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POLYGAMY AND THE CHURCH IN AFRICA: BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Polygamy has been a persistent problem in Africa for the Christian missions which brought the Gospel to the continent. Much has been written on this subject as evidenced by the extensive bibliography of this article. Though polygamy has been a divisive issue, the early missionary societies were remarkably united on their common approach to polygamy. Since monogamy is the biblical ideal of marriage, the pioneering missions raised a barrier to any polygamist being baptized and admitted into church membership, though the missions readily welcomed them into the Body of Christ. Since independence much new thinking has taken place. As a result the unified approach to polygamy of the earlier day is giving way to modifications. Dr. Muthengi interacts with the literature available, tracing the factors which led to polygamy among the Africans, the biblical data on which churches base their theological beliefs, and the various church positions on polygamy, both past and present.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The issue of polygamy has staged heated debates as it is evidenced by the number of articles and books written on the subject. While polygamy has been practiced by many societies in the world, it has strongly affected sub-Saharan Africa. The issue in question has ethical, theological, pastoral, sociological and missiological ramifications. The aim of this paper is to analyse the issue in the light of the above mentioned perspectives and to offer some practical suggestions.

DEFINITION

The term polygamy comes from two Greek words meaning "many marriages." The word refers to a situation where a man has two or more wives

(technically known as polygyny). The term polyandry is used for marriage situation where a woman has more than one husband. Polygamy is widespread in Africa while polyandry is almost a foreign phenomenon (Shorter 1974:172). Normally, polygamy exists in two forms namely simultaneous polygamy and successive polygamy. The former refers to a situation where the polygamist is living with and supporting two or more wives with their children. The latter situation is one where the husband takes another wife who is in addition to his previous wife or wives. Gradually, the man is no longer living with his previous wife or wives and finally deserts her/them.

Some scholars have offered a wider definition of the term. For instance, Hillman (1975:10) argued that a man may become polygamist when he divorced his wife and married another one. Accordingly, the man in question has two wives because he is engaged in consecutive polygyny. In the case of a woman who forsakes her husband and marries another man, she is involved in consecutive polyandry (Hillman 1975:10).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Throughout the history of the church, the issue of polygamy has been widely disputed among theologians. According to Hillman (1975), Augustine endorsed polygamy. He argued that polygamy was not wrong as long as its purpose was for the multiplication of the race (Barrett 1968:116). Augustine pointedly reasoned that polygamy was not contrary to the law of nature nor to the law of marriage itself.

Thomas Aquinas like Augustine argued that on the basis of natural law, polygamy was not prohibited (Hillman 1975:181). Aquinas therefore endorsed polygamy when he wrote:

A plurality of wives is said to be against the natural law, not as regards its first precepts, but as regards the secondary precepts, which like conclusions are drawn from its first precepts. Since, however, human acts must needs vary according to the various conditions of persons, times, and other circumstances, the aforesaid conclusions do not proceed from the first precepts of the natural law, so as to be binding in all cases, but only in the majority (Hillman 1975:181).

Like Augustine, Aquinas strongly believed that the primary object and purpose of marriage was procreation and bringing up children. Consequently, the purpose in question could legitimately be realised in polygamous situations.

The Protestant reformers manifested a great degree of differing opinions with regard to the issue of polygamy (Barrett 1968; Hillman 1975). For instance, Calvin argued that polygamy was prohibited by natural law and that it hindered domestic peace by creating inferiority complex within each of the wives (Hillman 1975:182). Luther and Melancthon argued that monogamy was not applicable to every situation. They believed that the Mosaic Law sanctioned polygamy. Luther in particular seemed to have it both ways as he claimed that "the Christian was at liberty under the Gospel to have more wives than one" (Barrett 1968:117).

In contradistinction to the reformers view (except that of John Calvin), the council of Trent strongly condemned polygamy. For quite some time there was little discussion on polygamy until the nineteenth century, the era of world wide missionary expansion. According to Harries (1953), Christian missions in Africa espoused a common view on the issue of polygamy. Harries wrote:

On this crucial issue the mission authorities of all denominations have consistently refused to surrender their ground. They have always maintained, and still maintain, that acceptance of polygamy would be fundamentally inconsistent with the teaching of Christianity (Harries 1953:335-336).

In an attempt to enforce monogamy various missions refused to accept polygamists and their families into church fellowship (Barrett 1968:117). The treatment of polygamists differed from one mission organisation to another. Some refused baptism to polygamists while others baptised the wives and children but not the husbands.

The missionary response to polygamy in Africa led to sharp reactions from the Africans (Hunter 1962, 33). Barrett (1968) has given a detailed discussion of the phenomenon in question. Accordingly, the conflict of missions with polygamy had adverse consequences. For example, in one large Nigerian city, many Christians rejected Christianity after a pastor refused to baptise a rich polygamist. Further, Barrett argued that in many parts of Africa, missions made a serious mistake by making hasty judgement on the thorny issue of polygamy (Barrett 1968:117-118). In order to avoid such blunder, missions should have allowed "the indigenous Christian conscience to evolve its own solution" (Barrett 1968:118).

An interesting connection between the missions' response to polygamy and African reaction was evidenced in the mushrooming of Independent Churches in Africa, in the turn of the century. Barrett (1968) has given numerous examples of the phenomenon in question. One example of polygamy

among African Independent churches was Isaiah Shembe, messiah of the Nazarite Baptist church in South Africa, who had four wives. Josiah Oshitelu, founder of the Aladura (Church of the Lord) had seven wives; Johane Maranke, founder of the African Apostolic Church in Zambia and Zimbabwe had sixteen wives before he died in 1963.

Barrett, however, conceded that there were other factors involved in the issue of independence besides polygamy. He cited one example of a separatist group in Kenya where more than one issue was involved in their independence. He, however, strongly argued that missions in Africa interfered with African culture too much (Barrett 1968:118-119). His conclusion is that "separatism emerges in a given tribe as the outcome of clashes between two cultures, the traditional and the missionary."

FACTORS WHICH LED TO POLYGAMY AMONG AFRICANS

Traditionally, polygamy was accepted all over Africa as the cultural norm. It was believed that the chief end of marriage was procreation. The more wives a man had the more would be his children and the more children one had, the longer he would likely be remembered, long after his death (Mbiti 1967:142). Such a man would have many descendants through whom the power of immortality would be manifested in that family (Mbiti 1967). Accordingly, children were the glory of marriage and the more children there were, the greater the glory!

In addition to the point made above, scholars have isolated other factors which encouraged polygamy among African men. First, polygamy is encouraged by failure to produce children which in many cases is thought to be the woman's fault. In such instances, a man decides to marry a second or third wife in order to remedy the situation (Mbiti 1967; Iteka 1981; Gitari 1988; Shorter 1974). Mbiti elaborated on the point as he wrote:

If the first wife has no children, or only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife, partly to remedy the immediate concern of childlessness, and partly to remove the shame and anxiety of apparent unproductivity. To be productive in terms of having children, is one of the essential attributes of being a mature human being. The more productive a person is, the more he contributes to the existence of society at large (Mbiti 1967:142).

From a traditional African or Kenyan point of view, barrenness is a tragedy that threatens both the family life as well as its future!

Second, polygamy is motivated by desire to secure alliance with good families. In this case, marriage from the African context is viewed as involving families and communities rather than individuals (Hillman 1975:92). Third, the chronological age gap between men and ladies at the time of marriage has been noted as a factor which encourages polygamy. Scholars have argued that in many parts of Africa, men normally get married late in life, thus creating a pool of marriageable women (Hillman 1975).

One should not, however, get the impression that the discrepancy mentioned above is the only factor involved. Hillman (1975) has conceded that other factors at work include the natural annual population increase, the relatively higher mortality rate among the male population. Hanin (1969) elaborated on the issue in question as he wrote:

Women, as a rule, marry at an earlier age than males, so men in the younger age-groups are excluded from the pool of "marriageable" ages. Further, if it is assumed that the number of births is increasing from year to year, then if women aged 15 marry men aged 20, they marry men born five years earlier than their own date of birth. But five years earlier fewer births were occurring. A large difference between the ages at marriage of men and women in a population of high mortality with increasing numbers of births tends greatly to reduce women's chances of marriage in a monogamous society (quoted in Hillman 1975:10-91).

The above viewpoint sounds rather attractive if taken at face value. It seems, however, to be based on the theory that every woman must get married! Further, on what basis should certain African/Kenyan men marry more than one wife while others marry only one?

Fourth, traditionally, polygamy was motivated by economic reasons. Marrying more than one wife and producing several children ensured division of labour. Wives and their children worked in the fields which would enhance productivity. Young men engaged themselves in looking after cattle while the father's duty was to oversee the work force (Yego 1984, 63). It should be emphasised, however, that the economic perspective of polygamy is increasingly losing ground, especially in Kenya. Rearing children is becoming an awesome responsibility. Many rural area families are facing hardship in day to day living and the rain on which they depend is oftentimes unpredictable.

Fifth, polygamy has traditionally been motivated by a desire to care for widows (Mpolo 1987:101). For most African men, it is socially accepted (outside the church, of course), that, the brother or close relative should marry the widow of his brother or cousin in order to preserve the lineage of the departed. Some

African scholars argue that the African practice mentioned above reflects the provision of the Levitical law (Deut. 25:5). Mpolo (1987) has pointed out that the Old Testament describes two women who protected their levirate right, Ruth (Book of Ruth) and Tamar (Gen. 38:6).

Sixth, research indicates that in most parts of Africa, women abstain from sexual intercourse as soon as they know they are pregnant (Mpolo 1987, 1-4). From the time of conception up to birth and at least two to three years thereafter, the woman normally abstains from sexual union. Such a prolonged period of abstinence has in many cases resulted in polygamous situations. It should be pointed out, however, that the above reasoning is not universally accepted even by African scholars. For example, some have argued that there were other factors involved in polygamy besides the desire to satisfy personal sexual appetites (Mpolo 1987).

Seventh, another factor which encourages polygamy among African men is prestige (Iteka 1981:107). In this case, some wealthy men get married to young looking girls in order to show off social status (Gitari 1988:42). Among the Kamba tribe of Kenya (to which the writer belongs), polygamists boast of their younger wife or wives, calling them *katinda ngooni* (literally "one who occupies my heart").

Finally, polygamy is motivated by lust or evil desires. This factor is, however, disputed by scholars who argue that it should not be brought forth in the discussion. For instance, Shorter (1974) wrote:

It is completely wrong to imagine that male lust or male selfishness is the principal motive behind polygamy. Men could satisfy their lust through adulterous unions and concubinage. Polygamy serves the posterity and growth of the extended family and provides status and support for women in societies where they have no vocation other than marriage and the bearing of children to their husband's lineage. (Shorter 1974:173).

It should be pointed out that the status of women in Kenya for example, has changed greatly since the above statements were written. For instance, there are more educated and working women today than there were in 1974. It does not help much to spend time and space trying to justify polygamy. Rather, more time and energy needs to be spent on how the church in Africa/Kenya should deal with polygamous situations, an issue to be dealt with later in the paper.

BIBLICAL DATA

While scholars are not agreed on whether or not the Bible clearly condemns polygamy, one thing is clear that the Old Testament records instances of polygamous situations. Gen. 4:19 records the first known polygamous situation. Lamech had two wives namely, Adah and Zillah. Abraham, although originally married to one wife (Sarah) is also considered a polygamist due to taking Hagar as a concubine. Jacob married two sisters (Gen. 29:23-30) and his wives' maids (Gen. 30:4,9). A cursory look at the rest of the Pentateuch reveals that other polygamous situations existed among the Israelites (Exod. 21:9-11; Deut. 21:15-17).

Other polygamous cases in the Old Testament included Elkanah, Samuel's father (1 Sam. 1:1-2) who had two wives namely, Hannah and Peninnah. King David married many wives and also kept numerous concubines (2 Sam. 5:13). Solomon had the largest number of wives and concubines ever recorded (1 Kings 11:1-3). The prophetic writings, however, emphasized monogamy. They disdained polygamy and used the symbolism of monogamous marriage as the basic relationship between Yahweh and the nation of Israel (Hos. 2:18; Isa. 1:1; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 15:8). The post exilic literature almost without exception indicated that monogamy rather than polygamy was the norm

By the New Testament times, monogamy was considered the normal case, particularly for any man to hold church office (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:16). Earlier, Jesus had used the Old Testament perspective of marriage (Gen. 2:24) to challenge the prevalent view of divorce (Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:8). The purpose of this section is to explore whether or not the Bible addressed the issue of polygamy and if so, to what extent? The issue in question has significant implications in the realm of marriage and the family.

Old Testament View of Marriage

Genesis 2:18 tells us that after God created the first man, He said "It is not good for the man to be alone." He therefore decided to create a helper suitable for the man (Gen. 2:20). The woman was man's ideal companion who would complement him at the highest possible level. Eve was not a hired hand but a wonder woman (Kaiser 1983:154). After she was presented to Adam, the man exclaimed, "Now at last, she is bone of my bones (my very own) and flesh of my flesh, she (this one) shall be called Woman" (Gen. 2:23).

The author of Genesis underscored the biblical view of marriage (Gen. 2:24) in the significant words "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." The

idea of man leaving his parents signifies passage to adulthood (Kaiser 1983), while the concept of cleaving indicates the God-sealed bond (Kidner 1967:66). The text points out that husband and wife are no longer two but one entity.

Some scholars have taken the idea of becoming one flesh to mean becoming one family or blood relatives (Holst 1967:206; Parrinder 1958:48). Accordingly, the idea expressed in Genesis 2:24 is similar to that of Genesis 29:14. When Laban saw Jacob, he exclaimed, "You are truly my bone and flesh," meaning 'blood relative.' It should be pointed out that while Holst and Parrinder agreed on their interpretation of what becoming one flesh means, they disagreed on the application of the text. For instance, Holst argued that "becoming one flesh could take place between one man and several wives" (Holst 1967:207). He concluded that the text in question has reference to the indissolubility of marriage, but it does not argue for a monogamous case.

Contrary to Holst, Parrinder categorically argued that:

If, then, a man cannot leave his wife, it is obvious that Jesus would not countenance a man's taking a second wife. This would be sheer adultery. The "one flesh" makes this quite clear. It is not permissible to have two marriage contracts at once, "two flesh". Nor can the unity of man and wife be broken up by the admission of a concubine. "They are no more two, but one flesh," excludes a third party (Parrinder 1958: 48).

As it will be pointed out later, Jesus quoted the Genesis passage in the context of the divorce issue. Nevertheless, He made it clear that He who created mankind in the beginning created them two (husband and wife). For the most part, polygamy should be viewed as human convention rather than God's ideal for marriage. It cannot be denied that the Old Testament records many cases of polygamy. At the same time, a line should be drawn between what the Bible records and what it endorses. Genesis 2, therefore, cannot be used to endorse polygamy. On the contrary, the text is a strong case in point against the practice in question.

Concerning the Mosaic law at large, a question to be explored is whether or not it sanctioned polygamy. Two key passages in connection with the issue are Exodus 21:7-11 and Deuteronomy 21:15-17. Concerning the Exodus passage, the emphasis seems to have been on the lot of the Israelite girls sold into slavery. Scholars are not agreed on whether or not the selling of girls was for the purpose of concubinage or marriage or simply due to poverty (Davies 1967:176), (Fuller 1953:55). The key verse in this text is verse 10, "If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights" (NIV).

The difficulty with the verse in question, however, is that it is not clear whether marrying another wife refers to "instead" of the first one (referring to the refusal to marry the slave girl) or in addition to the first one. If the latter was the case, then no doubt the man was a polygamist. On the other hand, if the text refers to the idea of refusing to marry the slave girl and marrying another woman, there was no polygamy involved. Dwight (1836:16) argued that the Hebrew of verse 10 should be rendered, "If he marry another woman instead of her."

Whatever interpretation one comes up with, it should be emphasized that the text in question is not a strong case either for or against polygamy. Moreover, the passage is in form of casuistic laws rather than apodosis, which means that it does not necessarily sanction polygamy. The former laws were "if" laws, while the latter were stipulations such as "You shall do or not do thus and so!"

The second text (Deut. 21:15-17) emphasize the authority of the Father over his sons (Kline 1963:108), particularly with respect to the rights and privileges of the first-born. The passage points out that in the case of polygamous situations, the first-born son had the rights of inheritance. According to the text in question, the Father's preference could not override the customary law. Von Rad (1966, 138) argued that the custom in question goes back to Genesis 27; 48:14). He noted, however, that the Deuteronomy passage emphasized the concept of the first-born in the biological sense. Such regulation made it difficult for fathers in Israel to make arbitrary choices with regard to the application of the issue in question.

As we conclude the discussion on the foregoing passages, it is important to note that the fact that there were instances of polygamy in the Old Testament does not necessarily mean God's approval of the practice. Contrary to this observation, however, Holst argued that the Old Testament did not view polygamy to be sinful (Holst 1967:209). He concluded, "It is important to note that these laws do not consider polygamy a sin but rather indicate that in polygamous marriage there were sinful practices in which especially wives and children suffered."

New Testament Teaching

Scholars do not agree whether or not the New Testament directly addresses the issue of polygamy. Hillman (1975) denied that the New Testament has any single text relevant in discussing polygamy. He argued as follows:

Polygamy is simply not treated directly and explicitly by the New Testament writers who, quite naturally, under the cultural ethos of their particular time and place in history, accepted monogamy as a normal point of departure for any discussion of marriage (Hillman 1975:139).

Hillman's argument could lead only to one logical conclusion namely, that any claim that the New Testament talks about polygamy may be based on inferences or implications.

Other scholars agree with Hillman that there are no examples of polygamy in the New Testament (Mann 1989:19; Parrinder 1958:44; Trowell 1956:17; Taylor 1964:46). Does it then mean that the New Testament does not address the issue in question? In order to answer the question, it is important to look at some relevant New Testament texts.

One of the texts in question is Matthew 19:4-5. Obviously, Jesus was responding to the Pharisees' disguised question about divorce. According to Jesus, God's ideal was that marriage should be an indissoluble unity (Gen. 2:24). Divorce was only allowed due to the wickedness and deceitfulness of human hearts. Did Jesus condemn polygamy in the text under consideration? According to Vass (1970:259) Jesus did not talk about polygamy, but divorce. The passage Jesus referred to is Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which is concerned only with divorce and remarriage (Vass 1970).

Hillman (1975) argued that:

Since the Lord himself makes no explicit reference to "the problem of polygamy," this whole argument hinges decisively upon the following assumptions: that Genesis evidently depicts monogamy as divinely willed from the beginning and that simultaneous polygyny (customary Jewish polygamy) is intrinsically bound up with divorce and remarriage--hence, also, with adultery. Such assumptions... are highly dubious. Here, therefore, it should suffice to emphasize that the Lord's reply to the Pharisees (cf. Matt. 19:3-9) is limited to the scope of their questions. We need not expect to find here the answer to a question that was not asked (Hillman 1975:155-156).

It seems clear from the foregoing that Hillman denied even the application of Jesus' words to the issue of polygamy.

However one interprets Matthew 19:4-5, one thing should be underscored, that the Genesis passage Jesus quoted supports monogamy rather than polygamy. It would be unthinkable to argue that becoming one flesh

can apply to plural marriages as well as to monogamous marriages. As it was pointed out earlier, it is important to distinguish between what the Bible recorded and what God endorsed.

Other New Testament passages relevant to the discussion on marriage are 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6. The phrase "husband of one wife" found in these texts has presented problems to scholars, leading to various interpretations. Some scholars have argued that Paul's teaching does not condemn polygamy, while others have maintained that the words in question strongly argue against polygamy.

Holst (1967:210-212) has argued that the Greek text of 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6 is rather ambiguous. Accordingly, the phrase, "husband of one wife," could be interpreted in four different ways. First, the phrase might mean that church leaders could not be polygamous. Second, the phrase might mean that church leaders could not take a second wife (after the first wife had died or had been divorced). Third, church leaders must be faithful in their monogamous marriage. Fourth, church leaders could not be single men.

After a lengthy discussion of each of the views mentioned above, Holst concluded that the third interpretation was most probable. He argued that a man was expected to be faithful to his wife, given that there was wide-spread adultery in the Hellenistic culture. Moreover, polygamy was not widely practised at the time.

The concept "husband of one wife" was of major concern to church fathers. For instance, Saint Jerome's argument is worth noting. He argued as follows:

The text quoted by the objector, "a bishop must be the husband of one wife," admits of quite another explanation. The apostle came of the Jews and the Primitive Christian church was gathered out of the remnants of Israel. Paul knew that the Law allowed men to have children by several wives, and was aware that the example of the patriarchs had made polygamy familiar to the people. Even the very priests might at their own discretion enjoy the same license. He gave commandment therefore that the priests of the church should not claim this liberty, that they should not take two wives or three together, but that they should each have but one wife at one time (quoted in Hillman 1975: 166).

Other church fathers such as Chrysostom, Theodore of Cyrene and Cardinal Cajetan all echoed Saint Jerome's reasoning (Hillman 1975). The

bottom line of the above argument is that the monogamy rule in the pastoral epistles applied only to the official functionaries of the church, namely bishops, elders and deacons.

Kent (1958:127) argued that polygamy was forbidden in the Roman Empire by Paul's time and that there could be no polygamists in the church. Accordingly, the phrase "husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2) must be taken in the same manner as the phrase "wife of one man" (1 Tim. 5:9). If the former passage condemns polygamy, the latter text should also address the issue of polyandry, since the same Greek expression is used in both cases (Kent 1958). Kent strongly argued that the expression "husband of one wife" does not necessarily condemn polygamy.

Contrary to Kent's views, Calvin (1948:77) argued that the phrase "husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6 clearly condemns polygamy. The issue in question was sinful and was forbidden by God's word to both bishops, elders, deacons and all Christians. The texts in question may be taken to refer primarily to church leaders. At the same time, it should be born in mind that the Genesis 2:24 passage is a strong case against the practice of polygamy by any Christian. It is true that many in the Old Testament practiced polygamy as it was the case with the surrounding nations. At the same time, there should be a clear line drawn between God's requirement (one man, one wife) and man's invention (several wives).

Moreover, Ephesians 5:22-31 underscores the point of union between Christ and His bride, the church, which is by way of covenant love. This state of affairs is most applicable in a monogamous situation rather than in a polygamous context. The emphasis is on the unity of Christ and the church from a singular perspective. Christ loved His church and gave Himself up for it.

VARIOUS CHURCH POSITIONS ON POLYGAMY

Although the cases of polygamy in Africa may be decreasing, the issue is far from disappearing. As the foregoing pages have demonstrated, polygamy in Africa has ethical, theological, pastoral, social and practical implications. In this section, the perspectives outlined above will become even clearer. The aim of this section is to examine the positions held by various church organisations on polygamy as relates to the African scene.

Roman Catholic Church

As far back as A.D. 866, the official Roman Catholic Church view of polygamy became clear. According to Urrutia (1981:276), Pope Nicholas I wrote

"Therefore, if one is found to have two wives at the same time he is to be compelled (*cogatur amittere*) to lose one and keep the first." The position in question has prevailed throughout the centuries. In modern era, however, the issue of polygamy has raised heated debates.

There has been disagreement among some noted Roman Catholic theologians on the polygamy issue. For instance, Urrutia (1981) has consistently supported the official Roman Catholic view on polygamy. He argued:

I can harbour no doubt that the series of magisterial pronouncements, as well as the above recalled constant and uncompromising practice demanded by the church, conveys to us the church's conviction that monogamy, to the exclusion of polygamy, is demanded by our faith. Indeed, the teaching is formal, explicit, unequivocal, constant throughout the centuries, in the face of enormously different cultural situations. And it is a teaching in which church authority is committing itself, either because it is given by ecumenical councils or because the pontiffs invoke their authority. In the face of cultural claims, the teaching is constantly based in a concrete reading of Holy Scripture (Urrutia 1981:280).

Urrutia further argued that the magisterium or official teachers of the Roman Catholic dogma, had divine authority to interpret the Holy Scripture.

The official Roman Catholic documents state that monogamy is dictated by God's revelation (Urrutia 1981:280). Pope John II in his 1980 visit to Zaire and other parts of Africa, clearly reaffirmed that the Roman Catholic view on polygamy has never changed. He viewed polygamy to be in the same category as divorce and abortion (Hillman 1982:166). The Pope argued that:

Polygamy radically contradicted the covenant of married life ("two in one flesh"), so it negates God's plan which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive (Hillman 1982:166).

The polygamy debate in the Roman Catholic Church has not been resolved even with words such as those strongly pronounced by John Paul II.

Hillman (1982:166) reported that "the 1981 plenary assembly of the Vatican congregation for the Evangelization of peoples," was at least willing to give the polygamy issue careful thought. Accordingly, the group approached the

issue in a sympathetic manner, due to insights gained from the African context and sociological data available at the time. Hillman's words are worth noting as he wrote:

It is now appreciated more generally that customary plural marriage in Africa is not at all what European theologians and canonists of the past had imagined it to be: merely a matter of primitive male lust, pride and domination found only among peoples who are "uncivilised," "immature" or "undeveloped." Even the writers of Vatican II's document on the church in the modern world had obtusely consigned polygamy, without any distinctions, to the same pejorative category as "the plague of divorce" and so called "free love" (Hillman 1982:166).

According to Hillman, the perspective on polygamy expressed by the plenary assembly of the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of peoples is a new point of departure. It showed a keen sensitivity toward African polygamous situations.

The new Roman Catholic perspective was especially expressed by Cardinal Paul Zoungana of Upper Volta as he argued:

It is necessary to see and understand polygamy such as it is, in order to grasp the obstacles that it places in the way of evangelization and conversion; then from there, we can find solutions to bring to the problems which have arisen (Hillman 1982:166).

The cardinal concluded that certain forms of polygamy were legitimate, for example levirate type of polygamy. The problem with such a conclusion, however, is that it opens doors for all types of polygamous situations. The issue at stake is the criteria on which one deems certain forms of polygamy lawful and appropriate while others are not!

Another Roman Catholic scholar disposed toward a tolerance of polygamy was Karl Rahner (Hillman 1982:165). He argued that the African peoples, for example the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, could not reproduce the morality of western Christianity. Rather, they were to live as Maasai Christians, with all the rights of baptism. Rahner's view reflected that of Eugene Hillman which is evident from all his writings on polygamy (including the 1975 classical book, *Polygamy Reconsidered*).

Finally, Bernard Haring was even more persistent on the polygamy issue than Rahner. He categorically argued:

Where polygamy was and unto now is the preferred system, the church has to fight against new forms of polygamy which are socially disapproved and unacceptable. But I suggest that the churches admit to baptism and full participation in the life of the church the polygamous families who find themselves in a socially approved and lawfully contracted marriage of this type when they come to faith. I do not think, however, that the church should allow [its] members who are fully evangelised and baptised to enter into polygamous marriage, although [it] can be temporarily tolerant in exceptional cases such as the levirate, where the woman and the deceased husband's brother cannot refuse it without grave harm to the persons involved, or in a case similar to Abraham's where a man is urged and forced by his environment to take a second wife when the first is sterile (Hillman 1982:161-162).

Haring's argument is rather convincing, especially with respect to baptism of polygamists as well as discouraging Christians or the so called baptised members from entering into polygamy. He, however, like Cardinal Zougrana seemed to relativise the issue by endorsing levirate marriage.

The Lutheran Church in Africa

Generally speaking, the official Lutheran church position has been the endorsement of monogamy, as the biblical norm. However, in 1951, the Lutheran Church in Liberia, West Africa agreed that polygamists and their wives could be admitted to baptism and holy communion (Wick 1978:57). They nevertheless made it clear that those in polygamous situations could not hold church offices.

Recent conferences and consultations among the Lutheran church leadership in Africa, have manifested the significance of the polygamy issue. For example, the 1963 Pan-African Workshop on "The Christian Home and Family Life" held at Mindolo, Zambia discussed the issue at length. They argued that the case of Isaac and Ishmael indicated that God's promise was fulfilled through the former, not the latter. Monogamy was therefore God's intention, since polygamy "denies each person his/her identity as an autonomous individual before God" (Mpolo 1987:114).

In addition to arguing from the Old Testament, the Lutheran conference in question argued from the perspective of history and the New Testament. Accordingly, at ten international meetings of Protestant Missions from 1856 to 1942 at which the subject of polygamy was discussed, there was one conclusion, namely that polygamy was against God's plan for marriage set forth in Scripture (Wick 1978:224).

The 1963 All-African Lutheran conference adopted two major resolutions concerning the issue of polygamy:

- 1) That we affirm that monogamy is God's plan for marriage, that it is the ideal relationship for the expression of love between a man and a woman, and is the proper atmosphere within which to develop a Christian family. The entering into a polygamous marriage by a Christian, whether through the normal channels of giving a dowry, or through inheritance, or gift, is an offence against the laws of the church.
- 2) That it is the responsibility of each church, being guided by the word of God through the Holy Spirit, and being cognizant of the particular time, circumstances and conditions in which it finds itself, to see that way which on the one hand will not weaken her standards of faith and practise in the eyes of the world, and on the other hand, will not arbitrarily place upon some who desire its blessing a burden, the consequences of which may be in opposition to the very message of the gospel (Mpolo 1987:114; Burce 1963:224-225).

The above statements have been criticised by scholars as providing poor pastoral guidelines. For example, Mpolo (1987:114) argued that the Lutheran church was "so caught up in administrative procedures that the development of counselling and therapeutic attitudes within pastoral activities has become a difficult task."

Another conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church was held in 1969, in Tanzania, East Africa. The then president of the Southern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania strongly argued:

The church is right in discouraging polygamy among its members. But they are wrong in making monogamy into one of the conditions of baptism and church membership... my plea with the church and mission is that pre-baptism polygamy [should be polygamists] should be baptised together with their wives and children without being forced to divorce their wives. They should also be accepted into full membership. The post-baptism polygamists also should not be excommunicated from church membership because of their wives they married besides the first wife (quoted in Yego 1984:77-78).

The foregoing discussion indicates that polygamy has been a hot issue in the missionary and church work on the soil of Africa. The discussion also

indicates that there has been no precise agreement on the polygamy issue among Lutheran church leadership.

The Anglican Church

Historically, the Anglican Church like any other church organisation has wrestled with the issue of polygamy. In 1862, Bishop Colenso of Natal Province in South African wrote to the bishop of Canterbury, England expressing his reservations with the official Anglican view on polygamy (Gitari 1988:42) Colenso argued:

The conviction has deepened within me that the common practice of requiring a man, who may have more than one wife at the time of his conversion, to put away all but one before he can be received to the Christian baptism, is unwarranted by Scripture, unsanctioned by apostolic example or authority, condemned by common reason and sense of right, and altogether unjustifiable (quoted in Gitari 1988:42).

In spite of such strong argument, Colenso's views did not go deep enough. His words landed on deaf ears because the opposition was too great.

According to Hillman (1975), Colenso never gave up his convictions concerning the Anglican church's insensitive position on polygamy. In 1855, Colenso argued:

I must confess that I feel strongly on this point, that the usual practice of enforcing the separation of wives from their husbands, upon their conversion to Christianity, is quite unwarrantable, and opposed to the plain teaching of our Lord. It is putting new wine in old bottles, and placing a stumbling-block, which He has not set, directly in the way of receiving the Gospel (quoted in Hillman 1975:31-32).

Even with such strong arguments, Colenso failed to carry the day.

In 1860 Colenso persistently made his views known to the rest of the Anglican Church leadership. He continuously reaffirmed his conviction as he once again wrote:

With respect to the polygamy question, all my experience has deepened and confirmed the conviction... that a most grievous error has been committed all along by our Missionary Societies in the course they have been hitherto adopting with regard to native converts who have had

more than one wife at the time of receiving the word of life in the Gospel (quoted in Hillman 1975:32).

Colenso's arguments finally paid off at the third Lambeth Conference in 1888 when the Anglican Church demonstrated sensitivity to the polygamy issue (Gitari 1988:42; Yego 1984:75; Hillman 1975:32).

Although the official Anglican Church position did not change all that much, there was some degree of flexibility. The resolutions were drawn that:

Persons living in polygamy [should] not be admitted to baptism but they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such a time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ (i.e., their 'surplus' wives have died or been divorced (Gitari 1988:42).

According to Yego (1984:75), the above resolution was "unanimously confirmed" at the 1908 Lambeth conference by the committee of foreign missions. Yego further pointed out that the 1888 resolution was finally confirmed during the Lambeth 1920 conference. Accordingly, the Synod of the Anglican Church of Uganda in 1938 accepted native marriage but condemned polygamy.

The issue of polygamy continued to cause heated debates within the Anglican Church in various parts of Africa. Newing (1970:130-141) pointed out that there was disagreement among several Anglican bishops on how to handle polygamous situations. He surveyed two groups of church official and he was stunned to find out while some held to the traditional view, others were quite liberal and willing to grant baptism to polygamists.

In his research on the position of various Protestant churches on the polygamy issue across Africa, Hillman (1975) argued that there were evident inconsistencies. Hillman wrote:

Even in some of the same churches there are contradictory disciplines, and this fact says something about the arbitrary nature of ecclesiastical decisions that bind upon men "heavy and oppressive burdens" (Matt. 23:4). Anglicans, for example, in West Africa allow the wives of polygamists to be baptised, while in South Africa and elsewhere they are not even admitted to the catechumenate without the authorisation of the bishop in each case (Hillman 1975:34).

Hillman's allegations are well founded on the pastoral and practical levels of the polygamy issue. They are not correct, however, if he challenged

the Anglican church and other churches on their commitment to monogamy as the biblical norm for marriage.

Finally, the words of the Anglican bishop of Malawi in the 1960's should not be quickly dismissed. His comments were as follows:

I came to this Diocese from a country where Christianity had been planted largely by Christian wives of polygamous husbands, and their courage and resourcefulness in living a Christian life... and bringing up their children as practicing members of the church, won my admiration. It was with profound shock that I learned that here none of them would have been admitted to Holy Baptism, not because they had the misfortune to be bought up in a society where polygamy was the rule. After discussion with the clergy, changes are coming, and baptism will no longer be refused to a woman who was married to a polygamist before her baptism ([conversion] (quoted in Hillman 1975:34).

These words, though written many years ago echo the sentiments of many Christians and church leaders throughout the African continent even today. The battle over polygamy is far from being won, especially on the pastoral and practical levels.

Africa Inland Church, Kenya

About one hundred years ago, the Africa Inland Mission began work in East Africa, Kenya in particular. Such missionary endeavours resulted to one of the largest evangelical denominations in East and Central Africa, specifically in Kenya, Tanzania, Zaire and Southern Sudan. One of the issues which the mission in question struggled with for decades is that of polygamy. Many of the first converts were in polygamous situations. The Africa Inland Mission, like other Mission organisations, held a strong view on polygamy. They outrightly condemned polygamy and upheld monogamy as the type of marriage supported by the Scripture.

For quite some time, the Africa Inland Church in the countries mentioned above has struggled with the issue of polygamy in the church. The denomination's official position on polygamy may be summarised in its 1972 constitution which has not changed to date. The statements are as follows:

1. **No Christian man being a polygamist and no woman being a polygamous wife shall be baptised, unless in the case of the wife, she is the first to have been married.**

2. Polygamists and polygamous wives may receive catechetical instruction, but it shall be made clear in the beginning that such instruction does not anticipate baptism. However, the first wife may be accepted for baptism.
3. Where men living in polygamy give evidence of a desire to live the Christian life, every effort shall be made to help and encourage them, looking forward to the time when all the wives but one may be put away without dishonour to them.
4. A polygamist shall not put away a wife against her will and without providing for her. In response to honest, earnest prayer, God will provide a way.
5. A woman adherent or member of the Church who consents to her husband's polygamous marriage shall be put under Church discipline.
6. An adherent or member who takes a second wife or concubine shall be suspended from the Catechumenate or church as the case may be, until such time as he repents and gives up the woman in question (Africa Inland Church Constitution 1972:49).

For the most part, the position outlined above reflects that of other major church groups discussed earlier.

African Independent Churches

Many African Independent Churches have endorsed polygamy while others have repudiated it (Hillman 1975:32). Those independent groups who have accepted polygamy as the norm in marriage, have done so as "part of their conscious indigenization of Christianity in Africa" (Hillman 1975).

It has been recognised that the issue of polygamy led to the formation of many of the separatist church groups in various parts of Africa (Hillman 1975:33; Barrett 1968:117-118). For example polygamy was one of the issues which led to the formation of African Brotherhood Church. The separation in question occurred in Kenya back in 1945. To date, the African Brotherhood Church baptises polygamists while the Africa Inland Church condemns it, as has been demonstrated above.

According to some African Independent Churches, polygamy is not a moral evil since even the Bible itself endorses it, especially in the case of the patriarchs (Obeng 1987:47-48). For example, the constitution of the United Church of Cherubim and Seraphim endorses polygamy as apostle G. N. Abana wrote:

It is never a law that everyone must marry one wife, rather this law is given to bishops and deacons, as it is written in I Timothy 3:2.... Some people assume righteousness because they marry only one wife, while they are neither bishops nor deacons, but may be traders or workers. To these people, I say, hold fast to your one, but if you go to another woman, you have committed adultery. But if you know that one is not sufficient for you, marry as many as you can. In this I stand to say it is not bad to marry more than one.... (Obeng 1987:47-48).

Some of the African Independent churches have been excluded from ecumenical fellowship due to their stand on the issue of polygamy.

As we conclude this section, one thing clearly stands out, namely that all the major mission and church organisations have a lot in common. They have condemned polygamy and endorsed monogamy. On the other hand, there has been a high degree of flexibility among the African Independent churches, many of whom have accepted polygamy as part of their expression of authentic African Christianity. This perspective, however, should be challenged because it goes against the biblical teaching on the norm of marriage.

CONCLUSION

We began this study by the statement of the polygamy issue which includes the definition of the term, polygamy, as well as the historical background of the issue. It has been demonstrated that although polygamy has been practised in many societies for centuries, it has been, nevertheless, an African issue. Throughout history, scholars have not agreed on a uniform manner of dealing with polygamy in the church.

The second section of the paper dealt with factors which lead to polygamy among Africans. Some of these factors are more legitimate than others, from a cultural/anthropological perspective. In the third section, we dealt with biblical data on the issue. Both the Old and New Testament perspectives were explored, leading to the conclusion that while the Bible records many polygamous situations, it does not necessarily endorse it. On the contrary, the teaching from Genesis 2 and Matthew 19:4-5 indicates that God's norm from the beginning was monogamy.

The fourth section examined various church positions on polygamy in Africa. It has been demonstrated that with minor variations, the major church denominations in Africa all condemn polygamy and endorse monogamy. The key issue has been that of refusing baptism to the polygamist and his wives except the first wife.

After all is said and done, three conclusions need to be offered. One, the issue of polygamy in Africa is far from being a dead issue. It is true that there may not be as many polygamous situations today as there were for example in the 1970's. Nevertheless, the few cases there may be involve real people and merits attention. Two, the church in Africa should re-evaluate its stand on the issue, by standing firm on the biblical teaching on monogamous marriage. At the same time, pastoral care should be exercised for those who are victims of the polygamy issue. For instance, those who became polygamists before they were converted should not be denied baptism. On the other hand, Christians who engage in polygamy need to be disciplined by the church, of course, in the spirit of love.

Three, the issue of baptism should be discussed and defined, since it seems to have been at the centre of the issue for centuries. Evangelical churches in Africa should be warned against confusing water baptism with the conversion experience. There are known cases, for example in Kenya, when men and women would be denied baptism due to their polygamous situation, even when they evidence a very high degree of commitment to Christ.

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