

Reviews

Carol Lynn Pearson. *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men.*

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The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy is a feminist dissection of Mormon polygamy by award-winning author and poet Carol Lynn Pearson. She confronts the living implications of a supposedly dead doctrine, using the perfect metaphor—a ghost. Pearson’s book wants to haunt a slumbering church with a rude awakening to its polygamous poltergeist, reportedly buried in a distant past, yet refusing to die.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of Pearson’s book with an opportunity to reflect on her critique of Mormonism’s most controversial doctrine. Her intent was to present enough evidence and reasons to rid the LDS religion of polygamy’s restless presence, particularly its phantom possession of women’s hearts, minds, marriages, and their hopes of heaven.

Pearson is well known for her sixty years of feminist writings about women’s struggle for self in Mormon culture. She confesses being “personally and deeply hurt by this doctrine” of polygamy when she first learned of it at age sixteen, baffled and wondering, “This is what God has in store for me?” She explains, “My mother had never told me about polygamy in heaven . . . [I’d] known about polygamy of long ago, way back in the days of the pioneers, but I didn’t know about polygamy as our eternal destiny.” She says that from then onward, “the specter of eternal polygamy had taken center place in a gallery of many dark thoughts.” It haunted Pearson’s poetry and writings through “a painful journey” over the course of her life, awaiting a full-fledged lament.

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy is Pearson’s exposé of that latent female pain from decades of polygamy’s echoes in her lived Mormonism. She’s no longer willing to ignore polygamy as having “faded into the background” of Mormon religion; she has seen polygamy’s ghost, alive and well in Mormon culture today, and

she attests that it's not dead. Pearson's book is a seance for disembodied spirits of polygamy lurking in the Mormon religious psyche—rattling blinds, spooking fears, inflicting lingering dread in the minds of countless LDS women.

Pearson's approach is to show the personal impact of polygamy in women's lives, in their struggles and feelings, rather than to provide an historical or sociological treatment, as in most works on polygamy. This is a compelling approach, focused on personal reception of polygamy in doctrine and theology. The contemporary voices Pearson profiles in her book are not women living in polygamous marriage but in polygamous theology—and this is the point of the book. Pearson wants to document the emotional reality of the belief in polygamy as it inhabits the lived experience of monogamist Mormon women. She wants to reveal the psychological power of a potential polygamy anticipated in heaven, as still shaping, impacting, and invading monogamous marriages in this world. She wants to bring the deferred vision of plural marriage in eternity down to earth in the present reality, to examine its validity.

The book is mainly memoir and commentary, treating the concept and theology of Mormon polygamy. It traces some crucial historical aspects and quotes, blended with personal stories from Pearson's own life and from women whom she surveyed. These are highlighted with her feminist and theological rebuttal of polygamy's viability and doctrines. The book is a rich, detailed, provocative collection of personal and theological reflections, an analysis of polygamy's reception by women. Each chapter contains Pearson's reminiscences of her encounters and studies of polygamy in LDS religion and culture, and ends with several confessions from other LDS women who share their own feelings about the doctrine.

"I knew there were many women, in the valleys of Utah and across all of Mormondom, who experienced a similar haunting," she explains. Pearson selected dozens of quotes from 8,000 responses to an online survey she conducted. Half of the women who answered were active members of the LDS Church at the time—and 85 percent of those women "expressed sadness, confusion, pain."

She cites Joseph Smith as founder of both the LDS Church and of Mormon polygamy, and thus the one responsible for it. However, she redeems Joseph as a "tragic hero" whom she can still admire,

in spite of his fatal flaws—namely his marrying over thirty wives, including a few teens.

“I walked along the paths of his personality,” she explains, “simple stories that make it very easy to love or at least admire Joseph. But his is not a small story, and so the plot has to thicken.” She wrestled with justifications of Joseph’s polygamy, such as, “it may look like a mistake but it really wasn’t” and “God was in charge,” so what “looks bad had to happen for the larger good.”

Pearson faced the hard fact that it “was Joseph’s fault. Unless it was God’s fault,” and concluded that it was Joseph’s fault, as an imperfect human being. He’s “like a very good man who steps on your toes,” she explains, yet “something went terribly wrong, and I believe that God insists, and insists very loudly, that we Latter-day Saints do everything we can to put it right.” She finally attests, “I believe that seeing Joseph’s polygamy as an error is the kindest way to evaluate it. And the surest way to correct it . . . Joseph made errors, and polygamy was the worst error Joseph ever made.”

That is the message of Pearson’s book, beyond its titular thesis that polygamy persists in Mormon theology. What Pearson wants her book to do is to convince readers that polygamy was a fatal mistake of a tragic hero, in need of correcting and healing, by Mormons today.

She forgives Joseph Smith for his revelation, resulting in the only LDS scripture prescribing polygamy: Doctrine and Covenants section 132. However, she devotes the bulk of her book to showing the bad fruits of that revelation as being destructive to Mormon women, past and present. “Joseph’s polygamy had little to do with romantic love. It came by commandment that no one seemed entirely to understand,” she laments.

However, Pearson treats Brigham Young less favorably. As “a man who had fifty-five wives,” she condemns his 1873 sermon “in which he said that if a man refused to take a second wife, in the eternities he would lose the wife he had.” She remembers that she felt “thunderstruck” by his words and flooded with “anger. . . . how could you say that[,] Brigham Young!” Yet eventually a pity replaced her rage: “I mourn for President Young. . . . he thought that he was never wrong.”

Conversely, Pearson views LDS origins in positive terms, as a time when women were “set on a progressive track in a patriarchal

institution ... as spiritually powerful beings ... [with] significant authority and responsibilities.” However, “this progressive track was immediately sabotaged by the arrival of polygamy” where “the male is eternally central and the female is eternally auxiliary.”

So, Pearson sets to work, countering the defenses most commonly used by LDS members (especially men) to support polygamy (at least in doctrine or theory). She wants readers to see these reasons as obviously weak or false arguments, or inadequate justifications:

“God commanded it.”

“It was necessary to multiply and replenish the earth.”

“It was needed ... for the large surplus of female members, especially widows.”

It “produced more faithful members.”

There “had to be a ‘restoration of all things.’”

“God commanded polygamy ... in the Old Testament.”

“There are more righteous women than men.”

“Monogamy leads to a corrupt society.”

“The one-wife system is a wicked arrangement and results in all manner of ills.” (Brigham Young)

It is “essential for the highest exaltation in the celestial kingdom.”

It “produces healthier children and thus a superior society.”

It carries “a certain publicity value to the whole work of God.”

It “weeded out the less committed members.”

“Without polygamy many of us would not be here.”

“God commanded polygamy ... to try his people.”

She refutes all of these claims by concluding simply that, “Any possible benefit is a penny’s worth of gain for a dollar’s worth of pain.” It’s hard to refute that logic, coming from a woman.

Pearson notes the ineffectiveness of the “Official Declaration” that ostensibly discontinued polygamy in 1890, by pointing to polygamy’s continued existence beyond its partial policy death by public “Manifesto.” She attests to polygamy’s historical practice as continuing for decades after 1890, in multiple ways, and to its theological persistence to the present time. She testifies that it “continued covertly for years, [and] continues into the present in actual fact in the ‘fundamentalist break-off groups,’” and “continues in belief and in preparation for eternity in the mainstream LDS Church today.”

She convicts the theology of polygamy as the cause of its practice, which she charges as utterly wrong, untrue, and ungodly. She will no longer overlook its practice in history, nor tolerate its presence in heaven. She declares that “plural marriage never was—is not now—and never will be ordained of God.” She sees polygamy as a human affliction rather than a divine revelation—a dark presence inhabiting Mormon theology in need of exorcism, a negative entity possessing women’s hearts and lives. Pearson is calling for a drastic change in LDS theology and doctrine, insisting that any past or partial repudiation of polygamy is not nearly enough.

In convicting the theology, Pearson goes deeper—to convict patriarchy as the source of that theology and its problems. She indicts male privilege as “a sad relic passed from generation to generation throughout most of history, a relic that not only is false but profoundly harmful to all humans of both genders.” She says that when patriarchy and polygamy were pitched as theology, it “all testified to a large and burning question: Why is maleness superior to femaleness?”

Pearson views patriarchy past and present in Mormon theology and culture as the foundation and culprit for all devaluing of women, including via polygamy. She describes Mormonism as swimming in patriarchal authority and governance—where men, not women, are worshipped as gods; men preside over the Church; men perform the saving ordinances; men are depicted in religious images, and men occupy top privilege in all church settings.

Pearson feels a deep personal “calling to help the human family cross the plains of patriarchy into the land of partnership.” She insists that this is the solution, since only partnership of both genders, not polygamy, can bring Zion, or God’s true kingdom on earth.

Pearson’s critique is focused on polygyny, the union of one man to multiple women. Yet she recognizes the complexity or variety of other polygamous relationships in LDS origins. “By the end of 1843, Joseph had taken between thirty and forty wives, some already married to other men, some sealed to him only for eternity, but many sealed for both time and eternity, including a traditional, marital, sexual relationship.” She mentions the practice of “levirate marriage” (sealing widows to living men), and of polyandry (sealing women to multiple husbands), along with polygyny (one husband with multiple wives), and “adoption” (the sealing of non-family members as family). She notes that all of these versions of polygamy or plural marriage emerged during LDS origins in the 1830s-40s. She explains, “Joseph wedded families together in his eternal kingdom by wedding women to him. It created alliances like the royals.”

However, she doesn’t view the non-polygynous forms of plural marriage or sealings (polyandry and adoption) as an improvement over polygyny, nor as desirable. They are exceptions rather than the rule, and “strange” aberrations to family unity. She focuses on the predominant form of plural marriage, as patriarchal polygyny, the theological and practical standard of polygamy in need of remedy. Her concern is that patriarchal polygyny allows one man to have multiple wives, which deeply diminishes and subverts women’s identity, value, equality and partnership, and which envisions a heavenly hierarchy where a male God presides over multiple female deity as his wives.

Pearson doesn’t give polyandry much attention, other than acknowledging its sporadic presence in LDS origins; there’s little mention of it potentially equalizing the unfairness of polygyny via a reversal of sexism, by allowing a woman to have multiple husbands. And she doesn’t give polyamory any attention as an alternative to polygyny, where the complexity of relationships and of loving more than one person may arise. She wants to rid marriage relations of emotional and sexual distractions that invite other partners into that intimate commitment. In other words, she wants Mormon

theology to practice the sanctity of marriage that it preaches in Mormon sermons at church, and at General Conference, and in public discourse.

Pearson is resolute: she will no longer ignore, minimize, endure, nor tolerate the sexism and misogyny inherent in polygyny, where a woman's equality as a marriage partner is diminished, devalued and disempowered by being one of multiple wives.

She refuses to ignore the hidden polygyny inherent in LDS temple sealings today, where an apparently monogamous marriage remains open to polygyny in heaven. Temple marriage allows a man to be sealed to multiple wives—one living legal wife, the others divorced or deceased; however, a woman can be sealed to only one man, in life and in heaven. She also sees sexism when men can annul a sealing at will, while women cannot, unless the man gives his permission. Pearson notes that a “Mormon widow faces a uniquely difficult circumstance, not faced by a widow in any other religious community”—since her sealing to a dead husband often stops any other man from marrying her. He cannot be sealed to her, nor sealed to the children they create together. A woman must be monogamous in her temple sealing, while a man can be polygynous, with temple sealings to multiple women.

Pearson doesn't mention the rare exception to this sexist sealing practice—where a woman retains a sealing to a deceased husband while obtaining a sealing with a living husband, resulting in eternal polyandry. Such gender equality, where women, too, can be sealed to multiple men, is not accessible to women normally, except in rare cases, where special permission is obtained. Yet this loophole seems a vital place to lobby for equality—either in access to multiple sealings with husbands in heaven, or for an end to multiple sealings with wives there. Pearson prefers to end to all multiple marriage sealings, and recommit to monogamy and loyalty in heart, soul, and body, rather than seek an equality of polyandry with polygyny.

Pearson sees in temple sealings a spirit of polygyny hovering over lived monogamy, despite Church claims of monogamous doctrine and practice. She cites a contradiction in sealing multiple wives in religious ritual while banning multiple wives in civil marriage. And she cites a contradiction in excommunicating Mormons who live in polygamy, while approving Mormons who

believe in polygamy, which “has never been excommunicated,” but is protected in theology. She sees these contradictions as an “emotional inauthenticity,” which she firmly “believe[s] to be something we Mormon women continue to deal with today.”

She quotes Phoebe Woodruff, the first of Wilford Woodruff’s seven wives, as an example of the double life and double bind on polygynous wives in history—who publicly promoted polygamy while privately despising it. Phoebe taught, “If I am proud of anything in this world, it is that I accepted the principle of plural marriage, and remained among the people called ‘Mormons’ and am numbered with them to-day.” Yet privately, Phoebe admitted: “I loathe the unclean thing with all the strength of my nature, but . . . I am old and helpless, and would rather . . . say anything commanded of me, than to be turned out of my home in my old age.” Pearson notes the irony that Phoebe’s husband was the LDS Church President who issued the “Manifesto” in 1890, ending plural marriage, yet she says this change was “not in response to the feelings of Phoebe and other women, their decades of bitter unhappiness, but in response to the fact that the church faced disenfranchisement.”

Pearson sees polygamy’s ghosts as invading marriage with invisible partners whose theological presence is psychologically disruptive, causing uncertainty of commitment, feelings of infidelity, and mistrust of physical intimacy, security, and loyalty. An additional lover, albeit invisible, causes an emotional loss of safety and faith, even of trust in God. To document this insecurity, Pearson collected thousands of stories from other LDS women who have confronted the personal toll of living with an unseen mistress in their eternal marriage. Many women see polygyny as an extramarital affair intruding on and refusing to leave a monogamist faith. She summons polygamy’s presence in LDS theology in order to exorcise it from the Mormon psyche.

Pearson explicitly calls for the LDS Church to renounce polygamy in all its forms, and admit that it was a mistake. She wants it dispelled from LDS theology, doctrine, ritual, practice, and from its potential presence in heaven. She suggests this can be accomplished by a few crucial “emergency” steps:

Have temple marriage rites place a man and woman on truly equal ground.

Produce an "inspired revision" of D&C 132 by removing the passages on plural marriage.

Use non-sexist language in all official LDS discourse.

Disavow the doctrine of polygamy as the word of God.

Renounce its role in past, present, or future sealings.

Pearson cites examples of other precedent for such doctrinal changes, including the removal of some racist teachings in LDS scripture, doctrine, theology, policy and practice. Pearson's push for revoking polygamy is based on ample examples of other equally complex or momentous changes in doctrine or policy. Her case for renouncing polygamy based on precedent may be the most daring and significant aspect of her book. She challenges LDS Church leaders to do something for women as big as the doctrinal change that enabled the ordination of Black men in 1978. She believes removing the doctrine of polygamy is like removing the ban on Blacks from holding the priesthood. She argues that polygamy, like the racial ban, has shown over time to be a deeply flawed idea, wrongly interpreted as divine commandment rather than recognized as human error.

Pearson doesn't explore polygamy as a purely spiritual concept or a religious metaphor where souls are all members of one spiritual family. Nor does she consider polygamy as a symbolic vision or mystical teaching about the quantum nature of divine being, as described in D&C 93 where all spirits are "light." She focuses on polygyny as literal theology, doctrine, belief and practice with bad results in real lives, mainly for women.

I found her feminist premises and arguments against patriarchal polygyny well presented, solid, convincing, and needed. Some of us feminists have worked with victims of patriarchal polygyny in Utah, for decades, and wish that polygynist aspects of LDS theology, doctrine, practice and culture would be revoked, fully. As a theologian and mystic, I contemplate the spiritual nature of relationships in heaven, where light beings are one family of God, and wonder, how do relationships work there? I sense that Joseph glimpsed eternal relationships as beyond human nature and comprehension. A mystical interpretation may be the most optimistic reading of eternal polygamy.

Pearson does cite the Mormon belief that “all things were created spiritually before they were created physically” to suggest that a higher spiritual reality may be trying to transform our fallen human tendencies. She asserts that God was not the author of patriarchal polygyny, on earth nor in heaven. She also believes that continuing revelation could heal Mormon polygamy—if our spiritual vision aligns with the true nature of God. Setting aside transcendent possibilities for eternal relations, her feminist claims about polygyny in Mormon culture are solid ones we can hold onto.

Finally, Pearson reminds readers that the LDS God is both male and female, not simply male, and that the divine Father and Mother are truly equals in heaven. While she and other LDS feminists see the equality of male and female deity as an obvious truth, Church traditionalists from Brigham Young onward tend to project male hegemony into heaven, where the Mother is subordinate to the Father’s priesthood. Yet Pearson rightly reasons that this makes no sense if both are Gods.

A canonical basis for this truth appears oddly in the midst of the most patriarchal, sexist chapter in all of LDS scripture, D&C 132. While this revelation commands the practice of patriarchal polygyny, it also stipulates the equality of male and female gods. Verse 20 describes the Gods as having the fullness of glory “above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods because they have all power.” This makes no distinction between the status of the Father and the Mother, which would refute any notion of patriarchal superiority over the matriarch. This passage does not envision a male god reigning over a harem of female deities, but depicts the Gods, male and female, as equal in divine power and authority. It theologically refutes most of D&C 132, with the potential to correct all patriarchal claims made in the rest of that text.

Meanwhile, Carol Lynn Pearson is a female prophetic figure herself, with white hair, translucent skin, and a powerful female voice that is still vital in her mid-eighties. Near the end of her book, she testifies that dispelling polygamy’s ghosts truly works because she has done it herself.

“The Ghost, I knew, was a formidable figure, well established and well protected. But I had faced him down in my own life, had evicted him from my personal house of faith. What if . . . many

of us together—could summon the fortitude and determination of our pioneer ancestors . . . that we could find the power to cast the Ghost from our community once and for all.”

Pearson found the solution to patriarchal polygamy in the simple, obvious gender equality of male and female Gods. She didn’t have to excavate the one or two good lines buried in D&C 132; she simply saw the truth in the Gods themselves, in the Mother as a perfect mirror of the Father. She did what Joseph Smith prescribed in his final sermon: “My first object is to find out the character of the only wise and true God. . . . If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves” (King Follett sermon). She came to know the eternal deity via her own eternal identity.

She explains, “It is my belief that when we, in our small Mormon corner of God’s universe, are able truly to expel the Ghost of Eternal Polygamy, we will ‘shout aloud and sing for joy’ and . . . speak of and to the two who are One, our MotherGoddess/FatherGod. The hopeful but misty thought that ‘I’ve a Mother there’ will give way to the experience that ‘I’ve a Mother here.’ We will know Him, Her, Them, Us, the Divine Family unbroken . . . singing the wholeness, singing the holiness.”

There is no ghost in this theology, no patriarchy, or hegemony, or polygyny—just a divine unity of self with God. “I am a castle. The Kingdom and Queendom of God is within.”