

Polygamy in Münster

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In 1534, under the leadership of Jan van Leyden (also known by his patronymic Jan Beukelson), the city of Münster required men to take multiple wives. This requirement of polygamy throughout the city of Münster was unique in the history of the Radical Reformation. This paper will explore the many historical threads that came together in that time and place and created the circumstances under which polygamy became law.

In order to understand the institution of polygamy in Münster, it will be necessary to look at the social and political realities of Münster in 1534 as well as the theological understandings of Jan van Leyden that formed the religious underpinnings of polygamy. The implicit understandings about the nature and role of women in Münster were challenged by a political reality that threatened to contradict the assumption that women needed to be controlled by men — the population of Münster was disproportionately female. At the same time, Münster was establishing a new theocracy based on Scripture. The political power that van Leyden wielded allowed him to dictate which theological understandings were acceptable. In addition, it appears that his personal desires for particular women may have encouraged him to develop his position in favor of polygamy.

Although the theologically-based institution of polygamy did not continue as a major thread in the Radical Reformation, the incident is important as study of this development in Münster will reveal the many forces that were at play during this time as they played out in the context of this one con-

trovery. As such, study of this one issue will shed greater light on the surrounding context.

One of the difficulties in discussing what happened in Münster in 1534-5 is that the various influences on the city were intertwined. Politics, theology, economics, and gender issues each played a part in making polygamy law, and each area of concern influenced each of the others. Therefore, the following attempt to pull apart some of the separate themes is challenging. Many ways of dividing the discussion are possible. The goal of the following is to tease out some of the many strands. Attempting to separate the strands demonstrates their interdependence. However, without such a dissection of the circumstances, it will be impossible to demonstrate how unlikely the combination of factors that arose in Münster was. At the same time, there is nothing that happened in Münster in 1534 that is out of line with currents of thought found elsewhere during the Radical Reformation. What makes Münster unique is the particular manifestations of ideas and social circumstances that existed in different combinations throughout many parts of Europe.

Jan Van Leyden

The illegitimate son of a village mayor and a maid,[1] Jan van Leyden was to rise to the kingship in Münster for a brief reign of glory. As a youth, van Leyden was fascinated by mystery and miracle plays – he even wrote and starred in his own sketches. A keen mind and pretty face made him popular with women. However, he could not rise beyond his early beginnings beyond the world of a tailor's apprentice, before he met Jan Matthijs.

He had married a sailor's widow, and was supporting their two children by running a seedy harbor tavern.[2] In 1530, Jan Matthijs drew van Leyden into his circle. Matthijs and van Leyden came to Münster when Matthijs started to teach that the apocalypse would come and Münster would be the place where the righteous would live. Matthijs quickly became the most influential citizen of Münster. By 1534, van Leyden was Matthijs' right hand man in Münster. Van Leyden insinuated himself into the community of Münster, including marrying the daughter of Bernard Knipperdolling, a prominent citizen and politician in Münster. Jan van Leyden, himself, therefore was a bigamist before it was legal in Münster. On April 5th of 1534, Jan Matthijs was killed and Jan van Leyden took his place as the lead influence in Münster. Jan van Leyden was only twenty-five years old when he took over the ideological leadership of Münster.[3]

On July 23, 1534, Jan van Leyden introduced polygamy to the city of Münster. The traditional story of the introduction of polygamy in Münster is that van Leyden introduced polygamy to satisfy his lust for Matthijs' wife Divara.[4] There are also stories that tell of van Leyden being seen sneaking into the rooms of a woman other than his wife and introducing polygamy to legitimate his actions.[5]

Adding to the evidence suggesting that van Leyden's personal desires were at play is the fact that he took more wives than any other citizen of Münster, eighteen. However, even if personal lust was a major motivating factor for van Leyden, he would not have been able to make this decree mandating polygamy without circumstances which reinforced his decree.

Politics in Münster

Münster was the capital city of the territory and Catholic Diocese of the same name in the north German Rhineland.[6] However, by February 14, 1533, the Catholic Bishop had been deprived of power, a Protestant congregation was established.[7] The elected city council was regarded by the burghers as a council of fellow-citizens. The United Guild had the right to veto the action of the Council.[8]

Politics and economics made for strange bedfellows in Münster. Poverty was extreme for most of the population in and around Münster. The clergy levied large taxes on the populace.[9] In addition, Bishop Franz von Waldeck had alienated the affections and support of the wealthy merchants of Münster through his enforcement of restrictive trade policies.[10] Therefore, the entire citizenry of Münster was united against the Catholics. Internal divisions were less influential to the chain of events than the united front against the Bishop and his siege. Artisans, merchants, clergy, civil officials and local nobility joined together in opposing the Catholic authorities.[11] The radical changes that were to occur in Münster took advantage of the shared antagonism.

On February 8, 1534, Anabaptists in Münster started to arm themselves as a result of threatening confrontations with both Lutherans and Catholics. On the 23rd of February, 1534, two things happened which were to drastically shape the future of Münster. Bishop Franz von Waldeck began a siege of the city in hopes of regaining power. At the same time, a new city council was elected. This new city council included many men who had concealed their rebaptism from the public, and was overwhelmingly Anabaptist.[12] The new council was also composed of men a lower social status than the previous council. Bernard Kipperdolling, a well-to-do cloth merchant[13] and one of those who had concealed his rebaptism, was appointed by the council as Mayor. [14] In response to the siege, in late February and early March the city council expelled all citizens who refused rebaptism.[15] This was the political environment when Jan Matthijs became the leading spokesman for Anabaptism in Münster.

Jan Matthijs never took formal political power. All of his influence was personal and indirect. Jan van Leyden, on the other hand, took political power as soon as Matthijs died. Claiming authority

from the Lord, he dissolved the governing council.[16] From this point on, contradicting van Leyden was equivalent to contradicting God.

Women of Münster

One of the most important social factors leading to the introduction of polygamy was the imbalance between numbers of men and women in the city of Münster after the ejection of those who refused baptism. Estimates are that in 1534, almost three-quarters of the adult population of Münster was female.[17] Many women who had lived in Münster prior to the expulsion of those who refused to submit to adult baptism were left when their husbands were expelled from the city. It appears that the women were not forcibly expelled with the men. Their husbands often left them in Münster with their children to maintain the household and businesses until the men were able to return.[18] Although some of these women may have had sympathies with the Anabaptists, many of them are likely to have desired the return of exiled men. These women will have been seen as threats to the stability of the Anabaptist control of Münster.

The mere fact that there were so many women in Münster compared to the number of men suggested that roles for women needed to be adjusted. The assumption that a woman would be her father's until she became her father's responsibility could not be applied to women without fathers or husbands in the city. Married women whose father's remained in the city after their husbands were exiled were not sent back to their father's homes. Something was going to shift in the role women played in society. The situation could, for instance, have turned into a moment in history when women were granted additional rights and responsibilities in society. But, with Jan van Leyden's theology guiding the city, greater freedom for women was not in the cards.

Theology in Münster

The theologians that principally influenced the citizens of Münster in the early 1530s were Bernard Rothmann and Jan Matthijs. Rothmann, a native of Münster, was rebaptised by Matthijs in 1534. However, he had been preaching radical ideas prior to that time. Rothmann was a popular preacher and a writer. Much of what is currently known about theology in Münster during this period is drawn from Rothmann's writings. Prior to the establishment of a Protestant congregation in Münster, Rothmann was ousted from the city for preaching heresy. However, he defied the order of exile and was so popular with the citizens of the city that the order could not be enforced.[19]

In addition to opposing infant baptism, Rothmann taught that history consisted of apostasy and restitution. The restitution consists of establishing all the things that God mentioned through the proph-

ets, and this would bring about the Kingdom of Christ. Once the Kingdom was established on earth by God's people, Christ would return in his glory and judge the people. Rothmann believed that the time of restitution had started with Luther but was not yet concluded.[20] This teaching became even more radical after Rothmann met Matthijs and was baptized by him. Matthijs taught Rothmann that Münster was the New Jerusalem and that God's elect were to be the instruments that establish God's kingdom on earth.[21] Matthijs believed at taught that the end of days would arrive on Easter of 1534, i.e. April 5, 1534.[22]

Matthijs and Rothmann encouraged a literal reading of Scripture that focused on the passages the foretell God's vengeance against those who oppress his people.[23] The focus on the Bible as the only form of truth was so strong that in March, 1534, Matthijs ordered the burning of all books except the Bible.[24]

One of the early political changes once the Anabaptists came to power was institution of a level of communal ownership of goods.[25] In addition to being a practical way of dealing with the influx of poor and the expulsion of many merchants, this community of goods was scripturally based. Bernard Rothmann taught that the community of goods implied in Acts 4:32-35 was the model for a Christian Community.[26] At the same time, the Old Testament was seen as providing the base model for a godly commonwealth.[27] The Old Testament had not been taught by the Catholic Church, so the Protestant focus on Scripture reading by lay people had introduced a new set of stories to the masses.[28]

Because of the political power held by Jan van Leyden, he was able to enforce a political reality based on his own interpretation of scripture. One of his first acts after taking power was to dissolve the city council and appointed a council of twelve elders which would rule on the basis of scripture.[29] He justified this by stating that the old council had been instituted by man and this new one was the creation of God.

As time passed, Van Leyden grew to view himself as a new King David. According to van Leyden's reading of the Bible, Jesus would not be a new David, but a new Solomon. This, he reasoned, is because David was not clean enough to build God's temple, and Jesus would not be such a soiled king.[30] Instead, Jesus would be righteous and wise as Solomon. David prepared Jerusalem for Solomon as van Leyden was preparing Münster for Jesus.

Jan van Leyden believed that the Kingdom of Christ would come when the 144,000 saved foretold in Revelation lived in Münster.[31] Given that the population stood at only 8,000 adults, a great increase was needed. The presence of many adult women in Münster could be a great asset in growing the population, but it also posed a threat. Adultery and fornication were capital crimes. Convicting any of the small population of Münster would detract from the goal of 144,000 righteous. On the other hand, so many women without husbands were so many wasted wombs. Not only did Genesis hold the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply,” but without reproducing quickly, the apocalyptic population could not be achieved. The interpretation of the commandment in Genesis 1 promulgated by van Leyden and Rothmann obligated men to have more than one wife. It was sinful for a man to have sex with a woman not his wife. Sex was for procreation. Semen was not to be wasted. A man could not, therefore, waste his semen by sleeping with his wife when she was pregnant. So, in order for a man to continue to fulfill the commandment in Genesis, he needed to have more than one wife.[32] And, van Leyden could justify polygamy by referring to other Old Testament texts. After all, didn’t the Old Testament tell us that many of the patriarchs had many wives? Jacob had two wives. Solomon had many more.

Institution of Polygamy in Münster

On July 23, 1534, Jan van Leyden announced the institution of polygamy.[33] Polygamy was justified based on Rothmann’s exegesis of the commandment in Genesis to “be fruitful and multiply.” It also helped solidify the community internally.[34] For the community to thrive during what appeared likely to be a long siege, it would need to continue to grow. Given the extreme imbalance between the number of men and women in Münster, growth of the community would be greatly aided by encouraging individual men to impregnate multiple women. However, in the context of a community where adultery and fornication were capital offenses, polygamy was the only structure that could allow behavior that would serve the goal of bringing about the Kingdom of Christ as soon as possible.

Jan van Leyden was not satisfied by merely legitimating polygamy. He wanted to free wives of exiled husbands for service in growing the population of the city. He therefore ordered that all marriages contracted under the previous system were no longer valid.[35] All single women were to be married, including those whose husbands were no longer around. A man who impregnated his wife was required to take another, and a third if he impregnated the second.[36]

The introduction of polygamy was highly controversial. The primary discontent was over the fact that van Leyden had declared previous marriages no longer valid. Some burghers feared that exiled men would return to find their wives married to other men and cause violent troubles.[37] Others were simply upset that the family structure they were comfortable with was being disrupted.

On July 29, 1534, there was an insurrection over the matter of polygamy.[38] Heinrich Mollenbeck led about two hundred insurgents against the Anabaptist administration. Jan van Leyden was captured briefly, but he escaped and was able to have his captors executed.[39] After this incident, van Leyden's power was solidified until June of 1535, when the Bishop's army was able to retake the city.

Conclusion

The combination of Jan van Leyden's theology, his libido, and his power in the city of Münster came together in a decree that has been seen as the lowest point of debauchery in the Radical Reformation by many scholars, and has driven sects inspired by the theologies that undergirded van Leyden's actions to distance themselves as far as possible from what happened in Münster in 1534. These accusations against one man leading others to debauchery are misleading. Many social, theological, and political forces were at work in Münster in 1534. If any one of these forces had been different, Jan van Leyden might have been unable to sway the preachers and lay people of Münster to accept his decree requiring polygamous marriages. Although many of the citizens of Münster disagreed with the institution of polygamy, they accepted it.

Those who objected to polygamy mostly objected to the disruption of family structures that had previously objected. The apocalyptic fever that called van Leyden to drive towards a political structure based on a literal interpretation of scripture was widely shared. The institution of a community of goods met a pressing social need – the need to keep the people in Münster alive during a prolonged siege. Likewise, the institution of polygamy served a social need. The role of women was altered but they remained subservient. At the same time, the religious goal of procreation was being furthered. Both of these addressed concerns of the people of Münster.

The siege of Münster by Bishop Franz put pressure on the city. The apocalyptic fever stoked by Bernard Rothmann and Jan Matthijs intensified this pressure. Jan Matthijs had established a following in the community that followed his vision. When Matthijs died and Jan van Leyden stepped into his shoes, he took the power that Matthijs had amassed and took political power for himself. The introduction of polygamy was a test of van Leyden's power. After a brief struggle, van Leyden proved that he did in fact have the power to assert his will over the city of Münster. It is likely that Jan van Leyden's own sexual desires were part of his introduction of polygamy, but without the convergence of all of the political, social, and theological factors present in Münster in 1534, polygamy would not have been successfully introduced.

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Endnotes

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Smithson, 100.

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[21] Smithson, 99.

[22] James M. Stayer, "Christianity in One City: Anabaptist Münster, 1534-35," 121.

[23] Smithson, , 94.

[24] Pearse, 87.

[25] Williams, 565.

[26] Pearse, 88.

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[29] W. J. De Baaker, "Bernhard Rothmann: Civic Reformer in Anabaptist Munster," in *The Dutch Dissenters*, ed. Irvin Buckwalter Horst (Leyden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 114.

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[31] James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1972), 265.

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[39] Ibid.

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