

Modern Marital Practices and the Growth of World Christianity During the Mid-Twentieth Century

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Studies concerned with modernity, mission Christianity, and sexuality generally address how western, Christian gender ideologies have affected women or how they have affected modernization. This article approaches the nexus of modernity, Christianity, and sexuality from a different angle. One of the notable consequences of modernization was that young people in industrializing nations began demanding the right to choose their own spouse and marry for love. Several scholars have noted the connection between modernization and spouse self-selection, but none have explored the relationship between Christianity's endorsement of spouse self-selection and its global appeal during the mid-twentieth century. This article examines a collection of letters written by young Africans to missionary Walter Trobisch after reading his popular 1962 book, I Loved a Girl. These letters suggest that Christianity's endorsement of spouse self-selection and marrying for love gave it a kind of modern appeal for young people who were eagerly adopting the modern values of individualism and self-fulfillment. The practice of prayer provided relief to young people who were struggling to navigate the unfamiliar realm of dating in the modern world.

I. WALTER TROBISCH AND *I LOVED A GIRL*

IN 1962 Walter Trobisch, a missionary of German ethnicity working in Cameroon for the American Lutheran Church, published a book for young Africans that advocated modern marital practices like spouse self-selection, and marrying for love. He called the book *J'ai Aimé Une Fille (I Loved a Girl)*. Trobisch wrote the book as a series of letters between himself and a hypothetical former student, whom he called François. It opened with an angry letter from François, who had just been fired from his teaching position for having premarital sex: “Last Friday, I loved a girl—or,

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as you would put it, I committed adultery—at least that’s what the whites call it and the Church, too.”¹ François believed he was blameless since “the girl wasn’t married, nor had any bride-price been paid for her.”² Trobisch responded in a letter arguing that “sexual union fulfills its purpose only when it is an expression of love.”³ He then elaborated on his view of love:

You did not love that girl; you went to bed with her—these are two completely different things. You had a sexual episode, but what love is, you did not experience . . . Let me try to tell you what it really should mean if a fellow says to a girl, “I love you.” It means: “You, you, you. You alone. You shall reign in my heart . . . I will give everything for you and I will give up everything for you . . . I want to share with you my thoughts, my heart and my body—all that I possess. I want to listen to what you have to say. There is nothing I want to undertake without your blessing. I want to remain always at your side.”⁴

The emphasis on intimacy, exclusivity, and personal sacrifice that constituted Trobisch’s view of love came in large part from his Swiss marriage counselor, Theodor Bovet. Bovet had written a popular book on the topic a few years earlier, in which he argued that “love should govern the whole field of sexuality, and . . . God should govern the whole field of love.”⁵ Trobisch’s book *I Loved a Girl* explored love, sex, and marriage from that same perspective. The conflict in *I Loved a Girl* centered on the bride-price. The heroine’s father demanded that François give him four hundred dollars as a bride-price. The story ended in despair with a letter from François to Trobisch:

Four hundred dollars! For me this is altogether out of the question, an impossible amount. You have made me dream. But reality is cruel and destroys that dream. I’ve ceased to hope . . . You have awakened in me feeling of which I did not believe myself capable. You have taught me to love. You have kindled in my heart a fire of heavenly origin, without which I no longer consider myself a man. But now this fire consumes me. It makes me suffer more than I can bear, and it will kill me.”⁶

Despite the tragic ending or perhaps, as Trobisch argued, because of the tragic ending, *I Loved a Girl* was wildly popular in Africa.⁷ Trobisch soon began

¹Trobisch, *The Complete Works of Walter Trobisch* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 31.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 33.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Theodor Bovet, *Love, Skill and Mystery: A Handbook to Marriage* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1958), xiii.

⁶Trobisch, *The Complete Works*, 57.

⁷Between 1962 and 1964, thirty thousand copies of the book were sold in French Cameroon alone (E. Suh to Walter Trobisch, June 25, 1964, box 15, folder S, Walter Trobisch Collection, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Archives, Elk Grove Village, Ill. [hereafter

working on a sequel, *I Love a Young Man*, which would tell more of the story of the heroine, Cecile.⁸ *I Love a Young Man* introduced Monsieur Henri, a wealthy suitor able to pay Cecile's bride-price. Although François and Cecile try to pursue Cecile's father to allow them to marry, they are ultimately forced to elope in order to escape Cecile's impending marriage to Henri.

Because Trobisch wrote *I Loved a Girl* and *I Love a Young Man* as a series of letters and included his own address on the back cover, several thousand readers of the books wrote to him for advice about the relational issues in their own lives. In 1964, Trobisch proudly told a friend that he had received letters "from over 20 different countries."⁹ He started an impromptu counseling service by mail, which he called Marriage Guidance Service for Africa.¹⁰ In 1971, Trobisch's wife Ingrid told a friend, "We have received about 7000 letters from 32 different African countries."¹¹ Most of these letters were written in French or English. Today between four and five thousand of these letters are housed in the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.¹²

The letters to Trobisch shed light on the complex relationship among modernity, mission Christianity, and sexuality. This article will consider "modernity" to encompass social and economic forces generally associated with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, such as urbanization,

WTC-ELCAA]). By 1965, both the English and French editions were "in their fourth printing" (List of all the editions of *J'ai Aimé Une Fille* either published or in progress, box 12, "Heidelberg" folder, WTC-ELCAA). Translations existed or were in progress for about thirty African languages (David Trobisch has copies of most of these editions and translations at his home in Springfield, Miss. It is also still possible to find copies of them in various libraries throughout the world). By 1969, sixteen printings of the text had been made for English-speaking Africans (James Sutton to Walter Trobisch, December 5, 1969, Ingrid Trobisch Papers, David Trobisch Residence, Springfield, Miss.). The French edition also went through several printings (WorldCat, accessed August 6, 2012, lists four printings from Karl Bäuerle in Karlsruhe, Germany, four from Editions Trobisch, one from Ed. Labor et fides in Genève, and one from Opération mobilisation France). For Trobisch's claim that the tragic ending of *I Loved a Girl* contributed to its popularity, see Walter Trobisch to Edward Sammis, April 7, 1964, Ingrid Trobisch Papers, David Trobisch Residence, Springfield, Miss.

⁸Walter Trobisch, *I Love a Young Man* (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1964).

⁹Walter Trobisch to John Beunde, April 14, 1964, box 14, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰As the letters became more numerous, Trobisch hired people to help him answer them. The Trobisches kept the letters they had received and carbon copies of the letters they wrote in response. See Anneke Stasson, "Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Global Mission of Walter and Ingrid Trobisch" (PhD thesis, Boston University, 2013), 130–134.

¹¹Ingrid Trobisch to Mrs. Johnson, August 25, 1971, box 19, WTC-ELCAA. Some people carried on a correspondence with Trobisch over a series of months or years. Others simply wrote him a single letter. This article focuses on letters from people who carried on a lengthy correspondence with Trobisch.

¹²This estimate comes from Joel Thoreson, Archivist at the ELCAA, email to author, May 12, 2014.

industrialization, the transition to a monetary economy, increased access to education, and the growth of certain values like individualism and self-fulfillment. Studies concerned with modernity, mission Christianity, and sexuality generally address how western, Christian gender ideologies have affected women or how they have affected modernization. For example, Jessie Lutz and Ryan Dunch argue that Christianity in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century China stimulated modernization and created new opportunities for women. A Christian primary or secondary school education “raised a girl’s standing and marital prospects” and in some cases caused her to marry later or not at all.¹³ Christian education “cultivated ambition and prepared the girls for leadership and public life.”¹⁴ It opened up doors for women to attend graduate school, perhaps even abroad.¹⁵ Although Christianity would by the 1920s be seen by many Chinese “as an obstacle to China’s modernization,” Lutz points out that “for a brief time in the early twentieth century many urban Chinese . . . joined the missionaries in linking modernization and Christianity.”¹⁶

Much of the scholarship on modernity, mission Christianity, and sexuality in Africa has highlighted the intrusive, oppressive quality of western sexual ethics. In an article about family life in South Africa, Sylvia Moena has argued, “The Christian gospel became a destructive agent used to propagate the expansion of capitalism or cultural imperialism.”¹⁷ John and Jean Comaroff have argued that missionaries were especially successful in enforcing their model of family because they were able to colonize consciousness: “The European colonization of Africa was often less a directly coercive conquest than a persuasive attempt to colonize consciousness, to remake people by redefining the taken-for-granted surfaces of their everyday worlds.”¹⁸ Tabitha Kanogo and Modupe Labode have described the oppressive atmosphere of mission schools for girls in Kenya and South Africa, where girls would occasionally revolt against the school’s program for them, which included being indoctrinated with the virtues of “purity and integrity, humility and industry” and participating in a grueling

¹³Jessie G. Lutz, “Women’s Education and Social Mobility,” in *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility*, ed. Jessie G. Lutz (Bethlehem, Penn.: Lehigh University, 2010), 397, 410, 412; Ryan Dunch, “‘Mothers to Our Country’: Conversion, Education, and Ideology among Chinese Protestant Women, 1870–1930,” in *ibid.*, 336, 338–339.

¹⁴Lutz, “Women’s Education and Social Mobility,” 411.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 412; Dunch, “Mothers to Our Country” 327.

¹⁶Jessie G. Lutz, “Beyond Missions: Christianity as a Chinese Religion in a Changing China,” in *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, 423.

¹⁷Sylvia N. Moena, “Family Life in Soweto, Gauteng, South Africa,” in *African Families at the Turn of the 21st Century*, eds. Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi and Baffour K. Takyi (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 255.

¹⁸Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 313.

training regiment of “laundry, housework, and cookery.”¹⁹ Fiona Bowie has said that most missionaries “were as arrogant in their enforcement of monogamy as they were blind to the benefits offered by institutionalized polygyny.”²⁰

This article approaches the nexus of modernity, missionary Christianity, and sexuality from a different angle. One of the notable consequences of modernization during the mid-twentieth century was the fact that young people in industrializing nations began demanding the right to choose their own spouse and marry for love rather than have their parents select a mate for them.²¹ This motif surfaces repeatedly in the letters to Walter Trobisch. Young people wrote to Trobisch to ask for help finding a spouse. They wanted to know how they could convince their parents to let them marry the person of their choosing. They asked about the relationship between sex and love.

The dynamic that unfolds in the letters to Trobisch is an altogether different dynamic than that suggested by much of the literature on modernity, missionary Christianity, and sexuality in Africa. The dynamic is not one of “colonizer and colonized,” “imposition and response,” or “hegemony and resistance.”²² Rather, the letters to Trobisch reveal a conversation. The letters demonstrate the ways in which African women and men were using Christian teaching on sexuality to make sense of their experience of growing up in modern, urban Africa. The letters help to counteract what Nancy Rose Hunt has called “the archival absence of African female voices.”²³ So much of the scholarship on colonial Africa, particularly that pertaining to African women, has had to deduce and construct African voices from missionary and colonial documents. The letters to Trobisch—written by African women and men, themselves—enable the researcher to see the particular ways in which African women and men were negotiating their sexual identity and shaping marital practices in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Given that it was the era of African nationalism, the “moratorium” on foreign missions, and the birth of African theology—movements that sought African independence from the West—one would expect readers of *I Loved a Girl* to

¹⁹Modupe Labode, “From Heathen Kraal to Christian Home: Anglican Mission Education and African Christian Girls, 1850–1900,” in *Women and Missions: Past and Present*, eds. Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood, and Shirley Ardener (Providence, R.I.: Berg, 1993), 129, 132; Tabitha Kanogo, “Mission Impact on Women in Colonial Kenya,” in *ibid.*

²⁰Fiona Bowie, “The Elusive Christian Family: Missionary Attempts to Define Women’s Roles, Case Studies from Cameroon,” in *ibid.*, 146.

²¹For the connection between modernization and spouse self-selection, see footnote 129.

²²Nancy Rose Hunt, “Introduction,” in *Gendered Colonialisms in African History*, eds. Nancy Rose Hunt, Tessie P. Liu, and Jean Quataert (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 4.

²³Nancy Rose Hunt, “Introduction,” 9.

express some pushback against Trobisch's advocacy of marital practices that many considered to be "western."²⁴ However, the letters to Trobisch give no sense that readers found these marital practices to be antithetical to either nationalism or the indigenization of Christianity in Africa. Neither did they feel that spouse self-selection and marrying for love somehow impinged upon their African identity.²⁵ On the contrary, most believed these practices enabled them to more fully express their identity as modern Africans. They found these practices to be in line with their desire for political independence. And the process of spouse self-selection also proved for many to be a means of deepening their Christian faith. Thus this article will argue that Christianity's support of spouse self-selection and marrying for love was an important part of the matrix that made Christianity attractive and relevant to young people in modern sub-Saharan Africa.

Most of the people who carried on a lengthy correspondence with Trobisch were already Christian or were sympathetic to the Christian religion. Thus, this article does not seek to argue that Christianity's endorsement of spouse self-selection and marrying for love *caused* young people to convert to Christianity. Neither does the article seek to argue that conversion to Christianity *caused* young people to marry for love. Lawrence Stone has argued that protestantism in early modern England caused the growth of "affective individualism," which in turn led to the development of the "closed domesticated nuclear family."²⁶ Certainly what Stone calls the "open lineage family" could be compared with family arrangements in many traditional African societies, and some of the trends that led to the "closed domesticated nuclear family" in England could be compared to trends that led to spouse self-selection in twentieth-century Africa. Nevertheless, this article will not make a cause and effect argument about Christianity and spouse self-selection in Africa. The letters to Trobisch suggest only that young people associated Christianity with modern marital practices like dating, spouse self-selection and marrying for love and that they appreciated Christianity's endorsement of these practices.

²⁴Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 66.

²⁵A survey of the material, in fact, found only one person who expressed any kind of criticism of Trobisch's view of love, sex, and marriage. The letter came from S. Iyoku, a twenty-five-year-old preacher and Bible translator in Nigeria. Interestingly, Iyoku's criticism was that Trobisch was too lenient on African traditions like polygamy (S. Iyoku to Walter Trobisch, January 2, 1972, WTC-ELCA). In a later letter Iyoku also told Trobisch that his books had neglected to mention how important it was for a couple to be financially stable prior to marriage (S. Iyoku to Walter Trobisch, November 8, 1973, WTC-ELCA).

²⁶Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977).

II. CHRISTIANITY, MODERNITY, AND MARITAL PRACTICES IN AFRICA

Since their first missions to Africa in the fifteenth century, western Christians have taken an interest in African marital practices. Initially, missionary teaching about Christian marriage consisted of proclaiming monogamy and condemning polygamy. There was a diversity of opinion about whether to admit polygamists to baptism, but “nearly all missions in Africa were agreed from the first that any baptized Christian taking more than one wife must be excommunicated.”²⁷ Missionaries also opposed the bride-price. They believed that it perpetuated an inferior view of women and that the logic behind it reinforced other undesirable practices like polygamy, divorce, and levirate marriage.²⁸

In the nineteenth century, as protestants got increasingly involved in the missionary project, the presence of missionary wives on the mission field intensified the missionary message about monogamy. Most protestant missionary couples considered equality and partnership to be essential aspects of Christian marriage, and many experienced high levels of marital satisfaction from the experience of working together in the mission cause. Natasha Erlank has said of missionaries John and Jane Philip that theirs was “a close relationship. Their love and regard for one another did not diminish throughout their married life.” They “envisaged marriage as a relationship of two people whose different abilities would complement one another in the creation of a harmonious partnership.”²⁹ Perusing the journals of missionary couples reveals that the notion of partnership was a common motif among missionaries.³⁰

Many protestant couples were intentional about putting their marriage and home life on display for interested onlookers.³¹ The civilizing approach to

²⁷Lyndon Harries, “Christian Marriage in African Society,” in *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life*, ed. Arthur Phillips (New York: Oxford University, 1953), 344.

²⁸Ibid, 360.

²⁹Natasha Erlank, “Jane and John Philip: Partnership, Usefulness & Sexuality in the Service of God” in *The London Missionary Society in Southern Africa, 1799–1999*, ed. John de Gruchy (Athens: Ohio University, 2000), 84.

³⁰Anna Hinderer said of her marriage to David: “We are one in heart, and meet in spirit, when absent in the body.” François Coillard said of his marriage to Christina: “We were only *one* in everything.” Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer, Wife of the Rev. David Hinderer, C.M.S. Missionary in Western Africa*, 4th ed. (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1877), 231; C. W. Mackintosh, *Coillard of the Zambesi: The Lives of François and Christina Coillard, of the Paris Missionary Society, in South and Central Africa (1858–1904)* (New York: The American Tract Society, 1907), 456.

³¹Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University, 1996), 65–75, Dana L. Robert, “The ‘Christian Home’ as a Cornerstone of Anglo-American Missionary Thought and Practice,” in *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914*, ed. Dana L. Robert (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 143–144.

mission dominated nineteenth-century, Anglo-American mission theory, and showing the superiority of Christian marriage was an essential part of the civilizing project. As American Board Secretary Rufus Anderson said, “The heathen should have an opportunity of seeing Christian families. The domestic constitution among them is dreadfully disordered, and yet it is as true there as everywhere else, that the character of society is formed in the family.”³² Missionary wives in particular made it part of their missionary duty to model the benefits of marital partnership, hygiene, discipline, manners, and housekeeping.

The domestic ideologies of missionary wives were as significant to the development of African culture as the ecclesial ideologies of missionary husbands.³³ Karen Tranberg Hansen writes, “By shaping notions of labor and time, architecture and space, consumption and accumulation, body and clothing, diet and hygiene, and sexuality and gender, the ideologies associated with domesticity played a crucial . . . role in influencing the cultural ordering of African history.”³⁴ Some missionaries found it particularly effective to communicate domestic ideologies to the African young people they employed in their home: “Marriages between former ‘house girls’ and ‘house boys,’ approved, if not in fact arranged, by missionaries, were the crowing aspiration of mission endeavor.”³⁵ Missionary publications were replete with comments about the way in which Christianity could “elevate” and “civilize” the heathen, and gender relations were commonly cited as an example of this process.³⁶ Enforcing monogamy, discouraging the bride-price, and getting Africans to imitate western spousal relations were essential aspects of nineteenth-century, Anglo-American mission in Africa.

It was not until the twentieth century that large numbers of missionaries began to speak of “adapting” and “purifying” customs like polygamy and the bride-price rather than condemning such practices.³⁷ As mission theory moved from a “civilization” to an “indigenization” paradigm, there was more

³²Rufus Anderson, “Introductory Essay on the Marriage of Missionaries,” in William Ellis, *Memoir of Mrs. Mary Mercy Ellis, Wife of Rev. William Ellis, Missionary to the South Seas* (Boston, Mass.: Crocker & Brewster, 1836), xi.

³³Deborah Gaitskell, “Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903–39,” *The Journal of African History* 24, no. 2 (June 1983): 242.

³⁴Karen Tranberg Hansen “Introduction: Domesticity in Africa,” in *African Encounters with Domesticity*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1992), 5.

³⁵Nancy Rose Hunt, “Colonial Fairy Tales and the Knife and Fork Doctrine in the Heart of Africa” in *ibid.*, 148.

³⁶Natasha Erlank, “‘Civilising the African’: the Scottish mission to the Xhosa, 1821–1864,” in *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*, ed. Brian Stanley (London: Curzon, 2001), 150.

³⁷Harries, “Christian Marriage in African Society,” 365.

room to be critical of western marital practices and open to African marital practices.³⁸ In the course of debate, mission theorists acknowledged both the diversity and commonalities across African societies. Roman Catholic historian Adrian Hastings noted, “The variety of marriage practice in Africa has been vast indeed . . . It would be highly misleading to paint a single picture . . . and label it ‘African traditional marriage.’”³⁹ Nevertheless, Hastings did find that “most African societies” exhibited an “extensive articulation of kinship relationships and responsibilities, the full social acceptability of polygamy, the early age at which girls normally married, [and] the widespread lack of extensive political and economic structures beyond lineage and village.” These features, said Hastings, contributed to a view of marriage that differed significantly from the way that most westerners viewed marriage. In Africa, “the greatest stress was laid upon the group significance and procreative purpose of marriage,” whereas in the West the stress was laid “upon its character as a union of and for two persons.”⁴⁰ Arthur Phillips identified similar features of “African customary marriage” in his introduction to the massive *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life*. Phillips said the widespread approval of polygamy, the payment of bride-price, the view of marriage “primarily as an alliance between two kinship groups,” and “the emphasis laid on procreation as the chief end of marriage” were “the main distinguishing features of African customary marriage, as compared with ‘European marriage.’”⁴¹

The two studies just mentioned, Phillips’s *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life* and Hastings’s *Christian Marriage in Africa*, were two of the most important texts to come out of a desire to contextualize Christian sexual ethics in Africa. The discussion that led to both texts began with the founding of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1921. At Edinburgh House, the headquarters of the IMC in London, the Africa Education Group was formed, and by the late 1920s and early 1930s African marriage was one of the most pertinent issues discussed by members of the group.⁴² The issue was of such importance that a subgroup on African Marriage was formed. One of the questions that interested the African

³⁸David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), 291–298.

³⁹Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1973), 27.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 30.

⁴¹Arthur Phillips, “An Introductory Essay,” in *Survey of African Marriage*, xiv, xv, xvii.

⁴²Natasha Erlank, “Strange Bedfellows: The International Missionary Council, the International African Institute, and Research into African Marriage and Family,” in *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge About Africa*, eds. Patrick Harries and David Maxwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 272.

Marriage Group was whether polygamy could be considered a valid form of Christian marriage.⁴³

Ironically, missiological openness to African culture occurred at the same time that traditional African societies were deteriorating under the pressures of modernization. Male heads of household spent long periods of time working in towns far from their rural family compounds, a practice which led to the rise of concubinage and prostitution.⁴⁴ Rural communities found it difficult to maintain initiation ceremonies, so young people grew up without the customary teaching about their sexuality and the moral obligations associated with it.⁴⁵ The process of urbanization and the separation of young people from the ethical norms that governed rural life led to an increase in premarital sex and, consequently, an increase in the rate of illegitimate births.⁴⁶

The deterioration of traditional African sexual ethics was, itself, one of the catalysts for missionary interest in contextualizing Christian sexual ethics in Africa.

As missionaries witnessed the collapse of sexual restraint in the wake of modernization, they realized their own complicity in this collapse and began to urge the church to develop a more positive theology of sexuality to counteract the negative approach for which Christianity was known. Writing in the 1930s, Scottish missionary James W. C. Dougall urged missionaries to end “the conspiracy of silence” about sexuality: “The missionary movement will do little to prevent the breakdown of African marriage and family-life unless it adopts fearless and imaginative attitudes to sex, and, by these or other means, shows quite plainly that it is not afraid to honour the reproductive functions as divinely ordained and necessary to its own spiritual health.”⁴⁷

Missionaries also began to express a desire to understand the purpose of many of the traditional marital practices they had previously condemned.⁴⁸ Adrian Hastings said of the bride-price: “It is the view of this report that it [the bride-price] is as such an acceptable and valuable custom and it is not the task of the Church to preach or struggle against it.”⁴⁹ Similarly, missionaries and African Christians at a family life seminar in Kitwe, Zambia in 1963 said that the bride-price system should “be not condemned in itself because of its acknowledged

⁴³Ibid., 275. They invited Rev. James W. Welch to deliver a paper on this topic at one of their meetings, a paper which he later published. See James W. Welch, “Can Christian Marriage in Africa Be African?,” *International Review of Missions* 22 (1933).

⁴⁴James W. C. Dougall, ed., *Christianity and the Sex-Education of the African* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937), 11–13.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶B.A. Pauw, *The Second Generation: A Study of the Family Among Urbanized Bantu in East London* (New York: Oxford University, 1963), 137.

⁴⁷Dougall, *Christianity and the Sex-Education of the African*, 20–21.

⁴⁸Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 20.

⁴⁹Ibid., 108.

abuse . . . [but rather] that the traditional exchanges be ‘Christianized’ into a token of the covenant between the partners and their families.”⁵⁰

Interestingly, although Walter Trobisch served as the chaplain at the Kitwe family life seminar, he did not share the majority view on the issue of the bride-price. The stories he had heard at Cameroon Christian College, where he worked as a teacher and chaplain for six years, led him to the conclusion that the bride price had turned from being “a very meaningful custom which served to stabilize marriage” to being a veritable “slave trade in girls.”⁵¹ Trobisch strongly believed that both western and African marital practices contradicted the “biblical concept of marriage,” which he said was best expressed by Genesis 2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”⁵² In his books, letters, and marriage seminars, Trobisch elaborated on each element of this verse. He called “leaving” the legal, public declaration of marriage and described how necessary it was for the new couple to make a clean break from their kin. He described “cleaving” as the personal, emotional side of marriage and “becoming one flesh” as the physical side of marriage. He argued that a married couple should “share everything they have, not only their bodies, not only their material possessions, but also their thinking and their feeling, their joy and their suffering, their hopes and their fears, their successes and their failures.”⁵³ For Trobisch, polygamy, the bride-price, and divorce (or what Trobisch called “successive polygamy”) prohibited a couple from fully “cleaving” and “becoming one flesh.”⁵⁴

Trobisch’s perspective on Christian marriage was similar to that of James Dougall and Adrian Hastings. Like them, Trobisch understood Christian marriage to be about love, companionship, equality, complementarity, and reciprocity.⁵⁵ He shared their excitement about marriage guidance in Africa even as he was less optimistic than Hastings about the capacity to Christianize the bride-price.⁵⁶ Trobisch’s students at Cameroon Christian College had often complained to him about the ways in which the bride-price impeded their ability to marry. The story Trobisch told in *I Loved a*

⁵⁰All-Africa Seminar on the Christian Home and Family Life, *The All-Africa Seminar on the Christian Home and Family Life* (Kitwe, Northern Rhodesia: Geneva, 1963), 56.

⁵¹Trobisch, *The Complete Works*, 61.

⁵²Genesis 2:24, King James Version.

⁵³Trobisch, *The Complete Works*, 383.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 511.

⁵⁵Dougall, *Christianity and the Sex-Education of the African*, 100–101, 122; Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 64.

⁵⁶Hastings believed that the lack of marriage guidance in Africa was “the most obvious gap in the Church’s work.” He called Trobisch “one of the most experienced Lutheran missionaries working in Africa” and appreciated Trobisch’s pioneering work as a marriage counselor. Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 107.

Girl was based on his students' stories. In fact, while he was working on *I Loved a Girl*, one of his students was writing a play that also dealt with the bride-price and the desire of young people to marry for love. The student, Guillaume Oyono Mbia, went on to publish his play, *Trois Prétendants . . . Un Mari*. In a speech that constituted the climax of Mbia's play, the main character expressed her frustration with the bride-price system: "Am I to be sold to the highest bidder? Can I not be consulted about my own wedding?"⁵⁷

Both Trobisch's and Mbia's stories depicted the transition in African society from a kin-based marital system to an individual-based marital system.⁵⁸ This transition occurred in the crucible of modernization, education, and nation-building. The modern, free-market economy encouraged young people to obtain a job without the aid of their family.⁵⁹ The workplace environment further instilled an individualistic orientation to life. Interactions with a potential spouse could not be as strictly monitored by custom and family oversight, so the family began to play a lesser role in marital negotiations.

Modern education also encouraged an individualistic orientation to life. According to Chuks Mba, Deputy Director of the United Nations Regional Institute for Population Studies, "The acquisition of modern education leads to changes in values and intellectual development across generations as younger people place greater emphasis on self-fulfillment as individuals rather than on their responsibilities toward relatives."⁶⁰ As increasing numbers of men and women encountered each other in the school environment, it was natural for romantic relationships to develop. Numerous studies from the mid twentieth century noted the increasing numbers of young people arranging their own marriages in Africa and expressing the desire for marital intimacy and partnership.⁶¹ In 1961, Kenneth Little conducted a survey among college students in Freetown, Sierra Leone. He wrote, "What emerges from these data is that overall both Creole and

⁵⁷In the original French: "Suis-je donc à vendre, pour que vous vous croyiez obligés de me donner au plus offrant? Ne puis-je donc pas être consultée pour un mariage qui me concerne?" Guillaume Oyono Mbia, *Trois Prétendants . . . Un Mari* (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1964), 17–18.

⁵⁸Certainly the transition was not quite that stark. As Hastings notes, "It is not true to say that young people never had any choice as to whom they were to marry . . . But it is true that marriage was seen more in terms of the group than of the nuclear family; that in many cases the choice of the partner was made largely—in some cases wholly—by parents or other senior relations." Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 29.

⁵⁹Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 171.

⁶⁰Chuks J. Mba and Martin W. Bangha, "Reflections on the Changing Family System in Cameroon," in *African Families*, 187.

⁶¹Ruth Levin, "Marriage in Langa Native Location," *Communications from the School of African Studies* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1947), 12; J.C.D. Lawrence, *The Iteso* (New York: Oxford University, 1957), 94; J.H.M. Meattie, "Nyoro Marriage and Affinity," *Africa* 28 (1958): 5; Michael Banton, *West African City: A Study of Tribal Life in Freetown* (New York: Oxford University, 1957), 208; John S. Mbiti, *Love and Marriage in Africa*, 225–226.

non-Creole young men and women regard marriage as a companionate relationship . . . marriage is to be a true union of husband and wife, as well as an economic partnership.⁶² In 1966, P.C. Lloyd looked broadly at all educated young couples across Africa and concluded, “Within the elite nuclear family the pattern of relationships between husband and wife tends towards one of shared roles, greater intimacy, and equality.”⁶³

The African independence movements also facilitated the transition to a model of marriage based on self-fulfillment and equality rather than on tradition or family ties. Educated, urban society was infused with the longing for and the language of political and economic freedom. It was natural for this longing to infiltrate the arena of personal relationships. And it was natural for young men and women to begin to use the language of rights to describe their personal relationships. For example, when several African women attended an international congress of Catholic women in October of 1957, “They insisted upon recognition of their equality with men as human persons, their equal dignity and their equal fundamental human rights . . . before, during, and after marriage.”⁶⁴ In 1958, African women held congresses in Ibadan (Nigeria), Nkongsamba (Cameroon), and Lomé (Togo) and in each case “asked that the free consent of the spouses be made an obligatory condition for marriage.”⁶⁵

In sum, many young, urban Africans in the mid-twentieth century decided to choose their own spouse and marry for love because these behaviors made the most sense in modern, independent Africa. The structural conditions of modernization and the experience of modern education encouraged an individualistic orientation to life. The political movements for independence carried over into peoples’ personal lives, and they began to demand the right to spouse self-selection. Factors like these made many Sub-Saharan Africans in the middle of the twentieth century pursue a “modern” model of marriage. That is to say, it was a model of marriage based more on love, companionship, and self-fulfillment than on tradition and family alliances. Interestingly, many of the sexual ethics that marked this modern model of marriage—monogamy, spouse self-selection, marrying for love, marriage as an equal partnership, the independence of the married couple from extended kin—were also sexual ethics that corresponded with the vision of marriage that Christian missionaries had long been advocating in Africa. As both

⁶²Kenneth Little, “Attitudes Towards Marriage and the Family among Educated Young Sierra Leoneans,” in *The New Elites of Tropical Africa*, ed. P.C. Lloyd (New York: Oxford University, 1966), 149.

⁶³P. C. Lloyd, *Africa in Social Change* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 30.

⁶⁴Marie André du Sacré Cœur, *The House Stands Firm: Family Life in West Africa* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Bruce, 1962), 228.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 231.

modernization and Christianity in Africa spread substantially over the course of the twentieth century, both triggered the development of these sexual ethics.

It would not be accurate to say, however, that the “modern” and “Christian” visions of marriage were equivalent. To name just one difference, most Christians lamented the modern acceptance of premarital sex in both Africa and the West.⁶⁶ Christian opposition to premarital sex in Africa aligned far more closely with traditional African attitudes towards sex.⁶⁷ The Christian vision of marriage in mid-twentieth-century Africa, then, represented a balancing act. On one hand, Christianity was thoroughly modern in advocating spouse self-selection and marrying for love, ethics that corresponded with modern values of individualism and self-fulfillment. On the other hand, the Christian ethic of premarital chastity could be seen as a direct critique of individualism and self-fulfillment. Premarital chastity required the lover to sacrifice his or her own desire on behalf of another person. In the midst of this balancing act, Walter Trobisch made an interesting move. He argued that premarital chastity could actually lead to a more satisfying life, that it was a way of achieving a deeper, more meaningful form of self-fulfillment.⁶⁸

III. SPOUSE SELF-SELECTION, MARRYING FOR LOVE, AND FOLLOWING GOD

Whether they longed for a mate, were cynical about premarital chastity, or were frustrated by intergenerational conflict, the young Africans who read *I Loved a Girl* and its sequel, *I Love a Young Man*, found concrete advice for how to deal

⁶⁶Dougall, *Christianity and the Sex-Education of the African*, 12–13; Trobisch, *I Loved a Girl*; Walter Trobisch, *Love Is a Feeling to Be Learned* (Kehl/Rhein: Editions Trobisch, 1971); Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, 38; John Mbiti, *Love and Marriage in Africa* (London: Longman, 1973), 33, 66–67, 72–74.

⁶⁷In traditional Cameroonian society, among the Akan of Ghana, and among the Nupe of West Africa all premarital sex was frowned upon (Mba, “Reflections on the Changing Family System in Cameroon,” 186; Eric O. Ayisi, *An Introduction to the Study of Africa Culture*, 2nd ed. [London: Heinemann, 1979], 6; Lucy Mair, “African Marriage and Social Change” in *Survey of African Marriage*, 11, 118). Among the Xhosa of South Africa, the Gikuyu of Kenya, the Pondo, Venda and Zulu of Southern Africa, and the Hausa of West Africa some premarital sexual activity was allowed, but young people were to avoid becoming pregnant (Pauw, *The Second Generation*, 121; Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* [New York: Vintage Books, 1965], 149; Mair, “African Marriage and Social Change,” 11–12, 118). In some African societies—for example among the Ganda, Luhya, Hehe, Kipsigis, Birwana, Sumbwa, and Gikuyu of East Africa—female virginity upon marriage was praised, even though premarital sex was allowed (Mair, “African Marriage and Social Change,” 50). It should also be mentioned that some African societies—for example, the Junam of East Africa and the Korongo and Mesakin of West Africa—had no problem with premarital sex (Mair, “African Marriage and Social Change,” 49, 118).

⁶⁸Trobisch, *The Complete Works*, 36–37.

with the situations they faced. When twenty-one-year-old C. Tanmi of Cameroon read *I Love a Young Man*, she was shocked at the extent to which the story mirrored her own. She wrote to Trobisch, "The whole book seems to be dealing with my personal difficulties."⁶⁹ Tanmi was "in love with a class-mate" of hers, but was engaged to a man her parents had chosen for her.⁷⁰ "When I was only 17 my parents influence me to like a certain young man," she wrote. "It was later decided that we should become married in future but sorry that I have not even a grain of love for this young man."

In 1965, Tanmi's letter was one of a thousand letters that Trobisch had received from people in twenty different African countries.⁷¹ Like Tanmi, many of the young people who wrote to Trobisch expressed their desire to marry for love. For example, T. Bogale of Ethiopia told Trobisch that he loved a girl "more than any body on the earth. I will never marry another girl if I cannot marry her."⁷² The problem for Bogale was that he did not trust the girl he loved. He felt she had betrayed him by dating other men and lying to him about it. "I love her truly and my love to her is not a hidden treasure—I usually reveal it to her and to others as well; but I feel that I am not equally loved," he wrote.⁷³ J. Ngbede Elijah of Nigeria had a similar problem. The girl he loved and expected to marry had left him. He wrote to Trobisch, "How I wish I forget her, but it seems that when she left that day along with her she took my heart, if so how can I love another when my heart is somewhere far away? She taught me to love her and now she has gone."⁷⁴

N. Tangwan of Cameroon told Trobisch that she loved two boys, both of whom were interested in marrying her. "The first one who hunted for me has been four years doing medicine in America," she told Trobisch.⁷⁵ "There had been a climax of sentiments in our correspondence. Now the writing is just normal but we hope to marry when he comes in June, 1966." The other boy was in Cameroon. Tangwan's father preferred the boy in America, and so did she. The problem was that "the boy in America says he cannot show himself so much [cannot be as expressive in his affection], because he feels that if there is not much sentiment now, there will be no great effect to both of our feelings in case of disappointments." This worried Tangwan: "I am afraid he might leave me when he comes back, but I love him with passion

⁶⁹C. Tanmi to Walter Trobisch, June 1965, box 15, folder T, WTC-ELCAA.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Jean Banyolak, "Africa Needs Marriage Counsellors," *All Africa Conference of Churches Bulletin* (February 1965): 67.

⁷²T. Bogale to Walter Trobisch, April 1, 1967, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴J. Ngbede Elijah to Walter Trobisch, August 12, 1975, box 14, folder E, WTC-ELCAA.

⁷⁵N. Tangwan to Ingrid Trobisch, February 23, 1966, box 15, folder T, WTC-ELCAA.

tenderer than the boy here. Which of them do you think will be my husband?" Clearly, Tangwan hoped to marry the boy in America, for whom she felt such tender passion. Knowing Trobisch's endorsement of marrying for love, she wrote for affirmation that following one's heart was the right thing to do, despite the risks involved.

The letters Trobisch received show not only that young people were interested in marrying for love but that they associated Christianity with this practice. F. Tekele from Ethiopia told Trobisch, "When I reached the age of nineteen I met my first love (my husband) we use to love and understand each other very deeply, we were very very much in love that we thought we couldn't be apart from each other."⁷⁶ Tekele and her husband were both Christians. Like the characters in *I Loved a Girl*, Tekele and her fiancé experienced obstacles to their marriage, so Tekele made the choice to "run away from home with the man I loved so dearly . . . my parents didn't know about it, all the world was against us, but we were still happy and faithful to each other, because there was love between us, so every thing was bearable." Because of her husband's "kindness his faith in God his love, it was the happiest time of my life." For Tekele, marrying for love and having faith in God were closely connected during this "happiest time" of her life.

The connection between Christianity and marrying for love was also evident in a letter from A. Suh of Cameroon, who wrote to Trobisch about her fiancé, George. Both Suh and George were Christians, and this influenced their search for a potential spouse. As Suh said, "Girls here now only want to marry either a rich man or a well educated man," but she wanted to marry George simply because she loved him and believed he was "the one God has chosen for me."⁷⁷ She told Trobisch that George had impressive self-control when it came to sexual temptation. "Girls like him very much," she wrote, "but he knows it is not right for him to go as far as he likes with girls." Trobisch responded by affirming George as a good marital choice and assuring Suh that George's self-control was "a certain sign of real love, which always seeks the happiness and comfort of the partner."⁷⁸ He also suggested that George's self control might be a way that God was blessing her for not getting caught up in the pursuit of wealth and prestige, as other girls were doing. "I share your happiness," wrote Trobisch, "especially, as you did not choose a rich man . . . Yet he is rich in God's eyes . . . Has not God given a very precious reward to you in return?—A man, a friend, who has decided to wait [to have sex until marriage]."⁷⁹ For Suh, this answer both confirmed

⁷⁶F. Tekele to Walter Trobisch, November 17, 1966, box 15, folder T, WTC-ELCAA.

⁷⁷A. Suh to Walter Trobisch, April 17, 1968, box 15, folder S, WTC-ELCAA.

⁷⁸Walter Trobisch to A. Suh, May 1, 1968, box 15, folder S, WTC-ELCAA.

⁷⁹Ibid.

her choice of marital partner and solidified the connection she perceived between following God and marrying for love.⁸⁰

The story of W. Kyereh, a young Ghanaian who wrote to Trobisch, illustrates the way in which membership in the Christian community often provided a context for young people to find a spouse and fall in love. Kyereh met a young woman at church. He told Trobisch that he and the young woman “have been working together for the cause of the Gospel: attending choir practice, service, prayer meetings etc.”⁸¹ The two initially became interested in each other “as we discussed our problems and shared our joys together.”⁸² Their friendship progressed, such that Kyereh felt he was able to discuss things “which I cannot otherwise discuss with anybody.” He told Trobisch that he had “really fallen in love [with the girl] . . . To confess, she is the girl I really want to be my better half. I can’t just imagine what my life will be without her.”

Not all of the young people who wrote to Trobisch were like Kyereh, gushing about their romantic relationships. However, even if they had not experienced romantic love themselves, many who wrote to Trobisch desired to do so and refused to acquiesce to marital arrangements that did not originate with romantic love. The experience of M. Bekele from Ethiopia, who carried on a lengthy correspondence with Trobisch in the 1960s, is illustrative of the widespread desire for freedom of choice in marriage. Seventeen-year-old Bekele met a thirty-five-year old man while she was visiting a relative. Her relative simply introduced her to the man, “nothing more,” but

The next day he sent me a letter saying that he wanted to marry me. Well, how could I say ok while I know that I have to finish high school and do something before I decide to marry. To his letter my answer was ‘No’. But he sent elder men to my father. My father said “ok” and they fixed the date for the engagement. I just ignored their decision because at that time I was working . . . At last my father told me that they have fixed the date and I was going to be engaged to the man who even didn’t date me once! I immediately sent a telegram to my brother who lives in Harar. He came to Addis the next day and asked me everything. What do you think my parents did? They just went mad! My father said that I have made him a liar and such things and mother seconded his idea. Anyway I was not to be moved. Before my brother left for Harar, he begged my mother and father to promise not to force me to be engaged or propose marriage.⁸³

⁸⁰When she next wrote, she said, “I was really very happy with the reply of your letter.” A. Suh to Walter Trobisch, August 1, 1968, box 15, folder S, WTC-ELCAA.

⁸¹W. Kyereh to Walter Trobisch, February 5, 1974, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³M. Bekele to Walter Trobisch, October 26, 1967, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

Because of the intercession of Bekele's brother, her parents did break off the engagement. Bekele's story shows how strongly Africans of her generation and education opposed the traditional practice of arranged marriage and desired to be in control of their own decisions. Bekele was not about to allow her parents to marry her off to a man twice her age. She had her own ideas about how a marriage should come about:

What I wanted since my childhood is a real happiness in life. I want to have a good Christian family. Till this day, things are the same. But you know Reverend, I am sure God one day will make me happy! . . . If I pray and beg God to help me find a real good lifemate, I will be happy. Don't you think so Reverend?⁸⁴

Bekele wanted God, not her parents, to help her find a spouse. For young people like Bekele, following God, finding a spouse, and marrying for love were intricately connected.

IV. DATING AND PRAYING FOR A MATE

The young Africans who wrote to Trobisch had largely embraced modern concepts of dating, but many of them were unsure exactly how to go about meeting a potential spouse. Twenty-year-old L. H. Chikoya of Malawi wrote to Trobisch after his girlfriend of two years broke up with him. He told Trobisch, "I want to start looking for a Life-partner. So I want you to help me."⁸⁵ W. Banutalira of Zambia also wrote to ask for help finding a girlfriend. He told Trobisch he was "too shy" and was unable to "express myself to a girl because I don't know what I can tell her first and last."⁸⁶ Trobisch advised Banutalira to hang out in "a group of girls and boys" or to get himself invited to the home of "a friend who has sisters."⁸⁷ In either case, Trobisch said, Banutalira would get himself accustomed to hanging out with girls. Banutalira wrote back a couple years later to thank Trobisch for his advice and to say that it had worked: "I can now tell you that, I meet girls without any difficulty due to your two possibilities."⁸⁸

For other young people, meeting someone to date was not so much the problem as knowing which people were acceptable to date and which were not. In *I Loved a Girl*, Trobisch gave advice for how to choose a spouse, but many people still wrote to him for advice pertaining to their particular situation.⁸⁹ S. Iyoku, a twenty-five-year-old Bible translator in Nigeria, wrote

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵L. H. Chikoya to Walter Trobisch, October 15, 1973, box 14, folder C, WTC-ELCAA.

⁸⁶W. Banutalira to Walter Trobisch, n.d., box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

⁸⁷Walter Trobisch to W. Banutalira, April 4, 1968, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

⁸⁸W. Banutalira to Walter Trobisch, June 8, 1970, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

⁸⁹Trobisch, *The Complete Works*, 50–52.

to Trobisch about his inability to find an appropriate girl to date and marry. "Looking around I can only see children of ten and twelves. Hardly any 15yr old girl has not been married. Also you can not see an educated girl. Every girl is married before she starts schooling."⁹⁰ Iyoku wanted to know whether he should simply propose to a child and wait until she came of age or whether he should perhaps marry a widow. He said he did have one friend who was a widow, but he doubted that she was a suitable choice because she was a Roman Catholic. Iyoku was also worried about marrying the widow because she was "bigger than I am and if I marry her, I will be like a house boy to her."⁹¹ Trobisch favored marrying the Roman Catholic widow and tried to assure Iyoku, "You will not be her boy but you will be an equal partner with her . . . Marrying such a woman would show that it is not the height of the body which counts but the union of the heart."⁹²

T. Fosu, a twenty-eight-year-old man from Ghana, also wrote to Trobisch with a question about choosing a spouse: "The problem I am facing to-day is how to choose a wife since I want to marry. I wouldn't like to marry and divorce the wife since it is against Christianity. How can I know that the girl I intend to marry loves me, obedient and there will be no separation in the years to come?"⁹³ M. Chulu, a woman from Zambia, was also concerned about choosing the right person to date and marry:

How can I find a proper man to marry in future. I don't mean to go looking for them but when they come to me in which way would I recognize a suitable boy for me? . . . There are many boys who are proposing me at this time, but I am refusing to accept because I don't want any troubles and I don't know how I can accept a right man for me.⁹⁴

Chulu's question was echoed by Bekele, the woman whose brother helped her get out of the engagement to the thirty-five-year old man. Bekele told Trobisch that her "real problem is how to choose the right man."⁹⁵ After exchanging several letters with Trobisch, Bekele did start dating someone. She eagerly wrote to Trobisch,

I have met someone whom I think is worth meeting. The first time I met him, writing to you came to mind and I took this opportunity to do so. Two months have elapsed since I met him and we are seeing each other now

⁹⁰S. Iyoku to Walter Trobisch, November 8, 1973, box 14, folder I, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Walter Trobisch to S. Iyoku, December 13, 1973, box 14, folder I, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹³T. Fosu to Walter Trobisch, June 6, 1974, box 14, folder F, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹⁴M. Chulu to Walter Trobisch, April 17, 1969, box 14, folder C, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹⁵M. Bekele to Walter Trobisch, October 26, 1967, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA. Mudido from Uganda had the same question. See E. Mudido to Ingrid Trobisch, March 8, 1966, box 15, folder M.

and then. In other words, I meet him at the University when I go to attend my night classes and he teaches there part time . . . Remembering your advice, I always pray and ask God to help me work out things in cases like this.⁹⁶

Trobisch told Bekele he was “very glad” about her new acquaintance at the university and urged her to continue to rely on God for guidance: “He will surely hear you. For in Psalm 32:8 he has promised: I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”⁹⁷

As is evident from Trobisch’s advice to Bekele, Christianity not only endorsed spouse self-selection and marrying for love, it also offered help in the difficult task of choosing ones’ spouse. Young people like Bekele learned that they could pray to God for guidance in selecting their spouse. Prayer was the advice Trobisch gave to J. Kizza, a twenty-one-year-old man from Uganda. Kizza loved a girl who did not seem to return his love.⁹⁸ Trobisch told Kizza the signs seemed to suggest that the girl was not the right one for him. Rather, he should “ask God for guidance to show you the right girl who could become your life partner.”⁹⁹ Kizza appreciated the advice and put it into practice, writing in his next letter, “Now I will pray God for his help . . . I feel thanks to God because he has passed in you to help me. Now my heart has settled down well.”¹⁰⁰

J. Kinyanjui, a twenty-one-year-old Kenyan man, also wrote to Trobisch with questions about the dating process. Kinyanjui told Trobisch that he knew many Christian women, but he did not know how to go about dating one of them. “Among the group that I am in there are very many sisters but I don’t know how it will work. Will the Lord tell me that it is that one . . . so take her.”¹⁰¹ Trobisch told him to pray about it: “It is never too early to pray for your future wife. Did you already start to do it regularly? Even if you do not yet know her, you can pray that the Lord leads you and her the right way, and that at the right time you will find and know each other.”¹⁰² In his next letter, Kinyanjui seemed even more worked up about the difficulties of dating: “One problem here in Africa is that you can’t have this thing the whites call dating . . . Another problem is that . . . there are so many of sisters and you can’t know whom is whom for they all seem to have the same actions and attitude towards me.”¹⁰³ Trobisch again urged Kinyanjui to turn to God:

⁹⁶M. Bekele to Walter Trobisch, March 29, 1968, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹⁷Walter Trobisch to M. Bekele, April 21, 1968, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹⁸J. Kizza to Walter Trobisch, n.d., box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

⁹⁹Walter Trobisch to J. Kizza, December 15, 1969, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰⁰J. Kizza to Walter Trobisch, January 19, 1970, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰¹J. Kinyanjui to Walter Trobisch, January 18, 1978, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰²Walter Trobisch to J. Kinyanjui, March 3, 1978, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰³J. Kinyanjui to Walter Trobisch, January 30, 1979, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

I know how difficult it is to find the right partner. That's why I want to turn your eyes to the one who is far more concerned about your choice and happiness than you can be: Jesus. I want you to live in a total inner relaxation knowing that God cares for you . . . It's not primarily your burden to choose or to find the right girl,—it's God's concern to guide you there. So please be confident and quiet and relaxed in your heart. I don't know which way you will find her but the Lord knows!¹⁰⁴

Just as he urged Kinyanjui to pray about his situation, prayer was also the advice Trobisch gave to G. Mashaba of Pretoria when she wrote to him with the following situation:

Please help a little girl of my age. I am 20 years of age, and I am a Christian. I am in love with a certain fellow who is a teacher. I love the fellow, his name is Isaac. He also love me . . . The only thing that I had realized with Isaac is that he is not a Christian.¹⁰⁵

Mashaba wanted to know whether Trobisch recommended that she break off her relationship with Isaac, since he was not a Christian. Trobisch's response was measured. On one hand, he urged her, "You must continue to pray for Isaac that he will become a Christian . . . Perhaps God will use your testimony to lead Isaac to Christ."¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, Trobisch warned Mashaba that she "must be ready to sacrifice him—just as Abraham did—if it becomes clear to you that God does not like your being together."¹⁰⁷

Trobisch made the same point about sacrifice when twenty-five-year-old Y. Beiene of Eritrea wrote to him about his seventeen-year-old fiancé. The two had been secretly engaged for three years. Because the girl had an unmarried elder sister and custom required the elder to marry before the younger, Beiene felt that all he could do was continue to pray for his fiancé and for the increase of their love.¹⁰⁸ He asked if Trobisch would "pray for 'our love' in the name of Heaven."¹⁰⁹ In his response, Trobisch commended Beiene for his prayers: "This really is the best thing you can do and must absolutely have the first place."¹¹⁰ He assured Beiene "that this girl will be yours in spite of all difficulties if she is the one God has chosen for you." However, Trobisch also challenged Beiene, "Are you willing to give this girl up if this is God's will?" Trobisch told Beiene that if he continued to pray daily, "God will answer your prayers by either strengthening your and her love, or by

¹⁰⁴Walter Trobisch to J. Kinyanjui, May 4, 1979, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰⁵G. Mashaba to Ingrid Trobisch, October 17, 1966, box 15, folder M, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰⁶Walter Trobisch to G. Mashaba, July 6, 1967, box 15, folder M, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Y. Beiene to Walter Trobisch, September 30, 1971, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Walter Trobisch to Y. Beiene, November 24, 1971, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

bringing about . . . a clean break.” He told Beiene to be content with whatever path God chose for him, and Beiene seemed to accept this advice, writing in his next letter, “I am very much pleased to get such nice advice which gives mental rest and God’s belief. I read your letter several times and . . . I found it to be like some drops of water in a desert which quenches thirst!”¹¹¹

A. Wibaba of Ethiopia also wrote to Trobisch about praying while dating. She told Trobisch that the man she loved had no idea that she loved him. She wondered whether it was “right for me to pray to get him.”¹¹² Trobisch replied,

Concerning the pastor you love . . . He probably has no idea whatsoever about your interest in him. The first thing you should do is to find out through some friends whether he has someone else he loves. If he does not you must try to get somehow to get in contact with him. Maybe you can arrange to be invited to a party or to a home where he is also invited. In that way you would have to try to get acquainted with him and to call your attention to him. This is not at all a sin for a girl to do that.¹¹³

In advising Wibaba to initiate a relationship with the pastor, Trobisch knew he was giving countercultural advice. That was why he assured Wibaba, “This is not at all a sin for a girl to do that.” Being encouraged to take such an active role in pursuing a man must have meshed well with Wibaba’s conception of herself. Her letter reveals that she already had a fairly independent conception of herself, despite the fact that she had so far lacked the confidence to initiate a relationship with the pastor.¹¹⁴

Just as he had told Wibaba to be more assertive, so Trobisch told P. Kagotho, a twenty-seven-year-old Kenyan man, to be more assertive. Kagotho told Trobisch that he had been praying for a spouse for a decade: “Even when I was a young kid of about 15 years I was praying God about the same issue. Up to now I have not found God’s answer to my prayer . . . Now I really want a wife not a girlfriend.”¹¹⁵ In his response, Trobisch told Kagotho that rather than simply waiting for God to present him with a wife, he should “look around in [his] church, or among the relatives of [his] friends . . . Sometimes we expect God to do great miracles, but indeed we simply have to do a very small step in faith. It’s not always God who has to act, but

¹¹¹Y. Beiene to Walter Trobisch, December 1, 1971, box 14, folder B, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹²A. Wibaba to Ingrid Trobisch, n.d., box 15, folder W, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹³Walter Trobisch to A. Wibaba, November 14, 1968, box 15, folder W, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹⁴She wrote, “If ever God wants me to marry I would like a man who will be interested to work with me in my church because my church counts a lot on me.” Wibaba to Trobisch, n.d., box 15, folder W, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹⁵P. Kagotho to Walter Trobisch, May 12, 1973 and January 5, 1974, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

sometimes we have to act.”¹¹⁶ A year later Kagotho wrote again to tell Trobisch that he had finally found a girl: “I have really prayed God to help me . . . I have followed your advice just as you told me and at last I am successful.”¹¹⁷

R. Klu, a twenty-two-year-old man from Ghana, also wrote to Trobisch about prayer in the context of dating. Klu’s correspondence demonstrates the role of prayer not only in finding and choosing a spouse but also in dealing with disappointment during the dating process. When Klu first wrote to Trobisch it was to say, “I seriously need a partner in my life.”¹¹⁸ Trobisch gave him the advice he gave to so many others: “Pray regularly (daily) that God may show the girl whom he prepared for you and who will be your wife.”¹¹⁹ Trobisch closed his letter with a verse from Psalm 37: “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” When Klu next wrote, he used this verse to tell Trobisch his good news: “I GOT WHAT MY HEART DESIRES . . . I fell in love with a Girl or rather we both fell in love simultaneously. If really she is the girl God prepared for me I shall very very be thankful to Him.”¹²⁰ A few months later, however, the girl’s father put an end to the relationship. Klu told Trobisch that his faith was sustaining him: “I am happy and this is my astonishment though it troubled me for sometime past but now I’m happy because I feel God’s good earth and the world is still beautiful.”¹²¹ Throughout the next two years, Klu continued to write to Trobisch as he waited for God to guide him to a wife. When his parents began pressuring him to marry, he told them he could “never marry a girl I don’t really know . . . I can’t cheat any girl by accepting a marriage planned by someone else.”¹²² Trobisch commended him for postponing marriage until he found the right girl, and Klu thanked Trobisch “for guiding me not to have picked on a girl which would not have been the chosen one for me from God.”¹²³ Klu then offered a testimony of how God was sustaining him while he waited for the right girl:

Even right now I am at a cross road with nobody in my mind, I am happy for knowing the Lord Jesus Christ who is so kind to me and has shown it in many diverse ways. I am sure the Lord will do His will for me and I am still waiting for Him anywhere, anytime.

¹¹⁶Walter Trobisch to P. Kagotho, January 28, 1974, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹⁷P. Kagotho to Walter Trobisch, April 18, 1975, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹⁸R. Klu to Walter Trobisch, April 29, 1976, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹¹⁹Walter Trobisch to R. Klu, June 29, 1976, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA

¹²⁰R. Klu to Walter Trobisch, October 29, 1976, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹²¹R. Klu to Walter Trobisch, February 24, 1977, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹²²R. Klu to Walter Trobisch, June 13, 1977, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

¹²³Walter Trobisch to R. Klu, June 13, 1977 and R. Klu to Walter Trobisch, December 14, 1978, box 14, folder K, WTC-ELCAA.

One thing I have noticed recently is that I have been so preoccupied and happy in the Lord so much that I have almost forgotten about my bachelorhood. This is not hallucination. The Lord is making it easy for me to go through all these months past and those to come with comfort and free mind.

Klu's testimony illustrates the way in which Christian faith could sustain a young person while he waited to find the right woman to marry.

The archives contain no further correspondence between either Klu, Wibaba, Beiene, Bekele, or Iyoku and Trobisch. We do not know if Klu eventually found a woman to marry, whether Wibaba initiated a relationship with the pastor, whether Beiene ended up marrying his seventeen-year-old fiancé, whether Bekele married the man from the university, or whether Iyoku married the Roman Catholic widow. However, it is clear that these African young people were committed to modern marital practices like spouse self-selection and marrying for love, and they appreciated Christianity's endorsement of these practices. They also found prayer helpful in the context of dating. By making God ultimately responsible for guiding their decisions, prayer relieved some of the pressure of finding and choosing a spouse.

V. CONCLUSION

The popularity of *I Loved a Girl* and the letters Trobisch received from its readers suggest that questions about dating and marriage weighed heavily in the minds of young, urban Africans in the mid-twentieth century. The letters to Trobisch attest to the widespread appeal of modern marital practices like dating, spouse self-selection, and marrying for love. But that is not all. Because many of the people who corresponded with Trobisch were Christians, their letters also offer insight into the correlation between the global spread of modern marital practices and the appeal of Christianity during this period. At least in Africa, Christianity's endorsement of spouse self-selection and marrying for love gave it a kind of modern appeal for young people who were eagerly adopting the modern values of individualism and self-fulfillment. Prayer helped young people feel less anxious about finding and choosing a spouse because it invited them to see God as the one ultimately responsible for guiding them through the dating process.

The idea that Christian sexual ethics have offered support for people coming to terms with the social changes of modernity is not a new idea. Deborah Gaitskill has argued that in nineteenth-century South Africa, Christian sexual ethics "accorded prestige, respect and power to married homemakers, while Christian associations gave them emotional and practical support in

their defense of a family form under threat of disintegration.”¹²⁴ Eliza Kent has argued that nineteenth-century Indian Christians accepted the western, nuclear type of marriage in order to alleviate their isolation from non-Christian family members and to set themselves apart from their non-Christian neighbors.¹²⁵ Elizabeth E. Brusco has called evangelical Christianity in twentieth-century Colombia a “strategic woman’s movement” for the way it counteracted machismo culture and “re-attached” men to the home.¹²⁶

What is new about this article is the focus on unmarried individuals. This focus allows a different side of Christian sexual ethics to come to the fore, namely spouse self-selection and marrying for love. Several scholars have noted the connection between modernization and spouse self-selection, but none have explored the relationship between Christianity’s endorsement of spouse self-selection and its global appeal during the mid-twentieth century.¹²⁷ This article has argued that Christianity’s support of dating, spouse self-selection, and marrying for love was part of the matrix that made it attractive and relevant to young people in modern Africa.

There may also be wider resonance for this thesis beyond Africa. There is good reason to think that Christianity’s support of dating, spouse self-selection, and marrying for love may have constituted part of its appeal in other geographic regions as well. In the mid-twentieth century, industrialization and urbanization were contributing to the breakdown of traditional family systems around the world. Sociologist William Goode was the first to explore this process as a global phenomenon. In his 1963 book *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, Goode argued that while the particular aspects and speed of social change differed from region to region, family systems around the world were simultaneously moving “in the direction of some type of *conjugal* family pattern—that is, toward fewer kinship ties with distant relatives and a greater emphasis on the ‘nuclear’ family unity of couple and children.”¹²⁸

Spouse self-selection did not figure heavily in Goode’s analysis, but it was certainly part of the same global trend that Goode identified. Ample studies since Goode’s have shown how modernization has led to increased instances

¹²⁴Gaitskell, “Housewives, Maids or Mothers,” 255.

¹²⁵Eliza F. Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India* (New York: Oxford University, 2004).

¹²⁶Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995).

¹²⁷For the connection between modernization and spouse self-selection, see footnote 129.

¹²⁸Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, 1. Goode surveyed the available sociological literature on modernization and family life in “Japan, China, India, the West, Sub-Saharan Africa” and among Arabic Muslim communities in “Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, the Arabian Peninsula, and Iraq” (88).

of spouse self-selection in various parts of the world.¹²⁹ One group of scholars has gone so far as to say that “no transition in marital processes has been more closely studied than the transition from arranged marriage . . . to love marriage.”¹³⁰

It is likely that Christian teaching on marriage facilitated the transition from arranged marriage to spouse self-selection. The dominant conception of marriage in nineteenth- and twentieth-century mission was one that stressed the intimacy and interdependence of husband and wife. Whether they were headed to Africa, China, India, Hawaii, the Pacific, or Western Canada, missionaries carried with them this marital ideal, which was as much a product of changes in the economic structure of western society as it was an expression of Christian values.¹³¹ As Christianity spread rapidly over the course of the twentieth century, this conception of marriage spread with it.¹³² Even when missionaries did not explicitly endorse spouse self-selection, their teaching on marriage implicitly supported it by elevating the nuclear family and relativizing the importance of extended kin.

¹²⁹Bruce K. Caldwell, “Factors Affecting Female Age at Marriage in South Asia: Contrasts Between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh,” *Asian Population Studies* 1, no. 3 (2005): 290; Giri Raj Gupta, “Love, Arranged Marriage, and the Indian Social Structure,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 80; M.S. Gore, *Urbanization and Family Change* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1968); Promilla Kapur, *Marriage and the Working Woman in India* (Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1970); J.C. Caldwell, P. H. Reddy, and P. Caldwell, “The Causes of Marriage Change in South India,” *Population Studies* 37 (1983): 343–361; Ronald Rindfuss, and S. P. Morgan, “Marriage, Sex and First Birth Interval: The Quiet Revolution in Asia,” *Population and Development Review* 9, no. 2 (June 1983): 270; Dae H. Chang, “The Korean Family,” in *The Family in Asia*, ed. Man Singh Das and Panos D. Bardis (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), 279; A. Thornton, J. S. Chang, and Hui-Sheng Lin, “From Arranged Marriage toward Love Match,” in *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan*, ed. Arland Thornton and Hui-Sheng Lin (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi and Baffour K. Takyi, “Introduction to the Study of African Families: A Framework for Analysis,” in *African Families*, 10; Gail Hershatter, “State of the Field: Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (2004): 995.

¹³⁰Dirgha J. Ghimire, William G. Axinn, Scott T. Yabiku, and Arland Thornton, “Social Change, Premarital Nonfamily Experience, and Spouse Choice in an Arranged Marriage Society,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (January 2006), 1181.

¹³¹Robert, “The ‘Christian Home’”; Erlank, “Jane and John Philip,” 84; Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1989); Bowie, Kirkwood, and Ardener, *Women and Missions*; Clare Midgley, ed. *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1998); Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre, eds., *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact* (New York: Cambridge University, 1989); Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*; Kent, *Converting Women*; Lutz, *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*; Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1984); Sarah Carter, *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2008).

¹³²For growth of Christianity, see David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., vol. 1: *The World by Countries: Religionists, Churches, Ministries* (New York: Oxford University, 2001), 13–14.

In conclusion, if we triangulate the vast literature on Christianity, modernity, and the global conjugal shift with the very particular evidence and argument of this article, it seems plausible that Christianity's support of spouse self-selection may have constituted part of its global appeal during the twentieth century.¹³³ Many of the same dynamics we find in the African letters to Trobisch were conceivably at work as Christianity and modernity spread in Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific. Christianity's endorsement of spouse self-selection and marrying for love likely gave it a kind of modern appeal. Prayer likely provided relief as young people struggled to navigate the unfamiliar realm of dating in the modern world. Ultimately, by supporting spouse self-selection and encouraging young people to pray for guidance in dating, Christianity adapted to changing global realities in the mid-twentieth century and presented itself as a religion conducive for modern, urban life and suitable for those committed to modern values like individualism and self-fulfillment.

¹³³The Walter Trobisch archival materials offer further support for this claim. Between 1962 and 1979, Trobisch's *I Loved a Girl* was translated into some seventy languages spanning six continents. Trobisch received letters from readers around the globe. It has not been possible for this article to incorporate letters from regions outside of Africa, but such work would certainly help to substantiate the global claim of this article. For a translation history of *I Loved a Girl*, see Stasson, "Love, Sex, and Marriage," 116–130.