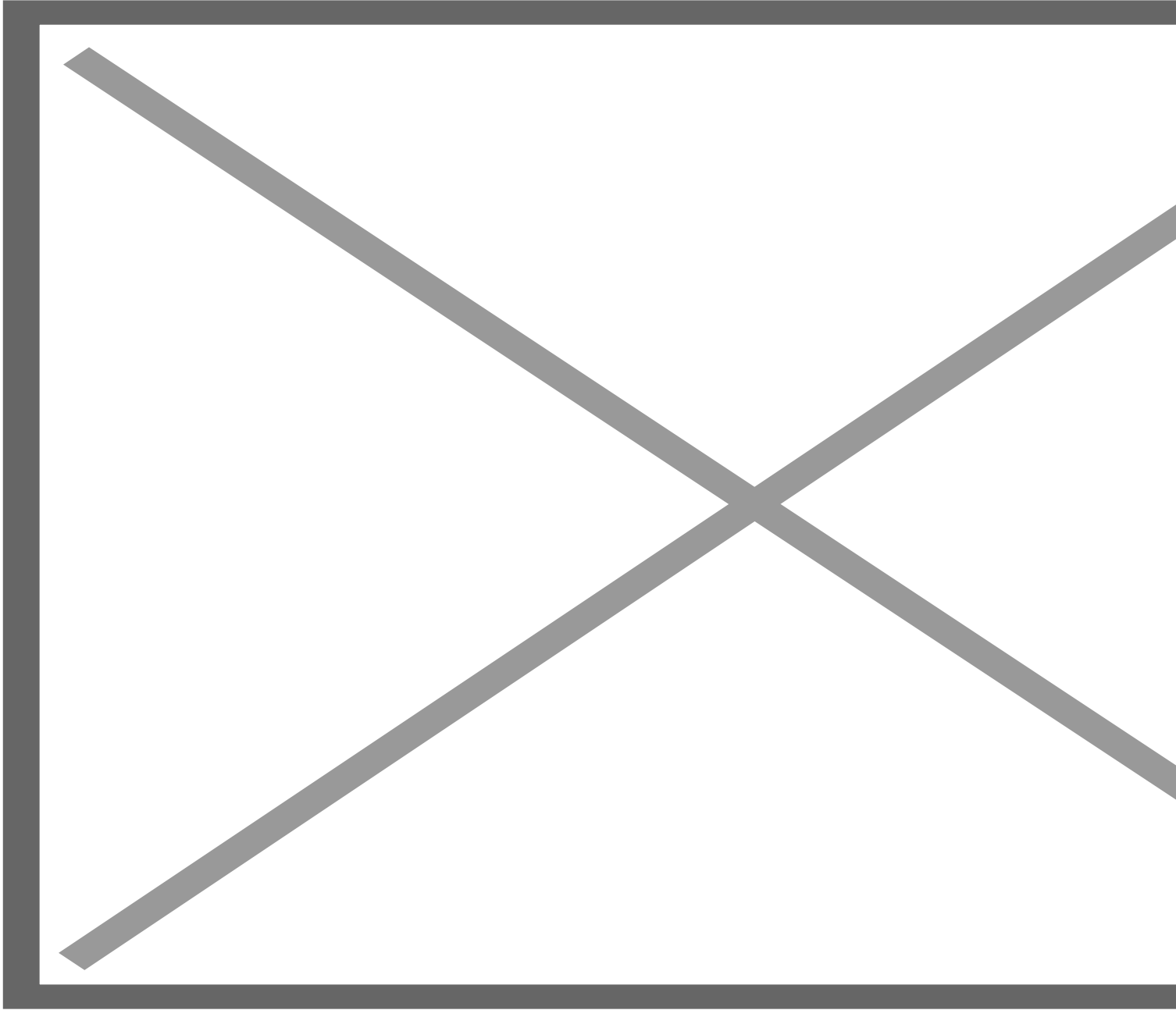


Understanding polyamory

Alternatives to monogamous marriage are going mainstream. How will Christians respond?

by [David Congdon](#) in the [October 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration

In March, the Portland City Council passed an ordinance prohibiting discrimination against individuals due to “family or relationship structure.” The Oregon city ranks second in the United States for its percentage of LGBTQ residents, many of whom, as in other cities, live in unconventional polyamorous arrangements. These alternative family structures frequently face obstacles in housing, health care, education, and other services due to systems that don’t take such arrangements into account, and the new ordinance aims to alleviate this.

Portland is by no means alone in this effort. Somerville, Massachusetts, became the first city to offer legal protections for people in polyamorous relationships in March 2023. Earlier this year, the city council in West Hollywood, California, unanimously agreed to pursue a plan to establish a registry of multi-partner domestic relationships.

As polyamorous families and relationships—those that include more than two romantic partners, with everyone involved knowing and consenting to the arrangement—become more commonplace, church leaders and other Christians will need to consider how best to respond.

When the first edition of Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy’s *The Ethical Slut* appeared in 1997, it was a largely underground publication that received no mainstream attention. My library search turned up only one review—published in the punk magazine *Maximum Rocknroll*. By the time the third edition appeared in 2017, however, the book was a massive bestseller, and talk of polyamory had gone fully mainstream.

Media representations of polyamory reflect the same growing interest. Showtime experimented with a reality show called *Polyamory: Married and Dating* as early as 2012. Netflix has produced a series of prestige shows that address the topic, including *Easy* (2016–2019), *She’s Gotta Have It* (2017–2019), and *Wanderlust* (2018). The cult indie film *Shortbus* (2006) was ahead of its time but was largely unavailable until its rerelease in 2022. Many other films have tackled the topic in recent years, like *El Sexo de los Angeles* (*The Sex of the Angels*, 2012), *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017), and *Splitsville* (2025).

When the Supreme Court’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision legalized same-sex marriage in 2015, many people asked what the next change to marriage laws was likely to be. Chief Justice Roberts raised the question directly in his dissenting opinion, in which he asked whether the same arguments could be used by “people who find fulfillment in polyamorous relationships.” *The New York Times* published an op-ed by law professor William Baude under the headline, “Is Polygamy Next?” and a *Time* magazine feature asked, “Is Monogamy Over?”

But it was the COVID-19 pandemic that really brought polyamory into the public consciousness. Beginning in March 2020—mere weeks after *House Hunters* aired an episode featuring a “throuple,” a closed romantic triad—people were stuck indoors for long stretches of time, and some used this extended period of proximity to experiment romantically and sexually. Many couples, starved for social intimacy, created bubbles with close friends they could trust, and in some cases this led to explorations in nonmonogamy, addressing a felt need for novelty and freedom during a time of restriction.

Since then, the topic has exploded. In late 2023, Christopher M. Gleason published *American Poly*, the first scholarly history of American explorations in polyamory and nonmonogamy. A few months later, Molly Roden Winter’s bestselling book *More: A Memoir of Open Marriage* presented a brutally honest picture of the ups and downs of an open relationship, what was once more commonly referred to as free love. Around the same time, NBC began airing a new reality show called *Couple to Throuple* on Peacock. TLC got in on the action in 2025 with the reality show *Polyfamily*. Right on cue, a number of think pieces came out, reflecting on what polyamory might mean for the state of Western society.

Much of this commentary treated polyamory as a trend among privileged straight White people. Kat Rosenfield called it a luxury belief, while Tyler Austin Harper critiqued it as the latest example of the ruling elite's therapeutic libertarianism. Both articles were written in response to Winter's memoir and took her as representative of the polyamorous community as a whole. This year, Lindy West's new memoir *Adult Braces* has instigated a whole new round of cultural commentary on polyamory.

There is research, however, that suggests that polyamory is in fact more prominent among those who have opted out of some of the privileges of mainstream society. A 2019 study in *The Journal of Sex Research* found both that "those in polyamorous relationships were more likely to report minority sexual identities" and that "individuals in polyamorous relationships were more likely to report being in a civil union, being divorced, and earning less than \$40,000 per year compared to individuals in monogamous relationships."

Our society has much to learn about polyamory. It raises profound questions—not only questions of social norms about love and sexuality but also larger philosophical questions about nature, culture, and community. These are questions that Christians in particular think a lot about and tend to take seriously.

The word *polyamory* has an image problem given that many, on first encounter, conflate it with *polygamy*. As anyone who has had to define one's relationship knows, using the right terminology is very important, and when it comes to the subject of polyamory, most people need a glossary.

While *polygamy* means "many spouses," *polyamory*, which literally means "many loves," was coined in 1992 to refer to the increasingly common practice of consensually having more than one romantic partner. Romantic partner often means sexual partner as well, but these are not strictly identical. Those within the broad polyamorous (often abbreviated as *poly* or *polyam*) community have varying degrees of fastidiousness regarding language use. Some insist that the word *polyamory* should be restricted to loving, romantic relationships. Those who remain romantically monogamous but allow for other sexual partners typically fall under the umbrella terms of *consensual* or *ethical nonmonogamy*, usually abbreviated as CNM or ENM. This can include everything from relationship anarchy, which is a form of nonmonogamy that privileges individual autonomy and avoids rules and hierarchies, to swinging, in which a romantically monogamous couple exchanges partners for sexual purposes. As early as 2012, writer and LGBTQ activist Dan Savage popularized the term *monogamish* to refer to variations on monogamy that allow for some level of sexual intimacy with others.

But as a quick, catch-all term, *polyamory* is more culturally accessible and recognizable. It has come to represent all those who deviate from the norm of monogamy or coupledness—what the more academically minded within the community refer to as mononormativity to highlight society's bias.

One can further subdivide polyamory into different styles. Parallel polyamory is one in which metamours—the term for the partner of one's partner—generally do not meet each other or spend time together. Kitchen table polyamory, by contrast, is a relationship style in which partners and metamours are friendly with each other, sometimes even spending time around the proverbial kitchen table. Polyamorous relationships can be either hierarchical or nonhierarchical, depending on whether there is a partner who is privileged over others in terms of time and commitment. Hierarchy is more common when a married couple is involved, though many in the community aspire to practice nonhierarchical polyamory in order to challenge what is known as "couple's privilege."

There are psychological and anthropological arguments against polyamory. There are also biblical and theological arguments in favor.

Christians have been largely reluctant to address this subject. And yet American experiments in what we would now call polyamory began among groups whose roots were Christian, however far they existed from the mainstream. The wave of utopian perfectionism in the mid-19th century produced both the rigorous celibacy of Ann Lee's Shakerism and the free love polyamory of John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community. Noyes, who was influenced by the Christian perfectionism of the Second Great Awakening, is credited with coining the term *free love* in his 1870 book *History of American Socialisms*. He also developed the concept of complex marriage, in which every member of his community was married in principle to everyone else. Noyes believed that Christ's second coming had already occurred and thus Christians should live as if the kingdom of God were already present.

For Oneida, free love was more than a sexual experiment. It was part of the group's broader philosophy of "Bible communism," according to which Christians, following the model of Acts 2, hold all things in common, rejecting both private property and monogamous marriage. Oneida later abandoned complex marriage in response to statutory rape allegations. The wave of utopianism came crashing to an end as more conservative norms gained power in American Christianity.

When experiments in polyamory emerged again in the 1960s, it was often among neopagan groups like Church of All Worlds and Kerista in San Francisco, solidifying the notion that nonmonogamy was not an option for Christians to consider. The Kerista community coined the term *polyfidelity*, referring essentially to what Oneida called complex marriage—in which multiple sexual partners are permitted, but exclusively among the other members of the community.

Fast-forward to 2019. Recognizing the growing interest in the subject, *Christianity Today* published "Polyamory: Pastors' Next Sexual Frontier." Some conservative readers were shocked by the article—even though authors Preston Sprinkle and Branson Parler were advising pastors on how best to *oppose* polyamory. "Instead of preaching about polyamory directly from the pulpit," they wrote in their conclusion, "consider constructing a positive vision for monogamy."

This is precisely what the Vatican chose to do in *Una caro* (One flesh), the most extensive theological response to polyamory to date. Published last November, the doctrinal note was prepared by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in response both to conversations with African bishops about the ongoing practice of polygamy and the church's "observation that various public forms of non-monogamous unions (sometimes called 'polyamory') are increasing in the West." *Una caro* takes a constructive approach to the issue. In decades past the Vatican addressed divorce by emphasizing the indissolubility of marriage, a negative tone that emphasizes what is wrong with ending a marriage. In this document, by contrast, the authors speak positively about the "unitive" function of marriage, the way it binds two—and only two—people together as "one flesh."

Una caro draws on a broad array of sources, including the Bible but also early church theologians (Tertullian, John Chrysostom), modern philosophy and theology (Søren Kierkegaard, Hans Urs von Balthasar), and even artists and poets (Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda). While it contains many different arguments for the unitive function of marriage, the document is not a rigorous case against polyamory so much as a menagerie of theological and cultural reflections on the beauty and significance of monogamous love.

More direct arguments against polyamory, in *Una caro* and elsewhere, often focus on the Bible's nuptial imagery. Adam and Eve serve as the paradigmatic couple, and the image from Ephesians of husband and wife becoming "one flesh" is held up as a symbol of Christ's relationship to the church (Eph. 5:31–32). The latter text is especially important in Catholic versions of these arguments, because the Vulgate's use of *sacramentum* as the Latin translation of the Greek *mysterion* was later used by Augustine of Hippo to support the idea of marriage as a sacrament.

Defenders of *Una caro* and other traditional theologies of marriage often argue that even if other readings are possible, interpretations of Ephesians and other relevant texts should conform to church tradition. In advocating against polyamory, they prioritize magisterial tradition above pro-poly arguments rooted in the practice of plural marriage in the Hebrew Bible, Jesus' observation that there is no marriage in heaven (Matt. 22:30), or theological resources for a Christian ethics of pleasure and abundance. The question of polyamory thus becomes primarily a question of church authority.

A less discussed but crucial topic is the question of the naturalness of monogamy or nonmonogamy. One of the founding scholars in the field of sexology, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), associated polygamy with Islam and Eastern cultures which he saw as closer to a state of nature, while Western monogamy was evidence of how White European society had evolved to be superior to the non-Western world. As he wrote at the start of his classic work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, “the Mohammedan woman is simply a means for sensual gratification and the propagation of the species; whilst in the sunny balm of Christian doctrine, blossom forth her divine virtues and her qualities of housewife, companion and mother. What a contrast!”

In more recent years, arguments against polyamory have been less about White supremacy and more about natural law. The religious right's overarching argument against birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and gay marriage pulled from both evangelical readings of the Bible and Catholic claims that these are all deviations from the natural order. The same approach is now being taken with respect to polyamory. But evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists have supported this approach as well, publishing numerous books showing that monogamy is built into human nature. After addressing the subject briefly in *Anatomy of Love*, Helen Fisher argued in *Why We Love* that the evolution of bipedalism led to monogamy because human females needed a mate to feed and protect them while they carried babies on their backs.

Yet biblical and theological arguments in favor of polyamory are readily available as well. As Robert Shore-Goss and Will Stockton have argued, the Ephesians image is hardly self-evidently supportive of monogamy, given that the church in question here, while singular in concept, is composed of a vast plurality of people—suggesting that if Christ's relationship to the church is supposed to be the model for marriage, it might well be a plural marriage. Moreover, mainline Protestants who already embrace same-sex relationships within the church don't necessarily see Adam and Eve in Genesis or the marital analogy in Ephesians as normative templates for marriage in the first place.

There has also been a growing pushback to arguments for monogamy based on what is natural. In their bestselling book *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*, psychologist Christopher Ryan and psychiatrist Cacilda Jethá argue that monogamy is not natural but rather a myth forced on people by culture, family, and religion. Drawing on evolutionary evidence, they claim instead that, “like bonobos and chimps, we are the randy descendants of hypersexual ancestors.”

Polyamorous philosopher Carrie Jenkins has criticized the efforts on both sides of this question to reduce love to a scientific, natural human function. In *What Love Is*, Jenkins proposes that love is both nature and culture, both hardwired and socially constructed. This duality, she argues, should free humans to experiment with different ways of loving and committing ourselves to others. She proposes viewing relationships like a Choose Your Own Adventure novel or a buffet dinner: We can pick the form of love that best reflects our values and interests, she argues, without insisting that everyone else conform to the same model.

Christians have good reason to be invested in this ongoing conversation—and to look beyond the category of “natural.” We believe in a God who raised a man from the dead and who works wonders regularly, whether these are actual miracles or the more everyday wonders of love and mercy. We look in hope to an eschatological kingdom in which all things are made right. None of this is natural. One does not need to sign up for John Humphrey Noyes's free love or complex marriage to see that he recognized something essential to Christian

faith: that it is a bold wager on the reality that God has made possible something radically out of step with the natural order.

These debates make it clear that Christians cannot simply assume that our faith straightforwardly supports the norm of monogamy. The same types of theological challenges that feminist, womanist, and queer theologians have posed to gender and sexual hierarchies are being brought to bear on relationship structures. The case for polyamory could in theory be substantially easier than the cases for queer love and same-sex marriage, given the nonmonogamy readily on display in the Bible. Evangelicals and Catholics have made their positions clear, but mainline Protestants have remained comparatively quiet.

Polyamory is not a new phenomenon by any means, but it has become a more socially acceptable option for many in a way that was not possible in decades or centuries past. It's here to stay, and it is past time for Christians to engage it thoughtfully, humbly, and openly—not just by debating the ideas in the abstract but by hearing what actual polyamorous people have to say.