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Utopian religions in America: The Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists and the Mormons, an issue of survival

Abstract

The Mormon Church has attracted many new members to its religion since its inception and has grown into a world religion. However, the Shakers only have a few remaining members, and the Oneida Perfectionists have none. By examining the founding figures' personality traits, each community's sexual attitudes and key rituals, and especially their recruitment methods, I will demonstrate why the Mormons have attracted so many more followers than the other two utopian communities, and why people have found the attitudes and rituals of the Mormon Church to be more attractive. In other words, I will show why the Mormons were much more successful at recruiting new members.

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Utopian Religions in America:
the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists and the Mormons,
an Issue of Survival

by

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Introduction

Since the foundation of the United States of America, many new religious groups have developed here. Some have died out rather quickly and some have attracted numerous members and have actually grown into world religions. This paper will focus specifically on three “utopian” religious movements that began in the U.S. at approximately the same time, namely the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Coming, the Oneida Perfectionists, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

These groups are all considered “utopian” religious movements. Utopian movements are totalitarian groups that were founded and developed in response to the society in which they live. These movements are based upon the need to form a separate and distinct community from the rest of the American public. These movements were founded by people who disagreed with the practices of their larger society, and hoped to correct those problems by forming their own segregated communities. The word utopian is used to describe these authoritarian and idealistic, which were trying to perfect society. In other words, these people would see something wrong in their world and then envision and create a community that intended to not only correct that wrong but to be completely flawless.

This study will consider in depth each founder’s childhood, adult life, and life as a community organizer. I will then analyze the personality traits that have led to each founder’s successes and failures. Then, we will focus on the key sexual attitudes of each community and observe a few rituals that each used in their worship. Each community had diverse ways of attempting to attract new members. Some of these

methods were fruitful in recruiting new members, while other methods were not very successful in enticing people to join their community.¹

Before going any further, there needs to be a clear explanation of the different names that each utopian community used. The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming are commonly referred to as the Shakers, and will be called that from now on in this paper. The Shakers began as a part of the Christian sect, known as the Shakers, which focused on an individual's direct contact with the Holy Spirit. The term "Shakers" is shortened version of the "Shaking Quakers" and was a derogatory term coined by outsiders. They were so characterized due to their unusual worship style, which involved a shaking style of dancing. Likewise, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is typically known as the Mormon Church and its members are Mormons. This pejorative name was coined by outsiders. The *Book of Mormon*, which is said to have originated with the early American named Mormon, and the public became comfortable with the term.

The Mormon Church has attracted many new members to its religion since its inception and has grown into a world religion. However, the Shakers only have a few remaining members, and the Oneida Perfectionists have none. By examining the founding figures' personality traits, each community's sexual attitudes and key rituals, and especially their recruitment methods, I will demonstrate why the Mormons have attracted so many more followers than the other two utopian communities, and why people have found the attitudes and rituals of the Mormon Church to be more attractive. In other words, I will show why the Mormons were much more successful at recruiting new members.

Founding Figures

All world religions begin with just one person. There are various reasons to consider when looking at the motivation behind why people chose to start a new religious movement. In this section, I will look at each founder's childhood and the experiences that led each founder to start a new religion. I will also briefly evaluate the personality and physical characteristics of these founders in order to understand the demise of the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists, and the rise of the Mormons.

Ann Lee

Ann Lee, who founded the religious group that would later be known as the Shakers, was born in Manchester, England on February 29, 1736. She was born as the second oldest of eight children to a poor and uneducated family. Due to her family's lack of money, Lee began working at a young age in a cotton factory and as an infirmity cook. Lee never attended any formal schooling because of her long work hours where she earned money to help support her family. According to Richard Francis, a Shaker historian who has written many books about Lee's life, Lee's lack of schooling was much like other children in any of England's industrial towns.²

Lee grew up in a very cramped home. Her family had no money to spare for luxuries and, even more significantly in view of Ann's later development, she had no privacy. The lack of privacy in a small house that was overcrowded with a large extended family may have enabled Lee to hear other family members having sex. Francis also wrote that Lee's dislike of "fleshy cohabitation" dated from early youth and this hatred of sex at such a young age likely led to her sexual attitudes later in

life.³ What is well documented is that Lee avoided her husband and sex after the catastrophic loss of all of her children. Andrews vividly wrote,

Her first reactions were guilt, shame, and aversion. She saw the deaths of her children as a series of judgments on her concupiscence. Fearing to stir up the affections of her husband, her testimony reads, she began to avoid her bed as if it had been made of embers. She was afraid to sleep, lest she awake in hell.³

Lee was convinced that the only way to cleanse her soul was to endure complete self-mortification. At that terrible time in her life, she stopped eating almost completely so much that she became anorexic. She drank just enough to get by and she barely slept.

Lee was part of the Quaker denomination throughout her childhood and early adulthood. Like all Quakers, Lee believed that a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit was the most important aspect of a Christian experience. However, Lee's tragedies with her young children, child birth, and sex led her to be dissatisfied with her Quaker experiences, and she sought other spiritual guidance. Lee eventually broke away from her Quaker upbringing in her search for spiritual enlightenment. James Wardley, a Frenchman who was the leader of a group known as the Camisards, started a religious movement in France that focused on energetic, intense and ecstatic connections with the Holy Spirit. Wardley was forced to leave France in 1747, and he and his followers fled to England to avoid persecution. Lee came under the influence of Wardley, and she was attracted to his worship style. After many dark nights of introspection, Lee left the Quakers and joined Wardley and the Camisards. In the beginning, Lee enjoyed being a part of the Camisards, but eventually she left

this group too due to her growing radicalism and differing opinion about “fleshy cohabitation.”

Lee strongly disagreed with the Camisards’ willingness to practice sex and continue procreation. Only through complete abstinence, she had come to believe, was it possible to attain perfect holiness. Lee decided that the only way to be entirely perfect on Earth was to abstain completely from all sexual practices. She began preaching this religious concept to her fellow English citizens and she surprisingly attracted a few new members.

Lee was a very controversial religious figure in England. She was constantly persecuted due to her radical religious ideas and rituals. Members of mainstream Christian denominations protested Lee’s practices and tried to stop her and her followers from worshipping in their “shaking and dancing ways.” Lee and her followers were often arrested and thrown in jail, only to be let out to return to their unconventional worship practices. Lee was even branded as a lunatic and she spent a few weeks in a mental hospital, primarily due to the preaching of her most controversial vision. This vision led her to believe that the heavenly Christ was returning to Earth in female form and, furthermore, that she was this new incarnation of Christ. This radical idea did not go over very well with the English citizens who believed in the traditional patriarchal form of the Christian Trinity, namely, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Lee also had other visions while in England. One vision in particular changed the course of her life and movement in that it encouraged her to leave England in 1774. Since Lee and her followers were frequently under attack from their

government and fellow English citizens, Lee came to believe that she and her followers should board a ship and sail to the New World so that they could worship how they wished without fear of constant harassment. Lee took herself and nine of her English followers (including her “earthly husband and brother”) to America so they could practice their religion freely. It took the group, now officially called the “Shakers,” three months to make the voyage, and once they landed, they began to set up a community and to proselytize converts.

While Lee was alive, she was in complete control of the leadership of the Shakers. However, before her death on September 8, 1784, she failed to set up a system that would allow her movement to continue without her leadership and guidance. Lee’s neglect to organize for the future and to set up a process by which new leaders would emerge is one of the reasons the Shakers’ population declined so rapidly after her death.

John Humphrey Noyes

John Humphrey Noyes was born on September 3, 1811 in Brattleboro, Vermont and became the founder of the Oneida Perfectionists, one of the most unique religious movements in American history. Noyes, from a rich and wealthy family, had an upbringing very different than that of Lee. His family could afford to send him to the best schools throughout his childhood and adolescence. His father was a graduate of the prestigious Dartmouth College and was a member of the United States Congress, and Noyes’ mother raised him in a strict Christian setting. Robert David Thomas, a historian from the University of Pennsylvania, who studied the Oneida

community for many years, wrote that Noyes' mother taught her son to be abnormally fearful of the Lord at a very early age.⁴

Following in his father's footsteps, Noyes attended Dartmouth College. He then went to law school thinking he would make a good lawyer. However, while enrolled in law school, Noyes had a sudden desire to end his plans to become a lawyer and instead he enrolled in the Yale Divinity School to study religion. In 1833, Noyes was issued a license to preach. While a student, Noyes started to question his strict Christian upbringing and became cynical of the organized religion that he was expected to embrace. Eventually, he became very interested in the idea of Christian perfectionism. This particular doctrine claims that one can achieve a sinless state during his or her earthly life. According to Lawrence Foster, a religious scholar who has written many fine books on the sexual practices of different religions, Noyes began to develop new religious and sexual theories stressing the importance of what Foster calls "inward attitude rather than outward forms."⁵ Noyes began thinking deeply about how he could cleanse his mind of earthly sins without devaluing the importance of sexuality.

Noyes left Yale in 1834 and began wandering around New England searching for religious truth. In this year, he had a profoundly moving revelation about love, marriage, sex, and religion. Noyes declared that there is no marriage in Heaven, and thus there should be no marriage on Earth either. He began preaching this idea to people throughout New England with very little success. Many New Englanders did not agree with such a controversial religious statement and tried to silence Noyes' preaching.

In 1837, Noyes met James Boyle, a former pastor of a Protestant church, who had recently left his denomination in search of obtaining earthly perfection. When he met Noyes, Boyle realized that he and Noyes shared the same desire to become sinless and perfect on Earth, and they began working together in hopes of finding more people who shared this same religious ideal. Noyes and Boyle published a journal, *The Perfectionist*, in hopes of attracting new members to their new movement. This journal was circulated throughout New England, with a large readership in New Haven, Connecticut and Putney, Vermont. Noyes eventually convinced people to convert to his perfectionist ideal, and to set up communities so members could strive towards achieving “Heaven on Earth.” Boyle ended up playing a small role in the organization due to a dispute among the two. Boyle and Noyes parted over Noyes’ very controversial and radical views towards marriage and sex (to be discussed in detail in the next section).

Foster wrote that Noyes’ desire to start and maintain a community with a “complex marriage” system may have been due to his extremely reserved personality towards sex and women. Noyes was described as being a shy man who had a very hard time approaching women. Noyes was married to a woman named Abigail Merwin and he had convinced her to try to obtain earthly perfection, as well. However, Merwin completely disagreed with Noyes’ views on developing a religious community that incorporated this thing called complex marriage, and she left Noyes for another man. Noyes was devastated that his first true love had left him, and he spiraled into deep depression. Noyes began writing letters and articles that described in detail how he wanted his religious community organized and began actively

seeking members to join him in his endeavors. This intense writing helped Noyes overcome the grief of his wife leaving him, and gave him a new outlook on life that would allow him to be more sociable in entertaining women.

In his day, Noyes was clearly the chief leader of the Oneida Perfectionist community.

He had complete control of all aspects of the Oneida congregation. He had a committee that helped with some of his planning, but he was the primary force.

However, this seems to be one of the weaknesses of Noyes as a religious leader. He did not know how to delegate to other people or how to encourage them to help him run the community. If he had done so, there could have been a better chance for the community and religion to continue after his death. Moreover, Noyes should have groomed a successor to lead his community before he died in 1886. It appears that Noyes did not want to share any of his authority with other members, thus condemning his community to the dust bin of history.

Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was raised in a large but poor family. Born on December 23, 1805 in Sharon, Vermont, he had no formal education, but it is believed that his father taught him to read at home. The Smith family moved numerous times throughout their lives in hopes of finding a better place to live. The Smith family finally settled in Palmyra, New York in 1816.

The Smiths considered themselves to be a very religious family. They prayed and read the Bible on a regular basis. According to Richard and Joan Ostling, historians who have done extensive work in researching Mormon origins, Joseph

Smith was like so many Americans at the time, as he became suspicious of institutional religion and uncertain about which religion taught the ultimate truth.⁶ Even as a youngster, Smith was interested in Methodism, but he was confused by what he took to be the church's competing claims. His mother and two of his brothers were Presbyterian, but he did not agree with all of the Presbyterian doctrines, either. Smith enjoyed studying different Bible books and grew up hoping to find a biblically based church that he completely agreed with.

However, at age fourteen, the exceptionally precocious Smith grew tired of learning about so many different Christian denominations and he prayed to God, asking Him for guidance. In Smith's first vision in 1819, two embodied spirits appeared to him; one was God the Father and the other Jesus Christ, God's son. He asked for guidance as to which church he should join and which one was correct. He was told that all the current churches were wrong and that he should join none of them. In this vision, God and Jesus told him that they were going to help him restore the original and true church to the people.

Smith's second vision came three years later. An angel, identifying himself as Moroni, appeared and said that he was the spiritual remnant of an ancient race of people, and that God had sent him to reveal a gold book that he and Mormon (his father) had buried in a nearby hill. This book, written by Mormon, contained an account of the former inhabitants of America. Also, Angel Moroni proclaimed that the book included the fullness of the everlasting Christian Gospel and with this book the true church would be restored on Earth. With the plates were the biblical instruments Urim and Thummin.⁷ These are special devices that were mentioned in

the Old Testament and Smith used them to translate the golden book, since it was not written in English, but, as was told, an old and forgotten Egyptian language.

This new document is called the Book of Mormon and it claims to describe the story of the ancient “history” of America. It tells of Jesus Christ preaching to the American Indians and setting up the true American Church centuries before Christopher Columbus reached the New World. Also, God told Smith to revise many portions of the Bible that were thought to be corrupted over time by Jewish and Christian people.

In 1830, Smith established a Church based on the new scriptures that he had discovered. He attracted many new converts to this religion due to his charismatic and charming personality and his enthusiasm for spreading his new Gospel. One of the key teachings in the Book of Mormon is that of plural wives, or polygyny.⁸ Smith preached that to attain the highest level of Heaven, a man needs to have more than one wife, and a woman needs to be married to a man with more than one wife. This teaching was not favorably viewed by other religious communities or the American public in general. Smith and his followers were continuously persecuted throughout his career as a religious leader, and he and his community were forced to move several times. Also, Smith was thrown in jail several times. He was eventually assassinated by an angry mob, which did not like his religious message, on June 27, 1844, while he was in the Carthage jail.

Smith worked closely with a fellow Mormon named Brigham Young, who became his successor. Young led his followers to Utah to set up a community there

so they could avoid persecution and organize a new religion to practice their principles without fear of the American government.

Smith had many personality traits that led him to be a very successful leader. In many sources, the young Smith is described as being a very handsome and charismatic man. Also, he showed perseverance throughout his life. While he and his followers were continuously persecuted and forced to leave their many homes, he did not give up. He kept pushing forward and kept finding new places to live. He never conformed to the standards of the people around him. However, the most important leadership characteristic that Smith had was his ability to share his power with Young. Smith and Young discussed ways to help their community grow, attract new members, and avoid persecution. Since Smith was murdered, Young was immediately able to take over the leadership position and allow the Mormon religion to keep growing despite such a great loss.

There is no single trait that makes one religious founder more successful than another. Appearance, personality, and leadership are three aspects that led to Smith's success as a religious leader. While Smith was described by all accounts as exceptionally attractive, Lee and Noyes have both been described as physically and personally unattractive. Nevertheless, Smith's community and religion flourished due to his ability to delegate his authority to other people, whereas Lee and Noyes appear to have unwisely maintained sole control of their communities, right up to their deaths, with no sense of future developments.

Sexual Attitudes and Key Rituals

Each of these religious movements; the Shakers, The Oneida Perfectionists and the Mormons, have their own distinct set of rituals that they believe is core to their world and life views. Rituals can vary greatly from singing to dancing to praying and all sorts of other practices. However, what is most significant here is that each community had unique sexual attitudes that were never viewed favorably by the general public. It is these attitudes and representative behaviors that will be the primary focus of this section, as we look at each of these communities in turn. Of course, our comparisons will be limited by what was (the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists) with what is (the Mormons.)

The Shakers focused their religion mainly around three very distinct principles: complete celibacy, total equality of the sexes, and the importance of simplicity in daily life. As said in the previous section, Lee believed that sexual intercourse was the root of all problems on Earth and that the only way to achieve perfection was to ban sexual intercourse at all costs. By not allowing any sex to be had by any members, the Shakers hoped to be able to focus their lives on more important religious aspects such as the worship of God. The Shakers' sexual ideology was based upon the belief that people spent too much of their free time thinking about and having sex, and when people avoid wasting their valuable time in these pursuits they are able to conduct beneficial rituals and attempt to lead perfect lives. Therefore, Shakers concluded that to completely abstain from sex was to be God-like and to achieve perfection in His image. The Shakers' mentality towards sex was this: God is perfect and does not have sex; Adam and Eve were imperfect human beings and had sex.

Also, by abstaining from sex, the Shakers believed they could bring about complete equality in the sexes. Men and women in the community could look at each other as people, and not as potential sexual partners. Men and women addressed each other as “brother” and “sister.” Those terms were even used by couples who once had an earthly marriage. By entering into the Shaker community one had to give up being a spouse. There was no earthly marriage in the Shaker community so as not to distract from the pure worship of God.

The center of Shaker theology was based around the notion of a divine gender duality, unlike the traditional Christian notion of a patriarchal Trinity. For them, each aspect of the Trinity contained both male and female characteristics. Even the first member, commonly known as the “Father,” was seen as having both male and female aspects. In this most unusual way, we see the Shakers commitment to the equality of the sexes. Their view that God encompassed both male and female characteristics in a radical way promoted the idea of the equality of men and women in the Shaker society.

The Shaker community lifestyle was focused on a simple life. Shaker men and women wore very drab clothing with no decoration. Men wore the same kinds of suits and women wore the same kinds of dresses. Shakers were not to spend time worrying about impressing the other sexes, and this was apparent in their very conservative and plain clothing styles. With everyone dressing simply and modestly, there was little room for inequality or for sexual desires to interfere. The wearing of simple and modest clothing styles was thought to help people focus on God rather than earthly desires.

The Shakers also had a very simple place of worship. The worship center was a large plain building with no decorations or religious emblems anywhere. It had a big room that allowed for the Shakers to be able to move about freely and without restraint, which suited their free style of worship. The Shakers religious ceremonies consisted of sporadic moving, dancing, shaking and speaking in tongues (glossolalia.) Therefore, a typical church with pews and a pulpit would not have been suitable for their community.

The Shaker worship style was focused on what they call a direct and honest relationship with the Holy Spirit. The Shakers believed that one should have a personal experience of the Holy Spirit, and that there was no need for clergy or anyone else to interfere with one's spiritual relationship. Once again, we see the emphasis on complete equality among all members. They believed that all people have the privileged opportunity to experience the Holy Spirit, not just males or people with education. The Shakers' religious ideology was also focused on the belief that the Holy Spirit can be experienced in different ways. Not all people have the same relationship with the Holy Spirit. People are all moved differently, and this fact was symbolized in the usual ways that the members moved and shook during Shaker religious services.

The majority of people originally attracted to the Shakers were illiterate factory workers. Since many of these original members could not read or write, the Shakers' religious services were not based on any type of written scripture. Instead, the Shakers preferred a one-on-one experience with the Holy Spirit. They did draw guidance from the Bible, but Bible study was not their main focus.

Shakers who could read and write were encouraged to keep journals to chronicle their experiences with the Holy Spirit. Ann Lee herself kept a detailed journal about her relationship with the Holy Spirit. Also, educated Shakers were expected to read Lee's journals to learn about her religious experience and how to improve their own spiritual lives.

At the core of the Oneida Perfectionist ideology, our second community, was the notion that there was no marriage in Heaven, and that in order for there to be a Heaven on Earth, there must be no marriage here either. According to Lawrence Foster, the scholar who has done the most work on the comparative mores of our subjects, Noyes coined this term "free love," where any Perfectionist was allowed to have sex with any other member at any time, so long as certain rules were followed.⁹ Upon becoming a member of the Oneida Community, one was not allowed to ever again form a bond or relationship with a single partner. If a man and a woman were believed to have formed romantic feelings for each other, called "special love," the two people were separated, not allowed to talk or to see one another, and possibly disciplined. The discipline would often take the form of forced abstinence. Forming any type of romantic attachment with just one member was completely forbidden in the Oneida community. Thus, special love was especially bad.

"Stirpiculture" was another key element to the Oneida community that Noyes implemented. This was based on Noyes' belief that only the healthiest, most intelligent males and females should reproduce. Stirpiculture is viewed as a primitive form of eugenics; that is, the proposed improvement of the human race by encouraging only the best people to reproduce to maintain only the most desirable

characteristics. Noyes led a special committee that determined which female and which male could be allowed to have children together. They picked parents based on their intelligence level, personality, looks, and religious activity. According to William Kephart and William Zellner, religious historians who penned the book *Extraordinary Groups: An Examination of Unconventional Life-styles*, nearly ninety percent of the community babies born in an eleven-year span were carefully planned by this committee. During the time of the stirpiculture program, remarkably no defective children were born and no mothers died as a result of childbirth.¹⁰

The Oneida Perfectionists practiced a form of birth control referred to as “male continence.” Male continence focuses on a man’s ability to control his body, specifically his sexual organ. According to Noyes, men should be in complete control over their bodies at all times. Also, Noyes believed that a man’s semen should be treated as a precious fluid and should never be wasted. Therefore, semen should only be expelled from the body when the purpose is to procreate and procreation should only occur with the permission of the stirpiculture committee. If a community man was having sex with a community woman and they were not ordered to do so or given permission to procreate by the Oneida stirpiculture committee, the man should be able to control his body enough to avoid an orgasm and to “pull out” of the woman before ejaculation. Avoiding pregnancies not planned by the stirpiculture committee was necessary to membership. Oneida community members were not supposed to practice masturbation either, as this was seen as a waste of vital fluid. Sex was to be used as pleasure in the Oneida community as long as the man practiced withdrawal,

but this pleasure was only to be shared between a man and woman who did not have romantic feelings for one another.

Another important practice of the Oneida Perfectionist community was that of “mutual criticism.” Once a week, all of the community members would convene for a town meeting. One member was selected to be the “target.” All of the other community members would openly and freely criticize this target. People were encouraged to expose all the bad personality traits they believed this person had and tell them how they should improve their life. This was thought to bring about openness among all community members. Oneida Community members were always encouraged to be completely open and honest with each other. Robert David Thomas, a Oneida Perfectionist historian, wrote in his biographical book, *The Man Who Would be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse*, that Noyes began this “mutual criticism” practice, but he never allowed himself to be the target.¹¹

There was no dress code that all members of this community must follow. However, the Oneida women dressed very provocatively compared to other women of the time. They were some of the first women to wear pantaloons, instead of traditional dresses. At the center of the Oneida Perfectionist compound, was a large building that looked much like a hotel. It was referred to as the “mansion house.” Each person had their own small room that was private from other community members. All people lived in this large central building. There were smaller

buildings around the mansion house that contained blacksmith shops, lumber mills, and clothing manufacturing shops.

The Oneida Perfectionist community used the Bible and writings of Noyes in their worship services. Noyes took passages from the Bible and tried to incorporate those teachings into the reality of the Oneida community. In particular, Noyes liked the biblical passage, Matthew 22:30, which states “for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Noyes used this passage for his basis of “free love” and his belief that there should be no marriage on Earth since there was no marriage in Heaven. Noyes wrote a lot of journals and articles, but his most important work was titled *The Berean*. This journal was circulated around the community and promoted Noyes’ most important religious ideals.

The Mormons, our third community, have many complex rituals that are core to their religion. One of the Mormon rituals that is quite different from other Christian denominations is that of baptism. In Mormonism, a person can have a vicarious baptism. If one dies before being baptized in the Mormon Church, another member can “stand-in” for them in a posthumous ceremony. However, this vicarious baptism does not “save” the deceased person and the person being vicariously baptized does not automatically go to the highest kingdom in heaven. Instead, according to the Ostlings, “it provides a choice in the afterlife; using his ‘free agency,’ the person may accept or reject the offer of receiving Christ and entering his kingdom.”¹² This allows people who did not hear the Mormon message while on

Earth to be able to enter the highest kingdom, or allows people who did hear the Mormon message but did not partake in their rituals to be allowed to enter Heaven.

Another ritual in which Mormons partake is tithing. Mormons are supposed to tithe, or give ten percent of their annual gross income to the Mormon Church. This money goes to building new temples, publishing scriptures, and paying the clergy. By requiring their members to contribute part of their income to the community, there will always be money for building new places of worship and to pay the clergy. The money from tithing also helps pay for the Book of Mormon to be published and distributed to help attract new members to their religion. Attracting new members to the Mormon religion means more money from tithing, thus allowing more churches to be built, more literature to be published, and allowing the religion to spread even more. The money that is raised from the tithing requirement seems to echo and to attract new members.

Mormon ideas of family and marriage are quite distinct from other religions. They believe that families are “sealed” together for eternity and that marriages continue in the afterlife. Weddings must take place in a Mormon temple and can only be observed by practicing members of the Mormon Church. In the wedding ceremony, a man and a woman are sealed together in their relationship for eternity. Mormon theology teaches that marriage does not end “until death do us part” like we see in traditional Western marriage ceremonies. The children produced from the marriage will also be their children forever, according to Mormon theology.

The Mormon worldview is much different than the mainstream Christian one. According to Ostling, one key to getting the gist of Mormonism is the belief that a

person's existence does not begin with birth on this Earth. Rather, Mormons believe all people lived as spirits before being embodied on Earth.¹³ Once embodied, the new person is given a "test" by God to see in which kingdom he or she will spend eternity, namely, in the celestial kingdom, in the terrestrial kingdom, or in the telestial kingdom. If a person obeys all of the Mormon commandments, and leads a life in accordance with the strict rules of their religion, then they will be most highly rewarded for those actions.

Firstly, the celestial kingdom is where God himself lives. A Mormon can enter the celestial kingdom by repenting sins and accepting Christ's atonement, striving to keep God's commandments, receiving confirmation from a church official and being baptized. Also, the celestial kingdom houses two other types of people: children who have died before the age of eight or anyone who has died without knowledge of the Mormon Gospel (but would have received it had they lived). For example, a person who lives in an African tribe that had never heard of the Mormon Gospel could still enter the celestial kingdom. Of course, only God knows if a person would accept the Mormon message if he or she was never afforded the opportunity to hear it. The terrestrial kingdom will include lukewarm Mormons, that is, confirmed members of the Mormon church who did not try to keep all of the commandments, such as tithing and dietary restrictions. The telestial kingdom will include adulterers, liars, murderers, rapists and those who did not receive the Gospel of Christ. There is one other eternal home. The outer darkness is a place where only really bad spirits, such as the devil, will spend eternity. Also, the outer darkness is reserved for people

who accepted the Mormon Gospel and then became apostate. The outer darkness is much like Hell in the traditional Christian sense. It is a place of utmost misery and is a direct result of unacceptable actions while on Earth.

Polygyny, or plural marriage where a man is married to more than one wife, was in the beginning a core belief of the Mormons. In 1852, Joseph Smith announced that polygyny was an important and integral part to achieving the highest level of Heaven in Mormonism. For over forty years, plural marriage was practiced freely by members of the Mormon religion. However, this practice came to an end for most Mormons in 1890 when the president of the Church, Woodruff Wilson, who is also thought to be a prophet, claimed to have received a message from God that polygyny should not be endorsed by their religion. While some Mormons may still have a polygynous family structure, it is not legal to do so and these families are shunned by the official Mormon Church.

The current stance on sex in the Mormon Church is very conservative. Mormons are not supposed to have pre-marital sex. They also shun the homosexual lifestyle and do not tolerate pornography. Mormons are encouraged to procreate after they are married and to raise many children. The use of birth control is not viewed highly by members of the Mormon Church. They believe that the most important part of sex is procreation and the use of birth control hinders the ability to procreate.

The Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists and the Mormons all had very unique ideas that were core to their religion. They had a vast spectrum of different sexual practices. The Shakers completely abstained from sex, while the Oneida Perfectionists promoted having sexual relationships with whomever they wished as

long as there was no “special love” between them and their form of birth control was used. The Mormons have a “middle position” on this issue. They do not forbid sex like the Shakers nor do they encourage “free love” like the Oneida community. Instead, sex is allowed in their community but only under certain conditions. This is probably what attracted more new members to this utopian religion movement as opposed to the other two groups. Complete “abstinence” and complete “promiscuity” was seen as too extreme by outsiders. Therefore, one who was looking for a utopian movement to join would choose to become a member of the group that has a more modest and less extremist position on sex. Such extreme views on sex as those of the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists would have caused difficulty attracting new members and gaining sustenance as a religion. While the Mormons did practice polygyny in their early years, they were able to reevaluate this part of their tradition and change it in order to fit in with American society.

Recruitment of new members

Recruiting members to a new religious movement is crucial in order to assure that the group lasts. Some recruitment methods work very well in attracting new members and some do not succeed at all. In this section, we will consider how the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists, and the Mormons did their missionary work. Each of our three communities had their own distinct way of attempting to convert people to their religion. Details of these methods will be compared and analyzed to determine why the Mormons were so much more successful than the Shakers or the Oneida Perfectionists. Once again, our comparison must be understood as limited.

The Shakers expanded their membership in two ways. First, the Shakers relied primarily on their converts encouraging close family members to join. The Shaker religion focused on the importance of a close-knit family atmosphere, and it was Ann Lee's hope that the current members would convince their own families to join the community. This type of recruitment was not very successful. Their religious message did not reach many people. At its peak, the Shaker religion had approximately 3,200 members. The Shakers only preached to a small, select group of people and did not try to reach out to the general public and to seek out potential converts.

When the Shakers first arrived in America, they did try to proselytize the general public. However, this did not go over very well due to the hostility of the Americans. Lee and her followers arrived in America shortly after the country had won independence from England. The newly independent Americans were not willing to hear such radical Christian ideas from newly landed English immigrants. As had occurred in England, Lee and some of her followers found themselves in prison because they promoted the "duality of God" (discussed in the previous section) and worship they engaged in practices that were interpreted as disturbing the peace. Since their country was a new and growing nation, the Americans did not take a liking to the Shakers' message that procreation was unnecessary.¹⁴

Because there were absolutely no intimate relations between the sexes, it was not possible to expand their membership through procreation. Even though no children were born to any adults living in the Shaker community, there were still some children in their society. If a husband and wife joined the Shakers, they were

allowed to bring their offspring. In Metin M. Cosgel's *Journal of Family History* article, "The Family in Utopia: Celibacy, Communal Child Rearing, and Continuity in Religious Commune," he wrote that the Shaker communities also adopted children from nearby orphanages and some children were left to be cared for by the Shakers from families who did not feel they could properly raise their children.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the children were very few compared to the number of adults. Lee and her followers happily adopted these children hoping they would commit to the Shaker religion for the rest of their lives.

Second, the Shakers also attempted to recruit outsiders. During the Shakers worship services where they practiced their typical routines of shaking and dancing in their interaction with the Holy Spirit, the Shakers allowed the public to come and watch. The Shakers hoped to find new members this way by demonstrating the beauty of their unique style of worship and their relationship with the Holy Spirit. However, this was not a very successful recruitment technique, either. According to Edward Deming Andrews, most people who watched the Shakers worship thought of it as a form of entertainment and obviously this was counterproductive and did not bring about the desired results.¹⁶ Most people were amused by the Shakers as though they had seen a play or musical. In other words, it was rare that anyone would convert to the Shaker religion after observing their worship service. Lee and her followers seemed to overestimate the attraction of their style of worship.

The Shakers did not partake in any other type of proselytizing missionary work. They did not go out door-to-door trying to attract new members, nor did they publish and hand out information on their religious group trying to draw in converts.

This indirect and passive type of recruitment was to be the Shakers biggest downfall in their inability to have any sustenance as a utopian movement. They simply were not aggressive in sharing their religious message. Hoping that their religion would just spread by “word of mouth,” convincing family members to join, and allowing the public to watch their worship practices were insufficient.

Like the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists lacked a systematic technique in their conversion practices, and they too were not very successful in finding new members. When Noyes first had his religious revelation, he aggressively tried to attract new members to his community. He preached his message of how to obtain Heaven on Earth in the streets of New England. He passed out many pamphlets and books sharing his new religious ideas. Most people disregarded Noyes’ radical message and wrote him off as insane.

After years of preaching, however, Noyes finally attracted a few members to join his utopian movement. He started a community where his religious views could be translated into actions. But once Noyes had established an organization, he became less proactive. Instead of Noyes himself taking the lead in attracting new candidates, the burden fell on potential converts to seek him out and apply for membership. Noyes would merely give the interested party an application form that he or she needed to fill out in order to be considered. This application required thoughtful preparation, including questions like: why one wanted to be a member of the Oneida Perfectionists and what benefits one could bring to the organization? Noyes put himself in charge of looking at member applications and then deciding if the candidate was “worthy” or not of obtaining a membership bid. Noyes was

extremely selective when deciding whether or not a particular person would bring enough admirable traits into the community. He only chose the smartest and most attractive to be considered. Noyes and his followers wanted to include only those people in their society that had the personal traits they deemed superior making them worthy enough to procreate future generations of Perfectionists. The members would need to participate in stirpiculture (a form of eugenics that was discussed earlier in the paper) and Noyes only wanted the most outstanding individuals with qualities that would improve the community's bloodline.

The application form was previewed by Noyes' and his close confidantes were also brought in to the decision making process. If they believed that a person was a good match with their community, the candidate would then need to go before a committee that ruled on stirpiculture partners. They would determine if the person had the capacity to become an outstanding member of the community. The committee would then inquire about the prospective member's capability of avoiding the problem of "special love" (also discussed earlier.) If the person requesting membership was male, he needed to be able to abide by their special birth control method. Also, this person was quizzed on the various aspects of the religious community. Noyes and his committee only wanted to invite people to join their community whom they believed were genuinely committed to their ideology. They did not want to invite people into their environment who would soon leave because they found it too difficult or no longer personally beneficial.

If the committee found a person, whom they believed would adhere to their religious ideals, they would allow that person to live in the community for one year.

In that first year, they would not be allowed to partake in complex marriage, but would be able to engage in “mutual criticism.” After the year was up, the potential convert would need to re-apply to the community. The committee would review the application again and rule on whether or not this person should be allowed to stay.

However, not many people were attracted to this prolonged process for obtaining full membership in the community. Once this extensive process was established, Noyes brought an end to all proselytizing activity. He believed that the good news of his religion and community would spread on its own and many people would be attracted to the idea of living a sinless life. In other words, it was Noyes’ view that once the general public heard about his community and their desire to achieve life without sin, people would flock to join his utopian experiment. Noyes failure to share his religious views with other people after the establishment of his religion was a clear failure on his part and contributed to the demise of his movement. Noyes assumed that people would want to join the Oneida Perfectionists without any prodding by him or an established member. Moreover, while most religions usually open their doors to all people, the idea of filling out an application form and possibly being rejected for not meeting community standards may have been too daunting a proposition. The Oneida Perfectionists’ high standards and required trial year was certain to scare many people away.

Unlike the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists, the Mormons have very aggressive and systematic recruitment techniques. Since 1851, just 20 years after Joseph Smith’s first vision, Mormons have engaged in assertive worldwide missionary work. The first missionaries traveled to Germany. Today, Mormons

work in countries such as China, Mexico, Russia, and Poland. Missionaries are expected to learn a foreign language and to study the culture of the country in which they will be stationed so that they are able to work with the local people and quickly adjust to the living conditions. Currently one-half of all American Mormon men go on missions, while about one-third of all non-American Mormon men work as missionaries in their lifetime. Missionary work is typically done in the late teenage years or early twenties before settling down, developing family obligations and being employed full time.

The Mormons developed a methodical approach to their missionary work. During a missionary's two-year-service commitment, they go door to door looking for people interested in hearing about their religion. If they find someone who is attracted, they have the perfect plan to "hook" them. Mormons use a psychological tool called the "foot in the door" technique. According to the psychologists Freedman and Fraser in their 1966 study, once a missionary gets someone to agree to a small request, it is much easier to get them to agree to a larger one.¹⁷

When Mormon missionaries speak with potential converts, they first highlight their prophet Joseph Smith and explain that the Book of Mormon is an additional scripture to the Bible. They discuss their belief that Joseph Smith is another prophet and that he brings a new message with a new scripture. The missionary will hand out a copy of the Book of Mormon and some explanatory pamphlets to the interested party. If the missionary can get a person interested in their beliefs (hooked), they will set up another meeting with their candidate to discuss other key Mormon principles.

During the next meeting with the potential convert, the missionary explains some of the more difficult beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, such as preexistence, the future eternal family, and vicarious baptism for the dead. If the person is still interested in becoming a member or learning more about the Church after discussing these ideas, they will set up a third meeting.

During this third visit, the missionary will explain the strict Mormon lifestyle, such as chastity. In the book *Mormonism for Dummies*, Mormon scholars Christopher Kimball Bigelow and Jana Riess, point out that the Mormons have a very conservative view of sex. They believe there should be no premarital copulation and the homosexual lifestyle is completely forbidden.¹⁸ Also, there are very stringent demands regarding food and drink for Mormons. Members of the Church are not supposed to consume alcohol, tobacco, tea or illegal drugs. It is important to notice that the missionaries do not reveal to their potential members these stringent rules governing daily life during the first visit. This is intentional. They do not want to scare off candidates during the first few consultations. The missionaries wait until they build up a rapport with the candidate before discussing the rigorous regulations that a member will have to follow.

The next few missionary visits are dedicated to discussions about God and theology. The missionaries quote passages from both the Book of Mormon and the Bible to describe the human relationship with Heavenly Father. For example, the missionaries may recite Jeremiah 1:5, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee” and Acts 17:29, “We are the offspring of God.” Bigelow and Riess wrote that Mormon missionaries discuss typical biblical passages because most of their new

members convert from a traditional Christian background.¹⁹ If the Mormon missionary can get the potential convert to connect these new teachings with what they are already familiar, it is probable they will more readily listen to and accept the teachings of the Mormon religion.

During the next to last visit with the potential convert, the Mormon missionary will introduce other Mormon lifestyle demands. These requirements include the prescribed tithing and fasting. The missionary will go into great detail about the importance of tithing and the benefits of fasting. Also, by the end of this visit, the missionary will set up a date with the convert to be baptized. The final visit with the convert will include a discussion of salvation and eternal life. After baptism, the person is now a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is expected to follow all of the Church procedures and rituals.

Mormons strongly encourage all of their members to get married, have large families, and raise their children in the Mormon religion. This, of course, is expected to expand the community as well. This type of internal expansion could not take place among the celibate Shakers nor the stirpiculture practicing Oneida Perfectionists.

Clearly the Mormon style of recruitment is well organized and their missionary work demonstrates a well thought out and detailed plan. For example, they do not bring up the very difficult and possibly unattractive parts of their religion during the initial visit. They do not start out discussing the strict requirements of tithing or any money matters until later on in the conversion process. Also, the missionaries do not discuss their dietary restrictions until the second visit, so as to

avoid scaring off potential converts before they have hooked them. Instead, they discuss the many positive aspects of Mormonism during the first few visits and save the unattractive elements of their religion until later visits. They also try to relate Mormon teachings to more familiar Christian teachings. Mormons seem to welcome all people who wanted to become members. They did not, nor do not now, focus on only recruiting certain types of people, like the Shakers. Nor do they require a stringent application procedure, as did the Oneida Perfectionists.

Conclusion

All three of the religious movements we have observed were primarily American and all began within ninety years of each other. However, only one of these movements is still a living and expanding religion. While there is no single explanation for the demise of the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists, there seems to be three key reasons for why they did not attract new members as readily as the Mormons. Once married, Mormons allowed their members to have as many children as they wanted. This is obviously not the case for the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists. The Shakers did not produce any children since celibacy was a key aspect of their religious program and the Oneida Perfectionists produced only a few children given the strict control on procreation. The Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists relied heavily on recruiting outsiders, while the Mormons could easily increase membership from within by having more children and raising them in the Mormon religion. To this day, Mormons are encouraged to have large families.

Another clear advantage that the Mormons have is their organizational structure. Even from the very beginning of their religion, they have had a systematic

approach and have planned for the future. For example, even though Joseph Smith was murdered unexpectedly, the Mormons had several strong leaders, any one of whom could have been a good successor to the prophet. In fact, when Brigham Young became the leader of the community, the Mormons experienced only a minor bump in the road.

The Mormon organization is also clear about their recruitment method. They have a carefully structured way of approaching and proselytizing potential converts. A lot of thought and planning has gone into their recruitment procedures. Their method stands in sharp contrast to both the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists. These two latter groups were very passive in their recruiting. But the Mormons actively sought out new members and today even do missionary work in other countries. The Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists were not interested in seeking converts outside the United States and both groups hoped potential members would seek them out. The Mormons understood that they needed to take a proactive approach in discovering new members, especially in the beginning of their movement. It was almost as if John Humphrey Noyes and Ann Lee were a little too confident in the appeal of their religion. That is, they had high hopes that their religious message would spread enough on its own and would not need practicing members to function as traveling missionaries.

A final reason that the Mormon religion was able to flourish for years after its inception was its willingness to change after being pressured by the American public. All three of these groups promoted sexual practices that many people deemed too radical. To review, the Shakers practiced complete celibacy, the Oneida

Perfectionists practiced complex marriage, and the Mormons practiced polygyny. Neither the Shakers nor the Oneida Perfectionists were willing to give up or modify their sexual practices in order to be accepted into the mainstream of American society. The Mormon Church, however, eventually decided they would no longer endorse polygyny.²⁰

Today, Mormonism is a growing world religion, while there are no Oneida Perfectionists left and only a handful of practicing Shaker women in New England. There are over twelve million practicing Mormons worldwide, and their religion keeps expanding with the building of temples and churches, and their missionaries traveling to different countries. Today, the Oneida Perfectionists and the Shakers are known only for their handiwork in silverware and furniture, rather than their religion. Oneida Limited, an offshoot of the Perfectionists community, still has factories where cutlery are produced and sold. Likewise, the Shakers still have manufactured sturdy furniture that bears their name. The Mormons do not have any sort of product for which they are known for. But, their religion continues to draw new members.

¹ It is important to note that the Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists are dead communities and will be treated as such. Throughout this paper, I will refer to these two communities in the past tense. However, the Mormons are a living and growing religion and thus will be referred to in the present tense.

² Richard Francis, *Ann the Word: The Story of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother of the Shakers, The Woman Clothed with the Sun* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000), 8.

³ Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 13.

⁴ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 72.

⁵ Richard N. Ostling, and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 23.

⁶ The Urim and Thummin are discussed in Exodus 28:30. They are described as the part of the process early biblical priests used in the casting of lots, in which some sort of special stones or jewels would be the medium.

⁷ Polygyny and polygamy are two different terms. Mormons once practiced polygyny, which means having multiple wives. On the other hand, polygamy simply means multiple spouses at the same time and does not differentiate between the sexes.

⁸ Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 107.

⁹ William M. Kephart and William W. Zellner, *Extraordinary Groups: An Examination of Unconventional Life-style* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 50.

¹⁰ Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 163.

¹¹ Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 33.

¹² *Ibid*, 46.

¹³ Philip Davies, *The Shakers at the Millennium* (London: Contemporary Review Company, 2000), 2.

¹⁴ Metin M. Cosgel, "The Family in Utopia: Celibacy, Communal Child Rearing, and Continuity in a Religious Commune." *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 25 No. 4.

¹⁵ Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 30.

¹⁶ http://www.usm.maine.edu/~psy/gayton/102/7_16i.htm, last accessed: March 9, 2006. "Foot in the door" psychological experiment is discussed in the 1966 Freedman and Fraser study. Researchers first requested people to sign a "Drive safe" petition. The second request asked people to place a "Drive Carefully" sign in their yard. People were more likely to place the sign in their yard, a rather large request, if they had first signed the petition. Basically, if you first get someone to perform a small favor, it is much easier for them to agree to a much larger one.

¹⁷ Christopher Kimball Bigelow and Jana Riess, *Mormonism for Dummies* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, Inc, 2005), 55.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 78.

¹⁹ After the Mormon Church president received a revelation that polygyny was no longer needed in their Church, the state of Utah was allowed to be part of the Union. Once Utah was granted statehood, Mormons were more readily accepted into American society. The Official Mormon Church of Utah no longer associates itself with any member who partakes in polygyny.

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