism, a communitarian philosophy claiming to be the first social science. Its originator, Frenchman Charles Fourier (1772-1837), believed that humans acted according to instincts and talents he called "passions." There were twelve passions distributed among 810 personality types. If the precise mix of personality types were assembled in the correct number



Fig. 4. "Vue générale d'un phalanstère," lithograph by Jules Arnout, early 1840s. In late 1844, Albert Brisbane "returned from France with a huge engraved aerial view of an ideal phalanx, which helped to spread the doctrine to impressionistic American audiences" (Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 28). This copy of the same print was presented to the Oneida Community in 1875 by the prominent French Fourierist, Victor Considérant. (Oneida Community Mansion House)



of people living together in a common residence (phalanx or phalanstery in English), the result would be social harmony, i.e., utopia. Work would become enjoyable—"attractive"—because people were doing what they were meant to do. The key assertion of Fourierism was that "passional attraction"—meaning personal inclination and occupational leaning—rendered labor and work attractive. Phalansteries also were sites of amorous passion because, liberated from the repressive strictures of the world, the communards could revel in every variety of physical lovemaking. Fourier's communes were rural, agricultural enterprises especially devoted to fruit-growing.<sup>17</sup>

The craze of Fourierism swept America in the early 1840s, with as many as one hundred thousand participants at one time or another. The first ten Fourierist communes, called "associations" in America, started up in 1843-44. Noyes wrote critically of Fourierism although, in comparison with his critiques of Millerism, his comments on the communarians were "relatively few and relatively kind."<sup>18</sup> Noyes, in fact, learned important lessons from the Fourierists. They demonstrated to him that "conventional institutions could be swept aside more easily than he had thought."<sup>19</sup> They taught him how work could become fun and how residential communalism could overcome the isolation of the family and household.

Noyes took particular note when Brook Farm, the transcendental commune outside Boston, embraced Fourierism in 1844. Almost immediately, the Brook Farmers began building an enormous residence—the country's first phalanstery. When *The Harbinger*, a prestigious Fourierist publication, was located there, Brook Farm, in Noyes' estimation, became "the foremost and brightest of the Associations," "the chief representative and propagative organ of Fourierism."<sup>20</sup>

Years later, Noyes remembered how he "was among the admirers of this periodical [*The Harbinger*], and undoubtedly took an impulse from its teachings." He and his congregation "drank copiously of the spirit of the *Harbinger* and of the Socialists; and have always acknowledged that they received a great impulse from Brook Farm."<sup>21</sup> Most of all, Noyes noticed how Brook Farm became the "religious center of the Associationist movement."<sup>22</sup>

Noyes was profoundly impressed by the arguments of the Brook Farm Fourierists, who claimed that in contrast to Fourier's ill-disguised secularism, American Fourierism was at bottom a religious movement that arose from Christian faith, subscribed to



Fig. 5. The Perfectionist chapel (right) in Putney.  
(Late-nineteenth-century photograph, Oneida Community Mansion House)

the Bible, and aimed “to establish the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth.” ... [T]he logic of translating biblical ideals into Christian social forms and the magnetic pull of the Brook Farm Fourierists drew his group toward community plans.<sup>23</sup>

The Putneyites have been described as evolving slowly toward communism and communalism during the early 1840s;<sup>24</sup> however, the development was indeed gradual and often denied by the Perfectionists themselves. In 1841, they built a chapel and announced themselves as a society of inquiry devoted to strengthening their religious faith. “Our object in coming together,” Noyes declared in 1843, “was not to form a Community after the fashion of the Shakers and Fourierites, but simply to publish the gospel and help one another in spiritual things.”<sup>25</sup> When they constituted themselves as a joint stock corporation in 1844, they reiterated that, since their object was publishing the gospel, “neither the attention nor the expense required by a primarily communistic enterprise could be spared.”<sup>26</sup>

In February 1846, Noyes wrote, “I am every day more persuaded, that to build here slowly and silently a little Community in which the true gospel shall be thoroughly embodied will tell more effectually on the interests

of God and man than to push forward extensive organizations at first.”<sup>27</sup> “Formal community of property is not regarded by us as obligatory on principle but as an expedient,” he stressed the following month. “We are attempting no scientific experiments in political economy, or in social science, and beg to be excused from association in the public mind with those who are making such experiments.”<sup>28</sup> In the middle of March, Noyes wrote that they had begun “the experiment of external union of interests” about six years before. “This experiment has always been

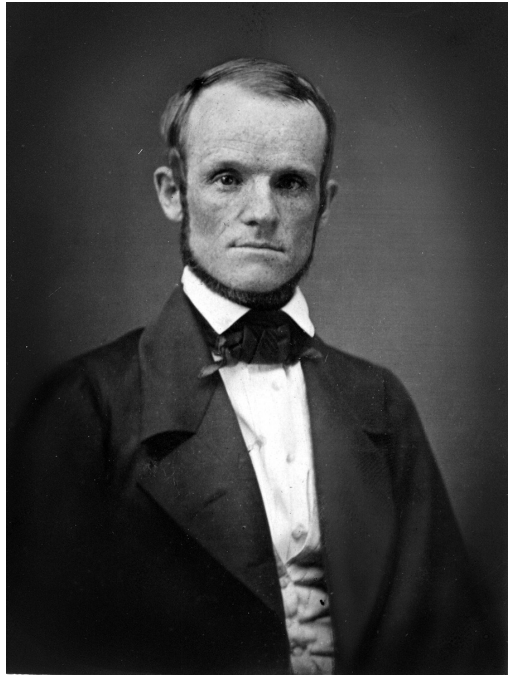


Fig. 6. John H. Noyes, about 1850.  
(Oncida Community Mansion House)

a secondary matter to us. Our primary object has been to publish the gospel of salvation from sin, and to form a Spiritual Phalanx.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Association in Putney (1846-1847)**

No sooner was the ink dry on their denial of being a communal venture, than the Putneyites suddenly became communitarians. Free love among the leading couples began in the spring of 1846 and with it, almost certainly, a method of birth control called “male continence.” Soon after, they announced their commitment to communism of property and persons and commonality of residence. They lived together in three houses but dreamed of building a unitary home, a grand phalanstery. Entering into a new social order, one of them said, “we stood forth a confessed Community.”<sup>30</sup>

What had happened? According to Noyes’ nephew and most knowledgeable biographer, “Noyes might not have embarked on his perilous voyage, had not events in the outside world simultaneously



Fig. 7a, b, c (next page). The three houses in which the Putney group initiated communal living in 1846.  
(Late-nineteenth-century photographs, Oncida Community Mansion House)







assumed a portentous aspect. It was this that pushed him off the wharf.” Noyes claimed that he was forced to take action to counteract lies and false doctrines. “We kept the law until 1846,” he averred. “We withstood Fourierism and Swedenborgianism in their risings.... I maintain that the Putney Community instead of causing the flood built the ark, and that it set about the work not a moment too soon.”<sup>31</sup>

Communitarianism at Putney, however, commenced in response to a specific event: the demise of Brook Farm. In March 1846, the “well-publicized” phalanstery, still incomplete, burned down, extinguishing the energies and hopes of that commune. This was the moment Noyes pushed himself off his wharf and built his ark. “In 1846, after the fire at Brook Farm, and when Fourierism was manifestly passing away,” he wrote, “the little church at Putney began cautiously to experiment in Communism.”<sup>32</sup>

Brook Farm, according to Noyes, “culminated between 1840 and 1846, and left as the net result the Putney Association.”<sup>33</sup> To imagine the Oneida Community as a continuation of or successor to the Boston commune suggests Noyes began the communalistic experiment to fill Brook Farm’s vacant niche and, perhaps, to assume leadership over what he saw as a movement of Christian socialism.

After a year of their new communitarian lifestyle, Noyes and his Putney followers issued this summary of their beliefs:



We believe that the kingdom now coming is the same that was established in heaven at the second coming of Christ. God then commenced a kingdom in human nature independent of the laws of this world. That kingdom, withdrawn to heaven, has been strengthening and enlarging itself ever since. We look for its reestablishment here.<sup>34</sup>

The document goes on to say that God had gathered them together “to be the medium of establishing on earth the institutions of heaven.” Accordingly, the Putney Association has trampled underfoot “the domestic and pecuniary fashions of the world. Separate households, property exclusiveness have come to an end with us.” Living in the heavenly fashion brought the resurrection state into being around them. “There is a power among us that can conquer death.” Therefore, on June 1, 1847, the Putney Association proclaimed: “The Kingdom of God Has Come.”<sup>35</sup>

Earlier, Noyes had described people as God’s co-workers. Implicit in this was the idea that human actions can affect the divine scheme. Now, Putneyites followed that logic out in claiming their efforts had been instrumental in bringing heaven to earth, establishing God’s kingdom without apocalypse. Earlier, catastrophe and destruction were downplayed; now they were not mentioned. In part, this was because what transpired was not sudden but gradual. The Kingdom of God was established “not in a formal, dramatic way, but by a process like that which brings the seasonal spring.”<sup>36</sup>

In upstate New York, where Perfectionists apparently were numerous, two conventions were called in September 1847 to consider the kingdom of heaven newly arrived in Putney. At the first, in Lairdsville, the New Yorkers approved the Putney press and agreed to cooperate with Noyes’ group. At the second, in Genoa, New Yorkers resolved to establish the kingdom of God for themselves by forming an association somewhere in central New York.<sup>37</sup> One of the places considered was Jonathan Burt’s property near Oneida between Syracuse and Utica. There, in late November, Burt and several neighbors united to commence what they called the Oneida Association.

At the same moment, the Putney group, then numbering about thirty adults, was breaking up. Public outrage over Perfectionist claims of miraculous power and their apparently licentious behavior, led to Noyes’ arrest on charges of adultery in late October. Warrants for the arrest of other Perfectionists were also issued with the result that several fled



Fig. 8. The early Oneida Association as remembered by elderly Perfectionist George D. Cragin in 1916. The Burt home, in which Noyes wrote the *Bible Argument*, is the large building directly above the trees in the lower right.  
(Oneida Community Mansion House)

Vermont and their commune was dispersed.<sup>38</sup>

Ending up at Burt's home near Oneida in late January 1848, Noyes accepted the invitation of the New Yorkers to join their association. A letter he wrote at that time to his Putney disciples indicates a strong inclination toward Fourier-like socialism:

Our warfare is an assertion of human rights: first, the right of man to be governed by God and to live in the social state of heaven; second, the right of woman to dispose of her sexual nature by attraction instead of by law and routine and to bear children only when she chooses; third, the right of all to diminish the labors and increase the advantages of life by association.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Bible Argument (1848)**

Sheltering in Burt's home and awaiting the arrival of his Putney disciples, Noyes contemplated the nature of the association about to coalesce on the

banks of Oneida Creek. The *Bible Argument*, written in February of 1848, was published within the Oneida Community's *First Annual Report* of early 1849. That pamphlet was mailed out to prominent public figures in New York to inform them what was occurring at Oneida. The *Bible Argument* was reprinted 1853 as part of *Bible Communism*, the fourth annual report of the Community.<sup>40</sup> Here I disentangle it from later packaging to focus on it as a plan for a community not yet in existence.

Two lines of argument are advanced. The first, concerned with the advent of Christ and the coming of the kingdom of heaven, is religious. This exposition begins with the assertion that group or "complex" marriage is both the way of heaven and the earthly means for bringing heaven about.

The Bible tells us there is no marriage in heaven, Noyes concedes, but that does not mean, as Shakers suppose, that there is no sex. The true meaning is that there is no monogamous or exclusive marriage. In the kingdom of God, there is a state of free or unrestrictive love for several reasons.<sup>41</sup>

God evidently created maleness and femaleness as fitted to each other to achieve perfect union physically and spiritually. Union certainly included sexual intercourse which Noyes described in mystical terms. It is an expression of selflessness drawing the partners closer to one another and to God. In sexual intercourse, men and women flow into each other's hearts through an exchange of magnetic influences and "express their unity of hearts by bodily unity."<sup>42</sup> The spirit of God (whose nature is bisexual and dual) passes between sexually conjoined partners and they "return to the conditions of Paradise, and become what Adam was before the fall, a male and female unit."<sup>43</sup> Sexual conjunction is "the image of the glory of God—the physical symbol of life dwelling in life, which is the mystery of the gospel." The sex act is "an emblem and also a medium of the noblest worship of God and fellowship with the body of Christ."<sup>44</sup>

God could not possibly outlaw in heaven a sacrament so important and good. "The Bible constantly associates ideas of heaven with sexual intercourse." "It was manifestly the design of God, in creating the sexes, to give love more intense expression than is possible between persons of the same sex; and it is foolish to imagine that he will ever abandon that design by unsexing his children, or impede it by legal restrictions on sexual intercourse, in the heavenly state."<sup>45</sup>

Further, any restrictions or exclusiveness in marriage would be

incompatible with the biblical emphasis on common ownership and, inferentially, complete communism. In the heavenly state, property is commonly, not individually, owned as was the case in the early or “primitive” Christian church at the time of Pentecost.<sup>46</sup> This is the core idea of “Bible Communism” in the Oneida Community although that term is not used here.

Property includes people because the Bible, Noyes claims, “expressly places property in women and property in goods in the same category, and speaks of them together, as ready to be abolished by the advent of the kingdom of heaven.” “The abolishment of sexual exclusiveness is involved in the love-relation required between all believers by the express injunction of Christ and the apostles, and by the whole tenor of the New Testament. ‘The new commandment is, that we love one another,’ and that not by pairs, as in the world, but *en masse*.” “In the kingdom of heaven, the intimate union of life and interests, which in the world is limited to pairs, extends through the whole body of believers; i.e. *complex* marriage.”<sup>47</sup>

Complex marriage, then, exists in heaven. The relevance of that fact to our earthly existence is that the kingdom is coming and Christ is returning. Christ must have control over the marriage system “and arrange sexual conditions according to the genius of his own kingdom, before he can push his conquests to victory over death.” Establishing the heavenly conditions of marriage is “the very means by which the resurrection power is to be let in upon the world.”<sup>48</sup>

This theological purpose is stated more clearly in the published editions of the *Bible Argument* (1849, 1853) both of which preface it with this summary of the Community’s religion.

[We believe] that the second advent of Christ took place at the period of the destruction of Jerusalem [A.D. 70]; that at that time there was a primary resurrection and judgment in the spiritual world; that the final kingdom of God then began in the heavens; that the manifestation of that kingdom in the visible world is now approaching; that its approach is ushering in the second and final resurrection and judgment; that a church on earth is now rising to meet the approaching kingdom in the heavens, and to become its duplicate and representative; that inspiration, or open communication with God and the heavens, involving perfect holiness, is the element of connection between the church on

earth and the church in the heavens, and the power by which the kingdom of God is to be established and reign in the world.<sup>49</sup>

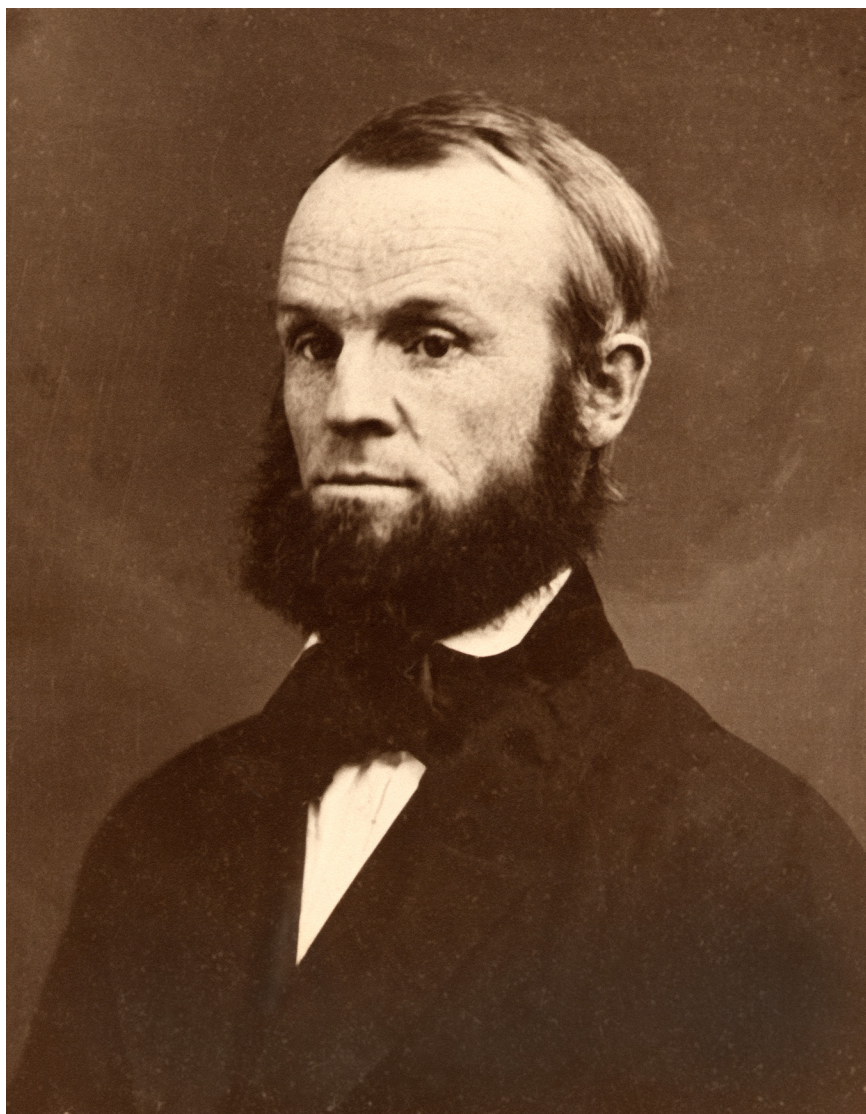


Fig. 9. John H. Noyes, perhaps early 1850s.  
(Oneida Community Mansion House)



This is similar to the affirmation of June 1847 and, like that statement, it means that Noyes and his disciples are the earthly duplicate and representative of the kingdom of heaven. It is they, through the practice of perfect holiness, who will be the medium for establishing God's kingdom here.

There are, however, two differences between this and the earlier statement. One is that heaven, which arrived in Putney in 1847, has not yet come to Oneida. The event has now been moved to the future. The second is that perfect holiness, the means by which "the resurrection power is to be let in upon the world,"<sup>50</sup> is defined chiefly as complex marriage. What the Oneida Community intends to do to duplicate the heavenly state so as to expedite its earthly reappearance is to have sex.

In addition to being fundamental to a millennial purpose, complex marriage also is the heart of the second line of argument: a secular program to correct social evils, relieve human misery, and reorganize society. "It is the special function of the present or body-church, (availing itself first of the work of the primitive church, by union with it, and a re-development of its theology,) to break up the *social* system of the world, and establish true external order by the reconciliation of the sexes."<sup>51</sup>

Noyes, as social reformer, defines and criticizes problems he will correct. These problems, however, are not so much social issues as they are categories of human misery. Noyes' subject is how much unhappiness there is in the world due to the demands first, of monogamous marriage and second, of reproduction.

Monogamous marriage, Noyes observes, is an artificial and unsatisfying institution. There is nothing natural in the way the world compels us to experience sex because sexual love is not naturally restricted to pairs. "Men and women find universally, (however the fact may be concealed,) that their susceptibility to love is not burnt out by one honey-moon, or satisfied by one lover. On the contrary, the secret history of the human heart will bear out the assertion that it is capable of loving any number of times and any number of persons, and that the more it loves the more it can love." Monogamous marriage is a source of misery and dysfunction because "It gives to sexual appetite only a scanty and monotonous allowance, and so produces the natural vices of poverty, contraction of taste, and stinginess or jealousy."<sup>52</sup> The solution to the problem is to love without restrictions.

A system of complex marriage, which shall match the demands of nature, both as to time and variety, will open the prison doors to

the victims both of marriage and celibacy; to those in married life who are starved, and those who are oppressed by lust; to those who are tied to uncongenial natures, and to those who are separated from their natural mates;—to those in the unmarried state who are withered by neglect, deceased by unnatural abstinence, or plunged into prostitution and self-pollution, by desires which find no lawful channel.<sup>53</sup>

Reproducing our species, the second source of hardship, increases misery for both parents in a monogamous marriage. For the man, it greatly augments the labor he must perform to support his family. For the woman, the curse of reproduction brings even more baneful effects. “The infirmities and vital expenses of woman during the long period of pregnancy, waste her constitution. The awful agonies of child-birth heavily tax the life of woman. The cares of the nursing period bear heavily on woman.”<sup>54</sup>

The solution to ills resulting from reproduction is a distinctive form of birth control described here for the first time. Sex, Noyes reasons, comprises two aspects: the amative function consisting of sexual attraction, amorous desire, and the sex act itself; and the propagative function, comprising male ejaculation, conception, and reproduction.<sup>55</sup> The amative and propagative functions can be separated by prohibiting male climax. This, of course, is “male continence” although that term is not used. “Our method simply proposes the subordination of the flesh to the spirit, teaching men to seek principally the elevated spiritual pleasures of sexual intercourse.” It allows lovers to use their sexual organs “as the servants of their spiritual natures.”<sup>56</sup>

“The foregoing principles concerning the sexual relation,” Noyes rather abruptly concludes, “open the way for Association.” Amativeness and complex marriage draw men and women to one another so that “the same attractions as draw and bind together pairs in the worldly partnership of marriage” are magnified in the larger social body.<sup>57</sup> “Loving companionship in labor, and especially the mingling of the sexes, makes labor attractive.”<sup>58</sup> The intrinsic pleasantness of male-female companionship not only renders labor attractive, it furnishes the motivation to associate in the first place.

The other side of the coin is that unrestrictive love with birth control frees men from the tyranny of excessive labor and emancipates women from the burden of bearing unwanted children. Complex marriage also is the antidote to division, jealousy, and strife that plague every organization in which men and women are forced, by custom and law, to

be monogamous.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, free love corrects a fundamental error of Fourierism. Massing a large number of people together, Fourierists hope for harmony from compression but find only inert density—a lifeless organization. For an association to live, every member must enjoy vital relations with other members. Complex marriage kindles “vital society” and, in Noyes’ association, “strength will be increased, and the necessity of labor diminished, till all work will become sport.” A vital society, Noyes adds, demands the surrender of conjugal and property interests “to the use of the whole.”<sup>60</sup>

Noyes also stipulates that the new society will have, as Fourier said, a unitary residence. “A community home in which each is married to all, and where love is honored and cultivated, will be as much more attractive than an ordinary home, even in the honey-moon, as the community out-numbers a pair. A motive thus mighty is needed for the Association enterprise.”<sup>61</sup>

The new society will subsist, as Fourier also proposed, on the fruits from trees. “Cattle occupy more of the soil at present than men. The cultivation of trees will be better sport than plowing, hoeing corn, digging potatoes, and waiting on cows and pigs.”<sup>62</sup>

Free love, Noyes emphasizes, is the engine and ligature of communal existence. Having critiqued society’s problems and advanced a solution, Noyes was now composing a road map to social reform. He proposes, in Fourierist language, a Fourier-like phalanx in which “complex marriage” takes the place of “passional attraction.” “The audacious appropriation of the central Fourierist metaphor marked both the symbolic ascendancy of Perfectionism over Associationism and Noyes’ irrevocable self-identification as a utopian.”<sup>63</sup> When we remember the commencement of this behavior at the moment Brook Farm wilted, it seems reasonable to suggest that Noyes was staking a claim to replace Brook Farm as the pre-eminent utopia of the Associationist movement.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

As a firebrand revivalist in the 1830s, John H. Noyes believed in a sinless condition obtained through faith. He also supposed that life in heaven involved communism of property, people, and sexual access. The heavenly state would soon be established on earth following the tumultuous end of our present world.

As minister to a small flock in his Vermont hometown in succeeding years, Noyes visualized communal life as a support group for religious faith and a team to operate a printing press. These were the years of millenarian movements in the outside world, the Millerite excitement announcing the coming of Christ and the secular Fourierist craze offering a new age of harmonious social relations.

Noyes monitored both closely. In apparent reaction to Millerism, Noyes backed off from apocalyptic descriptions of the end times and began to envision Christ's kingdom as something humans could help bring about. Noyes' interest in Fourierism focused on the Brook Farm Association. Its collapse, in early 1846, prompted the sudden reorganization of a Bible study group into a real communitarian venture. Group marriage, mutual criticism, male birth control, and communal residence were all undertaken at about the same time.

A year later, the Putney association announced that their efforts to bring heaven to earth by practicing the lifestyle of heaven had been entirely successful—heaven had arrived. The coming of the heavenly state, they now said, had been gradual and peaceful.

Driven out of Putney by the outraged townspeople, Noyes came to the burgeoning Oneida Association and, in February 1848, awaiting good weather to begin what would become Oneida Community, he wrote the *Bible Argument*. It was, on the one hand, a plan for religious communitarianism. Ignoring the earlier claim that heaven had arrived, Noyes now indicated it could be brought to earthly fruition through the practice of righteous, unrestrictive love. It was also a blueprint for social reform through associative action, a plan recasting Fourierism around the practice of group marriage.

The *Bible Argument* may be, as Parker enthused, “the Magna Charta of the régime of sexual communism,”<sup>64</sup> but it is still a preliminary exposition of a philosophy that would be elaborated and modified over time. As a treatise focused on sex, it repeatedly explains why one should not feel shame about sexual matters but says comparatively little about communism and even less about the importance of printing in associationist life. As a social analysis, it is very weak. Noyes criticizes the Fourierists for their focus on the industrial system but offers nothing to rebut them in comparable terms. Noyes seems indifferent to economic forces, relations of production, and differential distributions of wealth and opportunity. His analysis of labor organization lies in the future.

How effective was the *Bible Argument* as a plan for the Oneida Community? One inherent flaw was its acceptance of Fourier's enthusiasm for horticulture. This proved to be a policy that "led the community to the brink of financial disaster."<sup>65</sup> In time, the Oneida Community would redefine horticulture to mean what worked for canning and sale — produce from shrubs, vines, garden plants, and whatever trees were appropriate to the setting. Horticulture was modified to become the Oneida Community's successful "Fruit Business."

On the other hand, appropriating Fourier's concept of work as pleasurable and fulfilling, but adding to it an emphasis on mingling men and women together, proved to be inspired. "When the partition between the sexes is taken away, and man ceases to make woman a propagative drudge," Noyes emphasized, "men and women will mingle in all their employments, as boys and girls mingle in their sports, and then labor will be attractive."<sup>66</sup> On this important issue, theory effectively translated into action. "At Oneida," Guarneri noted, "men and women worked together not only more than in Fourier's books, but more often than at any contemporary commune." Here, Noyes truly "out-Fourierized the Fourierists" by conceiving the motive power for an association that would last many times longer than any phalanx.<sup>67</sup>

## Notes

1. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 90.
2. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, 90.
3. Noyes undoubtedly was influenced by ideas from many sources, including the Shakers whose writings he studied as early as 1835. He later paid tribute to that sect as America's Ur-communists whose success demonstrated the possibility of communitarian life. The example of the Shakers may have inspired some inclination toward communalism at Putney, but Shakerism did not impact Noyes' thinking in the direct and detectable fashion that Millerism and Fourierism did. George Wallingford Noyes, comp. and ed., *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community* (Oneida, N.Y., 1931), 152; John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1870), 192.
4. Carl J. Guarneri, "Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement: Oneida and Fourierism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no. 3 (1996): 471.
5. John H. Noyes, *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, Vt.: Office of *The Spiritual Magazine*, 1847), 149-78; George Wallingford Noyes, comp. and ed., *The Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes, Founder of the Oneida Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 178-83.



6. Noyes, *Berean*, vii, 236-45. "Energetic ambition" and "unquenchable desire" are quoted from p. 245.
7. Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 44.
8. Noyes, *Berean*, 178.
9. G. W. Noyes, *Religious Experience*, 143-44.
10. G. W. Noyes, *Religious Experience*, 308.
11. Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 80, 92, 132; Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 32-34; Wayne R. Judd, "William Miller: Disappointed Prophet," in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 36.
12. Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 33, 138; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), 287-321; David L. Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800-1850* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985).
13. Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 65, 98. See "Salvation from Sin" (Noyes, *Berean*, 149-78) and "Second Coming of Christ" (*Berean*, 275-300), two essays said to have been written in response to Millerism (H. A. N. [Harriet Noyes], "History of the Printing Business of O.C.," typescript in the Oneida Community Mansion House Archives [ca. 1875], 7).
14. Michael Barkun, "'The Wind Sweeping over the Country': John Humphrey Noyes and the Rise of Millerism," in *The Disappointed*, ed. Numbers and Butler, 153, 156.
15. Noyes, *Berean*, 53, 329, 397. Barkun seems to agree that Noyes deemphasized calamity and tumult in reaction to Millerism ("Wind Sweeping over the Country," 158). Barkun's main concern, however, is to argue that Noyes vehemently denied having views similar to Miller's in order to disassociate himself from ridicule and charges of madness directed against Millerites (Michael Barkun, "John Humphrey Noyes and Millennialism," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 28, no. 2 (1993): 11-21).
16. Noyes, *Berean*, 55.
17. Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 18-19, 122-34, 181-82. Another feature enhancing the attractiveness of labor was that Fourier's communes were joint-stock arrangements with guaranteed incomes. The highest rewards were to go to those performing the most unpleasant tasks.
18. Barkun, "Wind Sweeping over the Country," 156.
19. Guarneri, "Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement," 475, 480.
20. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 537, 107; Robert S. Fogarty, ed. *Special Love/Special Sex: An Oneida Community Diary* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 16.
21. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 537, 615.
22. Guarneri, *Utopian Alternative*, 280.
23. Guarneri, "Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement," 472.
24. Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 73; Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 615; Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 89-90.
25. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 46, 55.

26. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 71.
27. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 192-93.
28. Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1993), 54.
29. "Association," *Spiritual Magazine* (Association of Perfectionists at Putney, Vt.), March 15, 1846, 6. This unsigned article, probably by John H. Noyes, was later reprinted by the Oneida Community (undated) as a tract entitled, "Brook Farm and John H. Noyes's Community of Bible Perfectionists at Putney, Vermont, U. S. A."
30. H. J. S. [Harriet Skinner], "A Community Transplanted, from Putney to Oneida, III," *American Socialist*, Nov. 6, 1879, 277.
31. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 195. The spiritualistic doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) enjoyed a currency at the time and Brook Farm briefly flirted with them. Fourierists, according to Guarneri, "discovered similarities between Swedenborg's ideas that the inner life sought outer 'uses' and Fourier's notion that the passions governed human actions." (*Utopian Alternative*, 116-17) In addition to critiquing Swedenborgian theology, Noyes challenged Swedenborg's view of marriage as an "affair of affinities discoverable only through successive trials" (*John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 184).
32. Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 154; Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 615-16.
33. *Circular*, April 23, 1863, 31.
34. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 235.
35. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 237-38.
36. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 236.
37. Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 130-31; G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 258-63; *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (1849), reprinted as the appendix (295-361) in Lawrence Foster, ed., *Free Love in Utopia: John Humphrey Noyes and the Origin of the Oneida Community*, Compiled by George Wallingford Noyes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 298.
38. H. J. S., "A Community Transplanted," 277; Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 119-42; G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 282-91.
39. G. W. Noyes, *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community*, 368. The final publications issued in Putney frequently mention Fourierism. We do not exult in the demise of Brook Farm, one article states. Nor do we agree its passing means "the world will always remain a chaos of interests, an arena of selfishness," because the "new wine of God's grace" brings new institutions and forms of society (*Spiritual Magazine*, Nov. 1, 1847, 169).
40. Foster, *Free Love in Utopia*, xlii, note 21; *First Annual Report*; Oneida Community, *Bible Communism: A Compilation from the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Branches* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Office of *The Circular*, 1853). "Oneida Community" refers to the social entity resulting from an amalgamation of several Perfectionist groups on the banks of Oneida Creek in 1848. The groups included the Putneyites as well as the families already united at that location as the "Oneida Association." The name "Oneida Community" did not come into common usage until about 1854 and did not entirely replace "Oneida Association" for several years more.
41. *First Annual Report*, 313. The biblical passage most frequently quoted to this effect is: "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30).

42. *First Annual Report*, 315, 325.
43. *First Annual Report*, 323, 327.
44. *First Annual Report*, 328, 330.
45. *First Annual Report*, 317, 330.
46. "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common" (Acts 2:44).
47. *First Annual Report*, 314-15.
48. *First Annual Report*, 320.
49. *First Annual Report*, 307; *Bible Communism*, 7.
50. *First Annual Report*, 320.
51. *First Annual Report*, 321.
52. *First Annual Report*, 318-19.
53. *First Annual Report*, 319-20.
54. *First Annual Report*, 319, 323.
55. *First Annual Report*, 323.
56. *First Annual Report*, 326.
57. *First Annual Report*, 330.
58. *First Annual Report*, 333.
59. *First Annual Report*, 331, 334.
60. *First Annual Report*, 332. According to Perfectionist George Cragin, the Fourierists universally failed "because they were undertaking the herculean task of uniting into one harmonious community as many independent and antagonistic wills as they had individual members" (*Spiritual Magazine*, Nov. 1, 1847, 172).
61. *First Annual Report*, 330.
62. *First Annual Report*, 332-33.
63. Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium*, 79. Not only was Brook Farm the most important phalanx to Noyes, its end "was virtually the end of Fourierism" (Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 562).
64. Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 177.
65. Guarneri, "Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement," 482.
66. *First Annual Report*, 333. Noyes also proposed in this context that women should wear clothing suited to work.
67. Guarneri, "Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement," 482. The phrase about out-Fourierizing the Fourierists also is from Guarneri ("Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement," 476). The vast majority of Associations folded within a year or two. The record holder was the North American Phalanx's twelve years (1843-1855).