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Janet Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism*

Reviewed by Megan Goodwin

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articles and book chapters on philosophy. Among his Maxwell Institute publications are *The Life of Holiness: Notes and Reflections on Romans 1, 5–8; Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*; and the “Made Harder” series covering the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. He writes a weekly online column on LDS beliefs for Patheos.

Janet Bennion. *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Megan Goodwin

JANET BENNION COMPELLINGLY CONVEYS the “variability in experience” among contemporary Mormon fundamentalists in her latest monograph (p. xiv). *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism* encompasses two decades of ethnographic fieldwork in the North American Intermountain West, as well as an analysis of seventy to ninety hours of popular media consumption. Bennion explores the variegated and troubled histories of polygynous sects and contemporary American mainstream investment in religio-sexual difference repackaged as popular entertainment. *Polygamy in Primetime* demonstrates the multiplicity and complexity of Mormon fundamentalist belief and practice, both complicating fundamentalist identity beyond plural marriage and arguing strenuously for the decriminalization of the practice.

Bennion is professor of sociology and anthropology at Lyndon State College. *Polygamy in Primetime* is her fourth monograph. Her previous books addressed gender hierarchy among minority religious communities in northern Mexico’s Chihuahua Valley and women’s networks within and among polygynous families. She has contributed articles to several edited scholarly volumes critiquing the 2008 raid on the FLDS Yearning for Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas. As a vocal advocate for the

decriminalization of polygamy, she has argued that spouses of plural marriages should be afforded full rights and protections from abuse under the law (p. xvi).

In pursuing this argument, Bennion explores popular culture depictions of Mormon fundamentalist polygyny in scripted television programs such as HBO's *Big Love* and unscripted programs like TLC's *Sister Wives*, in news reports and talk shows, and in Internet articles and "polygamy websites" (p. xv). The author's stated primary concern is analyzing the impact of such popular culture portrayals of plural marriage on women and children in polygynous families, on mainstream American culture, and ultimately on the legal regulation of sexual and marital difference (p. xvi).

The project's approach is ambitious and often compelling, if a bit sprawling in its scope and organization (though in its rhizomatic structure, *Polygamy in Primetime* is perhaps not unlike the religious communities the book profiles). Bennion attempts to encompass "media influence, legislative history, gender dynamics, the politics of kingdom building, polygamous sexuality, and the cultural context of crimes related to plural marriage under one cover" (p. xvii). In the introduction, which argues for the ongoing relevance of engaging polygyny in the study of gender and American culture, Bennion revisits her previous work demonstrating the challenges and benefits of plural marriage for Mormon fundamentalist women. Part 1, "A Mormon Polygamy Primer," surveys the history, ethnography, and ideology of the four major fundamentalist groups—the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Apostolic United Brethren, the Latter-day Church of Christ, and the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times—practicing plural marriage today.

In this section, Bennion painstakingly chronicles the breadth and byzantine structure of Mormon fundamentalist theologies and provides vivid illustrations of lived religious communalism. Her accounts of conflict resolution, kingdom building, Adam-God theology, and consecration are detailed and comprehensive, which makes her primer both invaluable and at times overwhelming to the novice researcher. Bennion's

analysis of gendered and sexual dynamics among Mormon fundamentalist communities is particularly cogent, detailed, and insightful. Her “Gender Dynamics and Sexuality” chapter revisits her previous work on the appeal of plural marriage to conservative religious women but also considers the largely unexplored issues of divorce and queerness within Mormon fundamentalist communities.

Part 2, “How Do We Deal with Polygamy?,” considers the impact of mainstream media, legislation and enforcement, and public opinion on the theology and lived practice of fundamentalist polygyny both within and beyond Mormon fundamentalist communities. Bennion’s intention is to demonstrate a shifting popular narrative regarding plural marriage, one that strengthens the author’s argument for decriminalizing the practice. Part 2 is less focused and more polemical than the previous section; Bennion is perhaps a stronger ethnographer than she is a media or legal analyst. Though the persistence of American public interest in plural marriage is beyond contestation (as evidenced by the ongoing success of shows like *Sister Wives*), the direct impact of popular media on public opinion is notoriously hard to prove. Bennion is right to address the scholarly lacuna of work on popular culture and Mormon fundamentalism; her survey of television programs, news broadcasts, and Internet discussions does convincingly demonstrate a discursive shift with regard to sexual difference. However, her line of reasoning—that more, and more nuanced, popular depictions of lived polygyny will necessarily accrue popular acceptance and thus lead to decriminalization of the practice, which will further legitimize the practice and protect practitioners from abuse—is ultimately limited.

Bennion’s work is particularly noteworthy for her frank and nuanced discussion of the abuses prevalent among some Mormon fundamentalist communities. As John-Charles Duffy notes in his review of *Saints under Siege: The Texas State Raid on the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints*, many scholars of Mormon fundamentalisms occlude or ignore the abuses within the FLDS community in Eldorado in their eagerness to indict

the overreaches of Texas state legislators, law enforcement, and social workers.¹ Similarly, Bennion notes that her 1998 work on the Apostolic United Brethren in Pinesdale, Montana, “romanticized” Mormon fundamentalist polygyny (p. 260). But after her work with the LeBaron community in Mexico, Bennion insists that some forms of polygamy—particularly those in which the spouses are isolated, impoverished, and afraid—are more prone to facilitating abuses.

While Bennion frankly acknowledges the persistence of welfare fraud, underage marriage, and sexual coercion among some minority religious communities, she insists the institution of polygyny is not in and of itself abusive (p. xvi). Rather, illegality, isolation and circumscription, unequal access to authority within the relationship, male domination, economic deprivation, and the absence of a female network may exacerbate abusive tendencies (p. 261). The author rejects a causal link between the practice of plural marriage and the physical and sexual abuse of women and children and complicates the category of “abuse” to include economic deprivation, substance abuse, and neglect in addition to domestic violence and sexual assault (p. 261). In these ways, Bennion’s work meaningfully disrupts the dominant narrative that elides polygyny with child sexual abuse and coercive marriage practices. At the same time, she corrects her earlier work to insist that “some forms of polygamy are more conducive to the abuse of women and children” (p. 262).

While *Polygamy in Primetime* is a successful and useful complication of Mormon fundamentalism beyond issues of marital nonmonogamy, Bennion’s prescriptive and singular focus on the efficacy of decriminalization in combating abuse limits the scholarly utility of her work. While the author is undoubtedly correct in her assertion that “wives and children in families that are living in hiding are at risk of abuse, economic hardship, and circumscription,” Bennion fails to address the prevalence of domestic abuse within mainstream families, religious or secular (p. 262). With the exception of illegality, none of the

1. John-Charles Duffy, review of *Saints under Siege: The Texas State Raid on the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints*, ed. Stuart A. Wright and James T. Richardson, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80/2 (1 June 2012): 553.

factors she identifies as contributors to abuse are unique to polygyny. Decriminalization would absolutely grant plural wives access to greater legal rights and privileges, including spousal insurance, hospital visiting rights, and inheritance (p. 262). But given the pervasiveness of domestic violence and sexual assault in contemporary American households, Bennion's insistence that decriminalization would significantly decrease abuse within polygynous families is ultimately unconvincing.²

So too her assertion that legalizing plural marriage would cause polygyny to "eventually be viewed as yet another potentially viable alternative family type that should not be treated as immoral" (p. 262). She provides no clear path from decriminalization to widespread public acceptance of sexual difference, which is perhaps the primary limitation of her argument. Bennion places undue faith in the influence of the American legal system upon American public opinion. Though she clearly elucidates the theological and cultural motivations for plural marriage within Mormon fundamentalist communities, Bennion offers no consideration of the religious grounds upon which much of the American public rejects the practice. Neither does she account for the demonstrable conservative Protestant bias that governs most legal decisions within the American juridical system, particularly with regard to sexual difference.³

Nevertheless, this work is at its core a nuanced and careful consideration of a significant and contentious subject. Bennion successfully complicates lived sexual difference beyond novelty and decenters

2. With regard to the prevalence of domestic violence within American households, see "Survey of Recent Statistics," a report on domestic violence provided by the American Bar Association's Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence, accessed August 20, 2014, http://www.americanbar.org/groups/domestic_violence/resources/statistics.html.

3. Compare Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), and Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

sexuality as primary identity marker in Mormon fundamentalist families.⁴ *Polygamy in Primetime* offers a rich and careful history and ethnography of marginalized, frequently misunderstood religious minority communities, and as such will be of interest to scholars of gender and sexuality, American religions, American cultural studies, minority religions, new religious movements, and Mormonism.⁵

Megan Goodwin is the 2014–2016 Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow for Innovative Pedagogy with the Department of Religious Studies at Bates College. Her current project explores the role of normative sexuality in shaping contemporary American mainstream understandings of and responses to controversial minority religions.

Jeremy Grimshaw. *Draw a Straight Line and Follow It: The Music and Mysticism of La Monte Young*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Peter McMurray

IN REFLECTING ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF NIETZSCHE, Jacques Derrida writes: “The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keen-enough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place.”¹ Our stories of self are bound

4. Compare Carrie A. Miles, “‘What’s Love Got to Do with It?’: Earthly Experience of Celestial Marriage, Past and Present,” in *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues*, ed. Cardell K. Jacobson and Lara Burton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

5. The positioning of Mormonism relative to the study of new religious movements is, of course, a larger issue and one worth exploring at greater length.

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 51.