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Polygamy

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Let us now tackle the important question of polygamy. Polygamy is a very ancient practice found in many human societies. The Bible did not condemn polygamy. To the contrary, the Old Testament and Rabbinic writings frequently attest to the legality of polygamy. King Solomon is said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3)

Also, King David is said to have had many wives and concubines (2 Samuel 5:13). The Old Testament does have some injunctions on how to distribute the property of a man among his sons from different wives (Deut. 22:7). The only restriction on polygamy is a ban on taking a wife's sister as a rival wife (Lev. 18:18). The Talmud advises a maximum of four wives.^{[1](#)}

European Jews continued to practice polygamy until the sixteenth century. Oriental Jews regularly practiced polygamy until they arrived in Israel where it is forbidden under civil law. However, under religious law which overrides civil law in such cases, it is permissible.^{[2](#)}

What about the New Testament? According to Father Eugene Hillman in his insightful book, 'Polygamy Reconsidered', "Nowhere in the New Testament is there any explicit commandment that marriage should be monogamous or any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy."^{[3](#)}

Moreover, Jesus has not spoken against polygamy though it was practiced by the Jews of his society. Father Hillman stresses the fact that the Church in Rome banned polygamy in order to conform to the Greco-Roman culture (which prescribed only one legal wife while tolerating concubinage and prostitution). He cited St. Augustine, "Now indeed in our time, and in keeping with Roman custom, it is no longer allowed to take another wife."^{[4](#)}

African churches and African Christians often remind their European brothers that the Church's ban on polygamy is a cultural tradition and not an authentic Christian injunction.

The Qur'an, too, allowed polygamy, but not without restrictions:

"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.”(4:3)

The Qur'an, contrary to the Bible, limited the maximum number of wives to four under the strict condition of treating the wives equally and justly. It should not be understood that the Qur'an is exhorting the believers to practice polygamy, or that polygamy is considered as an ideal. In other words, the Qur'an has “tolerated” or “allowed” polygamy and no more but, why? Why is polygamy permissible?

The answer is simple: there are places and times in which there are compelling social and moral reasons for polygamy. As the above Qur'anic verse indicates, the issue of polygamy in Islam cannot be understood apart from community obligations towards orphans and widows. Islam as a universal religion suitable for all places and all times could not ignore these compelling obligations.

In most human societies, females outnumber males. In the U.S. there are, at least, eight million more women than men. In a country like Guinea there are 122 females for every 100 males. In Tanzania, there are 95.1 males per 100 females^{[5](#)}.

What should a society do towards such unbalanced sex ratios? There are various solutions, some might suggest celibacy, and others would prefer female infanticide (which does happen in some societies in the world today!)

Others may think the only outlet is that the society should tolerate all manners of sexual permissiveness: prostitution, sex out of wedlock, homosexuality, *etc.* For other societies, like most African societies today, the most honorable outlet is to allow polygamous marriage as a culturally accepted and socially respected institution. The point that is often misunderstood in the West is that women in other cultures do not necessarily look at polygamy as a sign of women's degradation. For example, many young African brides, whether Christians or Muslims or otherwise, would prefer to marry a married man who has already proved himself to be a responsible husband. Many African wives urge their husbands to get a second wife so that they do not feel lonely.^{[6](#)}

A survey of over six thousand women, ranging in age from 15 to 59, conducted in the second largest city in Nigeria showed that 60 percent of these women would be pleased if their husbands took another wife. Only 23 percent expressed anger at the idea of sharing with another wife. Seventy-six percent of the women in a survey conducted in Kenya viewed polygamy positively. In a survey undertaken in rural Kenya, 25 out of 27 women considered polygamy to be better than monogamy. These women felt polygamy can be a happy and beneficial experience if the co-wives cooperate with each other.^{[7](#)}

Polygamy in most African societies is such a respectable institution that some Protestant churches are becoming more tolerant of it. A bishop of the Anglican Church in Kenya declared that, “Although monogamy may be ideal for the expression of love between husband and wife, the church should consider that in certain cultures polygyny is socially acceptable and that the belief that polygyny is contrary to Christianity is no longer tenable.”^{[8](#)}

After a careful study of African polygamy, Reverend David Gitari of the Anglican Church has concluded that polygamy, as ideally practiced, is more Christian than divorce and remarriage as far as the abandoned wives and children are concerned.[9](#)

I personally know of some highly educated African wives who, despite having lived in the West for many years, do not have any objections against polygamy. One of them, who lives in the U.S., solemnly exhorts her husband to get a second wife to help her in raising the kids.

The problem of the unbalanced sex ratios becomes truly problematic at times of war. Native American Indian tribes used to suffer highly unbalanced sex ratios after wartime losses. Women in these tribes, who in fact enjoyed a fairly high status, accepted polygamy as the best protection against indulgence in indecent activities. European settlers, without offering any other alternative, condemned this Indian polygamy as 'uncivilised'.[10](#)

After the Second World War, there were 7,300,000 more women than men in Germany (3.3 million of them were widows). There were 100 men aged 20 to 30 for every 167 women in that age group.[11](#)

Many of these women needed a man not only as a companion but also as a provider for the household in a time of unprecedented misery and hardship. The soldiers of the victorious Allied Armies exploited these women's vulnerability. Many young girls and widows had liaisons with members of the occupying forces. Many American and British soldiers paid for their pleasures in cigarettes, chocolate, and bread. Children were overjoyed at the gifts these strangers brought. A 10 year old boy on hearing of such gifts from other children wished from all his heart for an 'Englishman' for his mother so that she need not go hungry any longer.[12](#)

We have to ask our own conscience at this point: What is more dignifying to a woman? – An accepted and respected second wife as in the native Indians' approach, or a virtual prostitute as in the 'civilised' Allies approach? In other words, what is more dignifying to a woman – the Qur'anic prescription or the theology based on the culture of the Roman Empire?

It is interesting to note that in an international youth conference held in Munich in 1948 the problem of the highly unbalanced sex ratio in Germany was discussed. When it became clear that no solution could be agreed upon, some participants suggested polygamy. The initial reaction of the gathering was a mixture of shock and disgust. However, after a careful study of the proposal, the participants agreed that it was the only possible solution. Consequently, polygamy was included among the conference final recommendations.[13](#)

The world today possesses more weapons of mass destruction than ever before and the European churches might, sooner or later, be obliged to accept polygamy as the only way out. Father Hillman has thoughtfully recognized this fact, "It is quite conceivable that these genocidal techniques (nuclear, biological, chemical) could produce so drastic an imbalance among the sexes that plural marriage would become a necessary means of survival....Then contrary to previous custom and law, an overriding

natural and moral inclination might arise in favour of polygamy. In such a situation, theologians and church leaders would quickly produce weighty reasons and biblical texts to justify a new conception of marriage.”[14](#)

To the present day, polygamy continues to be a viable solution to some of the social ills of modern societies. The communal obligations that the Qur’an mentions in association with the permission of polygamy are more visible at present in some Western societies than in Africa. For example, In the United States today, there is a severe gender crisis in the black community. One out of every twenty young black males may die before reaching the age of 21. For those between 20 and 35 years of age, homicide is the leading cause of death.[15](#)

Besides, many young black males are unemployed, in jail, or on dope.[16](#)

As a result, one in four black women, at age 40, has never married, as compared with one in ten white women.[17](#)

Moreover, many young black females become single mothers before the age of 20 and find themselves in need of providers. The end result of these tragic circumstances is that an increasing number of black women are engaged in what is called ‘man-sharing’.[18](#)

That is, many of these hapless single black women are involved in affairs with married men. The wives are often unaware of the fact that other women are ‘sharing’ their husbands with them. Some observers of the crisis of man-sharing in the African American community strongly recommend consensual polygamy as a temporary answer to the shortage of black males until more comprehensive reforms in the American society at large are undertaken.[19](#)

By consensual polygamy they mean a polygamy that is sanctioned by the community and to which all the parties involved have agreed, as opposed to the usually secret man-sharing which is detrimental both to the wife and to the community in general. The problem of man-sharing in the African American community was the topic of a panel discussion held at Temple University in Philadelphia on January 27, 1993.[20](#)

Some of the speakers recommended polygamy as one potential remedy for the crisis. They also suggested that polygamy should not be banned by law, particularly in a society that tolerates prostitution and mistresses. The comment of one woman from the audience that African Americans needed to learn from Africa where polygamy was responsibly practiced elicited enthusiastic applause.

Philip Kilbride, an American anthropologist of Roman Catholic heritage, in his provocative book, ‘Plural marriage for our time’, proposes polygamy as a solution to some of the ills of the American society at large. He argues that plural marriage may serve as a potential alternative for divorce in many cases in order to obviate the damaging impact of divorce on many children. He maintains that many divorces are caused by the rampant extramarital affairs in the American society.

According to Kilbride, ending an extramarital affair in a polygamous marriage, rather than in a divorce, is better for the children, “Children would be better served if family augmentation rather than only separation and dissolution were seen as options.” Moreover, he suggests that other groups will also benefit from plural marriage such as: elderly women who face a chronic shortage of men and the African Americans who are involved in man-sharing.[21](#)

In 1987, a poll conducted by the student newspaper at the University of California at Berkeley asked the students whether they agreed that men should be allowed by law to have more than one wife in response to a perceived shortage of male marriage candidates in California. Almost all of the students polled approved of the idea. One female student even stated that a polygamous marriage would fulfil her emotional and physical needs while giving her greater freedom than a monogamous union.[22](#)

In fact, this same argument is also used by the few remaining fundamentalist Mormon women who still practice polygamy in the U.S. They believe that polygamy is an ideal way for a woman to have both a career and children since the wives help each other care for the children.[23](#)

It has to be added that polygamy in Islam is a matter of mutual consent. No one can force a woman to marry a married man. Besides, the wife has the right to stipulate that her husband must not marry any other woman as a second wife.[24](#)

The Bible, on the other hand, sometimes resorts to forcible polygamy. A childless widow must marry her husband’s brother, even if he is already married (see the “Plight of Widows” section), regardless of her consent (Genesis 38:8–10).

It should be noted that in many Muslim societies today the practice of polygamy is rare since the gap between the numbers of both sexes is not huge. One can, safely, say that the rate of polygamous marriages in the Muslim world is much less than the rate of extramarital affairs in the West. In other words, men in the Muslim world today are far more strictly monogamous than men in the Western world.

Billy Graham, the eminent Christian evangelist has recognized this fact: “Christianity cannot compromise on the question of polygamy. If present-day Christianity cannot do so, it is to its own detriment. Islam has permitted polygamy as a solution to social ills and has allowed a certain degree of latitude to human nature but only within the strictly defined framework of the law. Christian countries make a great show of monogamy, but actually they practice polygamy. No one is unaware of the part mistresses play in Western society. In this respect Islam is a fundamentally honest religion, and permits a Muslim to marry a second wife if he must, but strictly forbids all clandestine amatory associations in order to safeguard the moral probity of the community.”[25](#)

It is of interest to note that many, non-Muslim as well as Muslim, countries in the world today have outlawed polygamy. Taking a second wife, even with the free consent of the first wife, is a violation of the law. On the other hand, cheating on the wife, without her knowledge or consent, is perfectly legitimate as far as the law is concerned! What is the legal wisdom behind such a contradiction? Is the

law designed to reward deception and punish honesty? It is one of the unfathomable paradoxes of our modern 'civilised' world.

- [1.](#) Swidler, op. cit., pp. 144–148.
- [2.](#) Hazleton, op. cit., pp 44–45.
- [3.](#) Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches* (New York: Orbis Books, 1975) p. 140.
- [4.](#) Ibid., p. 17.
- [5.](#) Ibid., pp. 88–93.
- [6.](#) Ibid., pp. 92–97.
- [7.](#) Philip L. Kilbride, *Plural Marriage For Our Times* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1994) pp. 108–109.
- [8.](#) *The Weekly Review*, Aug. 1, 1987.
- [9.](#) Kilbride, op. cit., p. 126.
- [10.](#) John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A history of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988) p. 87.
- [11.](#) Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: from Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1988) pp. 263–264.
- [12.](#) Ibid., pp. 257–258.
- [13.](#) Sabiq, op. cit., p. 191.
- [14.](#) Hillman, op. cit., p. 12.
- [15.](#) Nathan Hare and Julie Hare, ed., *Crisis in Black Sexual Politics* (San Francisco: Black Think Tank, 1989) p. 25.
- [16.](#) Ibid., p. 26.
- [17.](#) Kilbride, op. cit., p. 94.
- [18.](#) Ibid., p. 95.
- [19.](#) Ibid., p. 95.
- [20.](#) Ibid., pp. 95–99.
- [21.](#) Ibid., p. 118.
- [22.](#) Lang, op. cit., p. 172.
- [23.](#) Kilbride, op. cit., pp. 72–73.
- [24.](#) Sabiq, op. cit., pp. 187–188.
- [25.](#) Abdul Rahman Doi, *Woman in Shari'ah* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1994) p. 76.

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