

WOMEN OF PRINCIPLE

*Female Networking
in Contemporary
Mormon Polygyny*

JANET BENNION

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Contemporary Mormon Polygyny

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Of all men upon the face of the earth, we are the most favoured; we have the fulness of the everlasting Gospel, the keys of revelation and exaltation, the privilege of making our own rules and regulations, and are not opposed by anybody. No king, prince, potentate, or dominion, has rightful authority to crush and oppress us. We breathe the free air, we have the best looking men and handsomest women, and if they envy us our position, well they may, for they are a poor, narrow-minded, pinch-backed race of men, who chain themselves down to the law of monogamy, and live all their days under the dominion of one wife.

—George Albert Smith
(1856, *Journal of Discourses* vol. 3)

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Prologue



I saw this light shining above me in the night. Through it, a young woman of 19 or 20 years walked slowly, dressed all in white. She came toward me and smiled beautifully, saying, “Hello, old friend.” We sat in my room, bathed in light, and she held my hand tightly. She had my dark hair, my blue eyes, my full mouth. She told me that I was her only chance—her last chance—to enter this estate [*earthlife*]. She said I must bear one more child, herself, and then my duties would be finished and my name would be written on the Book of the Lamb in the Last Days.

“Please, Mother,” she pleaded, tears in her eyes, “I want my chance on earth, too.”

She said her name was Gabriela. She kissed my cheek and vanished. When I awoke, my head ached, and I felt chilled all over. How could I have another child? I already bore 13 children. I was 49 years old. Would my body withstand another birth? And what is Jacob, my husband, going to say? He didn’t want the last five children that I persuaded him to help me produce. He is never around at this time of year; always in Oregon or Utah on business or with Sandra, his latest wife. It will be difficult to get a verbal meeting with him, much less a sexual one. . . . I know Heavenly Father will send Gabriela to me. I will get Sheila, Jacob’s second wife, to convince him to sleep with me. She knows how to push his buttons; besides, she is the daughter of the prophet—he has to do as she says. No man can deny me this special gift-child. I will have her. —Victoria, a polygynist’s wife

This book was written in response to the lack of understanding about women in patriarchal religious groups, especially groups that are polygynous, illegal, and renowned for their poor treatment of women. So often,

these women are portrayed as oppressed, powerless victims of a male world (Warenski 1980), but as this narrative shows, women are far from being powerless. On the contrary, they wield considerable influence and control over their lives and the lives of their children.

The analysis of female experience in male-dominated religions is highly significant in this day and age. We live in an era when one man can control dozens of women, to the point of convincing them to die on his behalf (for example, the Branch Davidians, ruled by David Koresh of Waco, Texas). We live in a time when a small group of men stand up to the guns of the U.S. government, with hundreds of women standing by their sides (the Singers of Marion, Utah, and the Freeman of Montana). What type of women desires to belong to these kinds of groups? What is their place in society? Who are they? What are their experiences?

To answer these questions, I draw on my fieldwork among the Allred Mormon polygynous group, formerly known as the Apostolic United Brethren. I lived and worked in its northernmost branch in the winter of 1989 with my 18-month-old daughter, Liza. Since that original fieldwork, I have studied women and men in a variety of contexts and many different branches of the same group. Some major findings of this 5-year study of male-female behavior, which was the subject of my dissertation at the University of Utah, are that women are actually *drawn* to the group, voluntarily—and in significant numbers, too—and that men are not the key players in the management of domestic activities and community welfare, as has always been assumed. Women are the key players.

Women did not all agree that they felt powerful in the group. There were various levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their lifestyles. At least a dozen women, for example, said that polygyny was the best thing that ever happened to them, that it saved their souls, and, further, that it gave them something to live for. These women also said that it provided a wonderful environment for raising children and exalted women to the status of queens and priestesses. At the same time, however, many women, albeit a lesser number, told me that polygyny had ruined their lives, destroyed their self-esteem, and was abusive to their children's health and safety. Many of these women also said that they would leave except that they would lose their children, their homes, their possessions, and their souls.

In spite of this variable appreciation for the polygynous lifestyle, all the women with whom I studied understood the necessity of clinging to each other for survival, being creative in supporting themselves in the absence of their husbands, and manipulating a male doctrine to fit a female reality. Throughout the book, I explore this variability and attempt to make

sense of the patterns of female experience described. This book is primarily drawn from my larger analysis of male and female converts, found in my dissertation (Bennion 1996).

For the sake of providing anonymity, I have taken liberties with names by giving aliases. I have also obscured details of personalities and the identifiable events and places associated with them. Because bigamy is a misdemeanor offense in this northern state, punishable by a maximum of 6 months in jail and a \$500 fine, it is conceivable that polygynists could be arrested. However, the sheriff of the area has stated on numerous occasions that it is not worth his while to pursue these type of "crimes," and there have been no investigations into polygyny for many years. To insure further anonymity, the individuals in the narratives are cloaked with fictional physical characteristics (I used my own sisters, aunts, and cousins for models), and some of the events in the narratives have been collapsed and telescoped for the sake of brevity and camouflage. Thus, the combination of characteristics could not possibly be linked to any one person. Each name is used for only one person in the narratives and descriptions throughout the book, and the pseudonyms are all popular in the village. These adjustments, however, do not impinge on the reality of events described in the narratives or "composite profiles." What women say about themselves and others, what they think has happened, and how they base their preferences, aversions, and actions amount to a true-to-life picture. It is on this level that the drama of life is observed in these descriptions and accounts of women's lives lived out in the "Principle."

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Introduction

Women's Place in a Patriarchal World

This book is a study of women who convert to the Apostolic United Brethren (the "Allreds"),¹ a highly rigid, patriarchal Mormon polygynous community in the Intermountain West. The fundamental questions addressed here are (1) Why are women attracted to male-dominated Mormon schism groups? (2) What do they find there once baptized? and (3) Do men and women have different experiences in their progression toward a satisfied, stable life in the group?

This description of polygynous lifestyles extends the scant literature on contemporary Mormon fundamentalism (Altman and Ginat 1996; Bennion 1996; Embry 1987; Van Wagoner 1986; Jankowiak and Allen 1995; Logue 1984), particularly on the role and status of women in North American polygynous societies (Bradley 1990; Cannon [now Bennion] 1990, Bennion 1996). It clarifies the process of female conversion and integration by providing a coherent model of strategies women employ to obtain their ultimate goals. Through analysis of gender-marked conversion and integration in the Allred group, this book also provides relevant comparative ethnographic material for studies on the experiences of fundamentalist women cross-culturally and could be a valuable addition to other seminal studies of patriarchy and female status (Brink 1993; Cannon 1990; Friedl 1993; Sered 1994). Most important, this study of female experience in Mormon polygyny provides one case for the assumption that women are seeking alternative forms of family life in response to socioeconomic hardship in the mainstream.

Research on women in fundamentalist groups indicates that women are drawn to patriarchal movements for more than just a desire for traditional

sex roles and male-centered stability. Eiesland suggests that women are attracted to the solidarity, independence, and female forums that accompany many fundamentalist movements (1993:1–3). She writes that although Pentecostal fundamentalist women are triply marginalized—lack of formal leadership positions, subordinating theological tenets, and a subordinating patriarchal structure—these women are converting to Pentecostalism in significant numbers. Women are attracted to this group because of the women's prayer circle, which has given them "a tangible sense of their own capacity to promote change in a circumscribed public sphere" (1993:12). Their involvement in the female association of the prayer circle contrasts with the physical isolation promoted within the workplace. The group is perceived as genuine and unmediated in comparison with the work world, where people put on masks and use technology to communicate.

Friedl (1993:1–4) provides another explanation for female involvement in patriarchal movements. She looks at ideal womanhood in postrevolutionary Iran and finds that, despite the contradictions between the idealized strength of fundamentalist women and their idealized weak, subordinated social position, large numbers of women are attracted to and integrated within the rigidly patriarchal Islamic world. She suggests that it is precisely these contradictions that allow room to maneuver in social and moral space and a variety of lifestyles for women within the matrix of "ideal" feminine traits.

In the study of contemporary Mormon women, there are three feminist theories generated by Mormon scholars and those who are sympathetic to Mormon lifestyle: (1) one that advocates equality, (2) one that advocates difference, and (3) one that emphasizes "republican motherhood" (Hanks 1992:xi). Feminists who believe that sexual difference is irrelevant stress equality and an improved political position for women vis-à-vis men. Those who believe in the "needs, interests and characteristics common to women as a group" stress differences among women that allow a variety of female expressions of power and influence, vis-à-vis other women. The first emphasizes inequality between men and women; the second, variability among women. The third theory is "republican motherhood," an eighteenth-century doctrine adopted by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormon women that advocates motherhood as patriotic duty to bear and raise children (Evans 1989:57–58). As feminism encourages housewives to explore the public sphere, republican or compulsory motherhood "redirects women's newfound political consciousness back into the home" (Hanks 1992:xii).²

For whatever reason, observers of the Mormon scene tend to overlook

the full value of women's subsistence work, their beliefs, their politics, their successful integration, and their impact on society. Furthermore, these scholars tend to overlook the possibility that men are more often those who are discontented and marginalized in these societies. The dynamics of relationships *among* women have also been ignored. Why women are attracted to patriarchal fundamentalism and what they themselves say about their roles in society have not been studied. Because women in Mormon polygynous societies and the children they rear and care for both greatly outnumber men, it seems unjustified that very few studies have yet addressed the supportive power and relative strength of these women (Cannon 1990). Further, few anthropological, sociological, and psychological analyses on contemporary Mormon polygynous family life in general have been conducted (Altman and Ginat 1996; Bennion 1996; Jankowiak and Allen 1995; Singer 1978).

Also overlooked are the large number of groups that have emerged directly out of the Mormon mainstream (Baer 1976:35) that are currently experiencing an influx of converts, affecting the status of Mormon women in a myriad of ways (Bennion 1996). At present, on average, six mainstream Mormon families convert and become baptized into the Allred Mormon polygynous group each month—a fact that sheds light on the growing social and ideological tensions within current Mormonism.³

The largest number of converts to the Allred group are women. In a sample of 1,024 converts baptized from 1953 to 1993, 70% (716) were female converts; of that 70%, 20% (142) were blood relatives of other women in the group, approximately 15% (107) were widowed or divorced with children, 54% (385) were single women between the ages of 28 and 45 years; and the last 11% were already married when they entered the group. These facts may help shape information about the attraction women have to fundamentalist groups. Is it out of desperation on the part of lonely single Mormon women who otherwise might not find a mate in the mainstream system? Is it because the prospects for remarriage in Mormonism of divorced or widowed women with children are extremely low (Christensen 1972: 20–34)? Is it perhaps because women find it easier than men to live on “a higher spiritual plane”? These may be some answers to why women *enter* into polygamy, but why do they stay? Furthermore, what happens to the male converts? Do they stay on? What gender-marked dynamics are affecting this flow and flux of converts?

My premise here is that women are drawn to Mormon polygynous groups because they are marginalized in the mainstream church and the larger society. They experience relative economic, social, and emotional deprivation as displaced women in the church and desire something better

for themselves. They seek out tight-knit religious and economic solidarity with other women who have the same standards and desires—solidarity that they can find in abundance within Mormon fundamentalism. They want to be connected to, though not dependent on, a man who honors his “priesthoods” and can enable them to bear many children.

Based on 5 years’ observation and analysis of convert progression in the Allred group (Cannon 1990, Bennion 1996), I have made the following assumptions:

1. Women are attracted to Mormon polygynous fundamentalism because they experience extreme deprivation in the mainstream, and, in general, women are seeking alternative forms of sex, marriage, and family in response to the decline of the nuclear family and the growing poverty of the mother-child unit.
2. For the most part, women find surprising sources of power and autonomy in the Allred group, although these advantages are laced with certain serious compromises to their ultimate freedom and human rights.
3. Women are much better suited to succeed in fundamentalism than are men; they differ in their motivations and strategies for kingdom building in the system.

These assumptions about women in polygyny are supported by a handful of recent studies suggesting that many individuals in America are turning to alternative forms of marriage and family associated with unconventional religious movements (Altman and Ginat 1996; Fox 1993; Jankowiak and Allen 1995; Kilbride, 1995). The growing number of divorced individuals, single mothers, and unmarried men who live at their parents’ residences, gives rise to the search for alternative forms of marriage and family styles. The result is the adoption of polyfidelity, extended-family households, polygyny, and communal housing projects. Many of these individuals join nontraditional religious movements to access these alternative family and marriage forms and to enhance their feelings of acceptance and solidarity with others like them (Bruce 1990:10). Robin Fox suggests (1993:230) that more and more Americans are turning to alternative religious and family movements such as polygyny in response to the growing socioeconomic needs of marginal individuals. Where do single mothers go for financial and social security? Where do lower-class, unemployed men with large families go for social and economic advancement? Nontraditional or alternative religious groups offer marginalized individuals a way to escape the lower status they experience in the larger cultural system (Aberle 1972; Baer 1976:94; Glock 1973:212).

Phillip Kilbride recently generated dialogue on polygyny as a solution to broken families in the United States (1995). He suggests that plural marriage is one remedy for the moral and spiritual chaos in the country, with a divorce rate of 52% and a growing number of children reared without male role models. He discusses, for example, the benefits of plural relationships to address the demographic concerns of too few men for the number of women in African-American communities. Some African-American women are now discussing "man sharing" as a solution for the demographic imbalance.

Many cultures around the world practice polygyny and find it an excellent way to reduce numbers of divorced couples, orphaned children, and marginalized single women. The Allred group contains the same patterns of polygynous relations that are found in Africa, such as the inhouse solution to widowhood found in the levirate and the institution of sororal polygyny to provide for unmarried single women and barrenness. It also incorporates the "senior wife" pattern, where the first wife is wealthier and has more control than the subsequent wives. According to Kilbride, polygyny, as it is practiced in Africa and elsewhere will alter the face of American kinship and family structure for the better. "As a nation, we can't have it both ways—family values and a high divorce rate—without having devastating effects on children," wrote Kilbride (1995).

Kilbride draws attention to polygynous families, such as the renowned Alex Joseph clan of Big Water, Utah, that have enabled the rearing of numerous children, divided the domestic labor, and still allowed the wives relative freedom. One problem I see with his study, however, is his figure (2%) on divorce among fundamentalist groups. This figure in the largest fundamentalist group in 1993 was closer to 35%, based on information given by one of the group's councilman.⁴ Although this rate is lower than the rest of society, in a small group, 35% is significantly high. It suggests that, although polygyny may be a viable alternative for many marginalized women from the larger culture, its marriages are not universally stable, as Kilbride suggests. In fact, the nature of marriage and family in many polygynous communities that exist within a monogamous society is extremely complicated and experimental (Altman and Ginat 1996).

Thus, there is in the patriarchal religious movements a grand paradox. In these groups is a dominant male structure that inhibits the free expression of female power, and women are forced to structure their understanding of the world through the model of the dominant group. Yet, in the Allred Mormon fundamentalist group, women have chosen to express themselves with an alternative model, a model that emphasizes autonomy, mobility, female solidarity, and goddess worship.