

Polygamy in Judaism and Christianity



Polygamy is not a practice limited to the religion of Islam; rather, it is something well-known in the history of the People of the Book, the Jews and the Christians, as well. It is only in the later times that their religious men frowned upon it or forbade it outright. However, when one looks into the early history of the religions, they will find that it was at least an acceptable practice, if not encouraged.

Polygamy in Judaism

Polygamy existed among the Israelites before the time of Moses, who continued the institution without imposing any limit on the number of marriages which a Hebrew husband might contract. The Jewish Encyclopedia states,

While there is no evidence of a polyandrous state in primitive Jewish society, polygamy seems to have been a well-established institution, dating from the most ancient times and extending to comparatively modern days.^[1]

Another common practice was the taking of concubines.^[2] In later times, the Talmud of Jerusalem restricted the number by the ability of the husband to maintain the wives properly. Some rabbis, however, counseled that a man should not take more than four wives. Polygamy was prohibited in Judaism by the rabbis, not God. Rabbi Gershom ben Judah is credited by forbidding polygamy in the 11th century outlawing it for a 1,000 years (that ended in 1987) to Eastern European Jews (Ashkanazi). The Mediterranean (Sephardic) Jews continued to practice polygamy.^[3] Consequently, according to Will Durant, 'polygamy was practiced by rich Jews in Islamic lands, but was rare among the Jews of Christendom.'^[4] According to Joseph Ginat, professor of social and culture anthropology at the University of Haifa, it is common and growing among the 180,000 Bedouin of Israel. It is also frequent among Mediterranean Jews living in Yemen, rabbis permitting Jews to marry up to four wives.^[5] In

modern Israel, where a wife cannot bear children or is mentally ill, the rabbis give a husband the right to marry a second woman without divorcing his first wife.^[6]

Polygamy in Christianity

Jesus, who otherwise overlooked polygamy, is irrelevant as an model for marriage customs, since he did not marry during his earthly ministry. According to Father Eugene Hillman, ‘Nowhere in the New Testament is there any explicit commandment that marriage should be monogamous or any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy.’^[7] The Church in Rome banned polygamy in order to conform to Greco-Roman culture that prescribed only one legal wife while tolerating concubinage and prostitution.^[8]

The Roman emperor, Valentinian I, in the fourth century, authorized Christians to take two wives. In the eighth century Charlemagne, holding power over both church and state, in his own person practiced polygamy, having six, or according to some authorities, nine wives.^[9] According to Joseph Ginat, the author of *Polygamous Families in Contemporary Society*, the Catholic Church frowned on the practice, but occasionally sanctioned second marriages for political leaders.^[10]

St. Augustine seems to have observed in it no intrinsic immorality or sinfulness, and declared that polygamy was not a crime where it was the legal institution of a country.^[11] He wrote in *The Good of Marriage* (chapter 15, paragraph 17), that polygamy

...was lawful among the ancient fathers: whether it be lawful now also, I would not hastily pronounce. For there is not now necessity of begetting children, as there then was, when, even when wives bear children, it was allowed, in order to get a more numerous posterity, to marry other wives in addition, which now is certainly not lawful.”

He declined to judge the patriarchs, but did not deduce from their practice the ongoing acceptability of polygamy. In another place, he wrote, “Now indeed in our time, and in keeping with Roman custom, it is no longer allowed to take another wife, so as to have more than one wife living.”^[12]

During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther said, “I confess for my part that if a man wishes to marry two or more wives, I cannot forbid him for it does not contradict the Scripture.” He advised Philip of Hesse that he should keep his second marriage a secret to avoid public scandal.^[13] One of the greatest poets of the English language and the famous English Puritan, John Milton (1608 - 1674), wrote, ‘I have not said ‘the marriage of one man with one woman’ lest I should by implication charge the holy patriarchs and pillars of our faith, Abraham and others who had more than one wife, at the same time, with habitual sin; and lest I should be forced to exclude from the sanctuary of God as spurious, the whole offspring which sprang from them, yea, the whole of the sons of Israel, for whom the sanctuary itself was made.

For it is said in Deuteronomy (xxii. 2,) “A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of Jehovah even to the tenth generation.”^[14] On February 14, 1650, the parliament at Nürnberg decreed that because so many men were killed during the Thirty Years’ War, that every man was allowed to marry up to ten women.^[15]

African churches have long recognized polygamy. They stated in the 1988 Lambeth Conference, “It has long been recognized in the Anglican Communion that polygamy in parts of Africa, and traditional marriage, do genuinely have features of both faithfulness and righteousness.”^[16] Mwai Kibaki, the Christian president of Kenya, whose victory was attributed to ‘the hand of the Lord’ by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, is polygamous.^[17] No longer under the previous rule of Christian whites, post-apartheid South Africa has also legalized polygamy.^[18]

Early in its history, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints practiced polygamy in the United States. Splinter groups left the Church to continue the practice after the Church banned it. Polygamy among these groups persists today in Utah, neighboring states, and the spin-off colonies, as well as among isolated individuals with no organized church affiliation.

In the United States, polygamy is illegal, but it exists unofficially, with an estimated 30,000 to 80,000 people living as polygamists in the West. Typically, these families are Mormon fundamentalists or Christian groups that maintain polygamy is a time-honored and scriptural practice.^[19]

Before one points the finger at Islam and Muslims when discussing polygamy, it is necessary that one have enough knowledge of the subject and its history. One should not judge practices held acceptable throughout history though the narrow mind of the present times. Rather, one should research the subject thoroughly and most importantly, seek divine guidance.

Footnotes:

^[1] “Polygamy”, Executive Committee of the Editorial Board and Julius H. Greenstone. . The Jewish Encyclopedia. (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=425&letter=P>).

^[2] “Pilegesh”, Emil G. Hirsch, Schulim Ochser and the Executive Committee of the Editorial Board. The Jewish Encyclopedia. (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=313&letter=P>).

^[3] “Takkanah.” Encyclopædia Britannica from Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service. (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9071020>)

Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Globally, Polygamy Is Commonplace,” The Salt Lake Tribune 20 Sep. 1998.

- [4] Will Durant, "The Age of Faith: A History of Medieval Civilization -Christian, Islamic, and Judaic - from Constantine to Dante: A.D. 325-1300" (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950) 380.
- [5] Christopher Smith, "Polygamy's Practice Stirs Debate in Israel," Salt Lake Tribune Dec. 7, 2001.
- [6] Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Globally, Polygamy Is Commonplace," The Salt Lake Tribune 20 Sep. 1998.
- [7] Polygamy Reconsidered, p. 140.
- [8] Ibid., p. 17.
- [9] Matilda Joslyn Gage, "Woman, Church And State," p. 398.
- [10] Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Globally, Polygamy Is Commonplace," The Salt Lake Tribune 20 Sep. 1998.
- [11] St. Augustine, lib. ii. *cont. Faust*, ch. xlvii.
- [12] Deferrari, vol. 27: "Saint Augustine - Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects" (1955), pp. 31, 34, 36, 18.
- [13] Matilda Joslyn Gage, "Woman, Church And State," p. 398-399.
- [14] Matilda Joslyn Gage, "Woman, Church And State," p. 400.
- [15] O. Jensen, A Genealogical Handbook of German Research (Rev. Ed., 1980) p. 59.
- [16] Robin Gill, "Churchgoing and Christian Ethics" (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 249,
- [17] Sam Gonza, "Churches Celebrate Kenya's New President," Christianity Today Feb 20. 2003.
- Marc Lacey, "Polygamy in Kenya an issue after wives of president revealed," New York Times Dec 19. 2003.
- [18] Aurelia Dyanti, "Two wives better than one for some South Africa men," The Star July 16, 2003.
- [19] Cheryl Wetzstein, "Traditionalists Fear Same-Sex Unions Legitimize Polygamy," The Washington Times 13 Dec. 2000.