

## Polygamy – The Ultimate Inequality

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*“Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. (Matthew 19:4-6 NRSV)*

Our society may be about to take another step in the process of denying these wise words of Jesus on human sexual relations. With widespread divorce, we have long ago moved past the conviction that the two become one flesh. Now our courts are denying that in marriage the two must be a man and a woman. Soon, some argue, they will have to deny that the two must be only two.

If same-sex marriage is okay, then what’s wrong with polygamy? It seems a less fundamental violation of sexual complementarity. No culture has ever permitted homosexual persons to marry, but many cultures have permitted polygamy, including among the Old Testament patriarchs. So why does Jesus—and, following Him, almost all Christian churches—insist on only two marriage partners?

In every society which has sanctioned polygamy, the practice has been for men of wealth and power to collect multiple wives, leaving poorer men unable to have children and families. With polygamy, wealthy men can conspicuously display their wealth by having many attractive and fertile wives, much like wealthy men in our society often now display their wealth by owning a stable of expensive cars or a valuable collection of art. People can create more cars or paintings to compensate for such hoarding, but this is not possible with wives, because, as Jesus noted, God ‘made them male and female’. Every human generation is born male and female in about equal numbers, so for each wealthy man who takes four, five or more wives, there will necessarily be that many other poorer men who will have no wife at all.

Young men who are unable to have a wife and children—who, in a polygamous culture, can be as many as one in five young men--become a potent source of poverty, disorder and unrest. The responsibility of a wife and family generally stimulates men who marry to greater economic achievement; but not for these men. Crime and emotional distress are much higher for this group, and, without having to consider their children’s future world, political and community participation is much lower. This is one reason that countries with the highest rates of polygamy tend to be poor and politically unstable. West Africa, with the highest rates of polygamy in the world--about a fourth of women share their husband with at least one other woman—also has the world’s highest poverty rates. One study found that savings, investment and income in African countries that do not permit polygamy is over fifty percent higher than in those countries that countenance the practice.

A worse cultural effect of polygamy is its contribution to the demeaning of women. In almost all polygamous societies, but almost no monogamous ones, a woman is sold into marriage by the payment of a bride-price, typically at least a year’s salary, from the suitor to her father. (Recall that in the Old Testament, Jacob worked seven years each for his first two wives.) As women

become more valuable as brides, they are controlled more strongly by their family, and are sold at younger ages. The woman's only choice, if she has one at all, is between expulsion from her family or consent to be one of several wives. As an empirical fact, polygamy only flourishes where women do not enjoy the same civil rights and access to education and employment that are open to men.

It may be hard to imagine that the United States could become a society where rich men enjoy a harem and poor men have no access to marriage, but our practice of marriage is already moving in that direction. It is not a long step from the practice for an older successful businessman to marry a young, attractive "trophy wife", often after leaving a previous wife. Many young couples today live together without marrying because they want to make sure they are established financially and professionally before they get married; for them marriage becomes, as one marriage scholar observes, "a status symbol—a highly regarded marker of a successful personal life." Most couples today pay all or part of the cost of their own wedding, which increasingly are showy and expensive celebrations of success. But what if one is not successful? According to recent Pew research, poorer, lower-class couples are thirteen percent less likely to have married by age 30, and a whopping three times more likely to divorce before ten years, compared to wealthier, upper-class couples. Growing income inequality in America is already fueling a disturbing "marriage gap" between rich and poor. Openly acceptable polygamy would likely expand this existing trend, producing the ultimate inequality in marriage haves and have-nots.

The Christian revelation is unique in its strong prohibition of polygamy. Most cultures and most religions have either promoted or tolerated the practice, but all cultures dominated by Christianity have prohibited it. For Jesus and his followers, the equal dignity of man and woman, each reflecting the image of God, requires equal complementary in marriage. The Catholic Church sets forth these truths in its familiar strict moral code regarding sex and marriage, but also in a long tradition of Catholic social teaching that places marriage—one male and one female becoming one flesh—at the center of a just social order. In doing so, the Church is telling us that following the faith's moral truths leads not only to personal fulfillment but also to the most just and loving human society for everyone.

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