



Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community

Spencer Klaw

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Without Sin chronicles the rise and fall of nineteenth-century America's most successful experiment in Utopian living: New York's Oneida Community (1848-1880). Founded by the charismatic Christian Perfectionist John Humphrey Noyes, this remarkable society flourished for more than thirty years as a unique world where property was shared, men and women were equals, sex was free and open, work was to be joyous, and pleasure was felt to be "the very business that God set Adam and Eve about."

Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community Details

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Nancy says

Without Sin / Spencer Klaw. History of the Oneida Community in New York, 1848-1878 or so. Well-organized and written study of the community's beliefs, leadership, and operation. Fascinating: an intricate mix of conventional mores and otherwise (see complex marriage, most particularly). Much of their lifestyle would be at home today.

Postscript: I highly recommend touring the historical site in Oneida.

Brenda Clough says

A good all-around history of the movement.

Debbie Gunter says

A very readable discussion of the Oneida Community, one of the most successful communal living experiments of the 1800s. Based on Perfectionism, John Humphrey Noyes established this community and was its leader from 1848 to 1880. The "Bible Communists" were held together by the personal charisma of Noyes AND the control of sexual relations between the members. It is a fascinating story that explores the roles of sexual power, interpersonal relationships, and love of God or religious beliefs. One of the more interesting aspects was the use of "male continence" to ensure women in the community would achieve sexual fulfillment as well as to control fertility. Women's role in the Oneida community was much more free than that of general society, but women still were regarded as subordinate to men. The introduction of sex to young people in the community is particularly repellent in light of today's understanding of sexual abuse, but is par for the course in religious movements of the era and of many current reprehensible cults.

The Oneida Community morphed into the Oneida Community, Ltd., the silverware company. In its early days, this family business had enviable working conditions and much success, due to the moral values of the Oneida Community leadership.

John Kaess says

As a guy who grew up in Oneida, NY this was an interesting read on the history of the Oneida Community and John Noyes the founder. Some weird stuff. The Oneida Community was founded as a commune and religious cult in the 1800's. Strange ideas about sex and community and family.

Patrick Ross says

Spencer Klaw has written what must be considered the definitive history of a fascinating slice of 19th Century American culture, the Oneida Community of New York. It is most known for its abolishment of marriage, although it proved to be hardly some Hippie free-love community; pairings were dictated by community founder John Humphrey Noyes. Noyes comes across as a larger-than-life figure, a Messianic man who believed God spoke to him and that his community would usher in Heaven on Earth. The 19th Century was a rich time for the formation of American-born religious faiths, the most enduring being the Mormon Church. Noyes repeatedly resisted rapid growth of his faith, however, in contrast to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young; his focus was on control, and he wanted his followers close by so he could determine their every move.

The Oneida community lasted for decades, longer than most communes that we would now call cults. It didn't last Noyes' entire life, however; an internal dispute over his successor (he was pushing for a son of his that was not highly regarded) led Noyes to slip away in the night, dying a few years later having never returned. The commune--always focused on generating income through commercial ventures--eventually became a stock-based company that still exists today making housewares.

The strength of Klaw's book is also its weakness. He gained access to primary source materials never before seen, namely letters and diaries kept close by descendants of the commune and those who still closely guard its history. It's pretty clear a bargain was struck when gaining access; he would tread lightly on disparaging the movement and its many adherents. Even Noyes gets at times a pretty light touch. As it happens, a number of residents eventually published memoirs, so there already was a lot of primary material. To get a true, multifaceted view into Oneida, however, you need to read Klaw.

After a few chapters, however, this reader had spent enough time with these idealistic but misguided individuals. I would have preferred a bit of focus on the broader picture of late 19th Century America. What was happening in the culture that led to the Perfectionist movement from which Noyes' community evolved? What led to such a spark in exploration of faith? That is lacking here, and would have added value to the book.

Linda Benedict says

Good "local history". I am glad to have the background and philosophy of this movement. Next, a visit to the Mansion House in Oneida.

Ana says

The story of the Oneida community is so interesting and Klaw really did a nice job of covering the history from the very beginning to the very end. I also appreciated that the author wasn't judgmental of the Oneidans and provided many primary source accounts from diaries and letters that were written by members of the community.

Adrienne Jones says

A disturbing portrait of an influential narcissist using religion to control a population for personal

gratification. The child sexual abuse and "selective breeding" projects bothered me too much to continue.

Although the tale is dramatic, researched, and well-written, this is not a history for the faint of heart.

Erik Graff says

I'd previously read a revamped doctoral dissertation about Oneida and several books about utopian living experiments which included reference to it, but this is the best account I've seen insofar as it recaptures some sense of what it must have been like to have been a "Christian communist" in Oneida.

Although not myself a Christian, I have grown up under its influence and have made a point of seriously studying its history and various expressions. Of them, Oneida was not only one of the most successful but also one of the most personally challenging.

Leaving the more mutable aspects of Noyes' theology aside, the distinguishing core of Oneidan belief was perfectionist. Contrary to Augustine, sin was not a bedrock condition of human life. People, men and women both, could attain a state of "universal love", overcoming the jealous bonds of nationalism, clan and matrimony. At Oneida, every adult was "married" to every other adult and children, soon after weaning, were raised communally, every child being everyone's child (altho paternity and maternity were acknowledged). So to with property, everything but one's room and its personal contents being held in common.

As tendentiously represented above, I find these ideals to be ethically attractive. I'd like to be the kind of person capable of living as they did. I want to grow to become that kind of person. The example of Oneida and its satellite communities challenge me with a broader vision of what people may be capable of.

A few years ago I visited, with Walt Wallace, Putney, Vermont, where Noyes began his movement. Next time I'm in the state I plan another, more intelligently appreciative, visit.

Sara says

The book chronicles the history of the Oneida community in the 1800's. They are an interesting example of American Communism, with a Christian twist. Reading about their experiment with "complex marriage" (aka highly regulated free love) makes the book worthwhile! Does anyone, besides sociologists and historians, read about utopian communities?

East Bay J says

I knew nothing about the Oneida Community previous to coming across *Without Sin* at my local bookstore. They were a communist religious group who came together under the guidance of John Humphrey Noyes, a man convinced he was God's chosen vessel to lead the world to what he called Bible Communism. The practices and principles of Bible Communism included such concepts as Perfectionism (anyone who commits sin can't be called a Christian), Mutual Criticism (exposing oneself to the criticism of the community in face to face public meetings) and Complex Marriage (free love with the caveat that all trysts had to be sanctioned by Noyes) among others.

Spencer Klaw does a pretty complete job of laying out the story of the Oneida Community and includes a great deal of interesting incidental information. For example, Charles Giteau, who would go on to assassinate president James Garfield, was a community member for some time. Apparently, the reason he left was that he had such poor luck finding sexual partners. Also, the Onedia flatware company, which still exists, was started by the Oneida community and became its most sucessful business venture.

While Complex Marriage gets a lot of coverage, this book is almost completely devoid of any sort of sensationalist flavor. There are no titilating accounts of depraved sexuality, which is to Klaw's credit. As much as it seems obvious that Noyes and other core community members were up to some pretty shady sh*t in controlling sex at Oneida, Klaw deals with the subject matter in a non-opinionated, non-judgemental way. For instance, the fact that Noyes took responsibility for the first sexual experience of most of the young girls at Oneida is discussed without judgement. Where I would say Noyes was a charismatic, manipulative, Bible banging pedophile, Klaw covers all sides of the issue with impartiality.

Although women at Oneida were not allowed to raise their own children, marry, wear long skirts (they wore short skirts with pants underneath) or have long hair, they may have been treated as the closest thing to equals one will find in the United States of the 19th century. Another big bonus for the ladies was the practice of Male Continence. Men were not allowed to orgasm except when attempting procreation. This prolonged the act of sex and often meant women had orgasms, something not too many folks outside the community cared about in the late 1800's.

For the painful side effects of Male Continence, Noyes recommended prayer and the application of ice. Yikes!

In spite of any nutty religious shenanigans that went on, there are dozens of accounts from community members about how happy they were at Oneida. Until things fell apart in the 1890's, Noyes and his followers lived in almost perfect peace and prosperity. That, to me, is what makes the Oneida story so interesting.

Nina says

Excellent history of the Oneida community. A few years ago I read a novel about it (The Strawberry Fields of Heaven) so I was interested in a factual account. There was much about the community to be admired. They were educated, cultured, spiritual, and accomplished. Had excellent ideas on work which made Oneida, Inc one of the most advanced companies in the way it treated (and treats) employees. Women were probably better off in many ways at Oneida than in the world at large. The institution of "complex marriage" was interesting, but was only able to survive under virtually dictatorships conditions imposed by the founder. Noyes was an amazing leader, even if some of his "God inspired authority" was rather self-serving. IN the end, Noyes did in his own experiment by trying to force his son as his successor, despite knowing that his son was not a leader). Also, as in so many cases, financial success weakened the whole group and changed some of the finer aspects of the community.

Felisa Rosa says

A fascinating investigation of a 19th century Christian commune that makes it's 60's successors look tame. Although the author is relatively objective, and wryly humorous when describing the eccentricities and

hypocrisies of Oneida founder John Noyes, he creates a loving portrait of a group of people who sacrificed ownership to forge a society that was apart from the cultural and sexual constraints of the Victorian era.

Elizabeth Quinn says

This was part of my research for my novel-in-progress, *Perfecting Eden*, which is a fictional account of the lives of my ancestors in the Oneida Community. Klaw's was able to take advantage of the Oneida archive for this history, presenting a more complete view than earlier bowdlerized histories. An essential work.

Nora Roy says

As a descendant of the Oneida Community, I appreciate the way Spencer Klaw has approached his subject. Using original source materials, such as letters from community members to one another, Klaw puts the Community's men, women, and children into the narrative, and he doesn't mince words about the autocratic way in which John Humphrey Noyes created a dominion that defied conventional morality and yet lasted for thirty-two years.
