

On Polygamy

The Government's proposals for an uniform law of marriage have started a debate which is likely to continue for some time. Prominent among the subjects of debate, is "polygamy vs. monogamy". Without going into detail, I want to give here two quotations from two Westerners who have put the whole question in its perspective.

J.E. Glare McFarlane says: "Whether the question is considered socially, ethically or religiously, it can be demonstrated that polygamy is not contrary to the highest standards of civilization The suggestion offers a practical remedy for the problem of the destitute and unwanted female; the alternative is continual and increased prostitution, concubinage and distressing spinsterhood". (The Case For Polygamy, Longdon, P.30).

Mrs. Annie Besant wrote in 'The Life And Teachings of Muhammad:- You can find others stating that the religion (Islam) is evil because it sanctions a limited polygamy. But you do not hear as a rule the criticism which I spoke out one day in a London hall I pointed out to them that monogamy with a blended mass of prostitution was a hypocrisy and more degrading than a limited polygamy.

Naturally a statement like that gives offence, but it has to be made, because it must be remembered that the law of Islam in relation to women was until lately, when parts of it have been imitated in England, the most just law, as far as women are concerned, to be found in the world. Dealing with property, dealing with rights of succession and so on, dealing with cases of divorce, it was far beyond the law of the West in the respect which was paid to the rights of women. Those things are forgotten while people are hypnotized by the words monogamy and polygamy and do not look at what lies behind it in the West – the frightful degradation of women who are thrown into the street when their first protectors, weary of them, no longer give them any assistance".

These remarks are worth remembering in Tanzania where only 95 men are available for every 100 women. What will be the position of those five per cent 'extra' women (it comes to more than three hundred thousand souls) if the society decides to discourage polygamy?

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