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Polygamy and the Christian Church

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ON THE BASIS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, THE AUTHOR ARGUES THAT THE CHURCH'S general rejection of polygamy is not required by Scripture and is descriptive of African society.

Nearly four fifths of the people in the world today either practice or condone polygamy. The Christian church has traditionally opposed polygamy, citing practice of it as evidence of man's basic immorality and willful rebellion against the commandments of God.

This brief study will inquire whether the practice of polygamy is indeed inimical to the Christian faith. Such a question must be raised because the Christian church has spread to many lands whose social structure is predominantly polygamous, for example, Africa. This study will focus primarily on polygamy as practiced among the Ibos in Africa.

I. THE NATURE OF POLYGAMY

Polygamy allows for sexual relationships between one man and two or more women, all of whom are members of a single socially sanctioned marital unit. In Africa polygamy occurs in many tribes to regulate social relationships between men and women. A dowry presented to the parents of a bride becomes the stamp of approval for a marriage and legitimates the procreation of children.

Many people to whom polygamy seems complicated, not to say immoral, assume that polygamous marriage reduces women to slavery and forces them to become economic chattels. What they overlook is the fact that nearly as many women as men are stout protagonists of polygamy.

Among the African Ibos it is considered a laudable ambition, not a handicap, to have a plurality of wives. Polygamy is not due to human concupiscence, insatiable sexual drives, and the like, as some people claim. Among Africans it has been practiced because life expectancy is short, because the infant mortality rate is lamentably high, because the agricultural economy is sustained by manual labor, and because mothers are the cheapest source of food for infants during the nursing period of two or three years. During that period sexual relations are taboo. Furthermore, the prestige and social status of an African Ibo male depends on the number of his wives and children, not his accumulation of material possessions.

Procreation not only serves as a socially binding force in the community, but it is also culturally enjoined. Animistic doctrine emphasizes that a man may not see God until he has been purified through several successive incarnations. Polygamy offers more frequent opportunities to insure such reincarnations. Polygamy also lowers the incidence of "illegitimate" children, who are unwelcome in African society, and eliminates the need for adoption, which Africans loathe. Furthermore, in a polygamous society very few girls remain unmarried and hence childless, and the number of men who engage in adulterous affairs is considerably reduced. Finally, when a man has many wives and children engaged

in agriculture, enough food is produced for both consumption and sales or exchange.

II. THE APPARENT UNIVERSALITY OF POLYGAMY

Among ancient Semitic people marriages were consummated after the husband's payment of a dowry, called *mab'r*. Cash, cattle, or other valuable goods were acceptable as dowries. Among certain tribes in India the bride's father often made a payment to the prospective bridegroom. The dowry system is frequently misunderstood by Westerners as a commercial transaction. In reality it is a stamp of approval validating a marriage contract, either monogamous or polygamous. It prevents a young girl from being considered a harlot.

The ancient Jews, like their Semitic relatives and neighbors, also practiced polygamy and insisted on the payment of dowries. Biblical laws did not limit the number of wives a man could take,¹ and the practice of polygamy continued among Jews as late as the 14th century. The Levirate law, which permitted a man to marry his deceased brother's wife, was regarded as a regulation enjoining a religious duty, since a son was essential as heir and preserver of a family line. The first disclaimers of polygamy among Jews were probably voiced by the Essenes in the *Damascus Covenant* [?], literature which may have influenced early Christians to favor ascetic, or at least monogamous, ideals. Justin Martyr reports that some Jewish sages had four or five wives and that when advice on a polygamous marriage was sought, the

following counsel was given: "Whenever a man lusted after a beautiful woman, they advised him to act according to the custom of the patriarchs."² Talmudic sources likewise indicate that a man was free to take as many wives as he could support.

European people also practiced polygamy. Jews living in Spain received government permission to marry several wives, just like the Spanish citizens.³ The same situation existed in Germany and France. Among Mormons in the United States the practice of polygamy also flourished, until proscribed by the federal government in the last decade of the 19th century. According to Mormon doctrine, revealed to Joseph Smith on July 12, 1847, a man could seal more than one wife to himself "for time and for eternity."⁴ Mormons defended their practice of polygamy by arguing the theological necessity of populating the spirit world through the procreation of as many people as possible on earth. Furthermore, Mormons discovered ample Biblical warrant to justify their polygamy by referring to Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines.⁵ As a matter of fact, some Mormons today still approve of polygamy.

We believe the Manifesto [of 1890, proscribing Polygamy] was inspired not by revelation but by political and economic expediency. We believe the Church hierarchy traded the God-given principle of plural marriage for Utah's statehood. If it is a choice of living God's law or the

² *Dialog with Trypho*, CXXXIV. 1, CXLI. 4; *P. G.*, Vol. 6, pp. 785, 799.

³ Ze'ev Falk, *Jewish Matrimonial Law of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1966), p. 11.

⁴ Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* (New York, 1954), pp. 5—15.

⁵ Kenneth Hughes, "The Church and Marriage in Africa," *The Christian Century*, LXXXII (Feb. 17, 1965), 204—8.

¹ Deut. 17:17 is a prohibition that restricts the king, not the general populace, from taking more than one wife. See Harold J. Simons, *African Women* (Evanston, 1968), p. 81.

law of the land, we will live God's law. Polygamy remains a pillar of our faith.⁶

III. THE PRACTICE OF POLYGAMY IN AFRICA

Though the functions of polygamous marriage and the methods by which it is brought about differ according to ethnic tribal customs in Africa, the allowance of two or more wives to one man is universal on that continent. A primary factor for polygamy is, of course, the propagation of a male heir.

Many African Christians were polygamous before their conversion to Christianity. Some have become involved in polygamy even after their conversion because of special extenuating circumstances.

The first wife that a man takes receives the most honor both in the household and in the community, not because she is the only "legal" wife (for all the wives of a polygamist are considered legal wives and all the marriages are considered moral), but because she serves as leader and adviser to all of a man's other wives by virtue of her position as the first person married to that man. Her leadership is not dictatorial, but she serves as a counselor.

In polygamous marriages, furthermore, sexual relations after childbirth are taboo. A woman does not resume sexual relations with her husband until her child is at least two or three years old and no longer dependent on his mother for nourishment. Incontinence during this period is considered an offense to the gods.⁷

⁶ Ben Merson, "Polygamy Is Not Dead," *Ladies Home Journal*, LXXXIV (January 1967), 78.

⁷ George Basden, *Niger Ibos* (New York, 1966), p. 230.

Another contributing factor to polygamy is the feeling of humiliation in an African woman who is the only wife of a man. This provides evidence of his poverty and low estate. Besides, most African women loathe loneliness and enjoy their associations with the other wives of the same husband. Furthermore, celibacy among women is unthinkable in African society, so that single women prefer polygamous marriage to spinsterhood. Parents often ignore or abandon a daughter who remains unmarried after the age of 20.

Polygamous marriages among the Ibos of Africa accord honor, respect, and dignity to women. Both work and responsibility are shared among the wives according to the chronological order in which their marriages to a common husband occurred. The first wife has preeminence, but she does not dominate the marital unit.

In South Africa the government does not allow polygamous marriages among natives under the pretext of improving their moral standards. Children who are not the product of a union between a man and his first wife are considered bastards, prohibited from receiving a share of their father's inheritance. Such laws are diametrically opposed to native customs and social regulations.

When Christians first arrived in Africa, they taught that people who had married according to their customary social structure in polygamous marriages were living in sin. Christians considered polygamy a social problem, neglecting to reckon with the fact that it was a social system with both ethical and legal approbation. Women could not leave their husbands without refunding the dowries that had been paid for them and without giving up

their children, who belonged to their father because of factors in connection with patrilineal inheritance. African Christians who were polygamous were faced with a dilemma: either break up their marriages or relapse into paganism. The church did not recognize partners in a polygamous marriage as Christians. Thus they were often forced to sever the ties with their culture and in so doing offend their consciences.

IV. THE CHURCH AND POLYGAMY

Although polygamy may "widen the range of legitimate sexual satisfaction and may add to a man's prestige and luxury,"⁸ this is not its primary purpose among the Ibos, for whom it rather stabilizes the economic structure of their community.

The church has often by legislation refused to baptize or to recognize Christian converts who continued to live in polygamous relationships. The church has rather authorized divorces, which Africans regard as a despicable social evil. The church has tried to encourage monogamy by citing its apparent advantages: less dowries, less nagging in the home, "a certain pride in being able to speak of 'my loving wife.'"⁹ Yet the church has ignored other factors: occasions when farm work becomes too heavy for one woman and laborers must be hired despite no economic means for paying them; the moral problems created by abstinence from sexual intercourse for two years after a child's birth; the despair that arises when a woman cannot find a suitor who is content with a monogamous union and so she does not marry; the shredding of the

social fabric when there is no male heir born of a monogamous union. Such factors have forced many Africans to decide against the church's traditional teaching in favor of preserving the stability of their social system or else to become hypocritical, that is, to claim marriage to only one woman and yet secretly to propagate children by means of sexual union with many women.

Many Africans doubt the validity of the church's stance because in the Bible they read about polygamous marriages that were not condemned. They begin to see the church's teaching as an imposition of the white man. Leith-Ross describes it this way:

They are told polygamy is sinful and they accept the statements as one more axiom laid down by the white man, similar to his statement that blood circulates, that mosquitoes breed in water, that it is criminal to make counterfeit money, that the earth is round. They agree because it seems wisest and quickest and politest to do so and the words hold so little meaning to them that they do not even rouse a dash of opposition.¹⁰

The church has failed to make its evaluations in terms of the culture in which it finds itself. As Herskovits says:

Polygamy, when looked at from the point of view of those who practice it, is seen to hold values that are not apparent from the outside. A similar case can be made for monogamy — and what is true of a particular phase of culture, such as this, is also true of others. Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise.¹¹

⁸ Simons, pp. 79—80.

⁹ Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women* (New York, 1965), p. 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹¹ Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Dynamics* (New York, 1964), p. 48.

V. EVALUATION OF THE ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN POLYGAMY

Whenever a polygamous marriage is broken up and all wives except the first are either sent away or not permitted to cohabit with their husband, the result is severe social problems. The children remain with their father. Adultery and fornication begin to breed. The church assumes that its stance exemplifies what has always been the case, though Hughes effectively refutes that supposition:

In 1650, two years after the close of the Thirty Years War which had decimated the male population of western Europe, the Frankish parliament at Nuremburg legislated permission for every man to marry two wives. And while the West, under the lash of a national emergency, legislated bigamy after a thousand years of Christianity, certain Asian and African tribes far removed from civilization remained monogamous. The cultural development of a people is not the determining factor in either their de facto or de jure exercise of marital concepts. Sociological factors determine the ethics. It is with deep understanding, recalling how vulnerable we of the Judeo-Christian tradition are, that we should approach other cultures in regard to relationships between sexes. We live in a glass house, we cannot afford a holier-than-thou posture.¹²

Polygamy actually stabilizes African society since it allows all women a chance for marriage, eliminates fornication, and decreases tendencies for divorce. Children are seldom born out of wedlock.

Many contemporary theologians are beginning to challenge the church's insistence on an immediate change from polygamy

to monogamy. They point to the fact that the church's rejection of polygamy has been socially disruptive and morally questionable. It is not at all certain that Christian missionaries have either the mandate or the competence to change social structures that are not inherently evil but are in fact serving constructive purposes.¹³ In fact, one can build a case asserting that "progressive polygamy" — one wife for a few years and then another — is practiced in the West. How can this be more morally culpable than "simultaneous polygamy"?

VI. FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEM OF POLYGAMY

Many missionaries argue that Africans should abolish polygamy. However, legislation against it has had little effect. Tunisia was the first Muslim state to abolish polygamy in 1956, but three percent of the people are still polygamists. Since 1963 Ghana has enforced the registration of only one wife, but permits polygamy. This law creates problems for the children of non-registered wives when they try to claim their inheritance after their father's death.

It is my opinion that legislation against polygamy has done more harm than good. The church's position is neither warranted by Scripture nor sanctioned by apostolic example nor justified by common reason. It breaks up families and weakens the social fabric. It creates more sins than it corrects. Furthermore, it obfuscates the church's witness to the Gospel and allows 60 million animists to remain in their pagan beliefs or else drives them into the camp of Islam.

Marriage practice is not an article of

¹² Hughes, p. 204.

¹³ See Eugene Hillman, "Morality — Case for Polygamy," *Time*, 91 (May 10, 1960), 114.

faith. The church has not excommunicated celibates; why should it excommunicate polygamists? Polygamy does not vitiate the Lord's saying that in marriage two people become one flesh. Whenever the church breaks up legitimate family ties, creates bastards out of legitimate children, and indirectly promotes adultery or whoredom, it is failing its mission to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a desperately sick world. The church should never be caught in the embarrassing position of telling a man that he must divorce the mother of his children.

My desire is that the church accept polygamists into full membership, that it allow polygamy to die a natural death if it

will, and that it should not judge people for a matter that the Scriptures do not explicitly condemn. I am the grandson of a polygamist who had 17 wives and 27 grandchildren. My memory of family and friends driven away from Christ because they lived according to the social mores and ethical principles of their community is etched in vivid colors. The church should leave its dreamworld, realize that God speaks to "man's moral capacity of the moment,"¹⁴ and welcome all men into the church, even when their established customs include polygamous marriage.

¹⁴ Hughes, p. 205.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The author expresses his own point of view. The value of the article rests in the fact that he has been directly involved in the problem. Much more needs to be said about the Biblical teachings concerning marriage.)