

Does Islam Agree With Polygamy?

The phenomenon of multiple wives or "polygamy" has been one of the issues of the societies throughout the history of mankind. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of the researchers in different Eastern and Western countries even in the present age.

For example, some time ago, in United States a Christian priest "David Krish" claimed that he was a messenger of God and who also tried to collect weapons in his temple. He and his companions were killed by security forces of United States. It was revealed that he had 16 wives.

In the year 2006, another priest, "Varen Jeffs" in Utah State in America, who had about eighty wives, was summoned before the court as a result of complaints from some of his wives and for some other reasons. The explanations and expressions of his thoughts and the leadership of his sect and promulgation of polygamy was for a while the subject of the news and television discussions.

The Bases For Polygamy

It seems one of the social elements and a justification for polygamy in all centuries is that there have always been more women in comparison to men in many countries. Factors such as numerous wars prevailing in many countries, men working in dangerous places such as mines, the increase in life expectancy amongst women, and many other factors have caused the increase in the number of women in relation to men in the society.

In order to accommodate the lives of these women who could not find their male match, especially those who had lost their husbands in wars, some previous social reformers advised those men who economically and financially are able to support more than one family to marry these women who otherwise would have no opportunity to have married lives.

Social scholars have suggested three solutions to solve the problem of these groups of women whose number is more than that of men.

The First Solution is that these women remain single to the end of their lives and their expenses are covered by the governments. Although this solution may seem to be ideal, but considering two points it is not practical. Firstly, generally speaking, in previous societies and in many countries at present time, there is no social security system to cover these expenses. The women without the support will be vulnerable and will be deprived and left on their own. Secondly, each human being, further to his/her material requirements, has some natural and sexual needs and being asked to be single and unmarried for their entire life would be a recommendation against her/his natural needs and rights.

Second Solution is as is practiced in Western societies, is to expose these women to prostitution and earn their livelihood in this way.

Third Solution which is attributed to Bertrand Russell is that governments should provide the financial requirements of these women and their natural needs would be fulfilled through prostitution and illegitimate relations.

Obviously the second and third solution would lead into great social disorders such as degrading a women's honour such as that of prostitutes and its consequential dangerous outcomes, such as an increase in the number of illegitimate children. Considering the millions of illegitimate children in European and American countries, some of the western scholars have admitted the incorrectness of the second and the third solutions.

Fourth Solution is that in order to meet the financial and natural needs of this group of women, those men who are able to support more than one family economically and socially should marry another woman. This solution has been practiced during many historical cycles and in many countries such as Mesopotamia region, ancient Persia, Arabian countries and similar places.

Considering the above, it becomes clear that polygamy is not limited to Islamic period or its divine guidance, but it is something which had prevailed among ancient nations as well. Furthermore, many of pre-Islamic religious leaders who are respected by Christians and Jews, such as the Prophet Abraham (Peace be upon him) had more than one wife.

The Role Of Islam In Limiting Polygamy

With regard to these four solutions, Islam does not recommend the first solution for its impracticality in societies and the denial of natural needs of the women. It also rejects the second and third solutions because of prevalence of prostitution and its outcomes and Islam clearly discards them.

In order to solve this social disorder, only the fourth solution remains.

Islam has neither denied it completely nor at the same time approved it unconditionally and without any limitations.

Prior to advent of Islam in Arabian Peninsula, without undertaking necessary commitments for supporting women, men were allowed to marry even ten women. Furthermore, head of states such as some kings in dynasties of ancient Persia used to keep tens of spouses, rather than the queen, in their harems.

On the one hand, Islam limited polygamy and the number of wives one could have, and on the other hand, imposed two following main conditions:

First Condition: the ability of the husband to manage more than one family economically and to provide legitimate and natural needs of all the wives and their children.

Second Condition: the observance of treatment based on justice by husband towards all the wives and the proper and fair attitude to them on equal bases, without discrimination and without usurping the rights of anyone of them.

Now in order to clarify the role of Islam in limiting and imposing conditions on polygamy, two verses of the Glorious Quran will be reviewed:

Sura an-Nisa' – 4 The Woman

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثَلَىٰ ثَلَاثَ وَرُبَاعَ ۖ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً
أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۖ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا

[4:3] If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

The expressions of this verse indicate that the permission for polygamy from Islamic point of view is under certain strict conditions, without them, the social problems would not be solved.

The other point to note according to this verse is that the number of wives, under the specified special circumstances, has been limited to two, three and a maximum four. And Islam, according to this verse clearly does not permit unlimited number of wives even if one is able to observe these conditions.

Furthermore, the Glorious Quran has considered the justice among wives as the fundamental factor in polygamy and Islam clearly opposes having more than one wife if these conditions cannot be fulfilled. In that case it is recommended that a man should have only one wife. The Quran categorically states: **but if you fear that you shall be not able to deal justly with them then marry only one.**

In another verse of the Chapter “Women” of Glorious Quran, we read:

Sura an-Nisa' – 4 The Woman

وَلَنْ تَسْتَطِيعُوا أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا بَيْنَ النِّسَاءِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتُمْ ۚ فَلَا تَمِيلُوا كُلَّ الْمَيْلِ فَتَذَرُوهَا كَالْمُعَلَّقَةِ ۚ وَإِنْ تُصْلِحُوا وَتَتَّقُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

[4: 129] You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire: but turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air). If you come to a friendly understanding, and practice self-restraint, Allah is oft-forgiving, most merciful.

When this verse is compared with the third verse of the same chapter of the Glorious Quran, and if we think about them, obviously we will find that the Glorious Quran, in normal condition and where there are no exceptional circumstances, Islam prefers monogamy. Islam also limits the resort to polygamy even as a solution for social problems and insists on following with justice, which is difficult to accomplish.

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