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OUT OF THE FOLD.

"Oh, dreadful! They dwell in peace and harmony, and have no church scandals.
They must be wiped out."

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John Humphrey Noyes and Millennialism

BY MICHAEL BARKUN

WHEN JOHN HUMPHREY NOYES was twenty, he was obsessed with knowing the nature and timing of the Last Days. As he recalled later, “My heart was fixed on the Millennium, and I was resolved to live or die for it”.¹ His fascination with the end of history was neither novel for his own time nor for ours—indeed, the recent events at the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas, suggest that we are in the throes of a period of millenarian fervor every bit as intense as that of the 1830s and ’40s. Although we can see Noyes as representative, gripped like many of his age-mates with apocalyptic dreams, in his case the dreams were refracted through a quite untypical psyche.

Two psychological crises that Noyes endured in the mid-1830s turned his fashionable millenarian expectations into something very much his own. Noyes was concerned with conventional religious themes: the Second Coming of Christ, a harmonious millennial kingdom ruled over by Christ and his saints, and the abolition of human sinfulness. But for Noyes these ideas were embedded in a series of distinctly paranormal experiences that occurred during 1834 and ’35—episodes of delirium, divine voices, and startlingly dramatic visions—which would probably be referred to in contemporary language as altered states of consciousness. These experiences took place before the formation of either the Oneida or Putney communities, but nonetheless left their mark on the later Noyes.

The first breakdown came in 1834. After a period of depression, Noyes had a visionary experience on 20 February—subsequently referred to as the “High Tide of the Spirit”—after which came yet another extraordinary visitation when, he later recalled, “On my

1. John Humphrey Noyes, *Confessions of John H. Noyes. Part I. Confession of Religious Experience: Including a History of Modern Perfectionism* (Oneida Reserve: Leonard and Co., Printers, 1849), 2.

bed that night, I received the baptism which I desired and expected. Three times in quick succession a stream of eternal love gushed through my heart and rolled back again to its source.”²

Unfortunately for Noyes, this period of exaltation was quickly followed by a complete breakdown over a period of three weeks that spring—the so-called “New York experience” about which he later wrote at great and vivid length. He described his restless nocturnal wanderings, his inability to sleep, and his hallucinations.³ His letters of the period display a fractured syntax totally out of character for this fluent author.

Noyes emerged from these lost weeks only to suffer what appears to have been another breakdown exactly a year later, when he turned up at his sister Joanna’s home in New Haven looking dreadful and making little sense.⁴

There were ample witnesses to Noyes’s problems, particularly during the extended sojourn in New York, and it did not take long for his family to begin their own investigation. His brother Horatio, who tried to be optimistic, wrote to his sister, “Had I trusted to stories [I] should have believed him a downright madman”, but he concluded, “[I] believe him still to possess his right mind”.⁵ On the other hand, by the time Horatio saw him, John was in New Haven and presumably more coherent. Joanna heard the New York stories and concluded, “We have reason to suppose . . . that he has been deranged”. She saw him in New Haven after the second breakdown in 1835, and wrote that “he seems rational now”, but she thought him “deranged on the subject of religion”. She wrote the family that “he would not reason at all, but denounced every-

2. J. H. Noyes, *Confessions*, 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 38.

4. This is a particularly obscure episode, for which the only testimony is a letter of his sister Joanna. The original correspondence, like many other letters by and about Noyes, was destroyed, but a typescript copy remains among the George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library.

5. Horatio Noyes to Mary Noyes, 17 June 1834, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.



John Humphrey Noyes in his late twenties. This earliest known image of Noyes is from a badly scratched daguerreotype.

thing and everybody. He looked haggard and care-worn, and I felt positive after he left that he was deranged.”⁶

So apparently did the people of Putney, where Noyes went for rest and renewal. He was well enough by then to retain a sense of humor about his scandalous reputation: “Rumors of my fantastic

6. Joanna Noyes Hayes to her family, 23 June 1835, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

performances in New York had preceded me”, he wrote Horatio. Neighbors crossed the street to avoid having to confront him. “They seem to have entered a combination to avoid conversation with me. . . . I am at present living under an embargo”.⁷

Noyes’s psychological problems were not simply regarded as idiosyncratic, personal travails. They were seen by him and by those around him in terms of two larger factors: the first was the long-standing belief that excessive religious zeal produced insanity. The belief in a link between insanity and “enthusiasms” went back at least as far as the seventeenth century and was far from dead in Noyes’s own time. Indeed, as late as the mid-1860s, we find a writer in the *American Journal of Insanity* asking, “In those whirlwinds of passion and frenzied excitement which have too often gotten up under the sacred name of religion, is there no danger to the timid, the nervous, the sensitive, and especially to those who are hereditarily and constitutionally predisposed to mental derangement?”⁸ Noyes, as we shall see, believed there was such a danger, and later in life was anxious to show that, although he seemed to be insane, his breakdowns were only superficially pathological. This distinction was critical, for aberrant behavior in the religiously committed was usually blamed on the intensity of an individual’s spiritual excitation.

The other factor was the movement known as Millerism. The Millerite movement—named after the itinerant lay preacher William Miller—had congealed around Miller’s belief that Bible prophecy, correctly read, pointed to the occurrence of the Second Coming sometime between 21 March 1843 and 21 March 1844. No one knows how many Millerites there ultimately were. Miller himself estimated 50,000 committed adherents. What is clear is that the movement swept New York and New England in the early 1840s and cut an especially wide swath through the abolitionist and reform circles in which Noyes moved. The twenty-first of March

7. John Humphrey Noyes to Horatio Noyes, 2 July 1834, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

8. “Twenty-first Annual Report of the Managers of New York State Lunatic Asylum, for the year 1863”, *American Journal of Insanity* 21 (1864): 250–51.

1844 passed, of course, without incident, but most Millerites—undeterred—rallied 'round a new date, 22 October 1844. When prophecy failed a second time, in what came to be known as the “Great Disappointment”, the movement collapsed—although stalwarts within it later became the nucleus of Seventh Day Adventism, from which, by a series of schisms, the Branch Davidians in Waco eventually came.

Millerism confronted Noyes with three distinct problems. In the first place, the Millerites were the objects of much ridicule in the popular press (“mad” millenarians made excellent copy in the first great newspaper circulation wars of the early 1840s). Yet Noyes himself had had religious visions the content of which was like that of Millerism, and he feared being similarly stigmatized. Second, the Millerites were competing for Noyes’s small band of followers, several of whom left the Putney Community to follow Miller’s standard. Finally, the sensational character of Millerite predictions strengthened the old association between millenarian religion and madness. In light of the psychological tumult Noyes had experienced in the 1830s, any link between him and Millerism inevitably raised questions about his own sanity.

The Millerites’ preoccupation with the date of the Second Coming was an issue that Noyes had been concerned with for a full two decades before Millerism. By 1833 he had resolved the question of the Second Coming to his own satisfaction by deciding that Jesus had returned and appeared to the apostles in the year A.D. 70 at the time of the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. As he put it in an 1840 letter: “[If] an angel from heaven, bearing the seal of ten thousand miracles, should establish a religion, which should fail to recognize the truth which blazes on the whole front of the New Testament, that Jesus Christ came the second time at the destruction of Jerusalem, I would call him an impostor”.⁹ This was not merely rhetorical overkill on Noyes’s part. In effect, just such an angel had already appeared to him, during the episodes of the 1830s described earlier.

9. John Humphrey Noyes to Loren Hollister, 7 March 1840, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

Noyes had in fact “anticipated” Millerism by almost a decade through visionary experiences of an imminent Second Coming. During the 1834 breakdown, Noyes was preoccupied with apocalyptic imagery and Adventist expectations. At this time his belief that the Second Coming had already occurred in A.D. 70 was suddenly challenged by powerful visionary experiences that at least temporarily convinced him that the Second Coming was just around the corner. In a breathless letter to his mother in the spring of 1834 he wrote:

It is like the time when Jerusalem was approaching its predicted destruction. Wars and rumors of wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, signs in the sun, moon and stars, universal commotion and universal expectation seem to characterize the aspect of the moral world. Amidst it all for me, I have no fears. Do your hearts fail? [I] tell you another coming of the Son of Man is at hand.¹⁰

When Noyes wrote later about this period, in the *Confessions* of 1849, he acknowledged that during the “New York experience”, “I received a baptism of that spirit which has since manifested itself extensively in the form of Millerism”. Not once but several times during those three weeks in New York a spirit came upon him that “produced an irresistible impression that this manifestation [a physical Second Coming] was about to take place”.¹¹

Even stranger was his sister Joanna’s report that during the second breakdown, in 1835, John began to talk—in her words—“about his suffering for the world, and that he is immortal . . .”¹² That he briefly believed the Second Coming was imminent is clear from his own testimony. Did he also come to identify himself with Christ and see himself as the vehicle of a Millerite-style Second Ad-

10. John Humphrey Noyes to his mother. Although the typescript date is “May 1835”, the style, contents, and surrounding material argue strongly for a date of May or June 1834. George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

11. J. H. Noyes, *Confessions*, 39.

12. Joanna Noyes Hayes to her family, 23 June 1835, George Wallingford Noyes Papers, Oneida Community Collection.

vent? We can never know, for the evidence concerning the 1835 breakdown is too fragmentary.

Millerism itself produced a rich body of folklore, much of it without foundation. Millerites were said to have sold off their property in expectation of the great day; to have donned white “ascension robes”; to have stood on hills and rooftops waiting to be lifted to Jerusalem; and, finally, to have gone mad when Jesus failed to arrive. Nevertheless, Noyes regarded Millerism with the utmost seriousness. During its heyday, he lost more than a third of the members of the fragile Putney Community, and we know that some left for Millerism. More to the point, the folklore of Millerite madness raised new questions about the psychological consequences of Noyes’s own religiosity.¹³

Noyes’s response was twofold. First, he “repackaged” the events of 1834–35. He was not a madman. Rather, he was a “spiritual voyager”, as he put it, an explorer of inner domains, who took the risks of madness in order to gain precious religious insights. He went to the edge of sanity so that he could bring back truths that more timid souls were afraid to seek. Second, in the *Confessions*, he refined the concept of insanity by distinguishing genuine insanity from behavior that mimics insanity. The former required two conditions, “an external spiritual cause”, and a “morbid state of the brain to which that cause may attach itself”. That, he said, was not his situation at all, for “my mind was sound”. Instead, he was like a hypnotic subject, whose healthy brain was “exposed to disturbing influences” that made him appear insane to others, but “I had the objective, but not the subjective condition of insanity”.¹⁴

We may speculate that Noyes’s preoccupation with a structured, ordered community was in reaction against the turbulence in his youth. With himself as paterfamilias, the Oneida extended family, articulated by and controlled through complex marriage, ascending

13. The fullest discussion of Millerism and insanity appears in Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers, “Millerism and Madness: A Study of ‘Religious Insanity’ in Nineteenth-Century America”, in Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 92–118.

14. J. H. Noyes, *Confessions*, 38–39.

and descending fellowship, and mutual criticism, were all bulwarks against the dangers of undisciplined spirituality.¹⁵

The recent events in Waco remind us of how volatile millenarian beliefs can be, especially when they are accompanied by communal withdrawal from the larger society. Why, then, did Noyes and Oneida escape these dangers? As Carol Weisbrod's work demonstrates, the relationship between the Community and the larger society was conflict-prone, but it was neither violent nor confrontational.¹⁶

Many of the differences, of course, are differences between the America of the mid-nineteenth century and the America of the late twentieth century. But there are other, more concrete factors. For example, if the Noyes of 1834–35 had been at the community's helm, its course might have been vastly different. The Noyes of those years seems closer to David Koresh—or at least to what we know thus far about Koresh—than the Noyes of the Oneida years. By the late 1840s, the oscillations between exultation and despair, the altered states of consciousness, and the religious megalomania had passed.

As different as the Branch Davidians¹⁷ in Waco are from the communitarians at Oneida, they are linked by the thread of antinomianism, the belief that the age during which humanity needed to subordinate itself to divine law has ended and that such restraints as human conduct still required would come directly from God.

Antinomianism was implicit in Noyes's Perfectionism, with its doctrine of sinlessness, and in the institution of complex marriage, which made the forbidden permitted. Movements like Oneida and

15. In "complex marriage", all the men and women were considered to be married to each other, and the children of any birth parents were considered to be children of the entire "family" thus created. In "ascending and descending fellowship", the more spiritually advanced members were paired with those less spiritually advanced. For the latter, the fellowship was ascending; for the former it was descending. During "mutual criticism" sessions, members gathered to point out the spiritual failings of one individual and to give advice.

16. Carol Weisbrod, *Boundaries of Utopia* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

17. For a more extended discussion of the Branch Davidian case, see my "Reflections after Waco: Millennialists and the State", *The Christian Century* 110 (2–9 June 1993): 596–600.



The Oneida Perfectionists are gathered on the lawn of the Mansion House, ca. 1863. John Humphrey Noyes is in the right foreground.

the Branch Davidians are drawn towards antinomianism for two reasons: first, antinomianism is a hallmark of genuine charismatic leadership of the kind that—albeit in very different ways—John Humphrey Noyes and David Koresh both exemplify. The gifts that followers recognize in the charismatic leader give him or her an authority that transcends custom, convention, or law. What passes for law under charismatic rule is whatever the leader pronounces. Thus, David Koresh, when asked whether he was above the law, responded, “I am the law”—a response which to him, as to earlier charismatic figures, must have seemed not arrogant but simply self-evident. In much the same way, Noyes’s pronouncements overruled all other appeals.

Second, antinomianism exercises strong attractions over groups that believe themselves to be already living in the millennial age. They are apt to view law as appropriate to an unredeemed time, when sin and weakness required external controls. The millennium, by contrast, needs no distinction between the virtuous and the sinful, the permitted and the forbidden; for in such a time, the saintly by definition can only act sinlessly. To do what society forbids—particularly in areas hedged about by strong taboos, such as sexuality—is both to burn one’s bridges to the corrupt world outside, and to acknowledge in one’s very flesh that the rule of the saints has come.

The dangers of antinomianism are, of course, clear: the openings it offers to uncontrolled passion and violence. Noyes’s organizational genius lay in his ability to build millennial antinomianism into the daily life of Oneida while instituting various procedures and forbearances that kept destructive energies in check, although sometimes just barely. It is tempting to speculate that Noyes’s virtuosity in introducing and then largely controlling antinomianism was a product of his own early experiences with unrestrained millennialism and the personal disorganization it had caused.

We need look no further than the confrontation outside Waco to see the dangers of antinomianism unleashed among millenarians living communally. In failing to appreciate these dangers, which Noyes knew so well, the religious entrepreneur can all too easily

release energies that neither he nor his followers can control. The vivid spiritual crises of Noyes's young manhood left him acutely aware of the need to balance expectations of dramatic future change with social structures that could contain and channel anarchic religious impulses. The Oneida Community, with its complex apparatus of social controls, constituted both a partially realized millennium in miniature—a circumscribed realm of earthly harmony—and a structure that could prevent outbursts of destabilizing millenarian fervor.