

Spring 2009

# Sex, God, and Logic: The Power of John Humphrey Noyes' Defense of Bible Communism

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## Recommended Citation

Corrigan, Jack, "Sex, God, and Logic: The Power of John Humphrey Noyes' Defense of Bible Communism" (2009). *Writing Excellence Award Winners*. Paper 9.  
[http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing\\_awards/9](http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/writing_awards/9)

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## Sex, God, and Logic: The Power of John Humphrey Noyes' Defense of Bible Communism

Amid the prudish atmosphere of 19<sup>th</sup>-century New England, a strange anomaly sprung up in Oneida, New York. Defying traditional views of love, marriage, and family, the Oneida community was a radical departure from the norm. How could a community founded on the boldly-held belief that monogamous love was unnatural survive in the harsh, conservative climate of its time? But survive it did. And it did, thanks largely to the powerful arguments for its creation on the part of its creator, John Humphrey Noyes. Noyes' essay Bible Communism lays out the founding principles of the community. His argument is a powerful one, and its logic is impressive. Drawing heavily (and wisely) on the Bible to justify his revolutionary ideas, and appealing to the hampered sex drive of many a 19<sup>th</sup>-century New Englander, Noyes skillfully dismantled traditional views of love, marriage, sex, and community, all while expounding upon his own views of the ideal society. His clever employment of scripture to combat the qualms of a conservative audience, combined with his subtle appeal to the natural desires of man, served to build a powerful, persuasive argument for a radically new lifestyle.

Noyes' first targets were the barriers that prevent the free flow of love between individuals, especially sexual love. And while a cynic may be quick to assume that Noyes harbored ulterior motives in pushing for the freedom for individuals to have sex with whomever they chose, he is quick to provide a justification for his views. As good Christians, Noyes argues, people are obligated to love each other completely and “burningly,” which he interpreted as sexually.<sup>1</sup> Sexual love, which he often refers to as “amativeness,” is a natural part of human beings, and is one of the most powerful and direct links to the higher, spiritual plane. Noyes points out that Adam and Eve were free to enjoy the pleasure of sexual love before the fall, and notes that amativeness has disrupted many a spiritual sect in the past. Thus, the human sexual drive is not something to be “despised and ignored,” but rather, it is “the first and most natural channel of religious love.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, restrictions on the free flow of love between people (such as contemporary marriage laws) would go against the “anti-legality of the gospel.”

The power of Noyes' argument lies in two key areas: First and foremost, Noyes exploits the desires of those cramped by the sexually repressive climate of Victorian America. In calling for a freer system of love and sex, Noyes appeals to the “secret history of the human heart,” and offers an alternative to those trapped behind the “prison doors of... marriage and celibacy.”<sup>3</sup> Second, Noyes provides a measure of safety for those who may be inclined to agree with his views on sex, but would fear the backlash of conservative society. He grounds his arguments in the Bible. By equating sexual love with the love Christians are obligated to show to one another, Noyes provides a Biblical basis for his views, which is instrumental in giving him a measure of defense from any who would decry him as a sinful hedonist. Thus, Noyes ingeniously offers up the prospect of sexual liberty while stripping it of its usual ties to sin and guilt. And with the

case for this founding principle firmly established, he is free to move on to the broader implications of the belief that sexual freedom is both natural and moral.

Having established the need for unrestrained love, Noyes proceeds to challenge the primary obstacle to such a movement: marriage. He focuses on the restraints traditional marriage applies to the healthy, holy, and natural human tendency to seek multiple sexual partners. He is careful to note the way in which it “ties together unmatched natures” and “sunders matched natures,” thereby appealing to fears that one may pick the wrong partner in marriage, fears that were extremely prevalent in a society where divorce was nearly impossible. He bemoans the “scanty and monotonous allowance” afforded to the sexual appetite in a traditional marriage, and appeals directly to the young in pointing out that in a society that forbids premarital sex, “at the very time when appetite is strongest... the sexual appetite is starved.”<sup>4</sup> And while the strength of Noyes' attack on monogamous marriage is largely based on the assumption that his audience has accepted his proposal that love is to be spread “in all directions,” he further supports himself by listing such condemned practices as “prostitution, masturbation, and obscenity in general” as consequences sexually suppressive attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Here, Noyes' condemnation of “obscenity” has the subtle effect of separating Bible Communism from that which is considered depraved, a connection frequently made by his primary detractors.

In a further attempt to justify his theories regarding the proper role of sex within a community, Noyes takes an approach that is surprisingly scientific in comparison to his previous, biblically-based arguments. The human sexual organs, he asserts, have three functions: the urinary, the propagative (that is to say, reproductive), and the amative. The last of these, according to Noyes, is the exchange of “social magnetism,” a euphemism for the feeling of closeness and spiritual connection experienced by sexual partners prior to orgasm. The orgasm, by contrast, is a merely propagative function also responsible for cutting short the pleasure of amative sex and inducing “exhaustion and disgust.” And because the discharge of semen does not necessarily require the presence of a partner, Noyes concludes that it is a separate function unnecessary to sexual intercourse.

Noyes illustrates his theory with an effective analogy, noting that the human mouth has three functions as well, and while breathing and eating are both physical and natural, man's ability to speak separates him from the brutes, and operates on a more spiritual level. This, Noyes compares to the theoretical amative functions of the human sex organs: they are independent of the base, physical functions, and can operate on a spiritual level if the participants have the correct intentions.<sup>6</sup> By attempting to scientifically prove his theory of amative functions, Noyes appeals to a growing public interest in the sciences, an interest he himself shared. His willingness to take a logical approach to the defense of his ideas, then, was a powerful tool in winning skeptical converts to his community.

But Noyes' separation of the propagative and amative functions of the human sex organs serves another critical purpose: it provides an explanation for the practice of male continence, the rudimentary, but effective, form of birth control used in the Oneida community. Male continence, the practice of having sex without allowing oneself to ejaculate, was an effective tool in keeping control of the population of the community. It also allowed women the freedom to become pregnant whenever they wished.<sup>7</sup> But with Noyes' theory of amative love, there was also a spiritual justification. Branding the

propagative functions as immoral (at least when it was not one's intention to create a child), Noyes encouraged his followers to satiate only their amative desires. The altered, more careful nature of sex, then, became much like "other forms of intercourse, such as conversation, kissing, shaking hands, etc."<sup>8</sup> And while some may scoff at the idea of sex without orgasm, Noyes, ever the shrewd marketer, assured the curious that male continence "vastly increases" the pleasure of sex.

However, given Noyes' previous defense of man's "natural" impulses to seek out as many sexual partners as possible, it may seem a contradiction for him to promote male continence, a practice which requires a man to suppress his natural inclination to orgasm. Noyes cleverly counters this argument by praising man's "superiority to the brutes," which lies in his ability to subjugate his "own body to his intelligent will." Furthermore, he asserts, it could not possibly be natural for God to want man to waste seed in instances where he does not want a child (the prevailing form of birth control at the time was coitus interruptus).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Noyes is able to stay consistent to his message that that which is natural to man is best, while providing a religious justification for male continence.

Noyes' promotion of sexual intercourse unrestrained by partner loyalties or legalism, his attack on the unnatural institution of monogamous marriage, and his theory of amative, social love all point toward his view of the perfect community, a "vital society" in which the interests of the whole, which represent the interests of Christ, take priority over the interests of the individuals. For according to Noyes, "the interest of Christ stand first, because they include and are the sum of all other interests."<sup>10</sup> In addition, the amative ties between individuals draw even large groups of people together in cooperation, jealousy is nonexistent, and work is a joyous opportunity to mingle with potential sexual partners. In this vital society, Noyes announces triumphantly, there is so little strife that there is "victory over death."<sup>11</sup>

In arguing for his vision of Bible Communism, Noyes' task was not easy. But by providing Biblical support for complex marriage, Noyes established a critical moral foundation for his arguments. By explaining his ideas in a logical, even scientific, manner, he appealed to a growing desire for rational proofs. Even today, Noyes' arguments against the restraining nature of marriage resonate clearly. And through his argument, Noyes provided the basis for one of America's most successful experiments in cooperative living.