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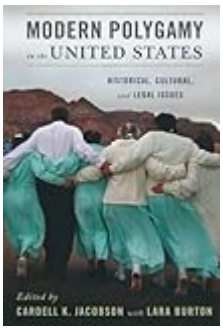

Cardell K. Jacobson, Lara Burton, eds. *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 384 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-974637-8; $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-974638-5.

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Rethinking Normal: Polygamy and Family Forms

Writing about polygamy tends to fall into one of two camps: First, there are authors who begin with the assumption that polygamy is wrong (morally, legally, from a feminist perspective, from a nation-building perspective, from lived personal experience, and so on) and thus set out to condemn it using every sordid and horrifying story available, usually generalized to encompass all polygamous relationships. Second, there are authors who begin with the assumption that polygamous relationships could be good relationships, but arenât necessarily so, and that polygamous communities contain a range of organizational structures that may or may not include unequal power relations and abuse of power. *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural and Legal Issues*, edited by Cardell K. Jacobson with Laura Burton falls into the second category.

This edited collection contains chapters from contributors ranging from academics, including sociologists, historians, and psychologists, to lawyers and a genetic counselor. This range of perspectives makes for interesting reading, with sometimes contradictory statements from one chapter to the next. If one is looking for *the* truth about polygamy, this book wonât offer it (nor, for that matter, does any other). But what it does offer is a variety of insights from a range of authors who have varying positions vis-Ã -vis polygamist Latter-day Saints (LDS). Many of the authors have family histories that include polygamy; some are members of mainstream Latter-day Saints who do not practice polygamy in this life. Some of the chapters are academically sophisticated, others draw on experiential evidence to make their arguments. This textured approach to the discussion is both a strength and weakness of this collection.

The book is divided into three parts: âHistorical and Cultural Patterns of Polygamy in the United Statesâ (five chapters); âSocial Scientists Examine Polygamy and the Seizure of the Fundamentalist LDS [FLDS] Childrenâ (6 chapters); and âLegal and Ethical Issues Surrounding the Seizure of the FLDS Childrenâ (two chapters). Many well-known and respected scholars who have expertise on polygamy have contributed chapters, including Martha Sonntag Bradley, Janet Bennion, Gary Shep-

herd and Gordon Shepherd, and Tim Heaton.

A significant strength of the book is that the authors acknowledge that polygamous groups are not immune from the power abuses that exist in all communities. Women and children suffer abuse (including forced and underage marriage); poverty is a problem in some communities; among some members of communities, squabbles over leadership can sometimes escalate into physical injury and even in death; and some communities suffer financial manipulation and uneven distribution of resources at the hands of their leaders. Readers who see polygamy as inherently wrong will see this as evidence for their position. Yet, the question remains: How are the experiences of those living in polygamous communities different from those who do not live in polygamous communities? Are there conditions in polygamous communities that make women and children more vulnerable to abuse? Are there support structures in place in polygamous communities that result in a different quality of life for women and children? If we view polygamous communities and polygamy as neither inherently âgoodâ or âharmfulâ the way is paved to generate open and honest discussion about the ways in which different types of communities, individuals, and social institutions support and suppress human flourishing. Unfortunately, the visceral reaction to polygamy and the weddedness to an ideal model of relationships has left us without the sorts of conversations we should be having around these issues. This book offers a number of perspectives from which we might begin to engage in those conversations.

One of the limitations of *Modern Polygamy* is that, for the most part, its focus is on the FLDS and other LDS splinter groups. While the collection offers a wonderfully textured and varied look at these communities, this focus (like most books and articles on polygamy) serves to reify the fetishization of religious polygamous communities in that it doesnât address the presence of polygamy or polyamoury as a way of life that is found outside of FLDS communities. Thus, the title of the book is a bit misleading in that the focus of the contents is rather narrower. Nonetheless, anyone who is seeking to understand the complexities of polygamous communities will benefit from the discussions in this volume.

Polygamy is enjoying increased scrutiny these days in a number of countries (the book considers the raid on Eldorado, Texas, but doesnât mention the reference case on the criminality of polygamy currently working its way through the Canadian courts or various international initiatives to eliminate polygamy). What is somewhat astonishing in debates about polygamy (more properly *polygyny* as the vast majority of multiple-party relationships are one man with multiple female wives) is the blissful ignoring of the messiness of life outside of religiously polygamous relationships. Polyamoury, adultery, open relationships, and serial monogamy (often with a bit of overlap of partners) all form a part of everyday life. Yet those who are morally and/or legally opposed to polygamy often adhere to a vision of family life that exists for almost no one–one man, one woman, for life. What remains to be explored more fully is how it is that an entire society can perpetuate a willful blindness that ignores the very complex forms that relationships often take. Singling out polygamy as uniquely harmful in this context is part of the perpetuation of the model family myth.

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