



Polygamy in Primetime (Brandeis Series on Gender, Culture, Religion, and Law)

Janet Bennion

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Recently, polygamy has become a “primetime” phenomenon. Television shows like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* demonstrate the “progressive” side of polygamy, while horror stories from victims of abusive marriages offer less upbeat experiences among the adherents of the fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS Church).

Bennion, herself a product of Mormon polygamy, seeks to dispel the myths and misinformation that surround this topic. This study, based on seventeen years of ethnographic research among the Allred Group (Apostolic United Brethren) and on an analysis of recent blog journal entries written by a range of polygamous women, examines the variety and complexity of contemporary Mormon fundamentalist life in the Intermountain West.

Although Bennion highlights problems associated with polygamy, including evidence that some forms are at high risk for father-child incest, she challenges the media-driven depiction of plural marriage as uniformly abusive and harmful to women. She shows how polygamist families can provide both economic security and social sustenance for some women, and how the authority of the husband can be undermined by the stresses of providing for multiple wives and children. Going beyond the media’s obsession with the sexual aspects of polygamous marriage, Bennion offers a rich description of familial, social, and legal contexts. Throughout, she makes the case for legalizing polygamy in order to allow greater visibility and regulation of the practice.

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