Why Two in One Flesh: The Western Case for Monogamy Over Polygamy

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John Witte, Jr.*

ABSTRACT

Questions about polygamy are likely to dominate Western family law in the next generation. Two generations ago, contraception, abortion, and women’s rights were the hot topics. This past generation, children’s rights and same-sex rights have dominated public deliberation and litigation. On the frontier of Western family law are hard questions about extending the forms of valid marriage to include polygamy and extending the forums of marital governance to include religious and cultural legal systems that countenance polygamy. This Article analyzes the 1,850 year tradition of Western laws against polygamy and the growing constitutional and cultural pressures to reform these laws today. I show how the traditional Western cases against polygamy and same-sex unions used strikingly different arguments drawn from the Bible, nature, rights, harm, and symbolism. I conclude that, because these arguments are so different, Western nations can responsibly hold the line against polygamy, even if they choose to accept same-sex marriage and its accompanying norms of sexual liberty, domestic autonomy, equality, and nondiscrimination. I reject ideological arguments, pro and con, that anti-polygamy laws are a form of traditional Christian morality. I reject slippery slope arguments, from the right and the left, that acceptance of same-sex marriage must inevitably lead to acceptance of polygamous marriage. And I reject arguments from domestic and international sources that religious freedom norms command the accommodation, if not validation, of

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religion, polygamy. The West may, and in my view should, politely say no to polygamy. An Appendix to the Article provides a detailed guide to different forms and terms of plural marriage discussed and prohibited in the West—real polygamy, constructive polygamy, successive polygamy, and clerical polygamy.

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For more than 2,500 years, the Western legal tradition has defined lawful marriage as the union of one man and one woman with the fitness, capacity, and freedom to marry each other. This was the dominant normative teaching of ancient Greeks and Romans, first millennium Jews and Christians, medieval Catholics and early modern Protestants, modern Enlightenment philosophers and liberals, common law and civil law jurists alike. While monogamous marriage is neither good for everyone nor always good, all these traditions have argued, in general and in most cases, monogamous marriage brings essential private goods to the married couple and their children, and vital public goods to society and the state.¹

For more than 1,850 years, in turn, the Western legal tradition has declared polygamy² to be a serious crime; indeed, it was a capital crime in much of the West from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. While a few Western writers and rulers have allowed polygamy in rare individual cases of urgent personal, political, or social need, virtually all Western writers and legal systems have denounced polygamy as an alternative form of marriage and have denounced the occasional polygamous experiments of early Jewish aristocrats,³ medieval Muslims,⁴ early modern Anabaptists,⁵ nineteenth-century Mormons,⁶ and modern-day immigrants to the West.⁷

The historical sources commended monogamy on various grounds.⁸ The most common argument was that exclusive and enduring monogamous marriages were the best way to ensure paternal certainty and joint parental investment in children, who are born vulnerable and utterly dependent on their parents’ mutual care and remain so for many years. Monogamous marriages, furthermore, were the best way to ensure that men and women were treated

¹ For detailed sources and discussion, see John Witte, Jr., The Nature of Family, the Family of Nature: The Surprising Liberal Defense of the Traditional Family in the Enlightenment, 64 EMORY L.J. 591 (2015).
² I am using the term “polygamy” colloquially to include both polygyny (one man with two or more wives) and polyandry (one woman with two or more husbands). Classically, the term “polygamy” covered all manner of other forms of plural union, too, some of which had their own distinct names. See the Appendix herein, infra notes 357–86 and accompanying text, for an overview of the shifting and confusing terminology.
³ See John Witte, Jr., The Western Case for Monogamy Over Polygamy 36 (2015).
⁴ See id. at 158–64.
⁵ See id. at 218–23.
⁶ See id. at 429–41.
⁷ See infra notes 63–66, 112–16.
⁸ See John Witte, Jr., From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition (2d ed. 2012).
with equal dignity and respect within the domestic sphere and that husbands
and wives, and parents and children provided each other with mutual support,
protection, and edification throughout their lifetimes, adjusted to each person’s
needs at different stages in the life cycle. This latter logic now applies to
same-sex couples, too, who have gained increasing rights in the West in recent
years, including the rights to marry, adopt, and parent in some places.

The historical sources condemned polygamy on a number of grounds. The
most common argument was that polygamy was unnatural, unfair, and unjust
to wives and children—a violation of their fundamental rights in modern
parlance. Polygamy, moreover, was also too often the cause, corollary, or
consequence of sundry other harms, crimes, and abuses. And polygamy,
according to some more recent writers, was a threat to good citizenship, social
order, and political stability, even an impediment to the advancement of
civilizations toward liberty, equality, and democratic government. For nearly
two millennia, the West has thus declared polygamy to be a crime and has had
little patience with various arguments raised in its defense.

With the growing liberalization of traditional Western norms of sex,
marrige, and family life in recent decades, and with the escalating
constitutional battles over same-sex marriage, these traditional Western
criminal laws against polygamy are coming under increasing pressure. The
first cases challenging the constitutionality of these laws have been filed—with
an American federal district court in Utah striking first in declaring partly
unconstitutional Utah’s state laws against polygamy. The first sustained
scholarly arguments for legal toleration if not state recognition of polygamy
have been pressed—with various liberals and libertarians, Muslims and
Christians, philosophers and social scientists, multiculturalists and
counterculturalists finding themselves on the same side. The first wave of
popular media portrayals of good polygamous families in America has now

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9 See infra Part II.C.
10 See infra Part II.D.
11 See Witte, supra note 3, at 389–439 (citing the ideas of Francis Lieber, Arnold Heeren, and Henry
Lewis Morgan).
and holding that Utah’s prohibition on polygamous cohabitation is unconstitutional); see also Brown v.
Herbert, 850 F. Supp. 2d 1240 (D. Utah 2012) (holding that Kody Brown and his sister wives faced a credible
threat of prosecution for bigamy from Utah authorities and thus had standing to press a federal constitutional
case against the county attorney for chilling their First Amendment free speech rights in airing their show
and advocating their polygamous lifestyle).
13 See infra notes 166–79 and accompanying text.
broken with shows like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* stoking the cultural imagination and sympathy much like *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Little House on the Prairie* had done for prior generations of urban and rural families. Just as same-sex advocates moved first against the criminalization of sodomy and then for the recognition of same-sex unions and marriage, so pro-polygamy advocates aim first to repeal traditional criminal laws against polygamy and then to include polygamy as an alternative form of valid marriage recognized by the state.

This Article, largely drawn from a new 500-page monograph on the topic, puts these looming questions in larger historical and comparative perspective. In Part I, I analyze the current Western laws against polygamy and the growing constitutional and cultural pressures to reform them. In Part II, I show how the traditional Western cases against polygamy and same-sex unions used strikingly different arguments drawn from the Bible, nature, rights, harm, and symbolism. While same-sex relationships were traditionally prohibited as unnatural sexual taboos that violated biblical norms, polygamy was prohibited as an abusive, harmful, and socially deleterious institution that violated the equal dignity of the marital partners. I conclude that, because these arguments are so different, Western nations can responsibly hold the line against polygamy, even if they choose to accept same-sex marriage and its accompanying norms of sexual liberty, domestic autonomy, equality, and nondiscrimination. I reject ideological arguments, pro and con, that anti-polygamy laws are a form of traditional Christian morality. I reject slippery slope arguments, from the right and the left, that acceptance of same-sex marriage must inevitably lead to acceptance of polygamous marriage. And I reject arguments from domestic and international sources that religious freedom norms command the accommodation, if not validation, of religious polygamists. The West may, and in my view should, politely say no to polygamy.

14 See, e.g., JANET BENNION, POLYGAMY IN PRIMETIME: MEDIA, GENDER, AND POLITICS IN MORMON FUNDAMENTALISM 167 (2012).


16 Witte, supra note 3.
I. TRADITIONAL LAWS AGAINST POLYGAMY AND MODERN CHALLENGES

A. Polygamy in America Law

A century and a half ago, American Mormons made international headlines by claiming the religious right to practice polygamy, despite federal criminal laws against it. In four main cases from 1879 to 1890, the United States Supreme Court firmly rejected their claims and threatened to dissolve the Mormon Church if they persisted. Part of the Court’s argument was historical: the common law has always defined marriage as monogamous, and to change those rules would be “a return to barbarism.” Part of the argument was prudential: religious liberty can never become a license to violate general criminal laws lest chaos ensue. And part of the argument was sociological: monogamous marriage is the cornerstone of civilization, and it cannot be moved without upending our whole Western culture. Contemporaneous European courts and legislatures were equally dismissive of Mormon and other polygamists’ claims. These old cases remain the law of the West. Most Mormons renounced polygamy in 1890, and in 1906, Mormon Church leaders made polygamy a ground for excommunication from their church.

The question of religious polygamy is back in the headlines, now involving a Fundamentalist Mormon group that has retained the church’s traditional polygamist practices. The Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints (FLDS) are a

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17 On early Mormon polygamy, see 1 BRIAN C. HALES, JOSEPH SMITH’S POLYGAMY: HISTORY (2013); GEORGE D. SMITH, NAUVOO POLYGAMY (2008).
18 Late Corp. of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. United States, 136 U.S. 1 (1890); Davis v. Beason, 133 U.S. 333 (1890); Murphy v. Ramsey, 114 U.S. 15 (1885); Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145 (1879). For context and case analysis, see SARAH BARRINGER GORDON, THE MORMON QUESTION: POLYGAMY AND CONSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA (2002).
19 Latter-Day Saints, 136 U.S. at 49.
20 See Reynolds, 98 U.S. at 167 (“To permit [polygamy] would be to make the professed doctrines of religious belief superior to the law of the land, and in effect to permit every citizen to become a law unto himself.”).
21 See id. at 165–66.
Mormon splinter group that was created in 1890 and has operated continuously in various subgroups since then. Their early founders rejected the mainline Mormon Church’s departure from its traditional polygamous teachings and practices.\textsuperscript{24} The FLDS regarded polygamy as a central religious practice and important to their own salvation.\textsuperscript{25} Seeking to escape social stigma and criminal prosecution, the church members withdrew into small, isolated, and often religiously controlled communities scattered throughout the thinly populated American West, as well as in Western Canada and Mexico.\textsuperscript{26} The largest such community today, under the leadership of Owen Allred, has 7,500 members. Total FLDS membership in America today is roughly 10,000, though exact numbers are elusive.\textsuperscript{27} These FLDS communities are now coming into the public eye. The New York Times Magazine had a major exposé on them in 1999.\textsuperscript{28} National Geographic carried a cover story and national television feature on them in 2010.\textsuperscript{29} Popular television shows like Sister Wives and Big Love, popular magazines like People and Time, and a spate of tell-all biographies and television appearances are making the polygamous lifestyle look mainstream, even edgy and glamorous.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{25} See Martha Sonntag Bradley, A Repeat of History: A Comparison of the Short Creek and Eldorado Raids on FLDS, in Modern Polygamy, supra note 24, at 3, 6.


\textsuperscript{27} See Jacobson & Burton, supra note 24, at xxii fig.1; see also Joanna Walters, Fleeing the FLDS: Followers are Abandoning the Notorious Sect in Droves, AlJazeera AM. (Mar. 16, 2015, 5:00 AM ET), http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/3/fleeing-the-flds-sect.html.


But, for all this new experimentation, the legal reality is that polygamy is still a crime in every state in the United States, and those who practice it risk criminal punishment.31 This is precisely what happened on April 3, 2008, when state authorities raided an FLDS community in Eldorado, Texas, called the Yearning for Zion Ranch. The authorities were acting on preliminary evidence that underage girls were being forced into sex and spiritual marriages with men two or three times their age.32 They eventually removed 439 children from the ranch and put them into state protective custody. They found twelve girls, aged 12–15, who had been forced into marriages, seven of them already with child.33 They found 262 other children—in 91 of the 146 families on the Ranch—who were themselves victims of child abuse, statutory rape, or neglect, or had witnessed or been exposed to the sexual abuse, assault, or rape of another child within their household.34 Eleven men, including leader Warren Jeffs, were eventually charged with polygamy, sexual assault, and child abuse. Warren Jeffs’s associates have been convicted—with punishments ranging from seven to seventy-five years.35 Warren Jeffs, the prophet of this FLDS community, was also convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment plus twenty years for forcing two underaged girls into spiritual marriages with others and for forcing a fifteen-year-old girl to join his harem and bear his child.36 He faces further accomplice bigamy charges both in Utah and Texas for presiding over other spiritual marriages of minors in other FLDS communities.37

Many of the legal questions raised by the Texas ranch case are easy. Coerced marriages, statutory rape, sexual assault, and other abuses of children


33 Id. at 3–4.


36 BAILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 116–20; Linda F. Smith, Child Protection Law and the FLDS Raid in Texas, in MODERN POLYGAMY, supra note 26, at 301. In a separate case in Utah, Jeffs was convicted as an accessory to two counts of statutory rape for presiding over a compelled spiritual marriage of a fourteen-year-old girl to her cousin in another FLDS community. The case was reversed, however, and remanded for a new trial because of erroneous jury instructions. State v. Jeffs, 243 P.3d 1250, 1260 (Utah 2010); see also STEPHEN SINGULAR, WHEN MEN BECOME GODS: MORMON POLYGAMIST WARREN JEFFS, HIS CULT OF FEAR, AND THE WOMEN WHO FOUGHT BACK (2008).
are all serious crimes. The adults on the ranch who committed these crimes, or were complicit in them, are criminals. They have no claim of privacy that will protect them from prosecution and no claim of religious freedom that will excuse them if duly convicted. Dealing with the children, ensuring proper procedures, and sorting out the evidence are all practically messy and emotionally trying questions, but they are not legally hard. The order of the Texas courts to return most of the children who had been seized from their homes during the raid underscores a further elementary legal principle: decisions about child custody and about criminal liability must be done on an individual basis as much as possible.38

The harder legal question is whether criminalizing polygamy is still constitutional. Texas criminal law makes marriage to two or more persons at once a felony—a first-degree felony if one of the parties is younger than sixteen.39 Every other American state has comparable criminal prohibitions on the books against polygamy or bigamy. These criminal prohibitions have been in place in America since its earliest colonial days40 and have been part of Western criminal law since the third century.41 Polygamy was, in fact, a capital crime, and American states were still executing a few of the most brazen polygamists until the 1830s, though most convicted polygamists were sent to prison.42 Can these 1,850-year-old prohibitions on polygamy withstand a challenge that they violate an individual’s constitutional rights to privacy and sexual liberty, to marriage and domestic autonomy, and to equal protection and non-discrimination—in addition to the rights to religious liberty?

In the nineteenth century, when the first Mormon cases reached the federal courts on religious liberty grounds alone, none of these additional constitutional rights claims was yet available to pro-polygamy litigants. Now they are, and the Supreme Court has used them to uphold every adult citizen’s

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39 TEX. PENAL CODE ANN. § 25.01 (West 2011). Texas (and other states like Utah and Colorado with FLDS polygamists) extends the definition of bigamy to include parties who cohabit with, purport to marry, or maintain the appearance of being married to a second spouse, while still married to a first. Id. This provision was designed to preclude bigamists like Tom Green, who divorced each of his wives before marrying the next one, yet kept all of them in his harem. Utah sent him to prison. See State v. Green, 99 P.3d 820, 822 (Utah 2004); Joanna L. Grossman & Lawrence M. Friedman, Inside the Castle: Law and the Family in 20th Century America 28–32 (2011).
40 See Witte, supra note 3, at 389–402.
41 See infra notes 218–19 and accompanying text.
42 See, e.g., State v. Norman, 13 N.C. (2 Dev.) 222, 227 (1829); Ewell v. State, 14 Tenn. (6 Yer.) 364, 365 (1834).
rights to consensual sex, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, contraception, abortion, sodomy, and same-sex relations if not marriage. Do Texas and other states have strong enough reasons to uphold their traditional criminal prohibitions of polygamy against such constitutional claims, especially if made by a party with deep religious convictions? May a religious polygamist at least get a religious liberty exemption from compliance with these laws? That would make polygamy a tolerated practice for these religious parties—a “de facto” form of marriage, as lawyers call it. The state would not prosecute them for polygamy. But the state would also not enforce their polygamous marriage contracts, provide them with family services or protections, or accord the spouses any of the thousands of rights and privileges available to state-recognized families. No state burdens, no state benefits: polygamous families and their religious communities under this arrangement would become “a law unto themselves.”

That raises a harder legal question—whether a state legislature could or should go further, by not only decriminalizing polygamy but legalizing it as a valid marriage option for its citizens. In one sense, this move from toleration to recognition, from “de facto” to “de jure” polygamy, seems like a small step. After all, American states today, viewed together, already offer several models of state-sanctioned domestic life for their citizens: straight and same-sex marriage, contract and covenant marriage, civil union and domestic partnership. Each of these off-the-rack models of domestic life has built-in rights and duties that the parties have to each other and to their children and other dependents. And the parties can further tailor these built-in rights and duties through private prenuptial contracts. With so much marital pluralism and private ordering already available, why not add a further option—that of polygamous marriage? Why not give to polygamous families the same rights and duties, privileges and protections that are afforded to other domestic


44 Romans 2:14 (King James). On the role of religious communities as legal actors, see the burgeoning literature illustrated in MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: MULTI-TIERED MARRIAGE AND THE BOUNDARIES OF CIVIL LAW AND RELIGION (Joel A. Nichols ed., 2012) [hereinafter MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE].


46 See Brian H. Bix, Private Ordering and Family Law, 23 J. AM. ACAD. MATRIMONIAL LAW. 249, 249 (2010).
unions recognized by state law? Wouldn’t that be better than consigning polygamists to a shadow-marriage world controlled by religious authorities, who have none of the due process constraints that the constitution imposes on governmental authorities?

Once we contemplate decriminalizing, or even legalizing polygamous marriage, that raises a still harder question—whether polygamy should be reserved to religious parties alone. If we leave religious liberty claims aside, are the other constitutional claims of privacy, autonomy, equality, and the like strong enough on their own to grant any consenting adult the right to enter a polygamous marriage, regardless of religious conviction? Indeed, won’t a policy of restricting polygamy to religious parties alone inevitably trigger a claim of discrimination by the nonreligious? Why should religious polygamists alone get special treatment? After all, the argument goes, what’s at issue are the fundamental rights to marriage and its attendant constitutional protections and statutory benefits. Shouldn’t these rights and benefits be available to all citizens regardless of their religious status?

These questions are not unique to members of the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints Church. In the United States, various Muslim, Vietnamese Hmong, and Native Americans, as well as various emigrés from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have been quietly practicing polygamy under the supervision of religious and cultural leaders and in defiance of state criminal laws. Various “poly communities” have also emerged in America—from sundry free love polyamorists and “pantagamists” on the left to conservative Muslims in the inner cities who see polygamous households as the only way to deal with the massive numbers of single mothers and non-marital children in their communities who need male support. It’s only a matter of time before

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these groups press for state recognition of their plural marriages, especially if they are targeted for prosecution. It’s also only a matter of time before litigants press for reform of America’s immigration ban on polygamists, in place since 1875, that bars polygamists from naturalization and even entry into the country.⁵⁰

Even if these anti-polygamy laws are not openly challenged on federal or state constitutional grounds, they may well slowly become dead letters on the books. The status of being in a polygamous marriage itself, while formally prohibited by criminal law in every state, now rarely moves law enforcement authorities to action. Most state prosecutors today will move on polygamous individuals or groups only if they engage in other criminal activities, such as coerced marriages or sex involving children, or if they seek to engage in social welfare, social security, or tax fraud to support their multiple wives and children.⁵¹ Indeed, the state attorney general in Utah recently issued a formal declaration, condoned by the governor, that his office would not prosecute even brazen public polygamy per se. ⁵² This declaration came despite the fact that Utah has one of the few American state constitutions to prohibit polygamy, a vestige of its early experiments with Mormon polygamy. ⁵³ Utah today, like other American states, treats polygamy mostly as an aggravant to other crimes. It is a point of leverage for prosecutors to pursue attendant sexual or social welfare crimes, and it gives judges power to impose heavier punishments on the duly convicted.


⁵³ Utah Const. art. III, para. 1; see also ARIZ. Const. art. XX, para. 2; IDAHO Const. art. I, § 4; N.M. Const. art XXI, § 1; OKLA. Const. art I, § 2.
B. Polygamy in Other Common Law Lands

Most of America’s common law cousins have comparable criminal prohibitions against polygamy and face comparable pressure to remove these prohibitions, or at least grant exemptions from them for religious and cultural minorities. In Canada, for example, an FLDS group in Bountiful, British Columbia, supported by a wide spectrum of pro-polygamy groups, pressed for the repeal of Canada’s traditional criminal law against polygamy on grounds of liberty, privacy, autonomy, equality, non-discrimination, self-determination, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and other rights set out in Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in various international human rights instruments to which Canada is a signatory. In a closely watched 2012 case, the British Columbia Supreme Court came down resolutely in support of Canada’s traditional criminal law against polygamy. Drawing on empirical, historical, and comparative arguments and data, the court held that

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55 See BAILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 69–132.


57 Criminal Code, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, s. 293(1) (Can.) (“Every one who (a) practises or enters into or in any manner agrees or consents to practise or enter into (i) any form of polygamy, or (ii) any kind of conjugal union with more than one person at the same time, whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage, or (b) celebrates, assists or is a party to a rite, ceremony, contract or consent that purports to sanction a relationship mentioned in subparagraph (a)(i) or (ii), is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years.”). This law builds on two laws: Offences Relating to the Law of Marriage, R.S.C. 1886, c. 161 (Can.), amended by S.C. 1890, c. 37, § 11; and the Criminal Code, S.C. 1953–54, c. 51, s. 243. For an analysis of the statutory history and context, see Martha Bailey, CANADA, POLYGAMY AND UNMARRIED COHABITATION, in THE INTERNATIONAL SURVEY OF FAMILY LAW 123 (Bill Atkin ed., 2011).
legalizing polygamy would visit inevitable and disproportionate harms on women, children, and society and that granting religious exemptions to practice polygamy privately would give untoward power to religious authorities who are not bound by due process or other rule of law constraints in the treatment of their members. The constitutionality of polygamy will likely come before the Supreme Court of Canada in due course. The outcome before this high court, famous for its avant-garde opinions, is by no means clear.

A decade before the British Columbia case, the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec faced a strong push by Muslims and other groups to establish Shari’a arbitration tribunals for governance of Muslim marriages, as a part and product of Canada’s firm commitment to multiculturalism. That proposal was thoroughly debated but ultimately defeated. But the stated concern was not so much about the legalization of polygamy as about giving religious authorities and religious laws a role in the governance of the family lives of Canadian citizens. Since then, Canadian multicultural theorists have pushed hard to develop nonreligious arguments in favor of a “multi-conjugal” society that would include state-recognized polygamy and other forms of polyamory subject to private ordering norms.

58 Reference, 2011 BCSC 1588, at paras. 1048–1094. For a careful case analysis, see Thomas Buck, Jr., Comment, From Big Love to the Big House: Justifying Anti-Polygamy Laws in an Age of Expanding Rights, 26 EMORY INT’L L. REV. 939 (2012). For more critical readings, see POLYGAMY’S RIGHTS AND WRONGS: PERSPECTIVES ON HARM, FAMILY, AND LAW (Gillian Calder & Lori G. Beaman eds., 2014) [hereinafter POLYGAMY’S RIGHTS AND WRONGS]; Angela Campbell, Beautiful’s Plural Marriages, 6 INT’L J. CONTEXT 343 (2010); Angela Campbell, Beautiful Voices, 47 OSGOODE HALL L.J. 183 (2009); Julia Chamberlin & Amos N. Guiora, Polygamy: Not “Big Love” but Significant Harm, 35 WOMEN’S RTS. L. REP. 144, 171–85 (2014) (discussing harm arguments within FLDS, noting three specific harms, “child-brides, lost boys, and polygamy” exacted through “verbal, sexual, or physical abuse”).

59 For contrary arguments, see, for example, ANGELA CAMPBELL, SISTER WIVES, SURROGATES AND SEX WORKERS: OUTLAWS BY CHOICE? 49–96 (2013); Nicholas Bala, Why Canada’s Prohibition of Polygamy is Constitutionally Valid and Sound Policy, 25 CANADIAN J. FAM. L. 165 (2009). For further historical context, see SARA CARTER, THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING MONOGAMOUS: MARRIAGE AND NATION BUILDING IN WESTERN CANADA TO 1915 (2008).


Australia and New Zealand likewise face challenges from various Aboriginal groups as well as Asian, African, and Middle Eastern immigrants who have been pressing for the right to practice polygamy under the governance of their own religious customs and courts. Both countries have had firm criminal prohibitions against polygamy since colonial days, and these laws have been confirmed in recent criminal law and family law statutes and cases. Neither country recognizes Aboriginal polygamous unions as valid marriages, nor do they accept polygamous marriages that were contracted abroad, though they grant some social welfare benefits to known polygamists. In Australia, the human rights case for polygamy is harder to press since the country lacks a national bill of rights, and the international human rights norms to which Australia is a signatory have not been interpreted to support a right to practice polygamy.

These Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand criminal prohibitions on polygamy, like those of America, were all modeled in part on traditional English criminal laws against polygamy that went back to Anglo-Saxon laws that called for polygamists to be subject to “hell-fire.”


65 See supra note 64.

66 See FREEDOM OF RELIGION UNDER BILLS OF RIGHTS (Paul Babie & Neville Rochow eds., 2012).

67 Cnut the Great, The Laws of Canute (c. 1018 C.E.), reprinted in THE LAWS OF THE KINGS OF ENGLAND FROM EDMUND TO HENRY I 135, 163 (A.J. Robertson ed. & trans., Cambridge Univ. Press 1925) (“A man shall have no more wives than one, and that shall be his wedded wife, and he who seeks to observe God’s law aright and to save his soul from hell-fire shall remain with the one [wife] as long as she lives.”). In addition to the laws of King Canute, the laws of King Ethelred provided, “And let it never be, that a Christian man . . . have more wives than one, but he with that one, as long as she may live; whoever will rightly observe God’s law, and secure his soul from the burning of hell.” Ethelred II, The Laws of Ethelred (c. 994 C.E.), reprinted in ANCIENT LAWS AND INSTITUTES OF ENGLAND 119, 135–36 (Benjamin Thorpe ed., London, G.E. Eyre & A. Spottiswoode 1840).
Parliament renewed these old laws in the 1604 Polygamy Act,⁶⁸ which again declared polygamy to be a capital crime, punishable in the Old Bailey and other criminal courts.⁶⁹ Parliament made polygamy a serious, but noncapital, crime in the 1861 Offenses Against the Person Act, the basic criminal law code that remains on the books, now with ample supplements and amendments.⁷⁰ These English laws on polygamy also continue to influence the laws of many of the fifty-three sovereign nations that are part of the British Commonwealth today and share a common law heritage.

While England rarely prosecutes polygamists today,⁷¹ it does not recognize polygamous marriages; only the first marriage will count as valid. A 2004 English statute empowers immigration officers to arrest without warrant any person seeking to enter the United Kingdom who is suspected of bigamy or polygamy.⁷² Polygamy remains an issue especially in contested inheritance and marital property cases, where the first wife and her children almost always get priority.⁷³ Nonetheless, England, like some other common law countries, does provide some public assistance and social welfare benefits to the wives, children, and dependents of polygamous families.⁷⁴ While England’s 1998 Human Rights Act provides protection for the fundamental rights to marriage

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⁶⁸ An Act to Restrain All Persons from Marriage Until Their Former Wives and Former Husbands Be Dead, 1604, 1 Jac. 1, c. 11 (Eng.) (“Be it therefore enacted . . . [t]hat if any Person or Persons within his Majesty’s Dominions of England and Wales, being married, or which hereafter shall marry, do at any Time at the End of the Session of this present Parliament, marry any Person or Persons, the former Husband or Wife being alive; That then every such Offence shall be [a] Felony, and the Person and Persons so offending shall suffer Death as in Cases of Felony, [] and the Party and Parties so offending shall receive such and the like Proceeding, Trial, and Execution in such County where such Person or Persons shall be apprehended, as if the Offence had been committed in such County where such Person or Persons shall be taken or apprehended.”).


⁷¹ For a recent polygamy conviction, see R v. Seed, [2007] EWCA (Crim) 254 (Eng.).

⁷² Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act, 2004, c. 19, § 14 (U.K.).


and association, to privacy and family life, and to thought, conscience, and belief, so far these provisions have not been used successfully to challenge England’s traditional prohibitions on polygamy. Comparable laws and restrictions are in place in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Northern Ireland, though some courts and commentators in those lands are pressing for the relaxation if not rejection of traditional criminal laws against polygamy.

Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams did set off a firestorm on February 7, 2008, by suggesting that some “accommodation” of Muslim family law was “unavoidable” in the United Kingdom. His speech was nuanced and qualified, carefully discussing the “growing challenge” of “communities which, while no less ‘law-abiding’ than the rest of the population, relate to something other than the British legal system alone.” But the Archbishop was strongly denounced for his open queries about “what degree of accommodation the law of the land can and should give to minority communities with their own strongly entrenched legal and moral codes.” England, his critics charged, will be beset by “licensed polygamy,” barbaric punishments, and brutal violence against women encased in suffocating burkas if official sanction is given to Shari’a courts and Muslim family law. This parade of horribles has not come to pass in the United Kingdom: Anti-polygamy laws remain firmly in place, and Muslim mediators and arbitrators are forbidden from knowingly presiding over polygamous unions.

76 Polygamous Marriages, supra note 22, at 107–12.
77 Offences Against the Person Act, 1861, 24 & 25 Vict., c. 100, § 57 (U.K.).
79 See, e.g., LAW REFORM ADVISORY COMM. FOR N. IR., DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 6: MARRIAGE LAW (2000); see also The Polygamous Marriages (Northern Ireland) Order, 1995, SI 1995/3211 (N. Ir. 20) art. 3.
81 Rowan Williams, CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS LAW IN ENGLAND: A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE, IN ISLAM AND ENGLISH LAW, supra note 80, at 20, 32–33; see also Dominic McGoldrick, ACCOMMODATING MUSLIMS IN EUROPE: FROM ADOPTING SHARIA LAW TO RELIGIOUSLY BASED OPT OUTS FROM GENERALLY APPLICABLE LAWS, 9 HUM. RTS. L. REV. 603 (2009).
82 Williams, supra note 81, at 20.
83 Id. at 21.
84 See, e.g., Catherine Bennett, IT’S ONE SHARIA LAW FOR MEN AND QUITE ANOTHER FOR WOMEN, GUARDIAN (Feb. 9, 2008, 19:13 EST), http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/feb/10/religion.law.
for fear of losing their licenses or being charged as accomplices to the crime of polygamy.85

C. Polygamy in Civil Law Lands

Like Western common law countries, Western civil law countries forbid polygamy too.86 Every Latin and Central American country has criminal prohibitions of polygamy on the books, which are sometimes also echoed in their family laws.87 Statutory punishments for convicted polygamists range from fines or three months in prison (Cuba)88 to seven years of prison (Belize and Guyana)89 as well as hard labor (Haiti and Jamaica).90 A few countries allow judges to take account of indigenous customs or cultural ignorance of the law of monogamy in their sentences.91 But no Latin or Central American

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87 For example, Colombia punishes polygamy as a form of perjury or “falsifying public documents” with punishments ranging from four to nine years in prison. Código Penal [C. PEN.] art. 287 (Colom.); see also Pizarro, supra note 86, at 172–84.
country gives an outright exemption to indigenous polygamy in its penal code, and a few countries, including the influential country of Brazil, explicitly prohibit accommodation of indigenous or religiously based polygamy.\textsuperscript{92} Intentional or fraudulently induced polygamy is more severely punished. But even negligently or mistakenly entered polygamy is still liable to criminal sanction. A number of countries also hold liable accomplices and government officials who knowingly issue marriage licenses to polygamists. The Penal Code of Honduras is typical:

\begin{quote}
Article 171. The person who contracts a second or subsequent marriage without having legitimately dissolved the previous, will be punished with a sentence of two to five years of imprisonment. The law imposes an equal sanction to a single person who knowingly contracts marriage with a married person.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Article 173. The civil servants who authorize marriages prohibited by law, with full knowledge, or without the concurrence of any of the requisites of existence or of validity of the same, will be sanctioned with a fine of 50,000–100,000 lempiras and disqualification for four to six years.\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

These prohibitions have been in place in Latin and Central America since sixteenth-century colonial days. They reflect the criminal laws of the Continental European mother countries that originally colonized them—Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and the Netherlands especially. All these European mother countries share the civil law tradition that was founded on classical Roman law. Well before the advent of Christianity, the “ancient law”\textsuperscript{94} of Rome required monogamous marriages and treated polygamy as “nefarious.”\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{92} CODIGO PENAL [C.P.] art. 235 (Braz.).
\textsuperscript{94} The language is from CODE JUST. 7.15.2–3 (c. 534 C.E.), reprinted in 2 CORPUS IURIS CIVILIS 300 (Paul Krüger ed., Apud Weidmannos 1904) (1897) (translation by author); see also CODE JUST. 7.15.2–3, translated in 14 THE CIVIL LAW 138–39 (S.P. Scott ed., Cent. Trust Co. 1932) (providing alternative translation).
a “barbarian custom or a mark of tyranny.”96 Well before the Roman establishment of Christianity, the “pagan” Roman emperors beginning in 258 C.E. outlawed polygamy as a crime of “infamia.”97 Later Christian emperors and Germanic kings passed ever firmer prohibitions against the infamous crime of polygamy, calling it a “wicked,” “unnatural,” “abominable,” and “treacherous” offense.98 By the ninth century, Byzantine Emperor Theophilus, for the first time, declared real polygamy to be a capital crime whether committed by clergy or laity, citizens or slaves.99 These capital laws against polygamy slowly multiplied in the secular civil law systems of the
medieval and early modern West—notably in Italy, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and various Nordic lands, which often duplicated these laws in the colonial Americas.
These millennium-long laws against the crime of polygamy remained firmly in place during the modern legal liberalization and codification movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both the influential 1794 Prussian Civil Code and the 1810 Napoleonic Penal Code, for example, expressly prohibited polygamy. “Whoever, being engaged in the bond of wedlock, shall contract a second marriage, before the dissolution of the preceding one, shall be punished with hard labour for a time,” reads the Napoleonic Penal Code, which was duplicated in a number of European lands.104 Likewise, the Bavarian Penal Code of 1813, the “first modern, rational, and liberal penal code,”105 though it removed many traditional crimes, still prohibited polygamy for all parties. “Since the state recognizes as valid only a simple marriage, everyone is subject to the laws of bigamy in the state, even if the principles of his religion might allow him to practice polygamy.”106 The 1871 Criminal Code of the German Empire similarly punished all intentional polygamists with “penal servitude up to five years.”107 The Spanish Penal Code of 1848 also prohibited all citizens from practicing polygamy, including its many Muslim citizens; this continued a Spanish tradition of anti-polygamy laws going back to the seventh-century Visigothic Code108 and several important medieval Spanish legal codes.109 These criminal prohibitions remain on the books in the revised criminal statutes and codes of most Continental European lands today, though the punishments have lightened and the pace of prosecution has slackened in recent decades.110

106 The quote is from the author of the code, the distinguished German jurist and psychologist, Paul Johann Anselm von Feuerbach, who rejected the option of (religiously based) polygamy, citing Roman law and civil law precedents. See Paul Johann Anselm von Feuerbach, Lehrbuch des gemeinen in Deutschland gültigen peinlichen Rechts [General Text on the Applicable Criminal Law of Germany] § 426, at 343–44 (Giessen, G.F. Heyer 1801).
108 See Witte, supra note 3, at 113–14.
D. Polygamy Laws in the European Union

Debates about the legal status of polygamy are sharpening on the Continent, however, with the rapid rise of new polygamous immigrants.111 “In a lot of European countries, marriage is not just an aspect of the immigration problem; it is the immigration problem.”112 For example, France is said to be home to more than 20,000 polygamous families, comprising more than 200,000 persons, despite firm new immigration and legal enforcement reforms enacted in 1993.113 Smaller numbers of polygamous are scattered throughout the rest of the European Union—nearly a million persons all told, according to some estimates, though exact numbers are not known.114 Many of these polygamous families hail from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and most of them are Muslims of various schools of thought and law. European nations will, as a matter of course and comity, recognize monogamous marriages contracted abroad, even in countries that formally recognize polygamy.115 But they will routinely deny visas and bar entry to known polygamous, as well as to second wives and their children who are seeking to unite with a husband or father who has moved to Europe. While Continental lands rarely prosecute known polygamous, only the first marriage of a polygamous household will usually be recognized as valid, especially in disputes about marital property and inheritance. Like common law countries, civil law countries in Europe differ widely in their treatment of polygamous household members in the delivery of education, charity, social welfare, health care, and other state benefits that turn on marital status. Tensions over these domestic issues have heightened between European Muslims and non-Muslims in recent years—in part as a broader nativist reaction to new immigrants in Europe, in part as a

also MARINO ALDO COLACCI, IL DELITTO DI BIGAMIA [THE CRIME OF BIGAMY] (1958); RICCI, supra note 100. I am grateful to Rinaldo Cristofori for helping me with these Italian sources.

111 A comprehensive European study of contemporary polygamy laws and their enforcement evidently remains a desideratum. For a partial study, see BOELE-WOEKLI ET AL., supra note 110.

112 B AILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 147 (quoting CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN EUROPE: IMMIGRATION, ISLAM, AND THE WEST 228 (2009)).


broader cultural backlash against Muslims occasioned by 9/11, Fort Hood, the English and Spanish train station bombings, and ongoing battles with jihadists at home and abroad.116

At the time of this writing, no major constitutional case in a European land has yet tested the constitutionality of Europe’s anti-polygamy laws and regulations. The European Court of Human Rights has resisted arguments for the state recognition of polygamy, even if pressed on religious freedom, family rights, privacy, equality and non-discrimination, and other human rights grounds set out in the 1953 European Convention of Human Rights117 (and echoed in the 2000 Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union).118 In the signature 2010 case of Şerife Yiğit v. Turkey, for example, the European Court upheld Turkey’s law that required couples to marry monogamously in a civil ceremony before a state official. Turkish law does not recognize a religious marriage ceremony to be sufficient to create a valid marriage at state law, and it threatened prison to any religious official who presided over a marriage without a prior civil registration of the marriage.119 The stated purpose of the Turkish law, as the European Court saw it, “was to protect women against polygamy. If religious marriages were to be considered lawful all the attendant religious consequences would have to be recognised, for instance the fact that a [Muslim] man could marry four women.”120 “Turkey aimed to put an end to a marriage tradition which places women at a clear disadvantage, not to say in a situation of dependence and inferiority, compared to men.”121 This Turkish prohibition of polygamy was thus not a violation of the European Convention’s stated right to marriage and a family, the European Court concluded, nor a form of religious or gender discrimination.122

In a similar move, the European Council has made clear that “[t]he right to family reunification should be exercised in proper compliance with...the
rights of women and of children.”123 “In the event of a polygamous marriage, where the sponsor already has a spouse living with him in the territory of a Member State, the Member State concerned shall not authorise the family reunification of a further spouse.”124 The Council has condemned polygamy as an offense against the rights of women and the demands for gender equality125—a position also taken by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.126 The European Council has further grouped polygamy with “slavery . . . [and other] crimes in the name of honour or tradition, of violence, trafficking, female genital mutilation, forced marriage . . . or deprivation of identity (for example, when women are forced to wear the burka, the nigab, or a mask).”127 Member States, the Council declared, must have “zero tolerance” for such offenses against the “indispensable” rights of individual women and children.128

E. Global Legal, Religious, and Cultural Patterns of Polygamy

Outside the West, several other large and populous nations have also prohibited polygamy: Japan (1880),129 the Soviet Union (1920s),130 Thailand

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124 Id. at 15, art. 4.4. Some scholars are concerned that this prescription against reunification of polygamous families may ultimately hurt the rights of women and children by leaving them in foreign lands without the support of their husband and father. See CLARE McGLYNN, FAMILIES AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: LAW, POLITICS, AND PLURALISM 134–35 (2006).
127 Roadmap for Equality, supra note 125, at 4.
128 Id., see also General Recommendation No. 21, supra note 126, at art. 16, cmt. 14 (“Polygamous marriage contravenes a woman’s right to equality with men, and can have such serious emotional and financial consequences for her and her dependents that such marriages ought to be discouraged and prohibited.”).
(1935), 131 China (1950), 132 India for all but Muslims (1955), 133 and Nepal (1963). 134 Taken together, the 120 plus Western and non-Western countries that today criminally ban polygamy, or do not recognize polygamy as a valid form of marriage, represent the vast majority of the world’s population.

Nonetheless, these nations represent only 15%–20% percent of the world’s known cultures. 135 Anthropologists estimate that of the approximately 1,200 known cultures in the world, 75%–85% of them (depending on who is counting and what domestic forms are being counted) recognize polygamy as a valid form of marriage.136 Many of these polygamous cultures, anthropologists tell us, are found in smaller tribal groups often living in “traditional, isolated, low-technology cultures” under the governance of customary laws.137 Many have traditions of arranged marriages in which women in particular have little control over their choice of husband—though some women choose polygamy to gain access to the resources and protection of powerful men. Many of the women who enter polygamous unions voluntarily or involuntarily are rural, poor, and uneducated; they and their children provide vital labor for the

137 ALTMAN & GINAT, supra note 23, at 40.
agricultural and other low-technology, labor-intensive household economies that are the common condition of these polygamous communities. In addition to these groups, a number of Aboriginal or Indigenous Peoples in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania recognize polygyny (one husband with multiple wives) and very occasionally polyandry (one wife with multiple husbands). Most of the time, anthropologists report, the polygamous practices of all these groups fade when their members are exposed to urbanization, technology, and mass media or when members leave the community.

A good number of these polygamous cultures are found within the fifty-five Muslim majority countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia whose state laws recognize polygamy as a valid form of marriage—albeit with Turkey (since 1926) and Tunisia (since 1956) excepted. But official recognition of polygamy by state law, custom, Islamic law, or some combination thereof, hardly means that all families in these countries are polygamous. In a comprehensive survey of polygamous practices in these lands as of 2010, Canadian scholars Martha Bailey and Amy Kaufman have shown that polygamy is a controversial and shrinking practice among many modern day Muslims in these regions, particularly among younger, educated, and urbanized Muslims who typically reject the practice. To be sure, in the African “polygyny belt” from Senegal to Tanzania, where customary laws and older traditions often combine with Islamic teachings, 30%–40% of all married men are thought to practice polygamy. But in Muslim-majority

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139 See H.R.H. PRINCE PETER, A STUDY OF POLYANDRY (1963); Nancy E. Levine and Walter H Sangree, Women with Many Husbands: Polyandrous Alliance and Marital Flexibility in Africa and Asia, 11 J. COMP. FAM. STUD. 283 (1980).

140 See PETER BRETSCHNEIDER, POLYGyny: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY (1995); REMI CLIGNET, MANY WIVES, MANY POWERS: AUTHORITY AND POWER IN POLYGYNOUS FAMILIES (1970); ZEITZEN, supra note 47.

141 For detailed country and regional studies and perspectives, see ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW IN A CHANGING WORLD: A GLOBAL RESOURCE BOOK (Abdallah A. An-Na’im ed., 2002) [hereinafter ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW]; DAVID PEARL & WERNER MENESI, MUSLIM FAMILY LAW (3d ed. 1998); WOMEN’s RIGHTS AND ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW: PERSPECTIVES ON REFORM (Lynn Welchman ed., 2004).

142 BAILiE & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 7–68.

143 Scheidel, supra note 96, at 284.

144 See REPRODUCTION AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN SUB-SAHARIAN AFRICA 338–59 (Ron J. Lesthaeghe ed., 1989) (collecting data and citing studies). For a collection of polygyny statistics, see STATCOMPIlE,
Arab countries of northern Africa, such as Egypt, Algeria, Libya, and Morocco, polygamy is practiced in less than 3% of all households.145 In the Middle East, countries like Jordan and Lebanon have comparably low rates,146 while in others like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and some of the Gulf states polygamy prevails in 10%–20% of all households—some of them elite and powerful families, most of them poor, rural, and tribal.147 In Eurasia and South Asia, where more than 60% of Muslims of the world now live, most countries (including the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia) have polygamy rates under 10%.148 Even in Asian countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, where polygamy is more common, state laws insist, on pain of fine and imprisonment, that a Muslim man may marry up to four wives only if the first wife consents and only if he can support his wives and children equally and fully.149

These latter restrictions on the practice of polygamy reflect common Muslim teachings, rooted ultimately in the sacred texts of Islam. Scholars of Islamic theology make clear that Islam regards marriage as an essential institution, and it encourages all faithful fit adults to marry.150 Marriage, the Qur’an teaches, builds alliances among groups and families, produces and nurtures legitimate children, protects and supports orphaned or abandoned women, and most importantly provides an essential means for husband and wife to provide material, physical, emotional, and spiritual support for each

http://www.statcompiler.com/ (last visited May 17, 2015) (follow “Data Table” hyperlink; select “Select All” hyperlink under country selection option; select “Next” hyperlink; select “Complete List” tab; then select “Other Proximate Determinants of Fertility” drop bar; select “Number of co-wives” drop bar; select “Women-number of other wives” drop bar; check “Two or more wives” box; then follow “OK” hyperlink).

146 See id. at 48, 50–51.
147 See id. at 38–45, 53–54.
148 See id. at 54–68; June S. Katz & Ronald S. Katz, Legislating Social Change in a Developing Country: The New Indonesian Marriage Law Revisited, 26 AM. J. COMP. L. 309, 311 (1978) (“The actual practice of polygamy was not very widespread before the new law, accounting for only 5% of all marriages.”); see also ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW, supra note 141, at 210 (“[O]nly 5 to 7 per cent of Indian Muslims are engaged in polygynous marriages.”).
149 See BAILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 57–61; see also ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW, supra note 141, at 34, 73–74, 101, 160–61, 195–96, 210, 256–57, 289–90.
150 See ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW, supra note 141.
other.\textsuperscript{151} The strong assumption and preference of the Qur’an is for monogamy, not celibacy, and for monogamy, not polygamy.\textsuperscript{152}

Polygamy is only an option, not an obligation, for Muslims. The only two Qur’anic verses on point aim to restrict rather than encourage polygamy—which most (though not all) scholars believe was a common practice in seventh-century Arabia where the Prophet Mohammed lived. One Qur’anic verse allows polygamy but only in the narrow context of protecting female orphans from the abuses of their guardians: “If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one.”\textsuperscript{153} A second verse, however, questions whether justice can in fact be done to all women in a polygamous marriage:

You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire. But turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air). If you come to a friendly understanding, and practice self-restraint, God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.\textsuperscript{154}

In the Hadith, the second most important sacred Muslim text after the Qur’an, the Prophet refused to allow his cousin Ali, who had married the Prophet’s daughter Fatimah, to take a second wife for fear of harming or hurting her. “Fatimah is part of me,” the Prophet said; “whatever hurts her hurts me, and whatever harms her harms me.”\textsuperscript{155}

More conservative schools of Islamic jurisprudence, particularly the Wahhabi and Hanafi schools, have long read these sacred texts together to allow for a limited right to practice polygamy for men of ample means, and this has persisted in some Islamic communities to this day, both in Muslim-majority lands and in dispersed Muslim communities throughout the world, including in the West.\textsuperscript{156} In Muslim lands and communities that follow the more liberal teachings of the Malaki and Shaf‘i schools of jurisprudence,


\textsuperscript{152} See Al-Hibri & El Habti, supra note 151, at 186.

\textsuperscript{153} Id. (quoting Qur’an 4:3).

\textsuperscript{154} Id. at 187 (quoting Qur’an 4:129).

\textsuperscript{155} Id. (quoting 7 Hadith bk. 62, no. 157, Sahih al-Bukhari 5230).

\textsuperscript{156} Id. at 185–90; see also ISLAMIC FAMILY LAW, supra note 141, at 200–11.
however, polygamy is an unpopular and shrinking domestic practice, particularly for families in urban settings and more developed cultures. 157 A number of Muslim jurists within these schools have been openly critical of the practice because of concern for the treatment of women and children. 158

Nobody knows the exact number of practicing polygamists around the world. In the nations where it is legal, polygamy tends to be either the prerogative of wealthy and powerful families or the practice of rural and undeveloped communities that follow customary law—though in some Muslim-majority countries, polygamy appeals to a wider cross-section of the population. In the nations where it is not legal, polygamy tends to be the practice of smaller indigenous, tribal, and religious communities, and the experimental practice of small and sometimes edgy countercultural groups on the far right and the far left. “[M]ost of the world has abandoned polygamy” over the past century, a trend hastened by colonization, globalization, urbanization, feminization, industrialization, Westernization, and Christianization. 159 But polygamy remains in place in parts of the world, and in a few places the practice is growing. 160 Martha Bailey and Amy Kaufman summarize the vast anthropological literature that seeks to explain why:

Because polygamy is often a deeply entrenched sociocultural practice, endorsed by Islam and traditional religions, law and policy makers find it difficult to eliminate or restrict the practice. Apart from any religious underpinnings, social conditions provide a climate within which polygamy can thrive. . . . Often a relatively small number of men control a disproportionate share of resources. These high-status males mate more often and leave more offspring. In these conditions, women may actually seek out polygamous marriages. A polygamous marriage may be an economic advantage for a woman with few options. Rural women with little or no education and low socioeconomic status are more likely to be in a polygamous marriage. Educated women of higher socioeconomic status have more options and are far less likely to be in a polygamous marriage. . . .

. . . Men in some areas desire large families to expand their alliances and bolster their standing in the society. As well, children may be needed to increase the labor supply within a kinship network. And in many polygamous regions there is a strong preference for

157 Al-Hibri & El Habti, supra note 151, at 185–90.
158 See id. at 187–88.
159 BAILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 7–8.
160 See id.
male children. Men may seek out additional wives if their first wives give birth to female children only or are barren. Men may also take additional wives for sexual satisfaction, particularly in societies with lengthy postpartum sexual taboos. In communities where families commonly arrange first marriages, men may seek out additional wives to satisfy their desire for a love match or to exercise their own choice. Polygamy is also found in closed cultures, where open displays of courtship and affection are shunned. In addition, polygamy has historically been used in place of divorce, particularly in countries that stigmatized divorce or that have limited grounds for divorce, and high thresholds for proving those grounds.161

Thus, in the cultures where it persists, polygamy almost always takes the form of polygyny and typically functions as a means to address problems related to shortages in material resources, labor, and socioeconomic status.

II. RECONSTRUCTING THE MODERN WESTERN CASE AGAINST POLYGAMY

A. Framing the Questions

Three sets of questions are now before us: First, given the modern global trends away from polygamy and given the social, economic, and psychological conditions that often attend the practice of polygamy, are there sufficiently compelling reasons to relax Western criminal laws against polygamy? Or, should Western states maintain and even strengthen these anti-polygamy measures, in part as an effort to enhance the equal rights and dignity of women, men, and children? Second, given the growing liberalization of Western norms of sex, marriage, and family life and the growing pluralization of state-sanctioned forms of domestic life, isn’t state recognition of polygamy inevitable and state rejection of polygamy discriminatory, especially to religious polygamists? Or, are there sufficiently compelling reasons for Western states to reject polygamy options, even while accepting and supporting a constitutional culture of sexual and religious liberty? Third, given that most Western state constitutions have both disestablished Christianity and prohibited state prescriptions or proscriptions of religion, doesn’t the Western case against polygamy inevitably collapse under the weight of the Christian tradition that so long supported it? Or, are the traditional Western arguments against polygamy, in original or reconstructed forms, cogent, just, and expedient in our post-Christian and postmodern Western culture?

161 Id. at 7–8 (endnotes omitted).
These questions about polygamy are likely to dominate Western family law in the next generation. Two generations ago, contraception, abortion, and women’s rights were the hot topics of Western family law and the culture wars.\footnote{See, e.g., Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) (extending the right to privacy to a woman’s right to have an abortion); Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965) (holding that obtaining contraceptives is protected under the right to marital privacy).} This past generation, it has been children’s rights and same-sex rights that have dominated public deliberation and litigation.\footnote{See, e.g., United States v. Windsor, 133 S. Ct. 2675 (2013) (striking down the Defense of Marriage Act’s definition of marriage as between one man and one woman); Hollingsworth v. Perry, 133 S. Ct. 2652 (2013) (holding against proponents of California Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage); Lawrence v. Texas, 539 U.S. 558 (2003) (striking down a law criminalizing sodomy). On children’s rights, see BARBARA BENNETT WOODHOUSE, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE TRAGEDY OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS FROM BEN FRANKLIN TO LIONEL TATE (2008); WHAT IS RIGHT FOR CHILDREN: THE COMPETING PARADIGMS OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS (Martha A. Fineman & Karen Worthington eds., 2009).} On the frontier of modern Western family law are hard questions about extending the forms of valid marriage to include polygamy and extending the forums of marital governance to include religious and cultural legal systems that countenance polygamy. As I noted in the Introduction, the first new cases challenging the constitutionality of traditional Western criminal prohibitions against polygamy have been filed—with one recent federal court finding Utah’s anti-polygamy law partly unconstitutional.\footnote{Brown v. Buhman, 947 F. Supp. 2d 1170 (D. Utah 2013). For a contrary recent case, with a detailed distillation of literature about the inherent harms of polygamy, see Reference re: Section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada, 2011 BCSC 1588 (Can.). Kenya, a former English colony that maintains portions of the common law, also recently passed a law authorizing a man to have an unlimited number of wives, while still prosecuting a woman for having two husbands. See Karimi & Leposo, supra note 54.} The first legal and cultural battles over the place of religious legal systems in modern liberal democracies have been waged—with strong new anti-Shari’a measures now being promoted and passed both in America and Europe.\footnote{See Fadel, supra note 62, at 164–65; Tariq Modood, Multicultural Citizenship and the Shari’a Controversy in Britain, in SHARI’A IN THE WEST, supra note 58, at 33; see also Symposium, Overlapping Jurisdictions: What Roles for Conscience and Religion?, 4 FAULKNER L. REV. 299 (2013).} And the first sustained scholarly arguments for legal toleration, if not state recognition, of polygamy have been pressed—with various liberals and libertarians, Muslims and Christians, philosophers and social scientists, multiculturalists and counterculturalists finding themselves on the same side.\footnote{For recent discussions and bibliographies, see MARK A. GOLDFEDER, LEGALIZING PLURAL MARRIAGE: THE NEXT FRONTIER IN FAMILY LAW (forthcoming 2015); POLYGAMY (Stefan Kiesbye ed., 2013); POLYGAMY’S RIGHTS AND WROGNS, supra note 58. Beyond these, I found helpful and challenging the various perspectives on polygamy in these recent sources: BAILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26, at 133–38; GARY S. BECKER, A TREATISE ON THE FAMILY 80–107 (enlarged ed. 1993); PHILIP L. KILBRIDE & DOUGLAS R. PAGE, PLURAL MARRIAGE FOR OUR TIMES: A REINVENTED OPTION? (2d ed. 2012); DAN MARKEL, JENNIFER M.
Many modern liberals argue that the state must facilitate and support the consensual intimate relationships of all its citizens—straight or gay, temporary or permanent, sexual or nonsexual, monogamous or polygamous. Many modern libertarians argue that the state has no business interfering in the private domestic lives of its citizens unless and until there is tangible harm to a victim. Both schools of modern political thought—and the numerous variations on them—generally support the repeal of traditional criminal laws against polygamy. Some liberals go further to call for state recognition of polygamy, too. Feminist theorists, queer theorists, critical race theorists, and multicultural theorists offer all manner of variations on these basic arguments, though notable scholars in each of these schools of thought oppose state recognition of polygamy while supporting same-sex marriage.

Many modern Muslims, Fundamentalist Mormons, and others add arguments from religious freedom and self-determination, religious equality, and nondiscrimination to press their case for polygamy. Every Western nation
(save Australia), they point out, has robust constitutional guarantees of religious freedom on the books for individuals and groups. Every Western nation, furthermore, is a signatory to the binding 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with its robust protections of freedom of thought, conscience, and belief for all peaceable believers—human rights norms that are echoed and elaborated in many other international human rights instruments, not least those guaranteeing religious and cultural self-determination.\(^{174}\) Even if nonbelievers do not have the right to practice polygamy, the argument goes, surely the voluntary faithful of these religious communities must be given the right to follow the examples and instructions of their founding Prophets in taking multiple wives. Surely, the leaders of these religious communities should be respected if a polygamous family chooses to be governed by religious law rather than by state law.\(^{175}\)

Some modern Christian missionaries have argued further that Western churches should accept new converts to the Christian faith who wish to maintain their polygamous households.\(^{176}\) After all, many of these men would rather give up their multiple gods than give up their multiple wives who offer them sex, love, labor, prestige, and heirs. After all, marriage is only an earthly thing: in heaven “they neither marry nor are given in marriage,” Jesus said.\(^{177}\) After all, the global church has found so many other ways to accommodate and enculturate the local customs of its new converts, at least as a stepping stone toward adoption of more common Christian practices in the next generation or two.\(^{178}\) After all, Catholic and Protestant churches, especially since the 1960s,


\(^{175}\) See, for example, the collection of articles and literature cited in MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE, supra note 44.


\(^{177}\) Mark 12:25 (Revised Standard).

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have been champions of religious freedom and human rights for all. 179 How can the church deny religious freedom to its own new members?

It is not within my competence as a legal historian to analyze all these current arguments. My aim in this Part is more modest: to retrieve and reconstruct some of the main historical arguments about polygamy and try to checkmate some of the partial and distorted “law office” histories that have already gathered around this issue.

B. Biblical and Legal Arguments About Polygamy and Same-Sex Relations

What the historical record makes abundantly clear is that the Western case against polygamy is markedly different from the Western case against sodomy and same-sex relations. The Western case against same-sex relations was (and for some still is) based first and foremost on the Bible. The Mosaic law commanded firmly: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” 180 “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall both be put to death.” 181 The Apostle Paul declared ominously that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness” including specifically the acts of “sodomites,” “sexual perverts,” and others who succumbed to “dishonorable passions”: “women [who] exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men [who] likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” 182 While some modern scholars see ambiguity in these passages, 183 the Christian tradition until recently treated these texts as a clear condemnation of same-sex activities and unions, let alone marriages. 184

179 See CHRISTIANITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: AN INTRODUCTION (John Witte, Jr. & Frank S. Alexander eds., 2010).
180 Leviticus 18:22 (Revised Standard).
181 Leviticus 20:13 (Revised Standard).
184 See detailed references in BRUNDAGE, supra note 100, at 57, 73–74, 147–49.
It was thus the church, not the state, that led the first campaigns against same-sex activities and unions in the Western tradition. The early canons of the church prohibited sodomy, buggery, transvestism, and other stated forms of “fornication” and “perversion,” spiritually punishing such sins and excommunicating recalcitrant sexual sinners. These prohibitions became more detailed and severe in the Germanic penitential literature that followed, and even more so in high medieval canon laws and scholastic texts. Sex between men was singled out as a particularly vile form of “unnatural” sin, even more so if it involved a cleric. While a few churchmen may have winked at occasional same-sex unions and even quietly blessed a few of them in special liturgies, one cannot rewrite this history by anecdote. The overwhelming teaching and practice of the historical Christian churches was to condemn same-sex relations.

Roman law, for its first 1,000 years, allowed same-sex acts and relationships—though only heterosexual couples of the proper class could contract valid marriages and produce heritable children. It was only after the fourth-century Christian conversion of Emperor Constantine that these biblically based laws against same-sex activities slowly soaked into Roman law. By the sixth century, the Christian Roman Emperor Justinian called sex between men an “abominable,” “abhorrent,” “diabolical,” and “reprehensible vice” that is so “contrary to nature” that the practice is “not committed [even] by beasts.” Since the biblical days of Sodom, Justinian declared, such “impious and criminal acts” and “filthy practices” have brought “the wrath of God” unto any community that countenanced them. “[S]evere measures” were thus needed to stamp out these acts for good. This classic Christian condemnation of sodomy and same-sex activities was echoed and elaborated in the civil law, canon law, and common law traditions thereafter. By the

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185 See Witte, supra note 3, at 101–43 (analyzing the treatment of polygamy in early canon law).
186 See id. at 101–95 (analyzing polygamy in Germanic penitential rules and the medieval ius commune).
187 See references in Brundage, supra note 100, at 212–14, 313–14, 396–400, 534–35
188 See Boswell, Same Sex Unions, supra note 183; Mark D. Jordan, Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage (2005).
189 See Witte, supra note 3, at 110–13; see also Brundage, supra note 100, at 48.
190 Grubbs, supra note 97, at 102.
193 Id. at 161.
twelfth and thirteenth centuries, church and state courts worked together to mete out severe punishment against convicted “sodomists,” including death by burning, beheading, or hanging (by their testicles and penises, no less!) for egregious offenders. 195

By marked contrast to same-sex relations, not a single command against “real polygamy” 196 appears in the Bible. The Mosaic law, in fact, contemplated polygamy in cases of seduction, 197 enslavement, 198 poverty, famine, 199 or premature death of one’s married brother, 200 and it made special provision for the maintenance and inheritance of multiple wives 201 and their children 202 in those cases. More than two dozen polygamists appear in the Hebrew Bible. 203 Almost all of them were good and faithful kings, judges, or aristocrats, and not one of them was punished for practicing polygamy per se. 204 While the New Testament condemned a wide range of sexual practices of the Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures of the day, it, too, was silent on polygamy, save for its special rules that a bishop or deacon had to be “the husband of one wife” 205 and a deaconess “the wife of one husband.” 206 The laity were commanded to “flee fornication,” 207 but in all the long New Testament lists of sexual sins illustrating what “fornication” means, not a word appears about real polygamy. 208

Accordingly, the Christian Church, for its first 1,000 years, said and did rather little about polygamy, though the practice persisted among first millennium Jews, seventh through tenth century Muslims, and various Indigenous groups in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. A few early Church Fathers called polygamy a dangerous betrayal of the natural ideals of marriage

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195 BRUNDAGE, supra note 100, at 397–401, 472–74.
196 See the Appendix for the definition of the term “real polygamy” as opposed to constructive, successive, and clerical polygamy.
199 Isaiah 4:1, 13:12.
200 Ruth 4:5–6, 13–21.
201 Exodus 21:7–12.
202 Deuteronomy 21:15–16.
203 WITTE, supra note 3, at 36, 44 & n.52.
204 King David was condemned for his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, not his polygamy. 2 Samuel 11:1–27. He still added Bathsheba to his harem, and she produced King Solomon, his successor. 2 Samuel 12:24.
205 1 Timothy 3:2–5.
206 1 Timothy 5:9.
207 1 Corinthians 6:18 (King James).
208 WITTE, supra note 3, at 68–71, 80.
as a creation of “two in one flesh.”209 Others criticized the spousal rivalries and family unrest of biblical and contemporary polygamists.210 But in the fifth century, the preeminent Western Church Father, St. Augustine, called real polygamy a perfectly natural form of sexual interaction and an efficient means of procreation, too.211 The Old Testament polygamists, said Augustine, committed no offense “against nature, [nor] against custom, [nor] against the [positive] law[].”212 “[F]or [polygamy] was no crime when it was the custom; and it is a crime now, because it is no longer the custom,” having been mostly stamped out by Roman criminal law.213 By the same token, the early canon law of the church said virtually nothing against real polygamy. Only a few cryptic canons on point have survived from the first millennium, and they called for real polygamists in the church to be punished at about the same level as petty thieves.214

It was the state, not the church, that always led the campaign against real polygamy in the West. Already half a millennium before the advent of Christianity, both Greek and Roman laws treated polygamy as a form of “barbar[ism]” and domestic “tyranny” that violated the natural human need for pair-bonding.215 “Love is born into every human being,” Plato wrote famously in the fourth century B.C.E.; “it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. ‘Love’ is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be

209 See id. at 99; Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31 (Revised Standard).
213 Augustine, Contra Faustum 21.47, translated in 4 NPNF, supra note 212, at 289.
214 See sources and discussion in Witte, supra note 3, at 114–21
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complete.”216 In extension of these ideas, early Roman laws also banned a man from having a wife and a concubine at the same time, even if they lived in separate households or cities.217 By the third century C.E., the pre-Christian Roman emperors declared real polygamy to be a crime of infamy, whose punishment their imperial successors gradually escalated. Polygamy was declared a capital crime in the ninth century, and so it remained in much of the West until the nineteenth century.218 With the exception of medieval England,219 it was the state courts of the West that, for nearly two millennia, took the lead on punishing real polygamy.

It was only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after the medieval church developed a robust sacramental theology and canon law of monogamous marriage, that it came to condemn polygamy clearly as a heretical violation of the exclusive and enduring marital sacrament.220 It was only then that the scholastic thinkers of the day marshaled a refined arsenal of natural law and natural justice arguments against real polygamy.221 It was only then that the

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217 CODE JUST. 5.26.1, reprinted in 2 CORPUS IURIS CIVILIS, supra note 94, at 216 (quoting Constantine in 321 C.E.); CODE JUST. 5.26.1, translated in 13 THE CIVIL LAW, supra note 94, at 213 (same); see GRUBBS, supra note 97, at 294–304 (discussing the pre-Constantian sources of this prohibition).
218 See supra note 99 and accompanying text.
220 WITTE, supra note 3, at 144–95.
221 See, e.g., 5 ST. THOMAS AQVNAS, SUMMA THEOLOGICA 2795 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., Thomas Moore Publ’g 1948) (c. 1274) [hereinafter AQVNAS, ST] (“[A] husband would by no means be willing for his wife to have another husband. Therefore he would be acting against the law of nature, were he to have another wife in addition.”); X 4.19.8 (John T. Noonan, Jr. trans., 1967), available at http://faculty.cua.edu/Pennington/Canon%20Law/marriagelaw.htm. The Decretals of Gregory IX quote a pronouncement of Pope Innocent III in 1201:

It is read that the patriarchs and other just men, both before and after the Law, had many wives at once. The Gospel or Law does not seem to command the contrary. . . . But this seems contrary and hostile to the Christian faith. From the beginning one rib was turned into one woman, and divine Scripture testifies that for this case a man shall leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. It did not say, “three or more”; but “two.” It did not say, “will cling to his wives,” but, “to his wife.” . . . That truth may prevail over falsehood, we assert without any hesitation that it was never lawful for anyone to have several wives at once, unless it was allowed them by divine revelation. . . . The true opinion is shown by the truthful testimony given witness to it in the Gospel, “Whoever puts away his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery.” So if one cannot lawfully take another when a wife is sent away, even more obviously he cannot do so when she is kept. So it is evident that plural marriage is reprobated for either sex, since they cannot be judged differently.

X 4.19.8 (citations omitted).
church courts—and for a time the Inquisition, too—joined the state courts in punishing real polygamists.\textsuperscript{222} And it was only then that polygamy was made a formidable “boundary marker” between true Christians of the West and various Jews, Muslims, Asians, Africans, heretics, and free thinkers who preached or practiced polygamy.\textsuperscript{223}

But even then the Christian tradition wavered in its opposition to polygamy. Late medieval Catholic luminaries like Cardinal Cajetan went back to Augustine and said that polygamy was a “perfectly natural” option in cases of personal or political necessity.\textsuperscript{224} Sixteenth-century Protestants like Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon went back to the Bible and ultimately considered consensual polygamy to be a better biblical option than brazen adultery or no-fault divorce to resolve hard marital cases.\textsuperscript{225} The biblical texts on polygamy also led a few early modern Christian communities like the Anabaptists in Münster to experiment with biblical polygamy anew.\textsuperscript{226} It also
led a few free thinkers such as Bernard Ochino,\textsuperscript{227} John Milton,\textsuperscript{228} and Martin Madan\textsuperscript{229} to suggest further that allowing polygamy might be a better way to end prostitution, rape, fornication, prostitution, concubinage, adultery, and bastardy than insisting on monogamy alone.\textsuperscript{230} It was only when the Council of Trent in 1563 issued its final confirmation of the sacramentality of monogamous marriage and its forceful anathema on the heresy of polygamy that this internal speculation about polygamy finally ended in Catholic circles.\textsuperscript{231} In turn, it was only when Protestants came to treat marriage systematically as a divine covenant modeled on God’s exclusive relationship with his elect\textsuperscript{232} or as a “little commonwealth” at the foundation of the commonwealths of church and state\textsuperscript{233} that Protestants had the theological machinery needed to declare anew that monogamy was the only valid form of marriage. Marriage, early modern Catholics and Protestants together now clearly said, was created as an enduring and exclusive “two in one flesh” union,\textsuperscript{234} rooted in the natural order of creation and modeled on the mysterious relationship of God and his elect,\textsuperscript{235} Christ and his church.\textsuperscript{236} Western states responded by reconfirming their traditional capital laws against polygamy and strengthening their prosecution and punishment of polygamy.\textsuperscript{237}
So what!—a modern skeptic might well say to all this history. So what if, two plus millennia ago, sodomy happened to be born a biblical sin and polygamy a Roman crime. So what if the first millennium church took the lead in punishing sodomy, and the first millennium state took the lead in punishing polygamy. So what if it took until the High Middle Ages or even the early modern Reformation era for church and state to combine their forces coherently in condemning and punishing both sodomy and polygamy. The reality is that for at least half a millennium the Christian Church and the Christian state together branded sodomy and polygamy as unnatural sins and crimes and together condemned and punished as sexually deviant anyone who felt naturally drawn to same-sex or plural unions. Under the hot, bright lights of modern constitutional liberty, these centuries-old sex “crimes” look equally prejudiced and problematic. Since consensual sodomy and same-sex unions (if not marriages) are now constitutionally protected, consensual polygamy and other forms of polyamorous union should be protected, too. Clever reconstruction of the variant ancient pedigrees of these purported crimes avails us little today. Dusty historical arguments about what is natural and unnatural just aren’t good enough anymore.

C. Natural Arguments

But there are striking differences between the traditional natural arguments against same-sex unions and those against polygamous unions. The heart of the traditional natural argument against same-sex relations was that they are by nature “non-generative.” However consensual and loving, same-sex intimacy simply cannot produce a child, which is the ultimate end and good of sexual intercourse. And having a child is essential for the preservation of the human race and for the perpetuation of one’s own family name, business, identity, memory, and more. Like every other animal, Aristotle already put it in the fourth century B.C.E., a “male and female must unite for the reproduction of the species,” and humans are thus born with “the natural impulse . . . to leave behind them something of the same nature as themselves.” Same-sex partners simply cannot procreate together, rendering their sexual intimacy unnatural.
Moreover, the traditional natural argument went, even the beasts do not engage in same-sex activities, despite their lack of reason and conscience. Many animals do kill and eat each other, take each other’s homes, food, mates, and offspring, and ignore other creatures in peril, even those of their own species. All of this violates basic natural laws of homicide, theft, adultery, family, and charity that humans have discovered and learned to implement through the use of their reason and conscience. But even the beasts, following natural instincts alone, know that same-sex activities are unnatural, even repulsive. If even the beasts instinctually know better, the traditional argument went, even the most irrational and irresponsible humans should also know that same-sex desires, relations, and activities are unnatural.

Finally, the human sexual body itself reflects what is natural, the tradition taught. A penis can slide into a vagina easily and comfortably, while anal penetration requires artificial lubrication and often causes pain. Vaginal intercourse can bring intense orgasmic pleasure to both parties in a way that oral sex cannot, absent simultaneous masturbation and “spilling of seed” by the party performing fellatio or cunnilingus. Face-to-face missionary vaginal sex brings the couple’s whole bodies more closely together in intimacy than any other sexual positions. We might blush or roll at our eyes at these distinctions today, using our imaginations or the Internet to find exceptions and counterexamples. But, historically, those differences between male–female and same-sex intimacy were taken as important evidence that the natural end or telos of the human sexual body was for straight sex, not gay or lesbian sex.

All of these traditional natural arguments against same-sex relations are seriously disputed today, and their erosion has helped topple traditional Western laws against consensual sodomy, same-sex unions, and in some places same-sex marriage. But none of these traditional natural arguments applies

241 See, e.g., Michael J. Perry, Constitutional Rights, Moral Controversy, and the Supreme Court 93–130 (2009); Michael J. Perry, Human Rights in the Constitutional Law of the United States 112–57 (2013). For a recent defense of these traditional natural arguments against same-sex and
to polygamy. Procreation is not only possible but is enhanced by having multiple wives rather than one. Polygamy is not only known in nature but is the predominant form of reproduction in most animals, including more than 95% of all higher primates. Pairing birds, voles, and a few other animals are the monogamous exception.\footnote{245} The human body is not only capable of having multiple sex partners but allows a man to impregnate several women in a night, though a woman can have only one pregnancy at a time no matter how many men she takes into her bed. That’s why Augustine\footnote{246} and many later Western sages such as Hugo Grotius\footnote{247} thought that only polygyny, not polyandry, was a “perfectly natural” form of procreation. And that’s why the current erosion of the traditional natural argument against same-sex relations has little bearing on the Western case against polygamy.

The traditional natural argument against polygamy was of a different order. Nearly eight centuries ago, the great Dominican scholar, Thomas Aquinas, put the argument clearly, and it became a commonplace of Western thought and law thereafter, especially among Enlightenment liberals and common law jurists who took it as axiomatic.\footnote{248} Human beings, Thomas argued, are distinct among the animals in having perennial sex drives rather than annual mating seasons.\footnote{249} They produce vulnerable babies who need the support of both their mother and father for a long time in order to survive and thrive.\footnote{250} Women bond naturally with children; men do so only if they are certain of their paternity.\footnote{251} Exclusive and enduring monogamous unions are the only way that humans can at once have regular sex, paternal certainty, and mutual caretaking for their young children.\footnote{252} Humans have thus learned by natural inclination


\footnote{246 Witte, supra note 3, at 89–93.}


\footnote{248 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, bk. III, pt. II, at 147–52 (Vernon J. Bourke trans., Univ. of Notre Dame Press 1975) (c. 1260) [hereinafter Aquinas, SCG]; 5 Aquinas, ST, supra note 221, at 2699–700, 2794–801, 2806–07. See detailed discussion in Witte, supra note 1.}

\footnote{249 5 Aquinas, ST, supra note 221, at 2699–700.}

\footnote{250 Id.}

\footnote{251 Aquinas, SCG, supra note 248, at 150–52.}

\footnote{252 Id. at 147–50.
and hard experience to the contrary to develop enduring pair-bonding strategies as the most effective means of reproduction.\textsuperscript{253}

Polyandry (one wife with multiple husbands) is naturally unjust to children, Aquinas continued.\textsuperscript{254} If a woman has sex with several husbands, it removes the likelihood that any child born to that woman will clearly belong to any one husband.\textsuperscript{255} That will undermine paternal certainty and consequent paternal investment in their children’s care.\textsuperscript{256} The children will suffer from chronic neglect and deprivation, and the wife will be overburdened trying to care for them and trying to tend to her multiple husbands and their rampant sexual needs at once.\textsuperscript{257}

Polygyny (one man with multiple wives) is naturally unjust to wives and children. It does not necessarily erode paternal certainty.\textsuperscript{258} So long as his multiple wives are faithful to him alone, a man can be assured of being the father of any children born in his household.\textsuperscript{259} But this requires a man to pen up his wives like cattle, isolating them from other roving males even when his own energies to tend to them are already dissipated over the several women gathered in his household.\textsuperscript{260} It places half-siblings in competition for every scrap of food, shelter, and paternal attention, and sets their mothers against each other and especially against rival stepchildren in the household.\textsuperscript{261} This is “not . . . an association of equals, but, instead, a sort of slavery on the part of the wife,” said Aquinas.\textsuperscript{262} It betrays the fundamental requirements of fidelity and mutuality of husband and wife, of the undivided and undiluted love and friendship that become a proper marriage.\textsuperscript{263} It also betrays the fundamental bond between parents and children reflected in the Mosaic Commandment to “[h]onor your father and mother, [s]o that your days may be long.”\textsuperscript{264} And it betrays the fundamental command of love of Jesus to “[l]et the children come”\textsuperscript{265} to receive love, support, protection, nurture, and education from their

\textsuperscript{253} 5 AQ\textsc{uinas}, ST, supra note 221, at 2806–07.
\textsuperscript{254} AQ\textsc{uinas}, SCG, supra note 248, at 152; 5 AQ\textsc{uinas}, ST, supra note 221, at 2794–801.
\textsuperscript{255} AQ\textsc{uinas}, SCG, supra note 248, at 152.
\textsuperscript{256} Id.
\textsuperscript{257} Id. at 147–48, 151–52.
\textsuperscript{258} See 5 AQ\textsc{uinas}, ST, supra note 221, at 2794–805.
\textsuperscript{259} See AQ\textsc{uinas}, SCG, supra note 248, at 150–51.
\textsuperscript{260} See id.
\textsuperscript{261} 5 AQ\textsc{uinas}, ST, supra note 221, at 2794–801.
\textsuperscript{262} AQ\textsc{uinas}, SCG, supra note 248, at 148.
\textsuperscript{263} See id. at 150–51.
\textsuperscript{264} See \textit{Exodus} 20:12 (Revised Standard).
\textsuperscript{265} See Mark 10:14 (Revised Standard).
Polygamy is thus unnatural, unjust, and unfair, Thomas concluded. It violates the natural law of God.

Later Catholic and Protestant writers argued that polygamy violates not only the natural law of God but also the natural rights of wives and children. Calvinist jurist Theodore Beza put this argument clearly nearly five centuries ago. Beza took the Ten Commandments of the Bible to be the best summary of the natural law, but he saw parallel commands in many other formulations of the natural law. He argued that polygamy violates the commandments against adultery, theft, false testimony, and coveting all at once. Polygamy is a form of adultery that breaches a man’s duty to be faithful to his first wife alone. It is a form of theft that breaches his duty to provide sufficient material support for his wife and their children even after his death. It is a form of false witness that breaches his duty to honor his promise of marital fidelity. And polygamy is a form of coveting that breaches a man’s duty not to lust after his female neighbor, as the lustful King David did in drawing the already married Bathsheba into his already full harem.

Each of these natural duties about fidelity, property, honesty, and respect rooted in the Decalogue has correlative natural rights that polygamy also breaches, Beza continued. Polygamy breaches the first wife’s natural rights to marital fidelity and trust, to ongoing marital property and material security, and to contractual expectations and reliance on her husband’s fidelity to the marriage contract. It breaches the children’s natural rights to proper support and inheritance and to the undiluted and unharrassed care, nurture, and education of their father and mother together. And polygamy breaches a neighbor’s rights to have an equal opportunity to marry without having most of the eligible


267 See THEODORE BEZA, TRACTATIO DE POLYGAMIA [A WORK ON POLYGAMY] (Geneva, Apud Eustathium Vignon 1587) (1568).


269 See Exodus 20:14–17 (Revised Standard).

270 See BEZA, supra note 267, at 12–14, 28–29.

271 Id. at 12–16, 19, 24–25.

272 Id. at 39–40.

273 See 2 Samuel 11:27 (Revised Standard).

274 See WITTE, supra note 3, at 257–60. See also sources in WITTE, supra note 268, at 57–58, 114–18, 139–40.
women horded in one harem or having his own wife or daughters subject to the
covetous privations of a powerful polygamous neighbor. Polygamy was thus
doubly unnatural, Beza concluded, a violation of natural law and natural rights
alike.275

This was a critical shift in emphasis from the natural wrongs of polygamy
to the natural rights that it violated. Polygamy was now viewed not only as
objectively wrong but also subjectively harmful. It violated not only the natural
law of God but also the natural rights of God’s children.276 Early modern
Catholics and Protestants drew on these formulations in their critique of the
polygamy of Old Testament patriarchs, Ottoman Turks, and traditional
Africans and Asians alike.277 Particularly during the age of discovery in the
sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, both traveler’s diaries and colonial chronicles
were filled with observations about the unnatural practice of polygamy in the
New World and the invectives against the natural rights violations of women
and children that this practice occasioned.278

Liberal philosophers and common law jurists from the seventeenth century
onward drew directly on these traditional natural law and natural rights
arguments against polygamy, even while they supported the legal
disestablishment of Christianity.279 Most liberals posited natural rights as
“inherent” in human nature or the state of nature rather than commanded in the
Bible or the order of creation.280 But they came to the same conclusion as
earlier Christians that polygamy violated the natural rights and liberties
especially of women and children. They opposed marital polygamy for the
same reason they opposed political tyranny. Seventeenth-century English
philosopher John Locke, for example, regarded polygamy as a violation of the
natural-born equality of men and women, as well as the natural rights of
children to be properly nurtured and fully supported by both their mother and
father until they were fully emancipated.281 For Locke, the natural laws

275 See Witte, supra note 3, at 257–60, 273–74.
276 Id.
277 See id. at 158–63 (discussing critiques on Muslim polygamy); see also id. at 282–85 (discussing
attacks on polygamists documented in travel diaries).
278 See, e.g., James Muldoon, The Americas in the Spanish World Order: The Justification for
Conquest in the Seventeenth Century 78–95 (1994); The Spiritual Conversion of the Americas
(James Muldoon ed., 2004).
279 See Witte, supra note 3, at 348–88.
280 Id.
favoring monogamy trumped religious arguments for polygamy, and he would allow no religious-liberty exemptions from criminal prohibitions on polygamy.\textsuperscript{282} A century later, leading common law jurist William Blackstone condemned polygamy as a “singularly barbaric” violation of the reciprocal natural rights and duties of husbands and wives, and parents and children, which no modern civilization could countenance.\textsuperscript{283} Polygamy for him was a grave offense against public health and public order.\textsuperscript{284} Eighteenth-century women’s rights advocate Mary Wollstonecraft castigated polygamy for privileging men and degrading women, forcing them to compete with other women, especially the more nubile and fertile young women whom their husbands would inevitably drag home to replace them when they grew barren or lost their good looks.\textsuperscript{285} A woman is not just a temporary object of beauty or dispensable channel of procreation, Wollstonecraft insisted. A woman is a full citizen who must be given the right, education, and opportunity to choose her own public and private vocations and to enjoy her natural-born liberty and equality within her own monogamous home if she chooses to marry.\textsuperscript{286} Marriage must be structured as a “dyadic friendship.”\textsuperscript{287} Scottish philosophers Henry Home and David Hume argued that polygamy would breed tyrannical patriarchy or servile submissiveness in children, depending on their and their mother’s place in the polygamous home.\textsuperscript{288} Children of polygamy simply cannot learn the healthy balances of authority and liberty, equality and respect, and property and responsibility that they need to survive, let alone thrive. For


\textsuperscript{283} See 4 WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, COMMENTARIES *164; see also 1 id. at *434–47 (discussing the reciprocal rights of parents and children).

\textsuperscript{284} 4 id. at *163–64.


\textsuperscript{286} Id. at 103, 106.

\textsuperscript{287} This phrase is from EILEEN HUNT BOTTING, WOLLSTONECRAFT, MILL AND WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS (forthcoming 2016).

Home and Hume, and nineteenth-century American writers who echoed them,289 this was no way to treat the natural rights of the child.

So what!—a modern skeptic again might say to all this talk about natural law, natural justice, or natural rights. Traditional “natural” arguments against polygamy are no more convincing than traditional “biblical” or “theological” arguments. After all, modern philosophers and linguists have made clear that “nature” talk is just a thin and movable cover for the imposition of underlying religious and cultural preferences and prejudices. They have proved that “irrefutable” principles of reason or “objective” facts of nature are always conditioned by a community’s levels of socialization and scientific knowledge. They have shown that “self-evident” truths are only temporary normative stopping points in endlessly evolving cultures.290 Take the “naturalist” argument for exclusive and enduring heterosexual marriages that Thomas Aquinas introduced and nearly eight centuries of Western jurists and philosophers thereafter repeated.291 Today, genetic testing has made paternity much easier to establish. Contraceptives have made extramarital sex much safer to pursue. Artificial reproductive technology, adoption, and surrogacy (maybe cloning soon, too) have made reproduction readily available to men and women, straights and gays, single and married, couples or communes. And the welfare state is there to help all these parents if they or their children have need. What Aquinas took as objective “natural” conditions about human sexuality and heterosexual pair-bonding strategies of reproduction were, in fact, conditioned by the level of science, economy, and politics of his day.292

As the conditions changed, domestic arrangements have changed, too. LGBTQ advocates have used this evolutionary insight to open the door to same-sex equality and marriage. Polygamy advocates can and must do the same, the argument goes.


290 See recitation and critique of these arguments in Don S. Browning, A Natural Law Theory of Marriage, 46 ZYGON 733 (2011).


292 I respond to this argument in a forthcoming volume, FROM CONTRACT TO COVENANT: ESSAYS ON CHURCH, STATE, AND FAMILY LIFE (forthcoming 2016).
Shifting the discourse from “natural law” to “natural rights” arguments against polygamy only compounds the problem, the skeptical argument continues. For natural rights—or “universal human rights” as we now call them—are also cultural constructs. They are rooted in and reflective of the values and beliefs of the Western cultures that first named and used them. 293 Theodore Beza and other early modern Christians were at least honest in rooting these natural rights firmly in the Bible and the order of creation. But post-Christian liberals have rooted these rights in the shifting sands of human nature and the state of nature. Jeremy Bentham was perhaps a bit too harsh in calling all this “nonsense upon stilts.” 294 Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. was perhaps a bit too cynical in calling a human right “only the hypostasis of a prophecy,” a mere prediction of what might happen to “those who do things said to contravene it.” 295 But the reality is that human rights are just normative totems of a community’s ideals, procedural means to enforce a favored set of social and institutional relationships. Calling these rights “natural” or “human” does not change the reality that most purportedly “universal” human rights in vogue today are principally Western (Christian) constructions of value and belief. They have little salience or cogency in polygamous communities around the world that have chosen to reject rights talk, or at least Western formulations of human rights. How do you answer a sincere good faith Muslim who claims his or her right to practice polygamy under the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights? 296 Or an African tribesman who anchors his claim to polygamy in the South African Bill of Rights? 297 Can you really tell them that their rights claims and documents are wrong? On what grounds? Maybe Bentham was on to something after all. 298

295 Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Natural Law, 32 HARV. L. REV. 40, 42 (1918).
298 I answer some of these arguments against (natural) rights talk in John Witte, Jr., Introduction to CHRISTIANITY and HUMAN RIGHTS: AN INTRODUCTION, supra note 179, at 8; John Witte, Jr., Rights and Liberties in Early Modern Protestantism: The Example of Calvinism, in CHRISTIANITY and HUMAN RIGHTS:
2015]

WHY TWO IN ONE FLESH?  1725

D. Harm Arguments

But even if we reject the validity of human rights, we cannot deny the reality of human wrongs. Even if we reject the capacity of the state to prohibit fault, we cannot deny the state the power to punish harm. And even if a global human rights campaign against polygamy might be out, a Western insistence on maintaining monogamy alone might still be in. For the most enduring argument in the Western tradition is that polygamy is too often the cause, consequence, or corollary of harm, especially to the most vulnerable populations.299 And that argument about the harms of polygamy still has power today.

Some 1,800 years ago, ancient Jewish Rabbis300 and early Church Fathers301 alike warned that polygamy was “trouble,”302 even when practiced by the most noble and God-fearing men and women. Think of Abraham with Sarah and Hagar,303 Jacob with Rachel and Leah,304 Elkanah with Hannah and Peninnah.305 All of these biblical households suffered bitter rivalry between their wives, bitter disputes among their children over inheritance and political succession, deadly competition among the half-siblings that ultimately escalated to incest, adultery, kidnapping, enslavement, banishment, and more. Think of the great King David who lustfully murdered Bathsheba’s husband to add her to his already ample harem.306 Or think of King Solomon with his thousand wives and concubines who led him into idolatry, and whose children


303 Genesis 16:1–6.


305 1 Samuel 1:1–8.

306 2 Samuel 11:27.
ended up raping, abducting, and killing each other, precipitating civil war in ancient Israel.\textsuperscript{307}

Some 800 years ago, William of Auvergne and other observers of Middle Eastern Muslim polygamy argued that the “bent love” of polygamy was inevitably, if not inherently, harmful.\textsuperscript{308} Women are harmed because they are reduced to rival slaves within the household, exploited for sex with an increasingly sterile and distracted husband, sometimes deprived of the children they do produce and forced to make do for themselves and their children with too few resources as other women and children are added to the household against their wishes.\textsuperscript{309} Children are harmed because their chances of birth and survival are diminished by their calculating fathers who might contracept, abort, smother, or sell them, and by their mothers who sometimes lack the resources, support, and protection to bring them to term, let alone to adulthood.\textsuperscript{310} Men are harmed because they do not have the time, energy, or resources to support their polygamous households and because their minds and hearts cannot rest if they are always on the lookout for another woman to add to their harems or for another dangerous man who will abduct his women.\textsuperscript{311} And societies are harmed because polygamy results in too many unattached men who become menaces to public order and morality, and creates too many ad hoc seats of domestic power which are based on sheer numbers rather than on legitimate political succession or election.\textsuperscript{312}

Some 500 years ago, European critics of the Anabaptist town of Münster documented the harms done when religious leaders gained power over an isolated polygamous community.\textsuperscript{313} There, a group of young men, giddy with lust and theocratic pretensions, combined charisma, brutality, and biblical platitudes to force a gullible Christian community to adopt their utopian vision of polygamy.\textsuperscript{314} Old couples were forced to end their marriages and start again. Young girls and women were coerced into premature and unwanted marriages; even little prepubescent girls were fair game and were literally raped to

\textsuperscript{307} 1 Kings 11:1–6.
\textsuperscript{308} See discussions of William of Auvergne’s views in Peter Biller, The Measure of Multipitude: Population in Medieval Thought 60–88 (2000); Witte, supra note 3, at 161–63.
\textsuperscript{309} Biller, supra note 308, at 60–89.
\textsuperscript{310} Id.
\textsuperscript{311} Id.
\textsuperscript{312} Id.
\textsuperscript{313} Witte, supra note 3, at 200, 220–24; see also Cairncross, supra note 226, at 1–33, 57; Leo Miller, John Milton Among the Polygamophiles 20–21, 45–46, 205–08 nn.19–22 (1974).
\textsuperscript{314} Miller, supra note 313, at 45–46.
Husbands collected wives like spiritual trophies, measuring their faith by the size of their harems and nurseries. Wives were used and then spurned when they were pregnant or nursing or when the next wife was added to the harem. Polygamous households were filled with bickering wives and children, who were then cowed into silence with threats of the sword. Wives who still objected, or who rejected their husband’s sexual advances to protest the unwanted polygamy, were summarily executed. Community dissenters and critics of these utopian excesses were summarily banished or executed.

Some 150 years ago, American critics of Mormon polygamy found much the same thing on the Western frontier. First, they charged, polygamy harmed young girls who were too often tricked, coerced, or commanded to enter spiritual marriages with older men and had too little education and too few means of escape when inevitably neglected or replaced by another favorite wife. Their plight was exacerbated by the practice of unilateral male divorce that allowed men to banish wives who failed to fall in line or who no longer offered children, labor, support, or sex. Women within the home were placed into competition with each other and the children for ever thinner resources and were reduced in effect to the status of slaves—bought and sold by wealthy and powerful men, hunted down and returned if they became fugitives, and put to hard work under unrelenting and unsupervised patriarchal discipline. Second, polygamy licensed and encouraged male lust for sex and power. It induced inevitable restlessness on the part of some males to add more women to their harems. It invited inevitable repression and ostracism of rival males eager to find a wife or lover among the scant supply of women who were left to them. It favored marriage by the richest and most powerful, not necessarily the fittest and most virtuous males of the community. And third, polygamy created religious power structures that rivaled the legitimate power of the state. Church leaders slowly gained control of the property, economy, and work force. They compelled their congregants, workers, and family members to support their polygamous policies and to vote for new officials who would do the same. They colluded to create laws and policies favoring polygamy and to

315 See CAIRNCROSS, supra note 226, at 15–17.
316 Id. at 14–15.
317 Id. at 16–19, 23–24.
318 See detailed sources and analysis in GORDON, supra note 18, at 93, 96, 112, 262 n.19, 266 n.51; WITTE, supra note 3, at 429–39.
319 GORDON, supra note 18, at 63–65.
suborn the perjury and contempt of those polygamists who were sought by the authorities. And when government officials sought to restore legal and moral order in the territory, these communities confronted them with boycotts, guns, riots, and violence. This simply could not be countenanced in a democratic land dedicated to the separation of church and state.321

Today, observers of polygamous communities scattered about the West point to similar problems of higher than average incidences of arranged, coerced, and underage marriages of young girls to older men; rape and statutory rape; wife and child abuse; social and educational deprivation of women and children in polygamous households; abuse and ostracism of young boys and poorer men who compete for fewer brides; rampant social welfare abuses by oversized polygamous families; social isolation of polygamous communities; and dangerous conflations of religious and political authority.322 Outside of the West, most polygamous cultures are rural, poor, and uneducated, with low technology and labor-intensive economies that require many children to do the work and that feature low survival rates among these children.323 Or they are part of powerful political and religious families in Traditional tribal settings, Muslim settings, or both. But regardless of “whether it is practiced in a Western democracy or sub-Saharan Africa, polygamy produces harmful effects that ripple throughout a society,” Brown University political scientist Rose McDermott concludes after a thorough cross-cultural study of polygamy in over 170 countries. All these polygamous communities suffer from increased levels of physical and sexual abuse against women, increased rates of maternal mortality, shortened female life expectancy, lower levels of education for girls and boys, lower levels of equality for women, higher levels of discrimination against women, increased rates of female genital mutilation, increased rates of trafficking in women and decreased levels of civil and political liberties for all citizens.324

321 See H.R. REP. NO. 49-2735, at 7 (1886).
322 See, e.g., ALTMAN & GINAT, supra note 23, at 41, 468; BAILEY & KAUFMAN, supra note 26; Scheidel, supra note 96; see also Chamberlin & Guiora, supra note 58.
323 See supra note 138 and accompanying text.
The Western legal tradition has thus long regarded polygamy as a *malum in se* offense—something “evil in itself.” Other *malum in se* offenses today include slavery, sex trafficking, prostitution, indentured servitude, obscenity, bestiality, incest, sex with children, self-mutilation, organ-selling, cannibalism, and more. Polygamy is usually regarded as less egregious than some other offenses on this list. But, like other *malum in se* offenses, polygamy is too often the cause, consequence, or corollary of other wrongdoing. That someone wants to engage in these activities voluntarily for reasons of religion, bravery, custom, or autonomy makes no difference. That other cultures past and present allow such activities makes no difference. That these activities don’t necessarily cause harm in every case also makes no difference. For nearly two millennia, the Western legal tradition has included polygamy among the crimes that are inherently wrong because polygamy routinizes patriarchy, deprecates women, jeopardizes consent, fractures fidelity, divides loyalty, dilutes devotion, fosters inequity, promotes rivalry, foments lust, condones adultery, harms children, and more—not in every case, to be sure, but in enough cases to make the practice of polygamy too risky to condone as a viable legal option.

Furthermore, allowing religious polygamy as an exception to the rules is even more dangerous, the Western tradition has concluded, because it will make some churches, mosques, tribes, and temples a law unto themselves. It is notable that no religious community in the West today regards polygamy as an absolute religious requirement. It’s a custom not a command, an option not an obligation, for the faithful. It is also notable that some Western communities that once preached and practiced polygamy, namely, Jews and Mormons, and a number of Muslims, too, have now rejected the practice. But even if polygamy were religiously obligatory, modern Western constitutional laws still empower states to prohibit behavior that the states consider harmful or dangerous. Again, some religious communities and their members might well thrive with the freedom to practice polygamy. But, inevitably, closed repressive and isolated regimes, like Anabaptist Münster or the

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325 See *BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY* 1103 (10th ed. 2014).
326 See *GOLDFEDER*, supra note 166.
327 See *WITTE*, supra note 3, at 55–63 (explaining the restriction and eventual ban on polygamy in medieval Judaism); supra note 23 and accompanying text (explaining that after 1890 Mormons rejected polygamy and eventually made it a ground for excommunication); supra notes 150–61 and accompanying text (explaining Islamic law restrictions on polygamy, and the growing abandonment of the practice in world-wide Islam).
328 See *supra* notes 313–17 and accompanying text.
Fundamentalist Mormon Yearning for Zion Ranch,329 will also emerge—with underage girls duped or coerced into sex and marriages with older men, with women and children trapped in sectarian communities with no realistic access to help or protection from the state, and no real legal recourse against a religious community that is following its own rules. The West prizes liberty, equality, and consent too highly to court such a risk.

So what!—a skeptic might argue for the final time. Monogamous households are filled with many ugly harms, too: wife and child abuse, deprivation and abandonment of children, wastrel habits, welfare abuses, and, sadly, so much more. That has not led to the abolition of monogamy but only to the closer policing and punishment of each harm as it occurs. Why not do the same here? If polygamy really does cause or correlate with various harms, why not just punish those harms when they occur? If polygamous wives or children really do suffer from increased levels of abuse, neglect, or deprivation, why not give them model contracts with strong, built-in protections for the vulnerable that are scrupulously enforced? If religious leaders really do subvert due process, why not let polygamous parties just litigate their claims in state courts? If religious communities really do isolate their members at the risk of abuse, why not make polygamy more mainstream, transparent, and accountable? If Big Love and Sister Wives can make the polygamous family work, why can’t everyone else be given a fair chance?

E. Symbolic Arguments

“Bad cases make bad law,” a familiar legal dictum has it, and so it is here. The compelling case for the lawfulness of polygamy is when three or more well-educated parties—similar in wealth, ability, and opportunity, eyes and doors wide open—choose to enter into a polygamous union. They can calculate and negotiate the costs and benefits, and the advantages and disadvantages, of their pending plural union. They can protect themselves through prenuptial and postnuptial contracts and through their own independent means. They can hire lawyers, accountants, private investigators, and security guards to help them if their partners betray or endanger them or their children. And they can hit the airwaves and social media to elicit sympathy and action if the state authorities don’t respond quickly or fully enough. For these exceptional parties, the state criminal prohibition against polygamy hardly seems necessary.

329 See supra notes 31–37 and accompanying text.
But general criminal prohibitions against polygamy are designed not for the exceptional case, but for the typical case. And throughout Western history and still today, a typical case of polygamy too often involves vulnerable parties that do not have the knowledge, resources, or connections to engage in the kind of self-protection and self-help available to a Big Love or Sister Wives wife. And while every Western state has general laws on the books against wife and child abuse; coerced marriage and statutory rape of young girls; deprivation of food, shelter, and education of children; welfare abuse; and more, the reality is that these laws in action have provided far too little support and protection for these vulnerable populations, especially as state administrative agencies face shrinking budgets, dwindling personnel, and political disincentives to prosecute. If the practice of polygamy is one root of these sundry domestic problems, why not enforce the criminal laws against this practice? If the legislatures have put and left polygamy laws on the books, by what right do state prosecutors or law enforcement officials simply ignore them?

But these traditional criminal laws against polygamy are more than just prudential prophylactics against harm. They also play an important symbolic and teaching function that the state and its family laws still play in our lives. Historically, in the West, the laws against polygamy were part of a broader set of family laws designed to support the classical Western ideal that the monogamous family was the most primal and essential institution of Western society and culture. Aristotle and the Roman Stoics called the union of husband and wife, and parent and child, the “foundation of the polis” and “the private font of public virtue.” The Church Fathers and medieval Catholics called the monogamous household the “seedbed” of the city, “the force that welds society together,” the sacrament that produces structural and symbolic stability. Early modern Protestants and Anglo-American common lawyers

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330 Chamberlin & Guiora, supra note 58; see also Reference re: Section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada, 2011 BCS 1588 (Can.); Wray et al., supra note 56.

331 Weismann, supra note 51 (noting that under elementary separation of powers principles, it is for the judiciary, not the executive branch, to be in the business of deciding which laws are enforceable under the state constitution).

332 See CATHLEEN KAVENY, LAW’S VIRTUES: FOSTERING AUTONOMY AND SOLIDARITY IN AMERICAN SOCIETY 97–110, 219–42 (2012) (examining the “teaching” function of the law); WITTE, supra note 293, at 263–92.

333 See WITTE, supra note 8, at 331–64 (listing detailed sources).

334 Id. at 4.

called the stable household a “little church,” a “little commonwealth,” the first school of love and justice, nurture and education, charity and citizenship.\(^{336}\)

John Locke and the Enlightenment philosophers called monogamous marriage “the first society” to be formed as men and women moved from the state of nature to an organized society dedicated to the rule of law and the protection of natural rights. In all these traditional metaphors, what was being celebrated and taught was a certain vision of the good life and the good society, with monogamous marriage at its core.\(^{337}\)

For all of the advances in our contemporary Western understandings of liberty, autonomy, and equality, and for all our current wariness about totalitarian state power, we still look to the Western state among other institutions to teach and encourage activities or relationships that cater to private and public “health, safety, and welfare” and discourage activities and relationships that do not. In the area of marriage and family life, we have shrunk the domestic ideals traditionally taught and symbolized by the marital ideals of sacrament or covenant.\(^{338}\) The modern state now allows and protects straight and same-sex relations, divorce and remarriage, marital and non-marital cohabitation, and more. And modern family law systems, among others, have moved away from many of the absolute “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” commands of the past, as well as the harsh and sometimes brutal measures used to enforce them. But still, in the “soft law” between these two apodictic poles, the modern state still does its teaching work, “nudging” its citizens in one direction or another.\(^{339}\) The state encourages, exemplifies, supports, funds, facilitates, and licenses certain behavior that conduces to the public and private health, safety, and welfare of the community. It discourages and warns against the opposite types of behavior and provides it with no funding, facilitation, licenses, or support.

The modern Western state does not require its citizens to get married, but it does “nudge” in that direction. It provides state marital licenses, tax and social security incentives, spousal evidentiary and health care privileges, and

\(^{336}\) Witte, supra note 8, at 257.

\(^{337}\) Id. at 284.

\(^{338}\) See sources on the important symbolic function of marriage in society cited supra note 222. But note the recent resurgence of a covenant marriage movement described in Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective (John Witte, Jr. & Eliza Ellison eds., 2005).

hundreds of additional federal and state benefits and incentives. It models monogamous marriage in its political officials. Most Western nations still look askance on the single political candidate or elected official who commits adultery (France and Italy excepted). In turn, the state still prohibits polygamy as a state-licensed form of marriage, but it increasingly tolerates de facto polygamy through much of the West. Constitutional norms of sexual liberty and domestic autonomy allow adults to live with multiple self-declared spouses so long as they all abide by the laws of adult consensual sex and so long as they do not seek marital licenses or welfare benefits from the state for more than one wife. The modern state also now provides the legal means to meet the traditional “necessity” arguments for polygamy. If a man wants more children than his wife can give him, he can adopt more, have them out of wedlock, or hire a surrogate. If a spouse is frustrated because his or her spouse cannot or will not have sex, unilateral divorce and remarriage options are now available. These steps are not costless or even easy, but they largely meet the concerns that historically justified polygamy in cases of necessity.

In a democratic polity, the judgment of whether the state should “nudge” for or against certain behavior—let alone prescribe or proscribe it—rests ultimately in the people. And, at least in the West, the “people” have decided that they still favor faithful monogamous marriage. “Two’s company, three’s a crowd,” a common Western adage has it. That speaks to the reality that in certain long-term social contexts—especially in the intimacies of bed, board, and bath—there’s something intuitively more attractive in being with one other person, not two or more. Yes, some say that dyadic attraction is a purely social construct, a routinization of habits that have gathered around an artificially privileged monogamous norm. They point to people who like living, sleeping, and bathing with several people at once; the commune, communal bath, and common bed are hardly anomalies among humans of various times and places. But these ample exceptions do not swallow the general preference for dyadic sexual pair-bonding in the West—especially among Western women, who have rarely practiced or condoned polyamory historically or today. Let’s face it: human polygamy is and always has been primarily about a small group of men seeking the social, moral, and legal imprimatur to have and to hold sundry females at once. But there’s plenty of empirical evidence to show that most men and women alike are instinctively attracted to single partner intimacy for the long term and instinctively repulsed and angered if forced to share their bed

and partner with a third party. Despite our wide cultural acceptance of sexual liberty in the West, adultery or sexual infidelity still breaks marriage and intimate relationships more often than any other cause.341

While some elite scholars and media now find polygamy acceptable, and even desirable, the vast majority of people in the United States still find polygamy to be deeply objectionable, even though many traditional sexual taboos no longer rinkle them. According to a 2013 Gallup poll, solid majorities of the American population now accept birth control (91%), divorce (68%), non-marital sex (63%), and having children outside of marriage (60%). Acceptance of abortion (42%) and gay and lesbian relations (59%) remains lower, owing to sustained beliefs and campaigns against both, but even those numbers are four times higher than they were fifty years ago. By striking contrast, only 14% of American people accept polygamy; this is double the number of 7% that accepted polygamy in 2001, perhaps owing to the growing media campaign for it, but that number is still remarkably low. Only adultery (6%) ranks lower in social acceptability.342

This suggests that, at least in the United States, any change in traditional polygamy laws must come from below, not from on high, by gradual democratic adjustments in each state, not by judicial pronouncements from the federal courts. The constitutional case for polygamy is weak compared to the cases supporting the liberalization of other traditional sex, marriage, and family laws; there are just too many serious concerns about harms and rights on the other side.343 Forcing the issue by constitutional brinkmanship might well trigger a strong democratic backlash if the fallout from Roe v. Wade is any indication. There may come a time that the West will more readily accept polygamy as a valid marital option that is licensed and regulated by the state. Polygamy may eventually move from Stonewall to Windsor, as same-sex relations have done. But that cultural and legal pilgrimage, in my judgment, is still a long way off.

For the West to maintain its traditional stance against polygamy does not mean that it needs to trade in all the ugly rhetoric that has historically attended

341 See, e.g., GROWING TOGETHER: PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS THE LIFESPAN (Frieder R. Lang & Karen L. Fingerman eds., 2004) (giving various perspectives on dyadic relationships); THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS (Anita L. Vangelisti & Daniel Perlman eds., 2006).


343 See Den Otter, supra note 166.
this stance. We don’t have to posit unilinear narratives of progress that brand polygamists as “barbarous” and “savages” lacking in virtue or value. We don’t have to say that the West is more “advanced” or progressive than the rest because of its monogamy. We don’t have to repeat the haughty and xenophobic arguments used by Graeco-Roman writers against their imperial subjects, by early Christians against Jews and Muslims, by early modern Europeans against New World natives, by nineteenth-century Americans against emancipated slaves, Native Americans, Asian workers, or traditional Mormons who practiced polygamy. The West can now simply and politely say to the polygamist who bangs on its door seeking admission or permission to practice polygamy: “No thank you; we don’t do that here,” and close the door firmly.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Western case against polygamy is not just about how to maintain Christian traditions in “a secular age.” The reality is that the West’s arguments against polygamy are both pre-Christian in origin and post-Christian in operation. They are “pre-Christian” in that the Bible has no clear prohibition against polygamy and includes more than two dozen polygamists among the biblical leaders of the faith. They are “pre-Christian,” furthermore, because the Christian Church was rather slow to ban polygamy, even though it quickly condemned many other sexual practices of the Roman Empire in which the church was born. It was the “pagan” Roman emperors who criminalized polygamy in 258 C.E., more than a century before they established Christianity and nearly a millennium before church authorities finally issued comparably firm prohibitions against polygamy. The high medieval Catholic Church and early modern Protestant churches, too, eventually made these anti-polygamous sentiments a part of their theology, ethics, and religious norms, and added their own deep arguments that became important to the Western case against polygamy. But Christianity was as much a carrier as an inventor of the West’s

344 See Lewis H. Morgan, Ancient Society, or Research in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, Through Barbarism to Civilization 3–18, 383–522 (New York, Henry Holt & Co. 1877); see also 1 George Elliott Howard, A History of Matrimonial Institutions 132–51 (1904) (listing detailed sources, distilling this social science literature at the turn of the twentieth century).
347 See Muldoon, supra note 278.
348 See sources in Witte, supra note 3, at 416–39.
349 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (2007).
aversion to polygamy. And its normative stands against polygamy were as much philosophical and prudential in argument as they were theological and biblical.

Because of this, the Western tradition’s aversion to polygamy eventually became decidedly “post-Christian” as well. Long after they disestablished Christianity and granted religious freedom to all peaceable faiths, Western nations in Europe and North America remained firmly opposed to polygamy. Indeed, some of the strongest Western arguments against polygamy came from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment liberals and modern common lawyers who firmly rejected Christianity but also firmly rejected polygamy as a betrayal of reason, nature, utility, fairness, liberty, and common sense. And, they marshaled their strongest anti-polygamy arguments not so much against secular sexual libertines but against several avant-garde Christians who were pressing the case for polygamy on natural and utilitarian grounds—as a cure-all for all manner of sexual, social, and psychological ills both at home and abroad on the new colonial and foreign mission fields of Africa and Asia.

These arguments against polygamy are also not simply about how to maintain traditional morality in a new age of sexual liberty. To be sure, polygamy has long been included on a long roll of traditional sex crimes. That roll also included adultery, fornication, abortion, contraception, and sodomy, which have all now been eclipsed by modern constitutional and cultural norms of sexual liberty. It is thus easy to think that the crime of polygamy is vulnerable to the same generic logic of sexual liberty that undercut so many other traditional sexual norms. Anti-polygamists often trade in this simple morality-versus-liberty dialectic in warning against the dangers of the slippery slope. A good example is Justice Scalia’s dissent in *Lawrence v. Texas*, the case that struck down traditional sodomy laws. “State laws against bigamy, same-sex marriage, adult incest, prostitution, masturbation, adultery, fornication, bestiality, and obscenity are . . . [all now] called into question,” Justice Scalia wrote in an ominous warning that clatters loudly in the literature of conservative family groups to this day. Pro-polygamists do the same thing by painting their opposition with the same broad brush of bigotry. The anti-polygamists of today, they argue, are just like the slaveholders,

350 See Witte, supra note 3, at 348–88; see also Witte, supra note 1.
chauvinists, and homophobes of the past, clutching to their traditional morality at the cost of true liberty for African-Americans, women, and same-sex partners.352

But traditional morality versus modern liberty is too blunt a dialectic to sort out the modern case for and against polygamy. It is too blunt, in part, because the modern logic of liberty and human rights was founded—in no small part—on traditional morality. Much of our modern Western rights structure was created by “traditional” Catholics and “traditional” Protestants from 1200–1700, long before liberal Enlightenment philosophers and jurists set out to work. Indeed, by 1650, Christians of various types had already defined, defended, and died for every right that would appear a century and a half later in the United States Bill of Rights or in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.353 And a good case has been made that modern human rights norms still need religious and moral sources and sanctions in order to be fully cogent and effective even in our post-establishment and post-modern secular polities.354

The dialectic of morality versus liberty is also too blunt because proponents of modern liberty have their own morality, grounding their arguments in deep moral beliefs, values, ideals, and metaphors—not least the foundational moral concept of human dignity on which the modern human rights revolution has been built since 1948.355 The notion that modern liberals press only neutral, objective, and value-free arguments in favor of liberty and equality while Christians and other faith traditions trade only in prejudicial, subjective, and judgmental moral values now faces very strong epistemological headwinds.356 Every serious school of legal, political, and social thought today rests ultimately on a foundation of fundamental beliefs and values.


354 See sources and discussion in W. COLE DURHAM, JR. & BRETT G. SCHARFFS, LAW AND RELIGION: NATIONAL, INTERNATIONAL, AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES (2010); and sources cited in supra note 298.


Modern reproduction technologies have changed how humans understand procreation and parenthood. Seismic cultural shifts have changed how we think about and adjudicate issues surrounding human sexuality and sexual bonding. Yet, apart from a few exceptional cases that are often glorified in the media, there is little evidence to suggest that polygamy is an effective way to promote social equality, familial stability, or the overall wellbeing of spouses and children. To the contrary, in its typical expressions polygamy coincides with extreme forms of patriarchy and correlates with substantial harms to women, children, and the broader communities in which it is practiced. In the still-ripe flush of the sexual revolution, courts may be tempted to classify laws criminalizing polygamy with now-defunct laws that once criminalized traditional sexual taboos, like “sodomy” and “buggery.” Courts may also be tempted to cast laws limiting marriage to monogamous couples into the heap of now-defunct laws limiting marriage to heterosexual partners. Doing so, however, would neglect important historical distinctions between the moral and legal justifications for these laws. In their haste to do away with discriminatory and repressive regulations in the spheres of marriage, sex, and family, courts should not give legal sanction to a form of marriage that is not uniformly, but inevitably, harmful and repressive to the most vulnerable parties.
APPENDIX: THE SHIFTING TERMINOLOGY OF PLURAL MARRIAGES

The topic of polygamy or plural marriage involves a shifting and slippery terminology that is worth spelling out a bit. The term “polygamy” usually brings to mind either the oft-prurient thought of sharing a bed with two or more spouses or the troubling thought of subjugated women forced to endure life in the harem of a wealthy, powerful, and older man. Some might also think of the traveling cad who keeps secret wives in multiple cities or the malicious deserter who abandons his wife and children and marries another woman down the road without bothering to end the prior marriage.357 Movie and literature lovers might also think of the tragic stories of a long deserted spouse who finally gives up hope and gets married to another, only to have the first spouse reappear after heroic struggle on the high seas or the battlefield, or after overcoming dire illness or long captivity. Think of Lord Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden*, Tom Hanks’s *Cast Away*, or *The Return of Martin Guerre*.358 All these are core cases of polygamy in the Western legal tradition.

But historically the term “polygamy” covered a number of other forms of plural union as well, and the term was combined with a number of other shifting and confusing terms. Below, Table 1 sets out the forms and names of plural marriage that were discussed in the Western legal tradition since biblical and classical times and which were subject to restrictions and sanctions by the state, and sometimes the church, too. All of them were considered to be forms of the generic category of “polygamy,” and the rationales for their respective punishment were often intertwined.

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358 ALFRED TENNYSON, *ENOCH ARDEN* (Boston, Ticknor & Fields 1865); *CAST AWAY* (Twentieth Century Fox et al. 2000); *THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE* (Dussault et al. 1982).
### Table 1: The Historical Field of Polygamy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Offense</th>
<th>Relationships Covered by the Offense</th>
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| **Real Polygamy/Bigamy** (also called Polygyny and Polyandry) | • a husband with two or more wives  
• a wife with two or more husbands |
| **Constructive Polygamy** (also called Interpretive Polygamy or Quasi-Polygamy) | • a man or woman with two or more fiancée(s)  
• a man or woman with one or more fiancée(s) and one or more spouses  
• a husband with a wife and one or more concubines  
• a man with two or more concubines  
• a husband who married or had sex with two or more sisters in a row  
• a man or woman who took both spiritual and marital vows |
| **Successive Polygamy** (also called Bigamy, Digamy, Sequential or Serial Polygamy) | • a divorcée who married before the death of the former spouse  
• a widow(er) who remarried too soon or too often |
| **Clerical Polygamy or Clerical Bigamy** (also called Digamy; later called Irregularity) | • a deaconess/avowed nun who had married two or more husbands, before taking vows  
• an ordained priest or avowed monk who had, before taking vows  
 o married two or more wives in a row  
 o married a woman who had already taken a spiritual vow  
 o married a non-virginal wife who was  
   • widowed  
   • a former concubine  
   • a former prostitute  
   • a former fornicator  
   • a former actress  
   • an earlier victim of rape or abduction by another |

**Real Polygamy/Bigamy.** As Table 1 shows, the core and clearest case of polygamy in the Western tradition involves a man or woman with two or more spouses at the same time. Historically, the term “bigamy” was sometimes used if a person had only two spouses at the same time; “trigamy” for three spouses,
“quadragamy,” for four spouses and so on. But “polygamy” was the more common generic word describing the act of having two or more spouses at the same time. Technically, the term “polygyny” (from the Greek “poly” for many and “gyne” for wife or woman) describes a man having two or more wives. “Polyandry” (combining “poly” with the Greek term “anēr” for man) describes the quite rare instance of a woman having two or more husbands. And the term “polyamory” is the generic term often used to describe all manner of plural spousal and sexual arrangements. These technical terms were occasionally used in historical texts and are used more frequently in the social science literature today. But again “polygamy” was and is the more common generic word for having two or more spouses at the same time.

Writing in the thirteenth century, the leading canon law jurist of his day, Hostiensis (c. 1200–c. 1271), called this core case of having two or more spouses at the same time to be “real” or “proper” bigamy or polygamy (polygamia vera, bigamia propria) as opposed to various forms of what he called “constructive polygamy” or “successive polygamy” that we will describe in a moment. Three centuries later, the great English jurist, Sir Edward Coke (1552–1634), echoed this view, calling his fellow common lawyers to use the term “polygamy” to describe only the crime of having two or more spouses at the same time. William Blackstone (1723–1780) again echoed this view in eighteenth-century England, as did James Kent (1763–1847) in nineteenth-century America. But other jurists, judges, and


362 4 BLACKSTONE, supra note 283, at *163 (“[W]hat our law corruptly calls bigamy; which properly signifies being twice married, but with us is used as synonymous to polygamy, or having a plurality of wives at once.”).

363 2 KENT, supra note 289, at 70; see also LEONARD SHELFORD, A PRACTICAL TREATISE ON THE LAW OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE 186 (Philadelphia, John S. Litell 1841).
legislators, throughout Western history, still sometimes used the terms “bigamy,” “polygyny,” “polyandry,” and “polyamory,” as well as “digamy” (double marriage) to describe a case of “real polygamy,” even though these terms sometimes had other meanings, too.364

Writing alongside Hostiensis and Coke, other medieval and early modern jurists began to call for a greater differentiation of types or degrees of “real polygamy”—a hierarchy of offenses from more serious to less serious.365 Various soft taxonomies of “real polygamy” slowly began to emerge in early modern times with different punishments attached to each level of offense. Some distinctions were based on the defendant’s state of mind: intentionally or knowingly having two spouses was considered more serious than innocently or negligently taking a second spouse (thinking, wrongly, that the first spouse was dead or that the first marriage had properly ended). Some distinctions were based on the defendant’s actions and the harm he or she caused: keeping two or more spouses in the same house or bed was considered more serious than secretly having two or more spouses in different locales, each unknown to the other. Some distinctions were based on the number of victims drawn into the polygamy: having three spouses at the same time was worse than having two; having four was worse than having three. Forcing, inducing, or inviting one or more of the spouses to accept the polygamy was worse because it made them accomplices in the defendant’s crime, if not criminals themselves. Drawing parents, priests, peers, and others knowingly into blessing or supporting an illegal second or third marriage was also more serious than keeping it secret.

By the seventeenth century, various jurists used these many forms of real polygamy to set out more refined taxonomies of types or degrees of real polygamy, and these slowly began to penetrate the law books and statutes of

364 See, e.g., MILLER, supra note 313, at 240 n.51 (discussing variations of the term “polyandry”); 1 HOWARD, supra note 344, at 80–84 (discussing how matrimonial institutions progress from polyandry to polygyny); Anne McLaren, Monogamy, Polygamy, and the True State: James I’s Rhetoric of Empire, 25 HIST. POL. THOUGHT 446, 473–74 (2004) (contrasting polygyny and polyandry).
365 See 3 DIDACO GARCIA DE TRASMERA, DE POLYGAMIA ET POLYVIRIA [ON POLYGAMY AND MULTIPLE SPOUSES] (Panhorni, Apud Decium Cyrillum 1638) and MONTAIGNE, supra note 100, at 122–32 for the most extensive arguments for the ius commune on the Continent. On common law differentiation, see G.W. Bartholomew, Polygamous Marriages and English Criminal Law, 17 MOD. L. REV. 344, 359 (1954) (“A valid potentially polygamous marriage will be a sufficient first marriage for the purposes of bigamy . . . . [but] [a]ny second marriage celebrated in [England] will be bigamous . . . .”); J.H.C. Morris, The Recognition of Polygamous Marriages in English Law, 66 HARV. L. REV. 961, 1010–11 (1953) (discussing the legitimacy of English polygamous marriages depending on whether it is in accordance with the parties’ personal law and agreed upon by contract).
Western lands. The real payoff for these distinctions came during the sentencing of convicted polygamists. While polygamy was a capital offense in the West from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries, execution orders were reserved only for intentional and unrepentant polygamists, especially those who openly kept multiple spouses at the same time or systematically married several women and then abandoned them and their minor children leaving them destitute. Most polygamists were convicted of lower grades of polygamy and faced lighter punishments—shame punishments, public confessions, fines, prison, whipping, indentured servitude, enslavement, banishment, or a term of rowing in the galleys.

From the time of the early Roman Empire until today, it has always been the state that has punished “real polygamy” as a crime, and a rather serious crime at that. Only in the later Middle Ages did “real polygamy” also become a serious spiritual offense, eventually punished simultaneously by the church courts and the Inquisition—and with no sympathy for claims of double jeopardy. By the seventeenth century, however, both Catholic and Protestant churches dropped their involvement in the criminal prosecution of polygamy. But they continued to impose spiritual discipline on real polygamists among their faithful, barring them from the church or at least from church offices.

Constructive Polygamy. Once various degrees of real polygamy came to be classified, it became easier to talk about what Hostiensis called “constructive polygamy” or “quasi-polygamy” (polygamia interpretativa). This was a form of plural union that approximated, emulated, or was a step on the way toward committing real polygamy. The classic form of constructive polygamy was being doubly engaged, or being married to one spouse and then getting engaged to a second, or vice versa. Another was having a wife as well as a regular live-in concubine (which pre-Christian Roman law had already prohibited). Another was having made religious vows to be a cleric or a monastic (and thus becoming “married” to Christ and the church) but then

367 Id. at 154. See case studies described in id. at 263–71, 305–20, 407–16.
368 Medieval church courts prosecuted cases of real polygamy with growing alacrity after the thirteenth century, Sara McDougall and others have shown, with the volume of church court cases against polygamy reaching their apex in the fifteenth century. See analysis and detailed primary and secondary sources cited in McDougall, supra note 222.
369 Hostiensis, supra note 360.
371 Id. at 58–64 & nn.23–43.
getting engaged or married to a person. Several other more attenuated forms of quasi-polygamy were recognized as well.

For much of Western legal history, these forms of “constructive polygamy” or “quasi-polygamy” were viewed as spiritual offenses punishable by the church more than as criminal offenses punishable by the state. But occasionally, these offenses were viewed as both sins and crimes, and subject to the spiritual sanctions of the church and the criminal penalties of the state. For example, in both Germanic law and early modern Protestant law, when engagement contracts were taken more seriously and not so easily broken, double engagements or being engaged to one and married to another were punished by both church and state. Similarly, in Catholic lands, monastics or clerics who abandoned their religious vows and got married to another person were not only disciplined by the church but, having lost their privilege of benefit of clergy, were subject to state criminal punishment as well. In these and other instances, the boundary between “real” and “constructive” polygamy was much blurrier. And again, in these cases, claims by some parties of double jeopardy were routinely rebuffed.

Successive Polygamy. A distinct Christian contribution to the Western case for monogamy over polygamy was the concept of “successive polygamy”—improperly being married to two or more spouses in a row rather than at the same time. In several passages, the New Testament strongly discouraged, if not outright prohibited, the divorced and the widowed from getting remarried. Neither Roman law nor Jewish law recognized these as forms of polygamy before the advent of Christianity, and state laws eventually dropped this category of polygamy after the sixteenth century. But “successive polygamy” of remarried divorcees and widow(er)s was a major part of the Western legal tradition’s concerns about polygamy from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries. It dominated a good deal of the theoretical discussion of monogamy versus polygamy in the West and was sometimes conflated with the discussion of “real polygamy.” Some of the arguments that eventually came to justify the prohibitions against successive polygamy also had a bearing

372 Id. at 72–73, 122–23, 137–40, 186–90.
373 Id. at 126–32, 151–55, 290–94.
374 Id. at 130–32, 263–69.
375 Id.
377 See detailed analysis and literature in Witte, supra note 3, at 70–72, 93–97, 120–22, 132–40, 182–86.
on the criminalization of “real polygamy.” Some were simple *a fortiori* arguments: if marriage to two wives in a row is prohibited, then marriage to two at the same time is even more obviously wrong. But more serious were the arguments that focused on the powerful symbolism and social goods of a single monogamous marriage, which called both real and successive polygamy into question.379

The introduction of this new, distinctly Christian form of “polygamy” complicated the Western case for monogamy over polygamy and also complicated the terminology. Later advocates for and against polygamy liked to quote selected passages from some of these earlier sources that seemed to be endorsements or condemnations of “real polygamy,” not realizing that many of the passages concerned “successive polygamy,” not “real polygamy.”

**Clerical Polygamy or Clerical Bigamy.** A final distinct form of plural marriage, also largely introduced by Christianity, was the concept of “clerical bigamy” or “clerical polygamy.”380 This was not a religious official who practiced “real polygamy,” as some later commentators mistakenly assumed. It was rather the special offense of a candidate for clerical ordination who had been married to two or more wives in a row (the first marriage ending by death, divorce, or annulment) or a candidate who had married only once, but his wife was not a virgin at the time of their marriage. Both the Hebrew Bible and early Roman laws governing the pontiffs and temple officials had laws concerned with priestly purity, virginity, and monogamy.381 But it was again Christianity that made concerns for “clerical bigamy” prominent in the fourth to sixteenth centuries. The basis for these rules was the repeated New Testament statements that a bishop or deacon had to be “the husband of one wife” and a deaconess the “wife of one husband.”382 The emerging rationale for these rules, rooted in the symbolic power of a single monogamous marriage, provided further indirect support for the Western legal tradition’s case for monogamy over polygamy.383

378 See Matthew 5:31–32; 19:9 (Revised Standard); see also X 4.19.8 (1201 pronouncement); *supra* note 221 (discussing same).
380 Witte, *supra* note 3, at 72–73, 122, 137–40, 186–90.
381 Id. at 72–73, 93–97.
382 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; 5:9 (Revised Standard).
Those clergy who wittingly or unwittingly had taken two or more wives or a single non-virginal wife before their ordination were charged with clerical bigamy or clerical polygamy. They were removed from clerical office and severely sanctioned if they had been intentionally fraudulent in hiding prior multiple marriages or the non-virginity of their one wife. Particularly in the High Middle Ages, church and state officials worked together to root out clerical bigamists, and this prohibition became an important part of the state’s criminal law as well as an impediment to a number of civil and political benefits and offices.384 After the sixteenth century, the category of “clerical bigamy” largely faded from state law, though it remained an important part of Catholic canon law385 and, for a time, Anglican ecclesiastical law as well.386

384 WITTE, supra note 3, at 190, 304–05.