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EXAMINING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND AFRICAN MARITAL PRACTICES: A Christian Perspective on Polygamy in Traditional Religions and Contemporary Issues

**Wolność religijna wobec afrykańskich praktyk małżeńskich:
chrześcijańska analiza poligamii w religiach tradycyjnych
i kontekstach współczesnych**

Abstract: The paper explores the contrasting views on polygamy from a Christian perspective and traditional African customs. It highlights that while the Church advocates for monogamy, many African communities value polygamy as an important aspect of cultural identity and communal heritage. Historically, polygamy was common in the Old Testament, reflecting societal customs, but Israel gradually moved towards monogamous practices, which were seen as embodying Yahweh's love.

The paper argues against the Church's rigid enforcement of monogamy, questioning whether it is fair to require polygamists to abandon all but one spouse before baptism. It emphasizes that faith should be a voluntary journey, free from coercion, and that God's commandments are meant to offer freedom rather than constraint.

The paper also discusses the significance of polygamy in African societies, viewing it as a symbol of prestige and social status that ties individuals to their cultural heritage. The practice often serves to ensure family lineage continuation and support for women through customs such as levirate marriage. The author calls for theological dialogue to bridge the

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gap between traditional beliefs and modern Christian practices regarding polygamy.

Key words: polygamy in Africa, religious freedom, Christian monogamy, traditional religions, interreligious dialogue, Christian inculturation, pastoral practice.

Abstrakt: W artykule przeanalizowano odmienne spojrzenia na poligamię wynikające z perspektywy chrześcijańskiej oraz z tradycyjnych zwyczajów afrykańskich. Podkreślono, że podczas gdy Kościół opowiada się za monogamią, wiele społeczności afrykańskich uznaje poligamię za ważny element tożsamości kulturowej i dziedzictwa wspólnotowego. Historycznie poligamia była powszechna w Starym Testamencie, odzwierciedlając zwyczaje społeczne, lecz Izrael stopniowo odchodził od tej praktyki, postrzegając monogamię jako odzwierciedlenie miłości Jahwe.

Artykuł kwestionuje sztywne egzekwowanie monogamii przez Kościół, stawiając pytanie, czy sprawiedliwe jest wymaganie od poligamistów porzucenia wszystkich żon poza jedną przed chrztem. Podkreślono, że wiara powinna być dobrowolną drogą, wolną od przymusu, a Boże przykazania służą wolności, a nie ograniczeniom.

Omówiono również znaczenie poligamii w społeczeństwach afrykańskich, gdzie jest postrzegana jako symbol prestiżu i statusu społecznego, łączący jednostki z ich dziedzictwem kulturowym. Praktyka ta służy często zapewnieniu ciągłości rodowej oraz wsparcia kobiet, m.in. poprzez zwyczaj lewiratu. Autor apeluje o dialog teologiczny, który mógłby zbliżyć tradycyjne przekonania i współczesne praktyki chrześcijańskie dotyczące poligamii.

Słowa kluczowe: poligamia w Afryce, wolność religijna, monogamia chrześcijańska, religie tradycyjne, dialog międzyreligijny, inkulturacja chrześcijaństwa, praktyka pastoralna.

Introduction

The paper discusses the dual perspectives on polygamy¹ – one from the Church advocating monogamy and the other from community members who see value in polygamy².

¹ Polygyny, where a man has multiple wives, is more common in Africa than polyandry, where a woman has multiple husbands.

² H. Horton, *African Traditional Thought and Western Science*, in: *Rationality*, ed. B. Wilson, Oxford 1970, p. 131–171; C. Nyamaiti, *African Tradition and Christian God*, Eldoret 1977, p. 11; J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi 1994, p. 48; K. Ward,

This often leads to discussions about what marriage means and who gets to decide what is acceptable.

As far as polygamy is concerned, we know that it was widely practised in the Old Testament, probably in keeping with the customs of the time around them, and that Israel gradually managed to get rid of it. The deepest theological motive that led Israel to embrace monogamous love was understanding Yahweh's love for his people (Ex 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15). Just as God had chosen only one people to whom he remained faithful in all circumstances, so too, in terms of family, each person was to have only one wife and thus reflect Yahweh's jealous love. Prophet Hosea advances this metaphor to show the past, present and future relationship between God and Israel (God is identified with "ישׂא" *ish*, meaning husband in Hos 2:16, and Israel is identified with Yahweh's "ישישׂא" *Ishsha*, meaning wife in Hos 2:19³).

Therefore, the divine pedagogy used the 'time' factor for Israel without suddenly imposing a law whose scope would not have been understood by all his people at that stage. God's pedagogy is implemented based not on coercion but on religious freedom.

Christian practice was, unfortunately, not inspired by this divine pedagogy in Africa, but demanded, from the outset, the radical observance of monogamy, to the point of sacrificing even individuals to the law. After several years, in fact, we can ask ourselves today whether it is truly human and Christian to demand that polygamists send away all their wives, except one, before baptism?

God's commandments are not a kind of constraint, but rather a call to freedom. "Faith always takes and requires time". This statement highlights the need for patience and perseverance in cultivating and strengthening one's faith. It acknowledges that faith is not a quick fix but a journey that requires ongoing effort and trust, even when things do not happen immediately. Yes, true faith contradicts any form of coercion. A core principle of faith is the free and voluntary choice to believe or not believe. Coercion, which involves forcing someone to believe or act against their will, under-

Religion and Revelation, Oxford 1994, p. 80; A. Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality*, London 1978, p. 21; P. Houtondji, *African Philosophy Myth or Reality*, London 1983, p. 166; A. Mihanjo, *Falsafa na Usanifu wa Hoja Kutoka Wayunani hadi Watanzania (Waafrica)*, Morogoro 2004, p. 261–283; M. McGrath, N. Grégoire, *Africa: Our Way to be God's Messengers*, Published by the authors, 1994.

³ Cf. F.T. Gench, *Marriage*, p. 317–318; C. Wiener, *Marriage*, p. 336–337.

mines this principle and contradicts the essence of faith, which is a deeply personal and internal conviction. Galatians 5:1 states, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”. This verse emphasizes that believers in Christ are liberated from the constraints of the law and the demands of legalism. It calls for believers to stand firm in this freedom and not return to a state of bondage or submission to the law. It means “that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

The Church’s traditions should evolve to connect with people’s lives today. Theological dialogue is essential due to the tension between Traditional African Religions and Christianity regarding polygamy.

1. Polygamy in Traditional African Beliefs

1.1. Significance of Polygamy in Cultural Identity

Polygamy holds profound cultural significance within various African societies, where it is often viewed as a key component of communal identity. Families that practice polygamy frequently perceive it not merely as a marital arrangement, but as a vital link to their heritage and traditional values. In many communities, having multiple spouses is often viewed as a symbol of prestige and social status, reflecting an individual’s wealth and ability to support a larger family. This practice enables families to preserve their cultural rituals and customs, fostering a sense of belonging and unity that is deeply rooted in their ethnic identity. According to the Traditional African belief system, marriage is a profound social institution interwoven with the fabrics of tradition, communal values and practices that stress the importance of family, unity and continuity. For modern men, it may seem completely unjust to hear that “a woman with many men is considered a prostitute, while a man with many wives is viewed as prestigious and honorable”.

In certain cultural contexts, a man may be compelled to take a second wife if his first wife is unable to conceive and bear children. This practice often stems from the desire to ensure the continuation of the family lineage and contribute to society by begetting many offspring, which is seen as the fulfillment of an individual’s primary responsibility towards society. Additionally, there are traditions in which a brother is expected to marry

his deceased sibling's wife, a practice known as levirate marriage. This arrangement serves to provide support and security for the widow, allowing her to remain within the family unit and ensuring that her late husband's name and legacy continue through their offspring. Such customs underscore the intricate interplay between familial duty, societal expectations, and the significance attached to progeny within these communities.

In many traditional African contexts, polygamous unions also serve as a strategic means of enhancing social and economic stability. By pooling resources, families can cultivate more land, manage livestock more effectively, and create diversified income streams. This collaborative approach can be especially beneficial in rural areas where agricultural labour is intensive and the market is unpredictable. Furthermore, polygamous households often establish stronger networks of support, where multiple wives can share responsibilities in child-rearing and household management, thus promoting a sustainable living environment. See the example below:

I know of a case involving one of my Maasai students who was preparing to become a pastor in a Pentecostal church. He was facing a challenge with his wife, who was urging him to take another woman as a wife. She needed a helper; she could not handle all the farming activities on her own. The student felt caught between two conflicting demands: the monogamous requirements of his Christian faith and the obligations of his tribal customs. Ultimately, he decided to take a second wife while continuing on his path to becoming a pastor, though he did not plan to disclose this decision. Surprisingly, the entire village is aware of the situation and finds it normal and acceptable.

In certain societies, there exists a wealthy man who, despite his affluence, chooses not to take multiple wives as is often expected. This decision, rooted in his personal beliefs and values, frequently exposes him to harsh criticism from his community. People label him as selfish, unable to embrace cultural norms that dictate a man of his status should possess many spouses. The weight of societal judgment hangs heavily upon him, painting a picture of a man torn between his personal convictions and the expectations placed upon him by those around him. In numerous instances, individuals ultimately conform to established societal norms and expectations. This often occurs as they navigate various social situations, feeling pressure to fit in with the behaviors, beliefs, and values that are widely accepted within their communities. Over time, these pressures can lead them to adopt attitudes and practices that align with the dominant culture, even if those norms differ from their personal preferences or beliefs.

The Ubuntu philosophy profoundly influences our understanding of community and existence, encapsulated in the saying, *mtu ni watu*, which translates to “I am because we are; since we are, therefore I am⁴”.

This worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a community, suggesting that one’s identity and existence are intricately tied to the existence of others. In this context, our individual successes and challenges reflect the collective experience, highlighting the importance of solidarity, compassion, and mutual support in fostering a harmonious society. Ubuntu inspires us to recognize that our personal growth is intertwined with the well-being of those around us, encouraging a sense of responsibility towards each other and reinforcing the idea that together, we thrive.

1.2. Some striking thoughts about Polygamy

I can summarize polygamy in Africa in five key points:

- Polygamy in Africa is viewed differently across cultures; in many areas, it is celebrated as a social norm with communal rituals⁵.
- It is associated with values like generosity, fertility, and loyalty, reflecting social status and the ability to sustain a larger family.
- Men often have multiple wives to support their lineage and homestead, while monogamy may be seen as inadequate in some communities⁶.
- Polygamous families typically operate harmoniously, viewing themselves as a single-family unit, and engage actively in local religious practices.
- The structure allows for shared responsibilities in child-rearing, enhances agricultural and business productivity, and can strengthen religious communities.

However, polygamy can also spark debate, especially in urbanized settings where monogamous relationships are increasingly regarded as the standard.

⁴ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, p. 108; A. Mihanjo, *Ancestor Metaphysics (AncestorCult Religion) as a Prelude to Understanding of Bantu African Thought Structure (Philosophy)*, Morogoro 2002, p. 44; M. Mukadi, *Screening the African Cogito Ergo Sum: A Challenging Socio-Epistemological Question*, „International Journal of Science and Research”, 11(2022), no. 1, p. 1272–1277.

⁵ M.C. Kirwen, *African Cultural Knowledge. Themes and Embedded Beliefs*, Nairobi 2005, p. 150–152.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 150.

2. Evolution of Religious Perspectives on Marriage in Africa

The arrival of colonizers and missionaries in Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries led to opposition against polygamy, as they promoted monogamous unions based on Christian values (Gen 1–2). Some scholars underlined this unfortunate colonial perspective. For instance, Shorter described monogamous marriage as a foreign practice among Africans⁷. As David Simotua Sigilai stated clearly⁸:

In African societies, polygyny was a culturally acceptable practice, and it was not uncommon in traditional Africa for a man to marry many wives⁹. However, this practice faced opposition at the advent of the missionary era. Many African converts to Christianity adopted an opposing view to polygyny. The mission-founded churches found it difficult to deal with polygyny because it was part of the African culture. In addition, some of the converts were already in polygamous unions, thus complicating the approach to the issue. This situation presented the church with practical and theological concerns to address. Overall, Christian missions in Africa in the early 20th century promoted the idea of monogamous unions and rendered Polygyny inconsistent with biblical teachings¹⁰. As a result, some denominations refused to baptize converts from polygamous marriages, while others baptized only the wives and children from such unions¹¹.

Over the years, religious interpretations of marriage have undergone significant evolution, influenced by both African beliefs and foreign religions, including Christianity and Islam. These religions often brought different teachings about the sanctity of marriage, gender roles, and family structures¹².

⁷ A. Shorter, *East African Societies*, London 1974, p. 172.

⁸ D.S. Sigilai, *The Practice of Polygamy and Church's Response: A Case Study of the Africa Inland Church, Losirwa in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya*, „ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies”, 1(2021), no. 2, p. 73–86.

⁹ J. Rehman, *The Sharia, Islamic Family Laws and International Human Rights Law: Examining the Theory and Practice of Polygamy and Talaq*, „International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family”, 21(2007), no. 1, p. 108–127.

¹⁰ K. Muthengi Julius, *Polygamy and the Church in Africa: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives*, „Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology”, 14(1995), no. 2, p. 57.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² M.C. Kirwen, *African Cultural Domains*, Book 1: *Life Cycle of an Individual*, Nairobi 2008, p. 113–142; J.M.V. Balegamire A. Koko, *Mariage africain et mariage chrétien*, Paris 2003.

Integrating religious perspectives into marriage practices has led to a dynamic interplay where traditional customs are reinterpreted through a religious lens, resulting in new forms of ceremonies and marital expectations that resonate with contemporary societal values. As a result, marriage in many African societies today reflects a complex tapestry of historical traditions, colonial legacies, and evolving religious beliefs. For example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches the unity and indissolubility of marriage¹³.

Furthermore, the Church asserts: “Polygamy is contrary to conjugal love, which is undivided and exclusive”. In colonial Africa, missionaries frequently encountered polygamy, which they viewed as incompatible with their Christian message. In their efforts to convert individuals, they imposed monogamy, which led to conflict and resistance among local populations. Additionally, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) had strongly condemned polygamy, declaring it unlawful for Christians and labelling anyone who disagreed as anathema. This reinforced the Catholic Church’s traditional stance on monogamy. Polygamous traditional African believers face restrictions in their choice when joining the Catholic Church; they must adhere to monogamy.

Within Christianity, views on Polygamy vary significantly among different denominations. Traditionally, most branches of Christianity, such as Catholicism and Protestantism, uphold monogamy as the ideal marital structure, referencing biblical passages that emphasize one man and one woman. However, throughout history, various religious sects, particularly some fundamentalist groups, have embraced the practice of polygamy, drawing inspiration from the Old Testament figures who were known for having multiple wives. Often rooted in specific interpretations of their faith, these groups are experiencing a resurgence in interest, particularly among rural African communities. Many individuals within these communities find that the concept of Polygyny resonates deeply with their established cultural and traditional values, which emphasize communal living and familial ties.

In addition to these Christian sects, Islam also plays a significant role in the discourse on polygamy, allowing men to marry up to four wives under certain conditions. This practice is often viewed as a means to support women and maintain social stability within families. As such, both Christian fundamentalists and Islamic traditions reflect a complex

¹³ The unity of marriage, distinctly recognized by our Lord, is made clear in the equal personal dignity which must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection.

interplay of religion and cultural norms when it comes to the acceptance and practice of polygamy.

3. A Call to Religious Freedom

Conflicts arise at the intersection of traditional cultural practices and religious freedom, particularly when longstanding community rituals clash with new religious beliefs. An example is the tension between polygamous traditions and emerging faiths promoting monogamy, leading to fears of losing cultural identity. Church regulations protecting religious freedoms may unintentionally infringe upon cultural traditions, complicating the balance between respecting heritage and allowing religious expression. These tensions are particularly evident in Africa, where tribal customs and major religions coexist, resulting in legal and ethical dilemmas as individuals navigate their cultural identity and religious obligations.

The Catholic Church's stance on the issue of Polygamy is clear and well-defined: "Polygamy is contrary to conjugal love, which is undivided and exclusive¹⁴".

The Church firmly prohibits polygamy, stating that it fundamentally contradicts the essence of conjugal love, which is characterized by its undivided and exclusive nature. In essence, this means that a man who engages in polygamy cannot truly be considered a Catholic Christian in any capacity. The Church emphasizes that the marital bond is intended to be sacred and monogamous, reflecting a deep commitment between two individuals, which polygamous relationships inherently undermine. Therefore, adherence to this doctrine is considered essential for anyone seeking to commit fully to the faith. A polygamous man is required to dismiss all his wives except one before he can be baptized. I believe it is neither humane nor Christian to insist that polygamists must send away all but one of their wives prior to baptism.

The topic of religious freedom warrants thorough examination, particularly in the context of the teachings within the Catholic Church. As articulated in paragraph 2109 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church firmly recognizes religious freedom as an inherent human right – one that is intricately linked to the dignity of every person. This foundational principle underscores the vital importance of individuals having the autonomy to choose their own religious beliefs and the right to practice

¹⁴ CCC, n. 1645–1648; GS, n. 49, §2; FC, n. 19.

them openly in public spheres. It underscores that this practice should occur without the threat of coercion, intimidation, or any external pressures that might undermine one's personal convictions. The Catholic Church's stance on this issue emphasizes not just tolerance but a deep respect for each individual's journey in faith, fostering an environment where diverse beliefs can coexist harmoniously.

It is, however, essential to critically examine the Catholic Church's interpretation of religious freedom, particularly in how it may be perceived as exclusivist. The Church champions the right of individuals to practice their faith freely and openly; however, one must question whether its doctrinal approach is excessively stringent or inflexible. This raises the important issue of whether the Church's unwavering commitment to its own beliefs and teachings inadvertently establishes limitations that could undermine the authentic spirit of religious freedom. In this context, it is worth considering whether such boundaries might hinder the genuine pluralism that characterizes a truly free society, potentially creating an environment where only certain expressions of faith are deemed acceptable, while others are marginalized.

This prompts a series of crucial inquiries: Where does the essence of true religious freedom exist? What does possessing the right to authentically select one's faith mean? Moreover, how can the core tenets of Christianity, particularly those championed by the Catholic Church, embody a harmonious blend of universal Catholic identity while also embracing distinctive African characteristics? This is especially pertinent when considering the rich and diverse tapestry of religious beliefs and practices that thrive across the African continent.

These questions invite us to deeply contemplate how the concept of religious freedom can be effectively negotiated and understood against the backdrop of diverse cultural perspectives and spiritual narratives. In particular, it invites exploration into how African traditions may interact with, complement, or even challenge the doctrines of the Catholic Church, shaping a unique expression of faith that honors both local heritage and universal principles.

If African traditional believers are faced with the imposition of monogamous marriage practices, we must tread carefully, as this could lead to a shallow or superficial conversion to Christianity. The concern here is that such a conversion may result in syncretism, where the integration of Christian beliefs with indigenous practices occurs. In this scenario, individuals might find themselves navigating a double life, outwardly conforming to the expectations set by church leaders while internally adhering to their

original cultural and spiritual traditions. This tension could undermine the authenticity of their faith journey and create a significant rift between their public persona and private beliefs.

This discussion highlights how cultural beliefs surrounding marriage can sometimes clash with the idea of individual rights to choose one's faith and practices. By examining this issue, we can better understand the complexities of African marriage traditions and their impact on religious expression.

4. Awareness of the Church in Africa

If we do not address Polygamy in Africa, it will inevitably impact us. The church in Africa must find ways to engage with this issue rather than hiding behind doctrinal teachings and rigid positions. It should instead develop new pastoral approaches to address this complex reality, as the previous method of evangelization through coercion has failed.

Polygamy has existed in Africa long before the arrival of both colonizers and missionaries; it remains a part of African culture and will apparently continue to be so. Perhaps, as mentioned in the introduction, we can consider the "time" factor, as Israel did when transitioning from polygamy to monogamy. In our case, we have observed that colonizers tried to impose monogamous marriage through laws intended to suppress it, but their efforts were unsuccessful. Likewise, missionaries have not managed to eliminate this practice. We should acknowledge its existence and recognize that it influences our faith and community life.

The fact that one is Christian does not separate him/her from his/her roots and culture. Once an African, always African. The only requirement is to create a space for debate and frank dialogue between traditional African religions and Christianity. There should be a principle of giving and receiving. In 1984, Saint John Paul II made an important statement before the Plenary Assembly of Non-Christians: "Indeed, no one can overlook the significance and necessity of interreligious dialogue for all religions and believers. Today, more than ever, we are called to collaborate so that every individual can achieve their transcendent goals, realize their authentic growth, and help cultures preserve their religious and spiritual values amidst rapid social changes"¹⁵.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Speech of the Pope at the Plenary Assembly of Non-Christians*, 3 March 1984, n. 2.

In the life of the church in Africa, there are two unforgettable moments: the Synod of 1994, which led to the publication of a post-apostolic exhortation in 1995, titled *Ecclesia in Africa*, written by Saint Pope John Paul II. While not explicitly naming “polygamy”, the exhortation’s emphasis on monogamy and the dignity of women implicitly critiques polygamous practices that contradict these principles. In my opinion, that approach is not effective. Critiques of polygamous practices will never resolve the issue; instead, they will encourage converted Christians to live a double life.

The second synod of the church in Africa is the second moment, called by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009. He published *Africae Munus* in 2011. While the document does not explicitly condone or condemn Polygamy, it does not directly address the issue. The focus is on the broader context of family life and the need for the Church to engage with African cultures and traditions. Thus, in both substantial exhortations, Polygamy is not explicitly named.

Based on the above observation, one can ask many questions: why does polygamy not appear in the two documents? Did the African bishops not bring the matter around the table for discussion as they have done now in the last synod of synodality? One might also reply: that is the ripening and the favorable time. A good answer may come from Pope Paul VI’s insight. I consider him a prophet of African Christianity.

5. Pope Paul VI is a pivotal figure in this complex situation

The Church in Africa will never forget the very first pastoral visit of a Pope to the continent: Pope Paul VI’s visit to Uganda in July 1969. This historic event occurred just a few years after the Second Vatican Council. For many Africans, it was significant because it marked the first time a Pope had travelled from his home to visit Africa¹⁶.

This visit was unique, as many Africans had their own expectations and questions regarding the expression of their faith as Christians. They sought answers from the Pope on fundamental issues such as: Can we truly be Africans and still be Christians? Conversely, can we be Christians while remaining authentic Africans?¹⁷.

Are Africans allowed to develop their own theology and liturgy?

¹⁶ M. Mukadi, *Rediscovering Reverent Silence in the African Liturgy According to the Vision of SC 30*, „Africa Tomorrow”, 15(2013), no. 2, p. 85–117.

¹⁷ J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, Nairobi 1994, p. 464.

All of these questions ultimately focused on one central theme: How can Africans worship the unique God as Africans without feeling alienated? There was a strong desire to worship God in a way that reflects the African context, reality, and culture. Thankfully, Pope Paul VI listened to the voices of African Christians and addressed their expectations. For this reason, he became a figurative “messiah” for Africans.

Historically, this situation echoed back to 256 AD, when an African bishop, St. Cyprian of Carthage, sought guidance from Rome but was met with a demand for conformity to Roman tradition: “Nothing should be innovated except what has been handed down” (*Nihil innovetur nisi quod traditum est*). Cyprian felt offended by the refusal to engage in discussion, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to faith¹⁸.

During his visit to Africa from July 31 to August 2, 1969, Pope Paul VI addressed two key points that could help the Church in Africa remain connected to the universal Church while preserving its distinct characteristics and unique expressions of faith in Christ. In response to the above questions, he stated, “The African Church must be Catholic. This means it should be completely founded on the identical, essential, and constitutional heritage of the same teaching of Christ, as upheld by the authentic and authoritative tradition of the one true Church”. He then made a key declaration regarding the inculturation of the Church’s faith, acknowledging the diversity of worship practices. He declared¹⁹:

The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith, may be manifold; hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture of the one who professes this one Faith. From this perspective, certain pluralism is not only legitimate but also desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, but also even favoured by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this.

Pope Paul VI made an eloquent appeal: “In this sense, you may, and must, have an African Christianity”. This means that “From now on, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves”. He emphasized that you have the right and the responsibility to develop an African Theology, an African Liturgy, an African Christology, and ultimately, an African Christianity²⁰.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 517.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 452.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 444–452.

As Roger Haight explains: “Human beings understand reality within the framework of their language, their situation in their society, and the context of their culture. The principle that Thomas Aquinas lays down relative to personal appropriation of knowledge can be rephrased in social terms. Whatever is learned or known is appreciated according to the social-historical form of the community that learns it.”²¹

Pope Paul VI opened the doors widely to Africans, allowing them to feel at home in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. As Pope Francis has said, the Church is “the house for all and not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of elected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the Universal Church to a nest protecting our mediocrity”²².

Paul VI’s call for an African Christianity was, in fact, one of the most revolutionary declarations made by a Pope and had immediate effects on the entire Church in Africa.

The unity of the Church does not demand uniformity, as we learn from the experience of Eastern Catholics. The principle of diversity is now applied more broadly to the faithful of the Roman Rite²³.

In the words of Bernard Lonergan: “... the world mediated by meaning is not only a world known by the sense experience of an individual but the external experience and internal experience of a cultural community, and by the continuously checked and rechecked judgments of the community. Knowing, accordingly, is not just seeing; it is experiencing, understanding, judging, and believing”²⁴.

Since this shift, Eucharistic celebrations have become moments of joy²⁵.

²¹ R. Haight, *The impact of Pluralism on Christology*, in: *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, eds. T. Merrigan, J. Haers, Leuven 2000, p. 36 (*Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Lovaniensium*, 152).

²² Editor’s Note: This interview with Pope Francis took place over the course of three meetings during August 2013 in Rome. The interview was conducted in person by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Italian Jesuit journal. Father Spadaro conducted the interview on behalf of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, America and several other major Jesuit journals around the world. The editorial teams at each of the journals prepared questions and sent them to Father Spadaro, who then consolidated and organized them. The interview was conducted in Italian. After the Italian text was officially approved, America commissioned a team of five independent experts to translate it into English. America is solely responsible for the accuracy of this translation.

²³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 37.

²⁴ B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York 1979, p. 237–244.

²⁵ L. Kabasele, *Liturgies africaines*, Kinshasa 1996, p. 16. Célébrer l’eucharistie en Afrique: Celebrating Eucharist in Africa.

6. Some Concrete Challenging Cases of Polygamy in the church

It is quite notable that a significant number of our dedicated community members – comprising lay believers, consecrated individuals, and clergy – hail from polygamous backgrounds. Despite their origins, many of these individuals exemplify admirable Christian values and live out their faith with sincerity and devotion.

In recent years, the local church has undergone a transformation, and polygamy has gradually shifted from being a cultural taboo to a more accepted reality, particularly as an increasing number of consecrated individuals emerge from such familial structures. This evolution marks a departure from the stringent practices of the past; just a few decades ago, during the period when missionaries served the church, entry into the seminary, the priesthood, or religious life was strictly reserved for those whose fathers were married only to one woman in a recognized religious ceremony.

Today, the church recognizes that the richness of faith can flourish within diverse family dynamics, embracing individuals who, despite their varied backgrounds, are committed to living out the teachings of Christ.

A few years ago, the Church held a strict stance against baptizing children born to polygamous unions, particularly those who were the offspring of second or third wives. However, in recent times, the Church has found itself in a position where it must embrace a more inclusive approach, recognizing that these children should not be denied baptism. After all, what injustice have they committed? They are innocent and deserve the same spiritual rites as any other child. Here I am reminded of the words of Pope Francis, where he said, “It is never necessary to refuse baptism to someone who asks for it”²⁶.

In many of our rural parishes and outstations, it is worth noting that several devoted female members play pivotal roles in various Church movements, including choirs, Charismatic groups, Legio Maria, Catholic Women’s initiatives, and small Christian communities. Remarkably, a number of these dedicated women are second wives. Their commitment and leadership are invaluable; they often go above and beyond in nurturing their communities. However, they carry the painful burden of being unable to receive

²⁶ Cf. Francis, *Homily for the Priestly Ordinations*, 26 April 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150426_omelia-ordinazioni-sacerdotali.html [5.05.2025].

Holy Communion, which deeply wounds their souls and creates a sense of exclusion from the Church community.

Moreover, some male parishioners are genuinely committed to their roles in the leadership of their parishes, even while navigating polygamous marriages. Many of them openly acknowledge their circumstances, and the truth of their situation is often known throughout the parish community. Surprisingly, the parish priest often remains unaware of these “irregular situations” as classified by Church doctrine. This creates a disconnect, highlighting the reality that such men face significant pressure when considering formal marriage within the Church. According to Church teachings, a polygamous man is confronted with the difficult decision of having to choose one wife to marry canonically, requiring him to abandon his other partners and their children, leaving them potentially destitute. This expectation, to me, starkly contradicts the Christian virtues of charity and compassion.

The Church’s directives impose significant burdens on families, forcing them to make difficult decisions that often lead to emotional distress and adversity. This approach seems to contradict the fundamental principles of religious freedom, love, and unity that should be central to Christian doctrine. Additionally, it raises concerns about the effectiveness of addressing syncretism within the Christian community, as the focus appears to shift away from nurturing genuine spiritual connections and towards enforcing rigid institutional requirements.

7. Conclusion and pastoral recommendations

7.1. Conclusion

The text underscores that God’s commandments are intended to invite liberty rather than restrict it. It highlights the necessity of patience and persistence in nurturing faith, emphasizing that genuine faith is a choice made freely and is not coerced. The passage from Galatians 5:1 emphasizes the freedom believers have in Christ, warning against returning to the limitations of the law. Additionally, it notes that creation will ultimately be liberated from its decay, reflecting the freedom of God’s children.

It is neither human nor Christian to force African polygamists to keep only one wife and leave the others destitute. It is neither ethically sound nor consistent with compassionate principles to compel African polygamists to maintain a monogamous structure, thereby leaving their other spouses

in a state of economic and social vulnerability. Religious freedom should align with the compassionate values of Christ. Every principle of religious freedom must promote happiness, peace, love, and an abundant life (John 10:10). In the absence of that framework, the scenario deteriorates into a manifestation of religious exploitation and cultural colonization.

7.2. Recommendations

1) The Church should fulfil her role as both *Mater* (Mother) and *Magister* (Teacher) by love and not by force or coercion. I advocate for a compassionate and understanding Church.

2) Religious Freedom: The Church should support religious freedom, allowing individuals to practice polygamy without discrimination within conversion limits, as I will underline below. This approach would promote inclusivity and foster a broader understanding of marriage. Without such support, many members of our faith may end up living in secrecy or leading double lives, which can prevent them from fully embracing their Christian identity.

3) Theological Framework: The perspective from the International Theological Commission emphasizes a multifaceted interpretation of religious freedom, especially concerning polygamous individuals converting to Catholicism.

4) Pastoral Recognition: I suggest granting formal pastoral recognition to a second wife in polygamous unions, ensuring her inclusion in the Church's sacramental life. Pastoral Sensitivity: Instead of requiring polygamous men to choose one partner for canonical marriage, the Church should acknowledge all partners through formal commitments. The pastoral approach to ministering to polygamous families requires a paradigm shift to better support and engage them. This involves understanding polygamous structures' unique dynamics, cultural contexts, and emotional complexities. Developing targeted programs and resources will address their specific needs and foster an inclusive environment for spiritual growth. Emphasizing an integrative approach of "both...and..." instead of a dichotomous "either...or..." is crucial for promoting collaboration and diverse perspectives within the community.

5) Monogamous Marriages: Upon baptism, individuals in monogamous marriages should be encouraged to maintain their marital status, in line with local legal provisions. This stance is consistent with the provisions outlined

in Tanzania's Act Law of Marriage, specifically Part II – Marriage (a) The Nature of Marriage, Section 9, which defines the essence of marriage.

(1) Marriage means the voluntary union of a man and a woman, intended to last for their joint lives. (2) A monogamous marriage is a union between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. (3) A polygamous marriage is a union in which the husband may, during the subsistence of the marriage, be married to or marry another woman or women. 10. Kinds of marriage (1) Marriages shall be of two kinds, that is to say – (a) those that are monogamous or are intended to be monogamous; and (b) those that are polygamous or are potentially polygamous. (2) A marriage contracted in Tanzania whether contracted before or after the commencement of this Act, shall – (a) if contracted in Islamic form or according to rites recognized by customary law in Tanzania, be presumed, unless the contrary is proved, to be polygamous or potentially polygamous; and (b) in any other case, be presumed to be monogamous, unless the contrary is proved. 11. Conversion of marriages (1) A marriage contracted in Tanzania may be converted – (a) from monogamous to potentially polygamous; or (b) if the husband has one wife only, from potentially polygamous to monogamous, by a declaration made by the husband and the wife, that they each, of their own free will, agree to the conversion. (2) A declaration under subsection (1) shall be made in the presence of a judge, a resident magistrate or a district magistrate and shall be recorded in writing, signed by the husband and the wife and the person before whom it is made, at the time of its making. (3) The judge or magistrate before whom a declaration is made under this section shall forthwith transmit a copy thereof to the Registrar General. (4) No marriage shall be converted from monogamous to potentially polygamous or from potentially polygamous to monogamous otherwise than by a declaration made under this section. (5) No marriage between two Christians which was celebrated in a church in Christian form may, for so long as both the parties continue to profess the Christian faith, be converted from monogamous to polygamous and the provisions of this section shall not apply to any such marriage notwithstanding that the marriage was preceded or succeeded by a ceremony of marriage between the same parties in civil form or any other form.

The Church's mission is not to Christianize by dehumanizing, but rather to humanize by Christianizing. Today, as in the past, there are still

polygamous Africans asking to be baptized, as well as their family members. Will we continue to ask them to send away all their other wives and stay with just one? Would God still be the God of Jesus Christ, the Loving God, if he allowed and even demanded the unconditional dismissal of women to whom one has contracted responsibilities and who, from one minute to the next, will be thrown out like rubbish on the street without any support in the name of religion? Such a religion would be cruel and would bear no resemblance to Christianity, which even preaches love for the enemy (Matthew 5:44). Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). True religious freedom within the Church can flourish only by harmonizing traditional marriage practices, creating a musical symphony, and avoiding any tendencies toward superficial conversion or syncretism.

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