

One man, one woman? The paradox of polygamy: The paradox of polygamy

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Christian attitudes toward polygamy are more controversial today than they have been for many years. As Euro-American churches debate the issue of same-sex unions, African Christians attack Westerners for their moral laxity and for caving in to secular hedonism. In response, some Western liberals retort that Africans themselves need to put their own house in order. Do African churches define marriage as a sacrosanct union between one man and one woman? If so, then why do their leaders tolerate polygamous unions?

Such an argument seems to convict the most visible Christian conservatives of hypocrisy, of failing to pluck the beam from their own collective eye. Yet far from convincing Africans, such an argument illustrates a continuing global gulf on issues of sexual morality.

For many societies across Africa, polygamy is far more than a historic vestige. South Africa's president Jacob Zuma has at least four wives, raising etiquette concerns over which one should formally take the role of first lady. So entrenched is plural marriage that Christian churches have long had to make compromises. The ancient Ethiopian church tolerated polygamy in some circumstances, despite periodic reform campaigns. After long encounters with Zulu peoples in southern Africa, the 19th-century Anglican bishop J. W. Colenso concluded that polygamy could not be eliminated in the short term. He decided that polygamy reduced promiscuity and that an official clampdown would only drive plural wives and their children from stable home settings.

Few leaders in Africa's European-dominated churches were as sensitive as Colenso was. Most demanded that Christians end their plural marriages. This policy initially limited the impact of the so-called mission churches, while pushing believers toward

the new independent congregations, the African-Initiated Churches or AICs.

Although individual groups varied in their practice, many AICs allowed polygamy on the basis of custom and the multiple examples supplied by the Old Testament. When legendary evangelist William Wadé Harris preached across West Africa in 1913, he traveled with several women who were probably his wives. Some independent churches enthusiastically embraced the practice for clergy as well as laypeople. And while other groups did not institutionalize the practice, they allowed converts to keep their multiple wives.

More controversial still is the survival of polygamy among the older mission-founded churches that originally forbade it. Anglican churches today treat plural marriage as a pastoral difficulty rather than an outright sin. Under policies approved in 1988, polygamous believers can be baptized and confirmed without abandoning their marital arrangements, although the church restricts their ability to serve in leadership positions. Plenty of mainstream churches know full well that at least some of the faithful live in complex domestic arrangements.

To say that some Christians practice polygamy does not mean that it is commonplace or that most senior clergy turn a blind eye to it. As African churches have matured, polygamy has increasingly become, like older animist practices, a disreputable vestige of the past, something no sensible younger person would wish to revive. Reinforcing this message is the growing status and self-confidence of women, as the spread of Christianity has promoted literacy and education. Even the old AICs are being pressured to change their polygamous ways.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that polygamy is widespread among African believers, even within global churches like the Anglican Communion. Given that fact, a liberal American might well ask: By what right can they lecture Episcopalians or Lutherans on sexual morality or insist that homosexuality should bar a person from holding church office? That question makes sense for many Americans in a way that it does not for Africans, because it treats all sexual sins as morally equivalent.

Yes, an African Christian might reply, the domestic practices of some of our members violate church law, and we must struggle to end this regrettable situation. But polygamy in itself does not violate God's law—or else we could not celebrate David, Solomon and all the ancient kings, prophets and patriarchs. The fact that this practice is now forbidden to Christian believers reflects the higher standards of

holiness prevailing under the new dispensation. In terms of legal language, polygamy is a *mala prohibita* offense, something forbidden by law in some societies but not others, rather than something evil in itself, *mala in se*, which all reasonable people know to be wrong. And while traditional African societies have historically had quite diverse attitudes toward homosexuality, the Bible shows no such tolerance.

For many African Christians, then, polygamy can properly be accepted in some social situations, whereas homosexuality is regarded as sinful always and everywhere. Americans might puzzle over what seems like a contradiction; Africans would likely ask why Westerners can't understand the plain difference. And the arguments will go on.