

The Sexual Politics of Louis Riel

Tom Flanagan

In 2011, the British Columbia Supreme Court upheld the Canadian Criminal Code's prohibition of polygamous marriage. The case involved so-called fundamentalist Mormons who had broken away from the mainstream Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, to practise polygamy as originally prescribed by the founders, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Though widely discussed, the case seemed rather peripheral to Canada because it involved renegade members of an American religious movement who had originally come to Canada hoping to evade American laws against polygamy.

Yet polygamy has deeper roots in Canadian culture than most people realize. The Métis leader Louis Riel was an advocate of polygamy. Unlike Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, Riel never practised polygamy (as far as we know), but he wrote about it at some length. It was a major part of the religious reforms that he proposed for the New World.

Originally vilified as a traitor, Riel is now lionized as a Father of Confederation, the Founder of Manitoba, and the symbol of native people's struggle for justice. He is probably the most recognizable figure in Canadian history, so it matters to our self-understanding as Canadians how we perceive him. We need to know the whole story if we are to evaluate Riel's role in our history.

Riel was indeed an important political leader, but in his own mind religion was more important than politics. From 1875 onward, he thought of himself as a divinely-inspired prophet endowed by God with the mission of reviving religious fervour in the New World. Securing

land rights for the Métis of the West was only a small part of the plan for religious regeneration that he pursued. He had in mind a complete restructuring of society, including the replacement of monogamy by polygamy.

Riel began his public life as a political leader advocating justice for his Métis people, but his horizons soon expanded far beyond politics. Though elected three times to the House of Commons, he could never take his seat because he had sanctioned the execution of Thomas Scott in the Red River crisis of 1869-70. Blocked from pursuing a conventional political career, he took refuge in the Ultramontane version of Roman Catholicism that he had absorbed while studying with the Sulpician Fathers at the Petit Séminaire in Montreal. By 1875, he saw himself as Louis "David" Riel, the "Prophet of the New World" (he was not christened "David"; he adopted that name to emphasize his similarity with his Biblical model), and "Prophet, Priest-King and Infallible Pontiff." Leading the Métis as the new chosen people, he would carry out a mission given to him by the Holy Spirit to reform Roman Catholicism in the New World. Always aware of current events, Riel dubbed himself "the telephone of God" because of the daily revelations he claimed to receive from the Holy Spirit (Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876).

Like many Christian prophets of a new dispensation, Riel wanted his modern chosen people — the Métis — to model themselves on the first chosen people, the Israelites. He thus announced a revival of the Mosaic Law, including male circumcision (perhaps to the chagrin of some of his followers), celebration

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all" as a synonym for all the evils of the modern world. What he meant by it specifically was self-indulgence, fulfilling individual desires rather than serving the will of God. By creating a larger and more all-encompassing family, polygamy would dampen individualism and promote dedication to God's providential plan.

Riel's political affiliations were mainly Conservative, and to the end of his life he considered himself a loyal ally of Sir John A. Macdonald. He wanted to be the George-Etienne Cartier of the Métis. But things did not work out that way. Finally, Riel offered a three-point social rationale for re-introducing polygamy to the modern world; all three points concerned what today we would call the status of women. Polygamy, he argued, is desirable because:

- It allows more women to get married;
- It encourages women, as they seek the favour of their husbands, to compete with each other in making a home and imparting to their children the Christian education that is their responsibility;
- It demonstrates once again to women that the only way they can please God and their husband and win the lasting respect of others is to sincerely practise modesty, economy, and sweet-tempered virtue.

Notwithstanding the fantasies of contemporary polyamorists, polygamy as a social institution is always associated with the subjection of women, who are treated as tradable assets in a complex game of family alliances. That's one of several reasons why the British Columbia Supreme Court upheld Parliament's banning of polygamy in the Criminal Code. Riel's justification of polygamy fits comfortably within the template of male domination. He depicts women — even those belonging to religious orders — as being fulfilled only through marriage, in which their role is to please their husband and take care of the children. In itself, that was not unusual for the mid-nineteenth century. Women were just starting to enter public life and would not start to vote in national elections until 1893 in New Zealand. In 1869, John Stuart Mill had published his essay, *The Subjection of Women*, calling for "perfect equality" between the sexes;

of the Sabbath on Saturday, and married clergy. Somewhat reminiscent of the Mormon founder, Joseph Smith, in Utah, Riel even received a revelation that the Indians of North America, and thus the Métis, were descended from Jews who had crossed the Atlantic long before Christ was born. Polygamy was part of this Jewish revival, a return to Old Testament patriarchal marriage practices.

When Riel started to announce his prophetic mission in late 1875, his friends and relatives thought he had lost his mind and committed him to insane asylums, first in Montreal and later in Quebec City. The confinement gave him the leisure to write out his revelations at great length. His asylum writings may have been crazy, but they were far from incoherent. Meticulously crafted and peppered with detailed Scriptural references, they laid out his doctrinal innovations with great clarity. He expounded his teaching about polygamy in a long revelation about the Mosaic Law, written when he was confined in the mental hospital at Beauport, outside Quebec City, between May 20, 1876, and January 23, 1878. He obviously worked hard on the text, because he wrote out a complete draft followed by a final edited copy in his own hand.

Riel was nothing if not precise. He specified that an ordinary man could have up to five wives, while a King practicing the new religion could have up to fifteen, a Crown Prince eight, a Governor General seven, and a Lieutenant Governor six. Parish priests could also be married, but only to one wife, and she should be a nun. More important than the details, however, were Riel's reasons for wanting to introduce polygamy. At one level, the rationale was theological, part of the restoration of the Mosaic Law for the new chosen people. There was also a general moral rationale: polygamy was a barrier against "liberalism," which Riel defined as "... turning your back on God and avoiding the duties of virtue, because of the love of comfort, luxury, and sensual pleasure;" "God wants polygamy," he wrote, because "it is one of the most substantial barriers against the liberalism of men and women." Thus Riel, following the practice of the Ultramontane clergy, often used the word "liberal-

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but Mill realized his ideas were so controversial that he deferred publication until his term in Parliament was over, not wanting to embarrass his colleagues in the Liberal party. So Riel took for granted the conventional view of women in his time, but he pushed it much farther by advocating polygamy to reinforce women's subordinate status.

Contemporary discourse usually portrays Riel as a radical frontier democrat, advocating the cause of his persecuted Métis people. That's not entirely false, but in itself it's a superficial reading of the man, for he was "conservative" in a sense that hardly exists in modern Canada. He cherished the memory of the French *ancien régime*, which survived in the *collèges classiques* of Quebec and in the Ultramontane wing of the Quebec Catholic clergy. Nourished on dreams of Throne and Altar, he went one step further as a prophet, announcing a theocracy in which church and state would be fused in his own grandiose personage of "Prophet, Priest-King and Infallible Pontiff." The best comparisons are with John of Leiden, the sixteenth-century Anabaptist prophet, and Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, both of whom announced polygamy to their followers as part of a new theocratic regime.

Visionaries of a new order often want to restructure the family, because the economic and emotional ties between men, women, and children are the cement of the existing society. Polygamy is one possible way to remake a monogamous social order. Another is free love, preached by early Communists in the Soviet Union as well as the hippies of the 1960s. Still another is celibacy, advised by St. Paul and other early Christians, leading the theologian Origen to castrate himself. (He is reported to have taken literally the words of Matthew 19:12, "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake.")

Polygamy, free love, and celibacy seem to have nothing in common, but in fact they are alike in repudiating the conventional family, in which a man and woman devote themselves in partnership to earning a living, making a home,

and raising their children. The real divide lies between those who accept the world as it is and seek to play their part within it, and those who want to restructure the world to fit their dreams of non-existent but perhaps possible realities. Riel was definitely on the far side of that divide.

We have no record of Riel speaking publicly about polygamy or writing further about it after he was discharged from the Beauport asylum. Yet it is clear from his comments about Saint Paul, the "Apostle of the Gentiles," in his 1885 prison diaries that he retained his belief in polygamy. Riel had argued in his asylum writings that God had permitted Saint Paul to depart from the Mosaic Law, including polygamy, in order to make it easier to preach the Gospel to the Gentile nations. But, wrote Riel in 1885, that was only a temporary concession on God's part:

Above all, Saint Paul excelled in his understanding of the mentality of his own age.

He was a great genius. His devotion to Jesus Christ could not have been greater. He died for the love of the Saviour. Nevertheless, although he knew how to win the hearts of men as a missionary, he was not so pleasing to God as a minister of the liturgy. Today, we cannot imagine the prodigious ascendancy Saint Paul exercised over the faithful during his lifetime. If you want further details of the revelations given to me about the 'Apostle of the Gentiles,' go ask the Reverend Father J.-B. Primeau. He is the one to whom I entrusted a substantial part of my writings, in which I mention Saint Paul.* When the time comes, the world will see what one must think of Saint Paul in order to please God.

It would be a mistake to think of Riel's ruminations on polygamy as temporary symptoms of insanity. Polygamy, as part of the revival of the Mosaic Law, was central to Riel's conception of himself as a divinely inspired prophet, which

* Jean-Baptiste Primeau, a parish priest in Worcester, Mass., acted as Riel's spiritual adviser when Riel was in the United States. The writings about Saint Paul that have come down to us were preserved in the archives of the Séminaire de Québec, whose priests ministered to the inmates at Beauport. Riel may have taken copies of his writings with him when he left the asylum and given them to Father Primeau for safe-keeping; but if that's true, they have not been found.

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dominated his thinking from 1875 until his execution ten years later. Did he ever share this aspect of his thinking with his young Métis wife, Marguerite Monet, whom he married in 1881? Polygamy can be a tough sell, even (or especially) to the wives of prophets. John of Leiden had to behead one of his wives to maintain his domination. Joseph Smith had a world of trouble with his first wife, Emma, when he started to take other wives; and after his death she and their son, Joseph, broke with Brigham Young and founded a different, monogamous branch of Mormonism, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Would Louis Riel have had greater luck with his own family with his own doctrine of polygamy? I doubt it, but as with all counterfactual questions, we will never be sure about the answer.

I have discussed polygamy at length because it has such important social and political implications, but Riel also had other sexual innovations in mind. In his revelation on polygamy, he also proposed allowing a special form of incest, marriage between brother and sister. This is harder to explain in theological terms since the Mosaic Law forbade incest. Perhaps the explanation was more personal; the first case Riel described in which incestuous marriage would be permitted corresponded almost perfectly to his own situation:

Our Lord Jesus Christ permits that if, after the death of the father of the family, an unmarried son takes care of his mother and his mother's children, as he should do for the love of God and of his family; and if, in order to remain more able to carry out this great duty, being

poor, he neglects to marry, Our Lord permits, I say, that the son request the hand of one of his sisters and that his mother give or promise the hand of one of his daughters.

Riel was the oldest son in his family. His father died in 1864, when Riel was a student in Montreal. Not yet 20 years old, Riel was unmarried not only because he was young but because he was expecting to study for the priesthood. He abandoned that plan; and, after a lapse of about four years, he did return to Red River to help support his mother and large brood of younger children. Did he nourish an incestuous passion for one of his sisters? The analogy between what he wrote and his own life seems too perfect to be coincidental, but there is no conclusive evidence.

Learning about Riel's revelations on polygamy and incest is not a prurient peek into his bedroom, lifting the veil on something better left private. He never published these writings during his lifetime, but that was because he was waiting for the right time. His papers are full of declarations about his desire to publish his revelations. The efforts of modern scholarship thus fulfill his mission of being the "Prophet of the New World." ❧

Note on Sources:

Riel's religion is described at length in Thomas Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel: 'Prophet of the New World,'* revised ed. (Toronto, 1996). The original French text of Riel's revelation on polygamy can be found in G.F.G Stanley et al., eds., *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel* (Edmonton, 1985), no. 2-044. All translations from Riel's writings are mine.

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