

“Lost Love” in the Controversy surrounding “Big Love”

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The TV show Big Love is the latest installment in the growing coverage of polygamy. Polygamy has gained widespread notoriety since the Winter Olympics were held in Salt Lake City in 2002. Recent media stories have included the ongoing FBI search for Warren Jeffs, leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the escape of former wives from polygamous enclaves, the “lost boys” (adolescents who left or were or thrown out of their families), and on the other side of the spectrum, stories from polygamy practitioners who portray it as an acceptable and non-problematic lifestyle.

The subject of HBO TV’s new series, “Big Love,” is the everyday challenges of one man, his three wives, and seven kids.

Is this the “Father Knows Best” of the 21st Century? What are we to infer from HBO’s latest TV series? Has polygamy gone mainstream? Or should we take a more cynical attitude and reason that if it’s controversial and has sex, it will sell?

Whatever view one takes, it is clear that in the last few years the media, public, and government has focused increasing attention on this subject.

It’s not polygamy in all its forms that has grabbed the spotlight, though discussion of polygamy in other cultures and religions has been touched on. More specifically, attention has focused on polygamy in fundamentalist Mormon groups. Polygamy, which appeared to be a “secret” hidden from the larger public’s eye for so many years, has emerged, exposing a culture that for some is a freely chosen religious lifestyle and for others - mainly women and children – a prison rife with exploitation and abuse.

Fundamentalist Mormon polygamist groups are not a recent phenomenon. They have been around since 1890 when mainstream Mormonism stopped the practice of polygamy. Despite this institutional decision, “true believers” continued living polygamy. Calling them fundamentalist Mormons disturbs the Mormon Church, which does not appreciate the use of their name in conjunction with polygamist groups. However, those polygamist groups see themselves as the true Mormons.

Actions of some of these fundamentalist groups have led to governmental investigations in the United States and Canada. Examples include: [*The Primer on Polygamy: Helping Victims of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse in Polygamous Communities*](#) (2005, Utah Attorney General) and a recent Canadian

report, [Polygamy in Canada: Legal and Social Implications for Women and Children - A Collection of Policy Research Reports](#) (Status of Women Canada, C2005, Ottawa). The Canadian report was made up of four separate reports, one of which received extensive media coverage because of a recommendation that Canada drop the prohibition against polygamy. The debate about whether or not laws against polygamy should be repealed or decriminalized will surely continue for a long time.

Such investigations, however, indisputably demonstrate that some people, especially women and children, are harmed seriously. Even if such harm is not the norm for such groups, there is no disputing that the harm is real. And these people need help now.

During the last few years both of our organizations have responded to scores of requests for assistance from second generation former members. These are individuals who were born and/or raised in high demand, rigid, and closed groups, including some fundamentalist Mormon groups. The problems they face upon leaving or being kicked out of their groups are different from those who may join during their adolescent or adult years.

Those second generation former members in recovery or in need of help do not have a "pre-group personality" to return to. Moreover, adapting to psychologically harsh environments can result in a multitude of problems, including extreme reactions to authority, extensive deficits in social and educational functioning, low self-esteem, and conflicts with other people.

As with other social issues, the needs of those who have the least power are often overlooked in the controversy. The media spotlight tends to focus on the problems, not the solutions. Hence, even with the increased public scrutiny of this issue, women and children continue to suffer with little or no recourse to adequate sources of help.

We can easily lose ourselves in the debate about changing or enforcing laws. Whether or not "Big Love" accurately reflects polygamous life or is merely voyeuristic entertainment is secondary. We must not forget that young children and weary mothers trapped in isolated communities are crying silently for help. With "Big Love" drawing so much attention, we wonder where is the "love" for those who need it the most.

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http://www.icsahome.com/infoserv_conferences/2006_home.htm

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