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A NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN RELIGIOUS UTOPIA

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The Harmony Society was one of the most successful and enduring of all 19th century American utopias. Founded in Butler County, Pennsylvania, in 1805, it lasted until 1904, almost a century. Why was it successful for so long a time? And since it was successful, why did it ultimately fail? These questions, with complete ramifications, will be covered in the following pages.

The people who originally formed this utopian society were Germans from the province of Württemberg in Germany. Their motivation for crossing the Atlantic to America was principally religious. They were Separatists from the German Lutheran State Church. The Lutheran Church had degenerated spiritually to the point where, in some cases, polkas were sung at services instead of hymns and sermons were given on how to raise a larger crop on one's farm. This religious laxity was deplored mainly by the middle and lower classes who desired more solid spiritual nourishment.¹

Among those shocked by this spiritual situation was George Rapp, the son of a small farmer and vine dresser. He was an avid student of the Bible and he came to see, more and more, the contrast between the way of life of the Christians in the New Testament and that of the society around him. Unable to contain his religious ardor, he began to preach sermons based upon his study and observation. Soon he had a small congregation holding private meetings at his house to hear the Bible expounded. (Bear in mind that at this time in Germany there were dozens of similar Separatist groups.)

The State Church soon came to regard Rapp and his followers as dangerous heretics and attempts were made to call a halt to their religious activities. Fining, imprisonment, and other types of persecution caused the group to grow rather than diminish, however, and finally a substantial group of 300 families accumulated.

By age 46 George Rapp had saved enough money to enable him to sail to Baltimore. This was in 1803. After searching for the most suitable area he could find, he purchased 5000 acres of virgin land in the Conoquenessing Valley north of Pittsburgh. Then, in July of 1804, two boatloads of people came from Germany, a total of about six hundred people. That winter, while the immigrants scattered to farms in Maryland and Pennsylvania to work, Rapp and the best workmen built houses on their property. In February, 1805, they were called together and formally organized themselves into the Harmony Society.²

Before moving ahead with the story, it would be helpful to give a quick sketch of the Harmonist's history. The Harmonists remained at their original home in Butler County, Pennsylvania, for ten years, till 1815. In that year they moved to southwestern Indiana, where conditions looked more promising. However, ten years later, in 1825, due to disease and unfriendly neighbors, they returned to Pennsylvania where they built the town of Economy, in Beaver County, about thirty miles up river from Pittsburgh. Here the Society remained until its close in 1904. Over the years, then, it built three towns on three different locations named, respectively, "Harmony," "New Harmony (or also, just plain "Harmony"), and "Economy."

Here it would also be interesting to point out the marked decline in the population of the Society over the years. This is a unique aspect of this group of people, dramatizing the pivotal influence of their religious beliefs, beliefs which motivated all their activities and practices. The two mutually related ideas that served to diminish their numbers from hundreds to none were 1) that celibacy was a holier state than normal sexual relations and 2) that Christ would soon return, an event for which they had to prepare themselves spiritually. The result was that they produced no children to carry on the Society! More details concerning other religious teachings and practices will be given later. As for their numbers, their peak population was in 1820, a total of 741. By 1837 the population was down to 425. In 1864 it had diminished to 170. By 1879 the total was down to 70, 1897 found only ten members remaining and by 1904 they had all died.³ It can be said, unreservedly, that misunderstanding of the Bible was the largest factor in causing the death of this organization.

But, let's return to February, 1805: How was the Society to be governed? In Germany these Separatists had tried to adopt the practices of the first-century Christians as they found them in the Bible. Now their new freedom in America allowed them to copy another feature of the early church found in the Book of Acts (2:41-45 and 4:32-35), sharing all things in common. This is clearly illustrated in their original articles of association, which were brief and consisted of five main points: The members of the Society agreed to do three things: 1) Give all their property to George Rapp and his associates; 2) obey all the rules of the community and work for its welfare; and, 3) they were not to demand the return of any goods or money if they withdrew from the Society. The leaders agreed to two major items in return: 1) Supply the members with all the necessities of life when sick as well as healthy and, after their death, to provide for their family; and, 2) if persons withdrew from the group they would be returned the value of the property they had brought into the Society, without interest, or a cash donation if they had contributed nothing in the way of material goods.⁴

These simple articles remained basically the same all during the years of the Society's existence. The only two changes worth noting took place in 1836 and in 1847. In 1836 the last item mentioned above was changed; from that date onward no withdrawing person could claim a refund. If he had contributed any money or goods he could not reclaim them; he had

parted with his goods forever. This was adopted due to trouble in a lawsuit in which a withdrawing member claimed a right to more than he was contractually entitled. (Incidentally, the Society never lost this or any other lawsuit brought against it.) Despite this change, anyone who did leave was voluntarily given a donation of at least two hundred dollars.⁵ The second change in the articles came about when the founder and original leader, George Rapp, died in 1847. New articles called for two trustees and seven elders to carry the responsibilities of the former leader.⁶ As we shall see from the following pages, no group of men could replace the leadership that George Rapp had provided for the first forty-two years of the Society's history.

The impact of George Rapp's character and personality on the Harmony Society can hardly be over-emphasized. He was almost six feet tall, well-built, with a stately walk. He had a long white beard. One writer makes special note of his eyes: He remembered especially from a personal interview, "...his large, dreamy, blue eyes, ...seemed most of the time to be looking at something far off, -- a peculiarity which invested them with a preternatural expression not easily forgotten."⁷

One author indicates that Rapp had many visions which he said came directly from heaven. These visions were more frequent, it is implied, when these German Separatists were still in Germany. Rapp is said to have used them to play on the superstitions of his adherents and to gain prestige among them. His visions were supposedly oftentimes revelations of plans for constructing great buildings. One in particular was to have been in the form of a Greek cross. (However, this was the only source of all those listed in the bibliography which mentioned anything about Rapp being a visionary. It is placed here simply for the reader's information.) The evidence that he had frequent visions, if any at all, seems weak. The original documents used here make no mention of them.

There is no doubt that Rapp was absolute ruler of the Harmony Society. His word was law. If any matter was questioned and the reply given was "Father Rapp says so," the problem was settled! Despite this the majority of commentators agree that he was seldom harsh or dictatorial and then only when necessary. Mainly he was good-humored, kindly, witty, and benevolent. He was very practical and industrious, never wasting a minute. He was constantly in the fields or factories helping and encouraging the members of his flock. His conversation always centered around religious matters and the right conduct of life. No matter how a conversation started out, Father Rapp would soon have it worked around to the subject of religion.⁹

All the records agree that he was a very eloquent preacher. He had a booming voice with excellent pitch.¹⁰ Despite his gifts along this line, he was never inclined to put on airs or be ostentatious. He was, in the final analysis, a plain and simple man who had no use for frills. His dislike of form and ceremony is illustrated by his manner of preaching:

and vigor all his life, right up until the time of his death at age ninety; he preached twice in church two weeks before his death. And one week before he addressed the people from his bedroom window.¹¹

He was well liked by all under his care, especially the children. He was always interested in the care of his group and worked constantly to improve their lives, both physically and spiritually. One reporter received the following comments from members of the Society some twenty-seven years after Rapp's death: "He was a man before whom no evil could stand," one said. Another commented: "When I met him on the street, if I had a bad thought in my head it flew away." A third said, "Ah, he was a man; He told us what to do, and how to be good."¹² Such was the influence of "Father" Rapp.

A sampling of the flavor of George Rapp's way of presenting things may be gleaned from one of his letters, written from Pennsylvania in 1814, to John L. Baker in Indiana, who had gone on ahead, before the Harmonists moved there as a group. The reader will readily notice how these excerpts are packed with references to the Bible and religion:

We figure each day how far along you may be, and yet we do not know anything, but otherwise the words of St. Paul are fulfilled: Love beareth all things, love endureth all things, because hope accompanies love. It is no small matter to have to miss another, even though only a short period has elapsed. But in this matter love must show its strength in order that our courage may be sustained to carry out our duties obediently, since the Brotherhood has so decreed. On this foundation you can stand firmly, it will not give way: if you live, you will live in the Lord; if one or the other should die, he will die in the Lord--and death will not part us.

...Therefore remain strong in the spirit of your soul, maintain your spiritual and your secular duties to the honor of our Lord Jesus and to our joy and to your gain. The few months will soon pass until I see you. If anyone suffer tribulation, let him seek refuge in prayer. In this manner all the saints and the faithful have found help...¹³

In sermons, Father Rapp and other Harmonist preachers put the allegorical method to use in many cases, especially in preaching from the Old Testament. Though they did not deny the literal meaning of the historical facts there, they also sought a deeper symbolic significance. For example, Moses represented the law and Joshua the gospel. Thus the barring of Moses by God from the promised land was not only a punishment for striking the rock in anger, but also a great spiritual lesson to Israel that entrance into salvation is not by the law but by the gospel of Jesus, who is the Joshua of the New Testament, as stated in Heb. 4.8.

In the same way, Noah and Joseph were thought of as types of Christ. The "scarlet thread in the window of Rahab the harlot" (Joshua 2.15) represented the saving power of the blood of Christ. And the year of jubilee, when slaves were set free and people were released from their debts, was a type of the great redeeming work of Christ when all would be freed from sin and restored to the Kingdom of God.¹⁴

Father Rapp was not the only leader the Society had, however. Another very able personality was Frederick (Reichert) Rapp, Father Rapp's adopted son. He was an excellent business man who had charge of all dealings with the outside world and was generally responsible for all the financial matters of the Society. In fact, he was so completely trusted that the title to all Harmony property was placed in his name. Father Rapp placed him in this responsible capacity so he could devote himself entirely to spiritual matters. When Frederic died in 1834 Father Rapp appointed two helpers to replace his son, R. L. Baker and J. Henrici. When Baker died he was replaced by Jonathan Lenz. These three names are the ones most frequently mentioned in relation to the later history of the Harmony Society.¹⁵

The Harmonists, in each of their three locations, as mentioned earlier, built a town complete with all necessary buildings including houses, a church, hotel, factories, stables and so on. Each of their three towns were extremely clean, neat, and pleasant, with lots of trees. Orchards and fields, all neatly kept and laid out, surrounded the community. In such a setting the Harmonists lived and worked. Truly, their property did look like a utopia.

These humble people worked hard--and they prospered! During their first ten years they produced and sold a wide variety of articles. Letters by their agent, John L. Baker, at Beaverpoint, their shipping point on the Ohio River, show some of the items they sent from Harmony to be sold in the outside world. Among them were cloth, hats, boots and shoes, iron hoops for barrels, wines, and whiskey.¹⁶ The Harmonists, throughout their history, produced plenty of fine liquor. As early as 1806 they produced three thousand gallons of whiskey!¹⁷

Fewer details are available about economic activities during their first ten years than for later periods, but there is no doubt they prospered. Evidence for this is the amount of money they were able to pay out for land when they moved to Indiana in 1815. Between 1814 and 1816 they bought a total of 24,734 acres for \$61,050. In subsequent years, to 1824, they purchased 4,311 additional acres for \$10,160.44. They obtained most of this land for two dollars an acre from the United States land office. Other smaller purchases ranged in price from eight dollars an acre down to two dollars.¹⁸ Land was cheap early in the nineteenth century, but to buy as much as thirty thousand acres took substantial financial resources even then. But the Harmonists, or "Rappites," as they were called in Indiana, had the wealth to do it.

The ten years in Indiana (1815-1825) found these industrious people prospering even more and spreading their enterprises far and wide.

The town of New Harmony, as their Indiana community was named, grew steadily. The work was done in groups with a foreman over each who supervised the carrying of the goods to storehouses, which were soon full of all kinds of materials and items for sale. Farmers came from far and near to purchase necessary goods and have their grain ground at the mill. But the Rappite goods were being produced in such abundance they had to find larger markets so they opened branch stores in Vincennes, Shawneetown, Illinois, and other places. They had agents in Pittsburgh, Louisville, and St. Louis. They sold their agricultural products and manufactured articles throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.

They sold surplus amounts of all types of food and articles: wheat, corn, oats, rye, barley, hides, cattle, sugar, cheese, hops, hemp, deer skins, bear skins, tallow, quills, feathers, eggs, tar, powder, cloth, honey, baskets, apples, chairs and yarn.¹⁹ These goods were transported long distances mainly on flat boats. A typical cargo sent to New Orleans in 1823 contained the following items: 680 bushels of oats, 88 barrels of flower, 100 kegs of butter, 39 kegs of lard, 103 barrels of pork, 32 oxen, 16 hogs, and 40 barrels of whiskey.²⁰

Here is an estimate of the increase of their wealth during the first twenty-one years of their history: When they first came to the United States from Germany they averaged twenty-five dollars per person. By 1826 they were worth about two thousand dollars for every man, woman and child! Obviously, they made the most of their opportunities in the New World.

But their greatest economic achievements were yet to come. Disease and the lack of sound currency in the Middle West caused them to sell their Indiana holdings and move back to Pennsylvania in 1825 where they built the town of "Economy" on the river north of Pittsburgh. They chose this name because this, their final community, was to be mainly an industrial enterprise since they had acquired manufacturing skills during the previous 20 years. They now had an excellent location for textile factories and they prospered as never before.²¹

Here it would be good to explain how they organized their activities. The business of the Society was divided into departments over each of which a superintendent was placed. There were supervisors over the store, cotton factory, tavern, woolen factory, brewery, orchards, blacksmith shop, distillery, hat factory, and so on. Accounts were kept for each activity. The manager of a department was responsible for the material entrusted to him and was given credit for his products. The year 1854 shows that accounts were kept for the blacksmith, baker, brewer, cooper, cloth society, cotton factory, silk factory, wool factory, doctor, dyer, distillery, hatter, joiner, saddler, mill, potter, shoe maker, sawmill, cider press, tanner, tinner, tailor, turner, painter, wagon maker, watchmaker, wash house, and wine cellar. This list richly illustrates the variety of functions and facilities the Harmony Society actually had. Their community left little, if anything, to be desired economically.²²

The two important industries at Economy were cotton and wool manufacturing. In 1831 the profit from the cotton was twelve percent and for wool manufacturing fifteen percent. Between 1830 and 1843 the profit from wool manufacturing totalled \$384,624.39. Their manufacturing success got them in trouble with their competitors because they soon controlled the Pittsburgh market. In 1829 a series of newspaper articles appeared attacking them as a monopoly against which other manufacturers could not compete. The Harmonists made such fine quality wool material and sold it at such a low price that the competition in the outside world could not match them. Their opponents were in favor of having the state dissolve the Society. As a result the Harmonists were forced to cut back on their manufacturing.²³ In 1858 the cotton factory was closed.²⁴

They engaged in other activities. Besides cotton and wool they manufactured silk for a time, and produced whiskey, wine, beer, flour, hats, other articles, and the usual variety of agricultural products.²⁵

Their greatest prosperity came after 1860 when a rich supply of oil was discovered on some timber land they had purchased in Warren County, Pennsylvania. They soon began drilling and manufacturing the oil. As we might expect, Economy oil was the best on the market.²⁶

The Harmonists went into a great variety of other enterprises which should be mentioned briefly here to fully illustrate their widespread affairs in the United States during the middle part of the nineteenth century. They had a large saw mill in Warren County after 1858. They had chief control in a number of railroad enterprises, the largest being the building of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad from Pittsburgh to Youngstown, Ohio. They acquired an interest in a cutlery works in Rochester, Pennsylvania, in 1867 and in the Western Pile Works at Beaver Falls in 1875, a very large factory. They also were connected with a shovel factory, a car works, a glass factory, a bicycle factory, a coal company, and they organized a bank. Due to unfortunate foreign investments, poor bookkeeping practices in later years, ineffective leadership, the hiring of more and more outside workers, and the decline in the population of the Society, the great economic prosperity of the Harmony Society eventually came to an end. Few now realize that these German Separatists once had a great impact in the economic affairs of the state of Pennsylvania and the entire eastern United States.²⁷

Aaron Williams discusses several of the more noteworthy lawsuits brought against the Harmony Society up to 1860. These lawsuits are interesting because they provide insights into the extent of the Society's wealth and also reveal the character of its members. People who tried to get money out of the Society tended to greatly overestimate its wealth. Some guessed it was worth eight or ten million dollars. In a lawsuit of 1851 all the records were hauled out and checked and it was found the Society's property was worth just under a million dollars. The checking done in this and other cases was trying to the Harmonists because all their private and domestic concerns were pried into. In every case they were

shown to have been completely honest in all their dealings. The leaders of the Society, though never called to account by the members, were found to be completely faithful because the records showed they had not stolen a cent in handling the community money. So these lawsuits fell out to the Harmonists' advantage even though they were troublesome at the time.²⁸

Another interesting topic: what were the social customs and habits of these people? What kind of life did they lead during the years of their existence? First it would be well to point out that though these people were deeply religious, they were not ascetics. They ate well and enjoyed life. They ate meat and drank beer and wine. In addition to the three regular meals, it was their custom to eat lunch at 9:00 in the morning and another afternoon lunch, called "Vesperbrod," at 3:00. Yet they did not overeat, but always practiced moderation. Proof of this is that there was little sickness, all were healthy, vigorous, and almost everyone lived to a ripe old age.²⁹

The Harmonists dressed as they had in Germany, as peasant people. They usually wore garments of a dark blue color, made with simplicity. They did not wear jewelry. Yet they always appeared well-dressed and were never dirty or ragged.³⁰ The tailor prided himself in his ability to keep the people of the Society well-clothed. He would keep an eye on their garments to see who needed replacements in trousers or coats. The shoemaker did the same in regard to the people's shoes. Articles of clothing were given out as individuals or families needed them.³¹

In the early years of the Society each family did its own baking. After the Civil War, a bakery was established where bread was prepared for the whole community. Each family had its own cow. When the milkman came by, in the morning and evening, each family would pour the milk from its cow into the large can on his truck and then take out, by means of the spigot below, the amount they needed. In this way everyone was amply supplied. As for other dairy products, each family manufactured its own butter and cheese. Though sometimes a nuisance, each family also kept its own chickens. The butcher slaughtered twice a week and each household went to pick up as much meat as it needed. Also every family kept its own vegetable garden.³²

Other necessary goods and services were supplied as follows: A weekly allotment of beer, cider, or wine was distributed to the members. Whiskey, however, was not given out except in cases of sickness or exposure. Every two months coffee, tea, and sugar were distributed to the members at the Society's store. Other groceries were given out as the members needed them; they were simply given what items they requested. Flour and feed for chickens and cows were obtained from the grist mill. Carpets and furniture for their houses were also supplied upon request at the store. In case of sickness they were taken care of by their own physician or, in later years, by a doctor employed by the Society. For those who were sick, weak, or aged, domestic nurses and servants were at hand to help. In the distribution of all these goods and services there was no discrimination between members and their families regarding quantity or quality; all were treated alike.³³

Here is another happy note about the Harmonists' character and way of life as given by Charles Nordhoff:

'As each labors for all, and as the interest of one is the interest of all, there is no occasion for selfishness, and no room for waste. We were brought up to be economical; to waste is a sin; we live simply; and each had enough, all that he can eat and wear, and no man can use more than that.' This was the simple explanation I received from a Harmonist, when I wondered whether some family or person would not be wasteful or greedy.³⁴

A pleasant illustration of the way the Harmonists lived is provided by the way they used the milk wagon on its twice-daily rounds. It actually took the place of a newspaper because on the side of it was placed a bulletin for all to read. For instance, if the people of the community were to get together to make hay, reap grain, pick apples or berries or whatever, an advance notice would appear: "Tomorrow (Wednesday)--hay is to be made at chimneyfield; everybody shall come and meet at 7 o'clock at the sawmill; bring your rakes and forks and mid-day meal."³⁵

Men and women in this utopia shared the work fairly and cheerfully. There was no discrimination here either. On Sunday morning the men would make their own beds and even helped the women, on and off, around the house. The women did the household chores, worked in the vegetable garden and then assisted the men in the fields when they could. Their work there was confined to the lighter duties, however. The women enjoyed this outdoor work and they believed it contributed to their health and happiness. Thus the sexes assisted each other in all the work of the community.³⁶

Father Rapp taught his people to love music and flowers. The picture we get of the Harmony Society from numerous writers and observers is one of bright colors and beautiful sounds. There can be no doubt these people genuinely enjoyed life. Their main recreation was music. Every member of the Society had some training in it and just about everyone could play a musical instrument. They celebrated the following religious feasts: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, the date of their founding (February 15), plus an annual Lord's Supper and a Harvest Home festival, both in the fall of the year. At each of these special feasts music played a prominent role; elaborate programs full of music were arranged. On the other hand, dancing was never practiced; the Harmonists always felt opposed to it.³⁷

The Harmonists never failed to keep up a good school for the children. They were very careful about the education of the children and in maintaining proper school policies. Every child had to attend school and

was taught German and English, reading and writing, and also natural history, technology, and elementary economics. As a result, there were no illiterate members in the Society. To teach the children habits of industry they had to work everyday under the watchful eye of their teacher performing such duties as collecting herbs or picking fruit. Lancaster's teaching methods prevailed in the Harmony School.³⁸ This was a method by which monitors, brighter and more proficient members of the class, were used to teach others under the direction of the head, adult teacher. The students were seated in rows of about ten each. The teacher would instruct the monitors and then each monitor would teach his row of students the lesson in reading, writing, arithmetic, science, or whatever other subject necessary. There were also monitors for duties such as taking attendance, giving examinations, checking notebooks, and so on. Finally, there was a monitor general over all the monitors.³⁹

Religion is a key topic in understanding what bound the Harmonists together and motivated them. Their theological beliefs were largely influenced, naturally, by the preaching and teaching of George Rapp who combined German mysticism with a practical application of Christian principles found in the Bible. The main aim of these people was to prepare themselves for the future life by obeying as strictly and literally as possible what they believed to be the will of God.

Father Rapp regarded the Bible as the only guide to be used in spiritual matters. As a result this was the one book most read by the Harmonists.⁴⁰ However, it is apparent that he got his interpretation of the Bible from German mystics such as Jung-Stilling and Jacob Boehmen. This is borne out by the fact that in 1855 the Harmonists had reprinted, and distributed in each of their homes, the Hirten Brief, which was a pastoral letter to Free Masons. The Harmonists were not Free Masons but they prized this work so highly because it very nearly matched their own beliefs on such topics as the fall and redemption of man and the nature of God. Jacob Boehmen, a German mystic (1575-1624), was probably the main source for the doctrines expressed in the Hirten Brief. He did not write this letter himself but there is no doubt that it grew out of the school of mysticism he started.⁴¹

The belief of the Harmonists, then, based on German mysticism, and taught by George Rapp, was that God had a dual nature, that He had within Him both the male and female sexual elements, and that Adam was also a dual being since the Bible states that God made man in His image. To prove this, the Harmonists quoted Genesis 1.26, 27, taking it literally: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." They believed that if Adam had been satisfied to remain this way he would have been able to reproduce without the help of a separate female being, and the earth would have been populated by this miraculous means. But Adam became discontented, desired what was physical and material more than what was spiritual, and so God separated the female part from his body, thus giving him what he desired. This is the Harmonists' version of the fall of man.⁴²

This brings us to a very important feature in the lives of these German Separatists, namely celibacy. From the belief outlined above they deduced that the celibate state is more pleasing to God, especially since they believed that Christ Himself had the dual nature Adam lost and that, in the world to come, all the saved would have restored to them the duality Adam lost in the fall. Since this matter of celibacy is so important to the history and ultimate decline of this Society, and since it played such a large role in their religion and life, it would be appropriate to see how the teaching was originally adopted.

During the first two years of the Society, the Harmonists did not discourage marriage. In fact, Father Rapp himself officiated at several marriages during that time. But the question arose whether or not there was a holier way than that of matrimony. In 1807 an unusually deep religious fervor came over the Society. They called it a "fresh revival of religion" such as had been present with them when their movement first began in Germany. The Harmonists, at that time, felt they had become spiritually weak; a deep sense of sin was experienced. They decided they had not kept the spirit of original Christianity. One feature of their lives they felt they had to change was the practice of sex in marriage.

Father Rapp strongly encouraged this growing ascetic spirit. He read and expounded passages from the Bible which appeared to advocate celibacy and said they were binding for all periods of the church, not just the early Christians who were suffering persecution at various times. Included were such scriptures as Matthew 19.10-12; I Corinthians 7.7, 8, 25-29; and Revelation 14.14. Marriage was not regarded as unlawful for everyone because all did not have a calling for this holier state, said Father Rapp. But since Christ's return was very near (this was another important teaching and will be discussed next) and since their goal was to be numbered with the "hundred and forty-four thousand" of Revelation 7, he urged his people to purify and prepare themselves.

Rapp set the example and practiced what he preached. Other leaders, and eventually, the majority of members who were married, agreed to stop engaging in sexual intercourse. No more marriages took place and it became the established law of the Society that no married persons could become members of it. A number of young people withdrew because of this severe demand, a not unexpected occurrence. Husbands and wives were not required to live separately, but remained living under the same roofs as before, with their families, treating each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. This was a hard test but the Harmonists testified it was made easier by the fact that the whole community shared the burden together.⁴³

Nevertheless there were indications of difficulty in remaining celibate. An example is found in a letter of December 17, 1815, written by a member of the community to Father Rapp. The writer, Dr. Christoph Miller, who was apparently the Society's physician at the time, confessed to his spiritual leader that a certain "Wagner woman" was troubling him and that he was "walking in the paths of lust" but that with the mercy and help of God he would be able to continue serving "the Lord Jesus", Rapp, and the community.⁴⁴

Whether all members remained completely celibate at all times is impossible to ascertain, but the fact remains that no children were born in the community after this and finally the whole Society came to an end because the last aged member died. There were no children to carry it on. All accounts lead to the conclusion that these people were very much in earnest about their religious beliefs and that they were steadfast and dedicated in maintaining them, including celibacy.⁴⁵

The belief in the near-return of Christ to this earth has already been mentioned. This was certainly one of their principle doctrines and it had a direct bearing on their whole way of life. It was one of the cardinal reasons for adopting celibacy, as already indicated, because they wanted to purify themselves to meet Him. They expected the first resurrection and the beginning of the Millennium to occur at any moment, or at least within a few years. Father Rapp believed unreservedly that he would live to see Christ's return and that he would have the privilege of presenting his group of believers to the Saviour whom they were trying to please by conducting their lives properly. The old patriarch's faith in this was so strong that it is reported he said on his death-bed, in 1847, at the age of ninety: "If I did not know that the dear Lord meant I should present you all to Him I should think my last moments come," and then he died.⁴⁶

This belief in the Second Coming actually led to one third of the Society's members withdrawing in 1832! This withdrawal was the result of the famous Count Leon episode included in all chronicles of the history of the Harmonists. To make an understatement, it was a major event in the history of this utopia, although the result was not as disastrous as it first appeared.

Briefly, the story is this: In 1829 George Rapp received a long letter from Germany from the secretary of one Count Leon who referred to the Count as "the Divine Messenger" among other exalted titles. The Count, whose actual name was Bernard Muller, had gathered around himself in Frankfort, "a religious sect of mystical and millenarian Pietists, who held him in high reverence" because he said he had special revelations about the return of Christ. He claimed he had been commissioned to gather the Lord's people out of the world and take them to a place to wait for Christ's return. He said he believed that America was the place for this gathering and that he wanted to come to visit the Harmonists because he felt they were a part of the true church. Rapp and the Harmonists developed a favorable attitude toward Count Leon, due to this letter, because of the apparent similarity in their beliefs. As a result, the Count and a group of forty followers came to New York in October, 1831, and spent the winter at Economy:

It soon became clear that Leon had views quite different from those of the Harmonists: he advocated marriage and a more luxurious way of life. The followers of the Count infiltrated the Society and influenced the weaker members. Finally, in spring, a tally was taken and it was discovered that 250 members sided with Leon, while 500 remained loyal to Father Rapp. Exactly one-third of the members withdrew. They were paid

in three installments, a sum of \$100,000, and they moved to start a new settlement ten miles away. They made a demand, in April 1833, for more money by sending a mob to Economy to press their demands but neighbors of the Harmonists drove them away without violence or bloodshed. Finally the followers of Leon came to realize he was an imposter so he quietly packed up and left for Louisiana where he died of cholera in the fall of 1833. Following this, the seceders, by industriousness and sacrifice, made a success of their community.

Despite this loss of members and money, the Harmonists found they were actually benefited by this uproar because the weaker members had removed themselves. Consequently, the remainder of the group found a greater amount of love and harmony restored to the Society than they had ever known before.⁴⁷ Such was the matter of Count Leon. It is included here because it shows the strong influence of the Harmonists' belief in the advent of Christ, so strong that it could lead them into potentially serious difficulty.

In 1824, while still in Indiana, the Harmony Society published a statement of its principles called, Thoughts on the Destiny of man, particularly with reference to the Present Time. This small volume was probably compiled by Father Rapp himself. It grew out of discussions members of the Society had in earlier years when gathered in small groups in their homes on Sunday evenings. Each member was to present a thought about what was best in religion and morals for man's eternal welfare. The most noteworthy of these were always brought to Rapp for his approval; if he liked it he recorded it in a book. Out of this grew Thoughts on the Destiny of man. The English version was probably done by Frederick Rapp.⁴⁸

The treatise opens with the following statements:

What is the chief end of man's existence? He is destined to make use of the faculties implanted in him by his maker, for the benefit of himself and others. To do this, he needs practice.

He has to learn, and that learning must be acquired among his fellow creatures. No one can find out the proper use of his abilities without having objects before him. For this intercourse with man is necessary.

The book goes on to show what the Harmony plan is all about: Human nature is a combination of good and evil and man must choose to follow either his reason or his evil propensities. But to triumph over the latter he must have help. True Christianity alone can give him the help he needs. By believing and following Christ's Word man can regain the dignity he lost in the fall. Active love for all men is what Jesus had in mind when he began His Church. Thus reason and religion in combination can guide men rightly.⁴⁹

The Harmony Society was the community where the members could learn to practice the principles of the religion of Jesus. Harmony is where all the members work for the welfare of all. This Society is the noblest form of state that has ever existed. If only one such harmonious society were present in the world, ultimately all nations would unite with it because the true religion "naturally converts all nations into moral and Christian brothers."⁵⁰

This book, then, reveals the hopes and aspirations of George Rapp. His plan was not narrow and selfish but "it embraced all mankind, and its aim was the regeneration of society."⁵¹

In relation to this we should also point out their beliefs on salvation for all of humanity. Father Rapp did teach a doctrine of future rewards and punishments, but the latter were only temporary. Ultimately all mankind was to be redeemed and saved. At Christ's return, only those who followed the celibate life and otherwise kept Jesus' commandments would be welcomed into His bright and glorious presence. Others would have to go through a period of probation and purification before they could be finally saved.⁵²

Relative to this it should be pointed out that the Harmony Society was never, at any time, a proselyting group. Religious principles were taught exclusively in their own private church services. The only way they tried to influence the outside world was by setting the example of an industrious, unselfish life practicing the principles they professed.⁵³

Their aim was not to bring large numbers into the Society. In fact, just the opposite was true. They actually discouraged people from joining. Only those with suitable character could join and then only after a period of one year's probation. Their reluctance to admit people to the Society is vividly illustrated by a letter of October, 1822, by Frederick Rapp to Chester Chadwick, refusing his request for admittance:

Your letter of the 15th...came to hand, in which we discover your desire to be admitted into our Society, with your family, in order to get rid of the trouble and care which is a requisite to support and procure an honest living for yourself and family; which is a good meaning so far, yet we doubt very much whether you could submit to our regulations and manner of living, for no person here possesses anything as his own, nor can anybody act or do according to his own will, every member of the community must be obedient to the ordained superintendents, which is very hard for people, who have not the kingdom of God for their chief object. For the fundamental principles, whereupon our community is established, are altogether religious. The religion of Jesus is practised here, in fact, no unrighteous man can abide here, far less a daring sinner, who lives yet in vices; therefore

one has to bethink himself better before joining our Society than you perhaps are aware of. We advise you not to do it. We have not admitted any person this long time, having been so often deceived by people who lived here one or two years, and finding the path to follow Jesus too narrow, they break off and calumniate us; then all our trouble spent to make them do better was lost...⁵⁴

Consistent with this, the Harmonists did not make any attempts to spread their views by publishing papers, pamphlets, magazines or other printed material. They felt this would not do any good and that they were already fulfilling the work they were called to do. They did not think God expected them to expand their functions to include printing; they regarded such activity as an unnecessary waste of time and money. Rather, they held that the return of Christ and the final judgment would make more of an impression in one day than all the printing presses could make in a whole century.⁵⁵

The religion of the Harmonists tied them very close together in bonds of brotherhood and love. This fact is touchingly apparent in two letters written in July and November of 1813 by a member who was obliged to be away from the Society for business reasons:

I wish I were able to go to Harmony today, for time drags on during the 14-day absence without being able to see my fathers and brethren. As a forlorn and miserable person I must even miss the meeting (church service), but since it has been so ordered, I commend myself to their memory...

It was a strange feeling, after one has been brought up in a loving and obliging brotherhood, to have the torment of doing business with persons who are without order and stubborn and of the worst sort, who can hardly be induced by money and good words to perform a service, at which one is usually half defrauded.

Dear, beloved Harmony. How fortunate are the members within your gates. Because of my love for you and my interest in you, I have indeed been bodily separated from you, but I shall ever hold and cherish you in my heart...⁵⁶

As one might expect, their religious services were quite plain and simple. On Sunday they ceased their regular work and attended public worship twice. These meetings were conducted much like those in Protestant churches with prayers, hymns, and a sermon. While Father Rapp

was alive, he preached to the people at both Sunday services and also on Wednesday evening. Further systematic instruction, both religious and non-religious, was provided at weekly meetings in which the Harmonists were grouped into five classes: the old men, the old women, the younger men, the younger women, and then the children of both sexes met together. Throughout his life Father Rapp attended these meetings and guided the activities.⁵⁷

Confession of sins was also practiced. When a person had committed a gross sin or had any burden on his conscience he was urged to confess it privately to Father Rapp or some other religious leader and also to God. They believed they could not expect full forgiveness from God without this confession to a minister. This practice was regarded as a useful defense against temptations in the future. It was used more frequently during Father Rapp's lifetime than after his death because by then all the members were older and more established in the religious way of life.⁵⁸

As already noted, one of the main goals of the Harmonists was to learn to help and serve one another within their community. However, they did not restrict acts of charity solely to their own group; they were also unselfish and generous in sharing their prosperity with outsiders. For example, in 1845 there was a disastrous fire in Pittsburgh; the Harmonists contributed generously to relieve the suffering. They did the same after the Chicago fire of 1871. And they sent aid to reduce the suffering caused by the Johnstown flood. As early as 1819, they had sent \$950.00 to Philadelphia to ransom three families of immigrants who were being held at that port because they were destitute. This was done despite the fact they had no personal interest in these people; they were not coming to join the Harmony Society.⁵⁹

Another typical example, with some interesting details, is the story of Moritz Frederick who came to America in 1847 at age thirty, whose goal was to be a Moravian missionary in Wisconsin. On his way to Wisconsin he stopped at the Economy hotel. That night his lungs hemorrhaged. To give him the best possible care he was taken to the home of the sister of Mr. Baker, one of the leaders of the Society at that time. There he was taken care of for the length of three years. Money sent to him from Germany was kept at the Economy store. When he left for Germany in 1850, the Harmonists gave him his money plus a gift of twenty-five dollars. In 1853 he returned to Pittsburgh where he lived for thirty-two years. During that period he visited Economy often and was always greeted as a friend. When finally his invalid wife died and his money was all gone he returned to Economy where he was given a pleasant home. Many other instances of similar deeds could be given.⁶⁰

Such were the precepts, principles, and practices, of the Harmonists' religion. One Harmonist put their religion into a nutshell by saying it consisted of, "Love to God above all and to thy neighbor as thyself, without laying much stress on forms, letter, or ceremony."⁶¹ Clearly, their religion to them was a way of life, not just a set of beliefs.

What did contemporary society think of the Harmonists? How did their neighbors "on the outside" regard them? The sources gathered for this paper indicate they were generally looked upon with favor by their neighbors in Pennsylvania but that the opposite was true while they lived in Indiana.

The latter negative attitude is illustrated by a letter of 1830 from a member of the Society who had left Economy to return to Ohio and Indiana for a time. This is his description of an encounter in a store in Cincinnati:

I entered a grocery; there they asked me from where I came; when I said from Economy, they asked whether my eyes had been opened; then they said that you were the greatest swindlers that ever lived on earth. I said that they would have to prove it to me or I should not be satisfied. Then they told me that Frederick had visited a house of ill-fame and got the pocks. Then I said it wasn't true; then they said they would prove it to me. I said I would bet \$100 that it wasn't true. I was so angry I threw \$100 on the counter and said, 'If you are not liars put your \$100 down.' Thereupon they slunk away and I never saw any of them.⁶²

One reason why the Harmonists published Thoughts on the Destiny of man in 1824, while still in Indiana, was to clear up misunderstanding about them held by hostile frontier neighbors.⁶³ As noted earlier, they did not care to publish religious material but, in this instance, they made an exception.

After returning to Pennsylvania and settling at Economy, however, we find reports of friendly neighbors and pleasant business and social relationships.⁶⁴ A concrete example is the behavior of the Harmonists' neighbors on April 2, 1833, the time of the famous Count Leon episode recounted previously. At this point the seceders from Harmony had been gone for one year, setting up their own community ten miles away. But, since they had run out of funds, Leon sent a mob of about eighty people to Economy to demand more money. The group took over the Economy hotel by force, then laid a set of outrageous demands before George Rapp and the other authorities. When these offensive requests were rejected, the invaders decided to take what they could by looting the hotel. While this was taking place, the other members of the Society remained quietly in their homes as they had been instructed to do.

Meanwhile, many neighbors and friends of the Society had gathered to see what was going on. When it became apparent that the mob was up to no good, they formed a citizens' army and, to the strains of a tune played on a drum and fife, they cheerfully helped the intruders out of the town without bloodshed or violence.⁶⁵ This is a reasonably fair indication of how surrounding people regarded the Harmonists during the

last eighty years of their history. It must not be overlooked, of course, that the Harmonists incurred the disfavor of the Pennsylvania textile industries because of the unbeatable quality and low prices of their products. As a result, newspaper articles were written opposing their growth. But this disfavor was purely the result of business competition and not due to personal, social, or religious considerations.

Was the Harmony community a genuine utopia, a place where everything was ideal? Certainly a completely positive answer would be an exaggeration. Yet, in many ways, it was a miniature paradise. Consider the following. In the Harmony community there was no problem with the high cost of living. Money was not used and yet all the material needs of life were readily supplied in abundance. This remained true whether the individual was sick, well, or in any other circumstances whatsoever; his needs were taken care of. Also important is the fact that all problems ordinarily connected with capital and labor were non-existent. Here farm and town life were blended together; at times the whole community could be found at work in the fields. If buildings needed to be erected everybody pitched in with no debts incurred, no bonds floated! The work simply got done.

In Harmony there were no drunkards or criminals, tramps, or unemployed people. Everyone dressed plainly but their clothes were of the highest quality cloth and not a stitch or button was missing; all were in perfect condition. And there was color and beauty at every hand. Flowers and vines grew abundantly in every garden and yard. In Economy, cherry trees lined the streets of the town--can you imagine them in full bloom? On the machines in the factories were flowers in vases and potted plants. Also, here there were no unwholesome forms of entertainment or amusement; but there was beautiful music in abundance from band and orchestra, concerts and song festivals, and individual performers. Games and sports round out the happy picture.

The Harmonists were trusting, humble, courteous, industrious, economical, efficient, and happy. They were adept at the art of living. And, to top it all, they contributed to many charitable causes as already shown, because their practical and effective way of life made it possible for them to be generous.⁶⁶

A person who was intimately connected with Economy in its declining years and who is still living there, although never an actual member of the Society, gave this description of the little community:

...Economy had no jail...In this day and age it is hard to realize that there did exist in this community a group of Christians such as they were. They had a contentment which others did not comprehend. It was called the "Harmonie Geist" or "Harmony Spirit." They had no police--the night watchmen patrolled the streets after dark. He would meet the trains and be on the lookout for fires. Any trouble--breaking in--was from the outside and not from within.⁶⁷

As students of utopian experiments know, it is unusual for a group such as this to continue for any great period of time. In summary, then, what were the reasons the Harmony Society endured for almost an entire century?

The first major reason was undoubtedly the strength and ability of their leaders, George and Frederick Rapp. Father Rapp had qualities of leadership that were outstanding. He was not only religiously zealous but he had good sense and sound judgment as well. Proof of this is his ability to successfully establish three towns in the space of three decades. Yet, most of the business affairs were taken care of, you remember, by Frederick Rapp. His leadership and financial acumen must not be overlooked.⁶⁸

Second, the colony had capital: the members had to turn over every bit of property to the Society when they joined it. None were rich but, since they contributed everything they had they were able to accumulate sufficient means to avoid failure by a comfortable margin.⁶⁹

Third, the Harmonists were deeply religious.⁷⁰ Their way of life was directly tied to their religion. It was a sin not to be economical and industrious. Also they believed they were preparing for the Kingdom of God which was soon to begin with the appearing of Christ. This belief in the near-return of Christ was a strong motivation to them because this was a definite expected event in their thinking, not a vague imagining. It was a real goal toward which they worked.

Hand in hand with religion went the character and quality of the people. Their religion strengthened certain traits of character, but they had to have determination to become members of the Society in the first place. This was true because only people with proper attributes were admitted. Those who were lazy or troublesome were not allowed to become members. If a member did not behave himself he was expelled, but this happened very seldom.⁷¹

Now for the other side of the coin. Why did the Harmony Society finally cease to exist? The reasons should already be quite apparent since most of them have been mentioned, but we may summarize them here. The most obvious reason was, of course, celibacy. These people produced no children to carry on in future years. Inextricably tied to this point is their belief in the momentary return of Christ to the earth. They fully expected to see Him before they died. Even Father Rapp thought he would live to see the coming of Christ. They thought the Millennium was almost here so they did not consider providing, or providing for, future generations. Added to this is the fact that they insisted on celibacy for all who wanted to join them, a strong deterrent to any increase in numbers.⁷²

Another important reason for their decline was the death of George Rapp, a leader on whom they depended greatly; and we should also mention the loss of Frederick Rapp, their able business leader. Captains of this

caliber were not on hand to succeed them after they were gone. It can't be denied that George Rapp was the key force upon which the members depended for guidance and direction. He was the founder of the group and, with his leadership absent, things were never quite the same.⁷³

There were other factors that should not be overlooked. The Harmonists in later years, had money invested in many varied enterprises. Some of these investments were unwise and much money was lost.⁷⁴ Also, after 1868, when Jacob Henrici was the principle head of the group, no accurate financial records were kept, only scattered memoranda. An additional cause of decline was the necessity of hiring outside help as the members themselves grew older and older and fewer and fewer. These outsiders were not motivated by the same ideals that made the Harmonists thrifty and industrious.⁷⁵

Finally, there was the factor of having to compete with society outside the community. The Harmonists were not on an island isolated from the rest of the world. They were in the state of Pennsylvania and right near the thriving city of Pittsburgh. The weight of such an overwhelming industrial environment was enough to swallow them up eventually even without the other causes listed here. The larger society finally simply swallows up the smaller. This has been true of communal living experiments other than the Harmonists as the history of utopias clearly shows.⁷⁶

History is the story of human experience. Usually history is studied in terms of nations, i.e. large groups of people. But isn't the experience of people in smaller units also informative, enlightening, valuable? The story of the Harmonists certainly seems to confirm that it is.

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