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EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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must be that for all its interest and stimulus Boswell's book provides in the end of the day *not one firm piece of evidence* that the teaching mind of the early Church countenanced homosexual activity.' Yet the ideologically determined are not easily deterred by the facts. As the churches continue to deliberate important questions of sexual morality, be prepared to encounter the invocation, as though with the voice of authority, 'But Boswell says ...' p. 71

The Church and Polygamy A dialogue with Omodo

Walter A. Trobisch

*Reprinted with permission from Readings in Missionary Anthropology
II ed. William A. Smalley (South Pasadena; William Carey Library,
1978).*

In this complex and agonizing dialogue, the author raises the question as to who faces the greater predicament, the pastor or Omodo. Marriage alliances that are less than the biblical ideal, whether polygamous, serial or homosexual carry their own consequences.

Editor

On one of my trips I worshipped in an African Church where nobody knew me. After the service I talked to two boys who had also attended.

'How many brothers and sisters do you have?' I asked the first one.

'Three.'

'Are they all from the same stomach?'

'Yes, my father is a Christian.'

'How about you?' I addressed the other boy.

He hesitated. In his mind he was adding up. I knew immediately that he came from a polygamous family.

'We are nine', he finally said.

'Is your father a Christian?'

'No', was the typical answer, 'he is a polygamist.'

'Are you baptized?'

'Yes, and my brothers and sister too', he added proudly.

'And their mothers?'

'They are all three baptized, but only the first wife takes communion.'

'Take me to your father.'

The boy led me to a compound with many individual houses. It breathed an atmosphere of cleanliness, order and wealth. Each wife had her own house and her own kitchen. The father, a middle-aged, good-looking man, tall, fat and impressive, received me without embarrassment and with apparent joy. I found Omodo, as we shall call him, a well-educated person, wide p. 72 awake and intelligent, with a sharp wit and a rare sense of humour. From the outset he made no apologies for being a polygamist, he was proud of

it. Let me try to put down here the essential content of our conversation that day which lasted for several hours.

'Welcome to the hut of a poor sinner!' The words were accompanied by good-hearted laughter.

'It looks like a rich sinner.' I retorted.

'The saints come very seldom to this place', he said, 'they don't want to be contaminated with sin.'

'But they are not afraid to receive your wives and children. I just met them in Church.'

'I know. I give everyone a coin for the collection plate. I guess I finance half of the Church's budget. They are glad to take my money, but they don't want me.'

'I sat in thoughtful silence. After a while he continued, 'I feel sorry for the Pastor. By refusing to accept all the polygamous men in town as Church members he has made his flock poor and they shall always be dependent upon subsidies from America. He has created a Church of women whom he tells every Sunday that polygamy is wrong.'

'Wasn't your first wife heartbroken when you took a second one?'

'Omodo looked at me with almost pity. 'It was her happiest day', he said finally.

'Tell me how it happened.'

'Well, one day after she had come home from the garden and had fetched wood and water, she was preparing the evening meal, while I sat in front of my house and watched her. Suddenly she turned to me and mocked me. She called me a "poor man", because I had only one wife. She pointed to our neighbour's wife who could care for her children while the other wife prepared the food.'

'Poor man', Omodo repeated 'I can take much, but not that. I had to admit that she was right. She needed help. She had already picked out a second wife for me and they get along fine.'

I glanced around the courtyard and saw a beautiful young woman, about 19 or 20, come out of one of the huts.

'It was a sacrifice for me', Omodo commented. 'Her father demanded a very high bride price.'

'Do you mean that the wife, who caused you to become a polygamist is the only one of your family who receives communion?'

'Yes, she told the missionary how hard it was for her to share her love for me with another woman. According to the Church my wives are considered sinless because each of them has only one husband. I, the father, am the only sinner in our family. Since the Lord's supper is not given to sinners, I am excluded from it. Do you understand that, Pastor?'

I was entirely confused.

'And you see', Omodo continued, 'they are all praying for me that I might be saved from sin, but they don't agree from which sin I must be saved.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, the Pastor prays that I may not continue to commit the sin of polygamy. My wives pray that I may not commit the sin of divorce. I [p. 73](#) wonder whose prayers are heard first.'

'So your wives are afraid that you might become a Christian?'

'They are afraid that I become a Church member. Let's put it that way. For me there is a difference. You see they can have intimate relations with me only as long as I do not belong to the Church. In the moment I would become a Church member their marriage relations would then become sinful.'

'Wouldn't you like to become a Church member?'

‘Pastor, don’t lead me into temptation! How can I become a Church member, if it means to disobey Christ? Christ forbade divorce, but not polygamy. The Church forbids polygamy but demands divorce. How can I become a Church member, if I want to be a Christian? For me there is only one way, to be a Christian without the Church.’

‘Have you ever talked to the Pastor about that?’

‘He does not dare to talk to me, because he knows as well as I do that some of his elders have a second wife secretly. The only difference between them and me is that I am honest and they are hypocrites.’

‘Did a missionary ever talk to you?’

‘Yes, once. I told him that with the high divorce rate in Europe, they have only a successive form of polygamy while we have a simultaneous polygamy. That did it. He never came back.’

I was speechless. Omodo accompanied me back to the village. He evidently enjoyed being seen with a Pastor.

‘But tell me, why did you take a third wife?’ I asked him.

‘I did not take her. I inherited her from my late brother, including her children. Actually my older brother would have been next in line. But he is an elder. He is not allowed to sin by giving security to a widow.’

I looked in his eyes, ‘Do you want to become a Christian?’

‘I am a Christian.’

The late Walter Trobisch is well known for his popular books on marriage in the African cultural context. p. 74

A Socio-Theological Evaluation of Polygamy

Leopold A. Foullah

Reprinted with permission from Evangelical Ministries (Jan–April 1985).

The author of this interesting contextual article calls for a return to a God-centred view of marriage.

Editor

Among the subjects that need careful evangelical theological attention for guidance of Christ’s church in Africa, polygamy stands high. History has revealed to us that polygamy has been debated from time immemorial by church prelates, anthropologists and also by renowned theologians of wider circles. Questions about polygamy with which the church is still wrestling are: Is polygamy condemned by the Bible? Is monogamy the only approved form of marriage? Should polygamists who become Christians afterwards be accepted into the fellowship of the church? Questions about polygamy are many.