"For the Honor of God and to Fulfill His Will": The Role of Polygamy in Anabaptist Münster

Darren T. Williamson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christian Denominations and Sects Commons, Christianity Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, History of Christianity Commons, Liturgy and Worship Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol42/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Restoration Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.
"FOR THE HONOR OF GOD AND TO FULFILL HIS WILL": THE ROLE OF POLYGAMY IN ANABAPTIST MÜNSTER

DARREN T. WILLIAMSON
Simon Fraser University

The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, 1534–35, is most vividly remembered for its excesses. Fanatical violence, communalism, and sexual peculiarities mark this unique episode of the Protestant Reformation. One of the more controversial innovations was polygamy, the full impetus of which eludes modern observers of the Münster Anabaptism. This study explores the variety of social, political, and religious factors contributing to this peculiar practice. Interpretations of polygamy usually emphasize the social and political circumstances in Münster and eschew the Anabaptist religious defense of the institution. This study attempts to shed light on the practice by taking seriously the Anabaptists’ theologically formulated statements in defense of polygamy. This approach reveals that a multiplicity of factors contributed to polygamy in Münster with religious ideology as a crucial element.

The preconditions for radical religious reforms were present in early sixteenth-century Münster. The Prince-Bishop’s habitual absence from the city enabled powerful and independent town councils to limit severely his control of local affairs. Bernard Rothmann, a native Münsterite preacher, provided the spark for religious reform, presenting anticlerical sermons in the late 1520s. He condemned Catholic doctrines of purgatory and the use of images, while attacking both the morals and efficacy of local priests. After returning from a forced leave of absence, he bore the censure of the bishop in mid-1531. Subsequently, Rothmann openly denied the Catholic faith and began preaching fully evangelical sermons. His popularity with influential craft guilds frustrated attempts of the church hierarchy in its quest to silence his heresies.1

---

1 The following overview of the rise of Münster Anabaptism is based on James M. Stayer, Anabaptists and the Sword (Lawrence, KS: Coronado, 1972) 227–80; Cornelius Krahn, Dutch Anabaptism (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1981) 135–61; the best
Rothmann soon gained enough renown to take over the pulpit of the main church, and by January 1532 he had published a fully evangelical creed. Soon after, the town councils endorsed the reformer by deposing the Catholic parish priests in the city and declaring their agreement with Rothmann's theology. In response to these events, Catholic leaders in December 1532 convened a strategic conference just outside Münster that was broken up by an armed and angry mob of Münsterites. A larger confrontation was narrowly avoided when neutral negotiators broached a compromise recognizing the divided nature of the church in the city. This agreement legitimized the Protestant reforms of Rothmann in Münster.

Had the Reformation in Münster progressed on a moderate course, it might have simply become another example of the many towns which converted to a Lutheran message in sixteenth-century Germany. With the arrival, however, of Anabaptist preachers in the summer of 1533, religious developments took a radical turn. These preachers, who fervently proclaimed the illegitimacy of infant baptism, soon converted Rothmann, who in turn began preaching against infant baptism from his influential post at St. Lambert's Church. In the fall of 1533 the reformed city council leaders, uneasy with such a drastic theological shift, censured Rothmann, but his popularity with the guilds again protected him.

From the fall of 1533 until early 1534, a threefold power struggle developed between the Lutheran town council, the remaining Catholic leadership, and Rothmann. Although Lutherans and Catholics briefly formed a coalition against him, they were unable to remove Rothmann from the city, and he continued gaining followers.

A significant number of adherents to his theology were Anabaptist immigrants from the Netherlands who during the preceding years had joined the movement led by Melchior Hoffmann. A furrier by trade, he converted thousands to a form of Anabaptism laden with an eccentric eschatology which anticipated the imminent return of Christ and the destruction of all secular authorities. Suffering persecution in the Netherlands, these "Melchiorites" viewed the success of anti-pedobaptist preaching in nearby Münster as a sign that it was a place where they could openly practice their newfound faith.

John Mathys, a self-proclaimed prophet who had recently usurped Hoffmann's place of leadership among Dutch Anabaptists, sent "apostles" to Münster to proclaim the city as the "New Jerusalem," to which Christ would return in the near future. These emissaries soon baptized 1400 people, including Bernard Rothmann. With this rebaptism, the Reformation in the city had moved from the category of excessive but still Lutheran reform to that radical heresy, ensuring the antipathy of both Lutheran and Catholic authorities. Mathys arrived

in the city in mid-February 1534, declaring himself the prophet Enoch and claiming all authority in Münster. Bolstered by an Anabaptist victory in the February city council elections, Mathys declared that everyone must submit to re-baptism, leave the city, or die, marking the beginning of violent Anabaptist rule in Münster.

With this radical turn of events, the Prince-Bishop began sealing off the city for blockade. As the siege works were built around the city, Mathys constructed a tightly knit community within the walls. Toward this end and encouraged by the impending military siege, Mathys established a form of communalism in the city. He outlawed private ownership of property and currency and forced the inhabitants to participate in a community of goods. However, after little over a month in the city, Mathys died while leading twenty men on a failed sortie against the besieging troops.

With the death of Mathys, John of Leiden, his young and ambitious adjutant, rose to prominence among the Münster Anabaptists. Accepting his claims of divine appointment as the “highest prophet,” the stunned and leaderless communicants quickly accepted him as their new leader. He immediately reorganized the defenders and disbanded the city councils, replacing them with the “twelve elders of Münster.” Since they were appointed by and subordinate to the “prophet,” this move essentially made John of Leiden the dictator of Münster.

In May 1534 the besieging army stormed the city walls but was driven back by the well-organized Anabaptists. John of Leiden utilized the wave of popularity brought by victory to implement one of his most scandalous contributions to Anabaptist Münster—polygamy. At first he encountered stiff opposition from the original reform preachers, including Rothmann, but through his persistent claims of prophetic authority, he eventually convinced them that polygamy was truly of divine origin. Further resistance was assured when he demanded not only acceptance of polygamy, but also required that every unmarried woman accept proposals of marriage. Following a brief and unsuccessful coup against him over the issue in mid-summer, polygamy became a fixture of Münster life until the fall of the kingdom in June 1535. After another victory over the Prince-Bishop’s troops in late summer, John of Leiden proclaimed himself the new King David of Münster and sovereign of the entire world. His mission was to destroy the “godless,” thereby hastening the return of Christ. He wore royal clothing, held court, and exercised absolute authority in both temporal and spiritual matters.

Two unsuccessful attacks persuaded the Prince-Bishop to adjust his strategy during the fall and winter of 1534/35 to one of blockade and attrition. During this time the defenders tried to smuggle in supplies and slip propaganda out to fellow Anabaptists in the Netherlands. In spite of efforts at food rationing and attempts to get supplies from their few allies outside the walls, hundreds of city dwellers began to die of starvation.
As the siege wore on through the winter and the spring crop failed to yield much relief, the Anabaptists began to despair. Eventually morale was so low that in June defectors led enemy troops through a poorly defended gate. The Prince-Bishop’s troops easily overpowered the weak defenders, offering virtually no quarter to the Anabaptist “heretics.” John of Leiden and three other leaders were taken captive, interrogated for several months, and brought back to Münster in January 1536. Confessing most of his prophecies as fabrications, John of Leiden and his two companions were tortured to death and their bodies hung in cages on the tower of St. Lambert’s Church as a testimony against Anabaptist heresy.

This overview provides the background for our understanding of the role of polygamy in Anabaptist Münster. To the contemporary opponents of the Münster Anabaptists, polygamy confirmed that their mission to conquer the city was just and that the Anabaptists were heretics of a particularly perverted sort. No doubt, the besieging army and contemporary observers—caught up in the religious polemics of the Reformation—believed that polygamy was simply a sign of the Anabaptists’ depravity. What they failed to understand was that the polygamy in Anabaptist Münster was in fact a culmination of complex social, political, and religious factors.

Regardless of religious ideology, the pressing political situation of besieged Münster created conditions which lent themselves to extreme alterations of societal structure. Food shortages, military organization, internal cohesion, and religious conformity all provided political challenges for the Anabaptist leadership. The political predicament for the Anabaptists was further exacerbated by the leadership vacuum brought on by the unexpected and disappointing death of Mathys. Understandably, the Anabaptists were intensely grieved and disillusioned at the loss of their “prophet.” John of Leiden, as the obvious choice for successor, had not only to rally the dejected masses but also to convince them to accept him as leader. In contrast to Mathys, whose dynamic personality and prophetic presence had quickly won over his opponents and rarely endured challenges to his authority, John of Leiden needed to convince the Anabaptists that God had raised up another prophet to take the place of Mathys and that, of course, he was that prophet.

R. Po-chia Hsia, an authority on sixteenth-century Münster, suggests that the introduction of polygamy is related in part to John of Leiden’s desire to marry Mathys’s widow for political gain. According to this viewpoint, after John became the “highest prophet,” he desired to further solidify his power base among the various groups in the city. Upon first arriving in Münster in January

---

of 1534, he wed the daughter of city burgher Bernard Knipperdolling. Although this marriage strengthened his connection with the native Münsterites, he also needed the support of the Dutch apocalyptic faction. This essential party in the political makeup of the city had already displayed its willingness to trade allegiances based on prophetic bluster and bombast. Mathys’s beautiful young wife, Divara, was greatly respected by his followers for her renown as a prophetess and visionary. Possibly, John of Leiden desired to marry her for the prophetic luster he would gain from the union. A divinely sanctioned system of polygamy would allow him to marry Divara, thereby stabilizing his authority in the eyes of the apocalyptic faction, while at the same time maintaining an essential tie to the native Münsterites. John of Leiden needed to consolidate his political base in his first several months of leadership, and his status as an opportunist leaves little doubt he realized the political significance of a union with Divara.

Another significant factor involved the demographics of the city. During the siege there existed a vastly disproportionate number of women to men, the best estimates suggesting a three-to-one ratio. Several reasons for this disparity between the sexes in Münster have been proposed. Some argue that women in general favored the Protestant Reformation and specifically saw in Anabaptism an opportunity to gain access to roles of religious leadership. Thus women initially may have flocked to Anabaptist Münster in greater numbers than men. In addition, one may suggest other reasons for this disparity of population. One is the reality of a higher death rate for men in early modern European cities; two other explanations may be offered. First, many women on the lower rungs of society (widows, single peasant girls, welfare recipients) were financially unable to leave Münster and became Anabaptist by default when rebaptism became compulsory. Second, upon the expulsion of the “un-believers” in late February 1534 many husbands likely left their wives in the city to watch over the family possessions. This action was based upon the dual assumptions that the Anabaptist affair would end shortly and that the wives would not become the targets of political reprisals.


7 James Stayer, “Vielweiberei als ‘innerweltliche Askese’: Neue Eheauflussungen
During the siege in Münster, the vast number of women whose religious and political devotion was in question presented the Anabaptist leadership with a significant problem. The threat of revolt from within could be just as destructive as the Bishop’s troops outside the walls. Polygamy may have been viewed as a practical way of ensuring this element of the population was kept in check. If each woman was married and submissive to a husband who in turn acquiesced to his prophetic leadership, John of Leiden’s control over the city’s inhabitants could be ensured. This practical need to control a major segment of the population constituted a major factor in the introduction of polygamy into Münster.

The political jockeying of John of Leiden and this need to control a large portion of the population do not, however, provide a complete explanation for the introduction of polygamy in Münster. At this point, the actual statements of the Anabaptists merge with an understanding of the political and social pressures to illuminate more fully the role of polygamy in Münster. Bernhard Rothmann’s theologically formulated arguments in defense of polygamy function as a window into the religious motivations. Despite the propagandistic nature of Rothmann’s writings, the arguments contained therein remain useful for understanding the Anabaptist view of polygamy. External factors always influence theological content. In the same way that it would be unacceptable to explain nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy without adequate reference to the theologically formulated apologies concerning the practice, so it would be improper to disregard the Anabaptist literature written in defense of their peculiar institution.


9 See W. J. de Bakker, “Bernhard Rothmann: Civic Reformer in Anabaptist Münster,” in The Dutch Dissenters, ed. Irvin B. Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1986) 105–7, 113, 116, who argues a proper interpretation of Anabaptist Münster should avoid the actual statements of the Dutch immigrants and their eschatological statements and focus instead upon the ideals of the native Münsterites. However, it must be noted that even the most biased propaganda reveals something of the theology and ideals of the Münsterites. Hans Hillerbrand, “The Propaganda of the Münster Anabaptists,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 62 (Oct. 1988) 507-11, reports that the local propaganda, which took the form of missives sent over the city walls, validate the eschatological worldview of the Anabaptists. If unsophisticated propaganda proves useful to reconstructing Münsterite thought, it seems the formal theological writings of Rothmann would also provide insights into their views of polygamy.

10 Hsia, “Münster and the Anabaptists,” 59, pays little attention to the “ostensible” reasons given for polygamy by Rothmann.
The religious motivations and role of polygamy in Münster are located in three basic spheres: the “restitution” motif to marriage, an expanded canon of religious authority, and a pious concern for sexual decorum. Essential to the theology of the Anabaptists of Münster was the concept of restitution, the belief in humanity’s repeated fall from grace and subsequent return to God’s favor. Rothmann’s philosophy of history provided the basis for this concept. He envisioned world history as encompassing three great epochs marked by repeated attempts by Satan to overthrow the “Word of God.” Satan’s efforts were often successful, thereby resulting in a series of human falls from the grace of God. However, God has always been faithful to restore his people after their precipitous falls. The greatest example of this restoration came in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the foundation of the church. Despite its powerful effect, Rothmann contends that even the appearance of Christ did not completely break the cycle of fall and restitution. On the contrary, since the event of the incarnation was the greatest restitution of humanity to God’s grace, the logical consequence is that the ensuing fall would accordingly be the greatest yet. “From the history of the people of God,” Rothmann proclaimed, “we learn that God brings about a restitution after each fall. In Christ a state of well-being had begun and he had restored what had fallen.” But of course, it did not last. He argues that the work of Christ had elevated humanity to a previously unknown height, but humanity had subsequently sunk to an even greater depth. In fact, “The higher Jesus Christ has raised mankind, the deeper they have fallen. The papacy brought about the last, dreadful fall, after which the eternal restoration of all things, begun in Christ, shall follow in majesty.” Of course, that majesty was present in Münster.

Rothmann argued that the current restitution had begun with the teachings of Martin Luther against the corrupt and fallen Catholic Church, but because of Luther’s pride and arrogance the restitution was stymied until “the fullness of truth had been magnificently introduced in Melchior Hofmann, John Matthys, and here in our brother, John of Leiden. Thus the Kingdom of Christ has begun here in Münster.” For Rothmann, the Anabaptists were participating in a grand scheme of God’s work among humanity. This understanding caused the

---


13 Ibid.
Münsterites, who were experiencing the actual physical beginnings of the kingdom of Christ, to envision themselves the frontline troops in the battle to restore God’s Word and will to the world.

The restitution was not simply a theoretical or non-tangible reality. On the contrary, it carried extreme implications for the community of Christ. The Anabaptists of Münster, to whom God had specifically chosen to reveal his truth, had a divine mission to carry out the restitution in the most practical of ways. After clarifying the theological basis for the restitution, Rothmann set out in his book to show “what has been restored by God in the New Zion . . . point by point.”

He affirmed polygamous marriage as part of that restitution. “God has restored the true practice of holy matrimony amongst us,” he pontificated. “Marriage is the union of man and wife—‘one’ has now been removed—for the honor of God and to fulfill his will, so that children might be brought up in the fear of God.”

Another religious factor contributing to polygamy in Münster involved an expanded canon of religious authority. The Münsterites departed radically from their fellow Anabaptists in their view of Scripture. Most Anabaptists based their theology in the NT and avoided the OT as a source of doctrine and practice. Beginning with Rothmann’s writings in 1533 and culminating in his Restitution in the fall of 1534, Münsterite theology steadily looked to the OT as its primary source. Menno Simons, a leader of the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, later observed that many Münsterite peculiarities resulted from appropriation of “Jewish doctrines,” meaning those practices found exclusively in the Hebrew scriptures. Rothmann’s shift from earlier neglect of the OT is most readily seen in the use of both violence and polygamy, based on the witness of the Hebrew patriarchs.

Indeed, according to Rothmann, one component of the restitution was the revelation that the OT and NT must be seen as one document. “The Old Testament and New Testament are one. As there is one God, so there is one Scripture.” In addition to collapsing the two testaments together, Rothmann continued in the tradition of Melchior Hoffmann and read the OT oftentimes literally and always typologically.

---

14 Rothmann, Restitution, 99.
15 Rothmann, Restitution, 101.
18 Melchior Hoffmann, Ordinance of God, in Anabaptist and Spiritual Writers, ed. G. Williams (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957) 202–3. Hoffmann’s concept of the “Cloven hooves” was inspired by the OT description of clean animals. Just as the two clefts of a clean animal make up one hoof, so are the OT and NT one. The interpreter must keep in mind the division and unity of the two testaments. All events of the OT are
Inasmuch as Rothmann held a literal and typological interpretation of the OT as normative for the teaching and practice of the community, it is not difficult to understand how polygamy could have been viewed as a valid form of marriage. This hermeneutic, combined with the added social and political pressures of the siege, makes the implementation of polygamy not very far fetched. Rothmann thereby argues for practice of polygamy based on the example of the OT. “This was true of the biblical fathers until the time of the Apostles, nor has polygamy been forbidden by God,” he proclaimed. “What God has provided for, and has been honorably practiced by the holy friends of God, cannot now be forbidden or called shameful.”

Since polygamy was practiced throughout the OT and the NT does not specifically censure it, opponents could not condemn the Münsterites without censuring the heroes of the biblical narrative. How dare one question the righteousness of the prestigious polygamists David and Solomon?

In addition to the example of biblical polygamists, the Anabaptist view of sexual relations added to the emphasis placed upon one particular OT command. James Stayer, a prominent interpreter of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, has observed that Rothmann, as Thomas Müntzer before him, stressed that sexual intercourse was solely for the purpose of procreation and not for the satisfaction of “base sinful lusts.” In light of the Münsterite belief that deliverance would come when their number reached the eschatologically significant 144,000 saints (Rev. 14), the fundamental command of Gen 1:28 to “be fruitful and multiply” became extremely important. Since sexual relations with a pregnant or barren wife caused a man to waste the “seed and gift of God,” polygamy was viewed as a way a husband could greatly enhance his ability to “obey” this command. Although the notion may appear at first to be a blatant rationalization, evidence suggests that the Anabaptists took seriously the idea of polygamy as a means of expanding their population.

Along with an emphasis on the OT as normative for his community, Rothmann also viewed revelations through prophets and visionaries as images and signs which correspond to events or persons in the NT or later periods.

---


20 The reference to “Apostles” likely reveals Rothmann’s interpretation of 1 Timothy 3, which refers to “the husband of one wife.” He took this as evidence of NT toleration of polygamy. Wray, “Bernhard Rothmann’s Views on the Early Church,” 235.

21 Stayer, “Vielweiberei als ‘innerweltliche Askese,’” 34.

22 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 282; Kobeck-Groch, “Divara of Haarlem,” 300. When queen Divara gave birth to a baby girl fathered by the deceased John Mathys, John van Leiden was not resentful, but reportedly rejoiced that the holy community of Münster had increased by one saint. Also, the “Judas” of Münster admitted that the leadership enjoined men to live with their wives in a “divine” manner. See Heinrich Gresbeck’s *Bericht*, 259.
authoritative for his theology. The story of Anabaptism in Münster, including its precursors in the Netherlands, is replete with changes in direction and belief based on the assertion of divine inspiration. Obbe Philips, an ex-Melchiorite and contemporary observer of the events of Münster, located much of the blame for the failure of the Anabaptist kingdom in the acceptance of false prophecy enforced by spiritual tyranny. This principle is important to an understanding of how polygamy would eventually come to be accepted by the vast majority of Münsterites. Some Anabaptists might object to a hermeneutic which viewed OT polygamy and exhortations to “be fruitful and multiply” as fragile evidence for the propriety of polygamy, but few would deny the practice if bolstered by claims of divine inspiration. John of Leiden’s primary tool for persuading the hesitant preachers to his position had been his prophetic office. The Twelve Elders of Münster, shortly after the institution of polygamy, declared that “What the elders in common deliberation in this new Israel have found to be good is to be proclaimed and announced by the prophet John of Leiden as faithful servant of the most high.” In essence, his position as “highest prophet” gave him the ultimate authority in Anabaptist Münster. Any scruples about ambiguous scripture references used to support polygamy were swept away by the authority of the prophet.

A final major impulse driving the theological motivation of polygamy involves a concern for purity in marriage. The Anabaptist practice of plural marriage cannot be viewed merely as an invitation to a sexual extravaganza, despite the accusations of lasciviousness. In fact, from the early months of the Münster kingdom, strict moral regulations guided the inhabitants of the holy city. Not all of the inhabitants of the city (either immigrants or natives who stayed) were Anabaptist from enthusiastic conviction. Some remained simply out of necessity, while others may have initially entered the city because of the social benefits evident in the early stages of Anabaptist influence in the city. The conduct of these “halfhearted Anabaptists” may have given the leadership reason for concern about the moral conduct of the city’s population. Whether out of fear of this segment of the population or as a general principle, the Twelve Elders published a code of conduct in mid-1534 which contained strong warnings regarding sexual behavior, based primarily along OT guidelines. Death penalty by decapitation awaited those who committed adultery, rape, incest, or “other unclean sexual sin.” Clearly these Anabaptists took seriously the pure conduct of their group, and this concern may have caused the leadership to consider polygamy as a viable option.

23 Obbe Philips, Confession, 224.
24 The Twelve Elders of Münster, A Code of Public Behavior, in Zuck, Christianity and Revolution, 96.
25 The Twelve Elders of Münster, Thirteen Statements of the Order of Life, in Zuck,
Rothmann himself had entertained concerns earlier that year about moral conduct within the Anabaptist community. He refuted accusations by those outside the walls that the besieged Anabaptists were lax on sexual morals, responding, “God will judge fornicators and adulterers.” Quoting the instructions of Jesus concerning lust, he rebutted charges that the Anabaptists had wives in common, practiced bizarre forms of fornication, or engaged in incest. He also promised that anyone practicing the types of sexual deviation of which they were accused would be appropriately punished. These documents, which predate the institution of polygamy, display the Münsterite concern for moral purity as consistent with other Anabaptists.26

Ironically—since polygamy was usually associated with sexual immorality—the Münsterite theological defense of the practice stemmed in part from a concern for sexual purity in marriage. Polygamy in Münster was far from a wild love-fest, but rather a serious familial arrangement. The view that sexual activity was strictly for the purpose of procreation caused the Anabaptists to view sex outside these boundaries as an “abomination.” Quite the opposite of moral laxity, polygamy in Münster was actually the ultimate expression of a “radical asceticism.”27

Polygamy as a form of asceticism is bolstered by Rothmann’s apparent association of monogamous marriage with rampant sexual sin in society outside Münster. Within the context of polygamy, he argued, “the husband should assume his lordship over the wife with manly feeling, and keep his marriage pure. Too often wives are the lords, leading their husbands like bears, and all the world is in adultery, impurity, and whoredom.” 28 This passage suggests that, in Rothmann’s view, polygamy served a moral purpose by helping prevent the sexual sins so common in urban society. Münster was no ordinary city. It was the chosen place to which Christ would shortly return. A godly city expecting to usher in the kingdom of Christ could ill afford the contamination of sexual impurity in its midst. The disproportionate number of women and the stress of military siege may have produced a relaxation of sexual mores among the inhabitants, a situation very hostile to the purity of the saints in Münster. In this context, the Anabaptists had good reason to worry about the potential for sexual immorality and to view polygamy as a theologically justifiable solution. Indeed, a combination of legal forces which demanded the marriage of every woman of legitimate age, together with the enforcement of capital punishment for sexual

*Christianity and Revolution,* 95.


immorality, especially adultery, effectively served to promote the practice of plural marriage.

A return to male dominance in the family was also a force promoting polygamy in Münster. “Nowadays, too many women wear the trousers,” Rothmann complained. Instead, the proper arrangement maintains that “The husband is the head of the wife and as the husband is obedient to Christ, so also should the wife be obedient to her husband without murmuring and contradiction.” Not only would polygamy substantially reduce the temptation to sexual sin within the Anabaptist community, but it would also help restore male leadership to the family. With a plurality of wives, no longer could a single wife rule her husband by holding him hostage to sex (“lead him around like a bear”). A wife was but one of several partners with whom she had to compete for her husband’s attention. Consequently, the husband was liberated now to exercise his proper place of leadership in his own household. As Rothmann reflected, “Freedom in marriage for the man consists in the possibility for him to have more than one wife.”

The role of polygamy in Münster is evident only when the political and social factors are viewed alongside the religious motivations. Various pressures converged with radical religious views and personalities to encourage a drastic change in marriage structure. While it is possible that John of Leiden viewed polygamy as a means of attaining political cohesion through marriage to Divara, there is much more credibility to the argument that the vast disparity between men and women played a crucial role in the development of plural marriage in Münster. Had there not been such a preponderance of unattached females in the city, polygamy could scarcely have been an option, let alone the norm. The desire for purity among the saints of Münster also apparently played an essential role in establishing polygamy. A pious concern for sexual decorum likely combined with a need to control the women of the city to produce a radically altered practice of marriage. Even with the political pressures and theological concern for purity in the community, it remains incomprehensible that polygamy could have occurred in Münster without the biblical hermeneutic employed by these Anabaptists. An authoritative reading of the OT and a belief in divine special revelation accommodated intense social and political pressures to give polygamy its theological basis. All these factors coalesced at besieged Anabaptist Münster and contributed to the instigation and sustenance of polygamy in that city.

---

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid. See Roper, “Sexual Utopianism,” 407, who contends the Anabaptists feared the “anarchic power of female lust” and had to incorporate women into a household to control them.