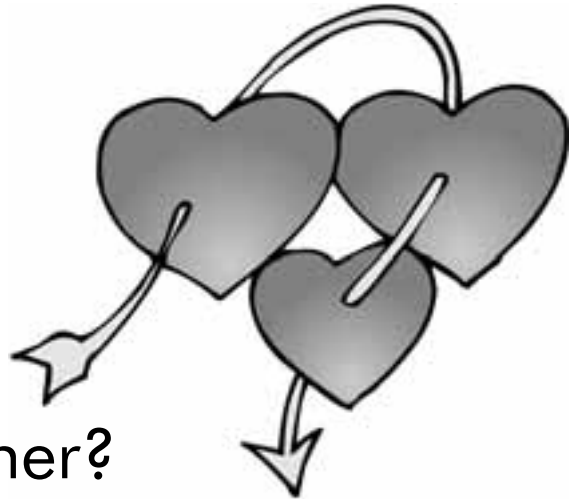


Toe-to-Toe

A Forum for Controversy and Opinion

Two's a Party, Three's a Coven: Do Polyamory and Paganism Go Together?



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Thanks, but no thanks!

I have to confess that in my romantic heart of hearts I would like to believe that polyamory is possible. There is something wonderfully bright and hopeful about belief in the ability to love more than one person at a time. But after observing the attempt in others, and making it once myself, I have decided that in practice it is not a Good Thing.

I am not confusing polyamory with either adultery or polygamy. Adultery is the disruption of an established relationship, and usually involves deceit or disregard for the state of the relationship and the feelings of the other person involved. Polygamy, as it is practiced in most of the world, is not specifically to do with love. Besides, polygamy creates a series of one-to-one relationships; the new spouse is married to the opposite-sex partner, and not to her (usually) other partners in the marriage in question.

If one defines polyamory as simply a series of affairs, then there is no discussion. Many relationships founder on affairs or open marriage, and others survive them, and life goes on. The discussion arises when people want to make polyamory an

established and accepted framework for stable relationships among three or more people.

On the bottom rung of the ladder of reasons I'm against polyamory is the question of finances. The Western legal, political, and social structure offers the most support to the married heterosexual couple. Change any one of these words, and you start to have problems. Common-law couples do not always have the same spousal or inheritance rights as couples who are legally married. Same-sex couples have recently been granted some spousal rights but even in highly liberal countries, these rights are limited at best.

When you change the word "couple" to "group", the word "married" goes right out the window in even the most liberated of countries. This means that only one of a polyamorist's partners can have spousal benefits in any employee pension fund, dental or drug plan, insurance policy, etc. One partner would have the spousal property rights in case of a split. In a polyamorous relationship of three people, each one might choose a single partner as the beneficiary of these financial arrangements. Unless all parties have jobs

with equivalent benefits, someone is going to get the short end of the stick.

Then there are questions of spousal leave, where financial aspects lap over onto relationship support issues. If, say, your mother-in-law dies, you may be able to get compassionate leave to attend the funeral. You certainly won't get it more than once. Things get even more dicey when you begin to talk about parental leave. Some institutions allow mother and father to divide the leave time between them. If a baby is born to a polyamorous trio, one partner gets no leave time to spend with his or her new baby. Also, one partner will be left off the birth certificate, and will have no legal rights or obligations in relation to the child.

Then there comes the question of end-of-relationship issues. Nobody beginning a relationship wants to believe that it will end, but about half of first marriages end in divorce. Divorce is rarely pleasant, sometimes hardly civil, but there are legal measures in place to try to ensure that children are supported by the absent parent, and that family assets are divided fairly. Such measures do not take polyamory into account. While the names of all three partners could

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**“Thanks but no thanks!”
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go on a mortgage agreement to safeguard financial rights to some degree, what happens when one partner wants out, and wants his or her share of the assets? If the partner who wants out is the biological mother of a child, she has legal rights regarding the child. An “other mother” in the relationship has no such rights. Similarly, an “other father” who is not the declared biological father of a child has no rights.

Perhaps this is the point at which to discuss the root problem that makes me come down against polyamory. Whatever steps a relationship may take to work around the legalities and the lack of financial support systems, it is the human factor that gives me the most pause.

We have been raised in a particular culture, and we are the products of that culture. Marriage in the Western world treasures the ideal of a romantic, passionate attachment as the basis of a lasting relationship. We’ve all seen the carnage that this ideal leaves in its wake, and yet we maintain a touching belief in its rightness. When you add a third partner to a relationship, you have taken all the requirements for adjustment that two people make in living together and tripled them. Unless you are incredibly understanding and lucky, that can spell disaster.

There are logistics questions. Will all three partners share a domicile? If they don’t, how do they maintain intimacy? If two share living space, will they be “at home,” and the third feel like a visitor?

What about lovemaking? How will the needs for both sex and physical affection of all partners be met? If two partners are of one gender and one of the other, how does the sexuality of the same-sex partners affect the relationship?

Then there is the question of jealousy. Anyone who has had a relationship knows that jealousy is not limited to matters of sex. My first marriage foundered on an “other woman” who was a computer. Work, golf, volunteer activities, time with

friends can all create jealousy in a relationship. What if your two partners spent more time together than either did with you, even if that time was spent repairing the car or discussing Proust?

How would a polyamorous partnership be formed? If a third person is added to an existing couple, both members of the existing couple have to form a bond with the third. There is always a risk that one partner may give in to the wishes of the other to add a third person from fear of the couple splitting. A polyamorous partnership formed under these conditions is asking for trouble. I speak here from my own very short-lived experience. The best situation, it seems to me, would be for all members of the partnership to be in on it from the beginning. This brings us to our relationship with other people.

Imagine introducing your two prospective spouses to your mom and dad. Now imagine living through three of these scenes, as each partner introduces his or her two intendeds to his or her parents. Parents can make a great deal of trouble for their offspring even in the matter of a single partner, everything from trying to railroad the wedding to arguments over where to spend Christmas and Thanksgiving. Siblings may request that nieces and nephews not be told about Auntie Jane’s or Uncle John’s unusual household arrangements. Requests may be made that one partner or another not come to family functions, or come as “a friend.” Not having the support of one’s family in a relationship is extremely demoralizing.

In fact, it can be very difficult to be completely open about the nature of such a relationship in many settings. Your friends may understand that you three are a stable and solid unit, and that a dinner invitation is for three, not just two, but most other people will not comprehend this. Many will ask who is the “real” spouse, the one you actually legally married (if either). The social round has enough trouble coping with single people or same-sex couples without blowing a gasket; and really,

to how many strangers do you want to explain your private life? Yet we seem to believe as well that openness, honesty, avowed loyalty are all important to a stable and secure relationship. So how, other than living entirely within a sub-culture of polyamorists, can one even hope to function in society as a triad (or more)?

The final reason that I cannot support polyamory as a practice is the stress that it puts on the people who live it. The constant balancing act, or the constant defense of one’s own lifestyle, can make the most consenting adult crazy and tired. Neither of these conditions is good for any relationship, of any size.

But isn’t the topic of debate polyamory in Paganism? Doesn’t the Pagan faith make a difference to all this? Yes, it makes some difference in that Paganism in its various forms doesn’t flat out come down against polyamory. In fact, the Charge of the Goddess can be quoted as tacitly supporting it — “all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals.” But many of us in the Craft, even those who have been there for decades, were raised from our impressionable childhood with a certain model of family life as an ideal, even if our own family life did not conform to it. Same-sex couples, single parents, couples childless by choice, even happily single people all put up with a certain amount of nosy curiosity and social stress for not conforming to this ideal. Polyamorous relationships have all that, plus an added level of prurient curiosity — who does what with whom — to boot.

In brief, polyamory is a very sketchily charted territory, without financial, legal or social supports. It’s *terra incognita* for coupledness, and considering the difficulties that even “conventional” couple marriages have, and the stresses they face, I would advise against it, alas, even for Pagans. ▲

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