



## True Christianity without Dialogue

### Women and the Polygyny Debate in Cameroon

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**Abstract.** – This article focuses on the Christian debate on polygyny from the perspective of mission theologians, missionaries, and women at the grassroots level in Cameroon. From the end of the last century onwards, Christian Churches condemned polygyny since it was thought to be incompatible with Christianity and to victimize women. To be “true Christians” and respectful spouses, Africans had to do away with polygyny and to marry monogamously. The article explains that women in Cameroon have been creating their own interpretations of Christianity in which polygyny appears as an aspect of “true” Christianity. [*Africa, African Christianity, religion, women, polygyny*]

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Since the first Christian missionaries started working in Africa in the late 19th century and early 20th century, one of their most important duties has been to eradicate polygyny and to create “real” Christian societies. Missionaries criticised polygyny as an uncivilised, unchristian, and immoral custom as it violated the universal rule of monogamy. Though biblical arguments sustained their professional condemnation of polygyny, the most fervent argument that they brought forward in journals, reports, and personal letters was the lack of respect and equality between the spouses in polygynous marriages. Missionaries felt especially sorry for women because they considered them

their husband's slaves and the powerless victims of an African tradition. Therefore, they adopted an attitude of women's advocates: they felt responsible for what they called “women's liberation” and the “reinstatement of women's dignity.” They passionately devoted themselves to free women from polygyny and to offer them Christianity as a means of empowerment because these women were thought to lack the opportunities to liberate themselves (e.g., Dumas 1947).

Until now, missionaries have not succeeded in their goal, in spite of long-established and successful missionary practice in Africa and harsh conversion policies with respect to local marriage customs. Many Africans accepted Christianity but did not give up polygyny. They did not agree with the whole missionary message but selected and made their own decisions about what was important and what was not. Since Christian missionaries in Africa almost made of monogamy the touchstone of true Christianity, Africans have often been denied the status of “true Christians.” However, it is more interesting to look for local interpretations of true Christianity than to judge African Christianity on Western principles.

In recent theological debates on formulating African Christianity, the acceptance of polygyny for African Christians has become a main point (Bosch 1991; Hastings 1973, 1976, 1993). Central concepts in mainstream mission theology are “inculturation” and “dialogue.” In the encounter with local Christians, missionaries are supposed to explore a new form of Christianity that is