

There was an old fellow of Lyme  
Who lived with three wives at one time.  
When asked, 'Why the third?'  
He replied, 'One's absurd,  
and bigamy, sir, is a crime.'

-William Cosmo Monkhouse

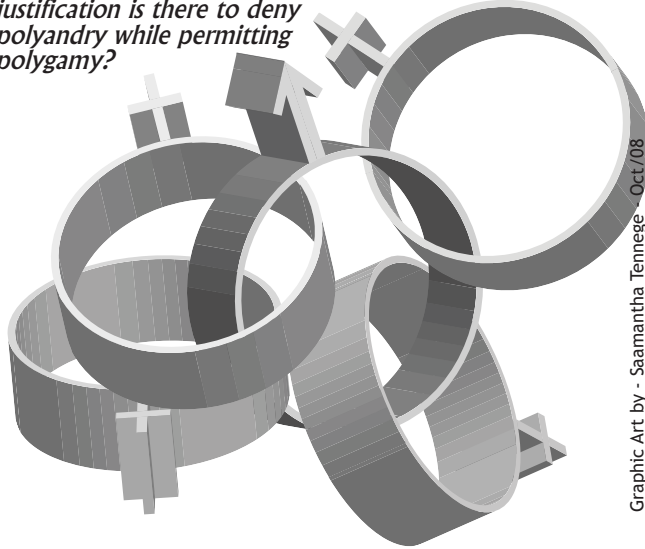
The newspapers recently gave a lot of publicity to a demand for changes in Australian law to allow for polygamous marriages here. The demand originated from Muslims in the New South Wales and was followed in other states. Chief among those who demanded this were Sheik Khalil Chami of The Islamic Welfare Centre, Sheik Musse Isse of the Werribee mosque and Keyser Trad, translator of the former mufti of Australia and head of the Islamic Friendship society.

Sheik Isse Musse pointed out that there are already some twenty families from Somalia that are polygamous and argued that it is nothing but fair to regularise this in law. Trad said that he had already proposed to a second woman with whom he had fallen in love. Trad asks that he be allowed to legalise this marriage as he does not want to have sex out of wedlock. According to the news report, Trad's wife Hanifa is supposed to have given her consent since she thinks Trad should be allowed to "do it right". It is

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they all commonly share their own specific religion and thus basis for polygamy. These small groups ranging from a few hundred to about 10,000 are reported to be located in various communities of the Western United States, Canada, and MA different variation known as concubinage was also practised in biblical times among Jews and in China. Concubinage is an arrangement where additional spouses had inferior status

The practice of polygamy does have



Graphic Art by - Saamantha Tennege - Oct/08



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.

Kilbride has a point here. On the other hand, it is easy to assume that little will go wrong when a lot could in fact go wrong with this kind of alternative. Spouse rivalry and sibling rivalry can wreck such families and create severe tensions. The Muslim preconditions of equal treatment and equity may be hard to implement and more difficult to allow for legal implementation. Implementation difficulties would be compounded in societies that lack the kind of compulsion that Islamic societies do have.

Furthermore, if polygamy be allowed why not polyandry, too? In countries where there is no imbalance deficiency of the female gender and where, as in the West, the woman need not be economically dependent on the man as breadwinner breadwinner what justification is there to deny polyandry while permitting polygamy?

Another concern is that polygamy can deteriorate into a practice that makes a substitute prostitute of a woman. This would damage the dignity of women.

# A DEMAND FOR POLYGAMY IN AUSTRALIA

said that Trad already has nine children!

This demand is an echo of what recently happened in UK where polygamous Muslim men who settled in the country had succeeded in their claim for extra allowances for their harems-namely jobseekers allowance, housing and Council benefits etc. These persons had married in their previous countries where polygamy was legal. Muslims are allowed to marry up to four wives provided they can upkeep the latter fairly and with equality. However, in UK as it is in Australia bigamy is an offence. Opposition MPs in Britain have protested over this practice and a review is under way to consider whether the state should continue to make payments in this fashion.

Australian authorities would not be able to brush aside this demand easily. They may argue that this is a threat to the so-called Australian way of life. However, that is not an adequate defence as it contains questionable assumptions. Especially within the context of Australia's liberal immigration laws policymakers are going to crack their brains to find a solution. As in the UK example there are bound to be incoming families who had already married polygamously before they arrived here. Human Rights issues arise.

The practice of polygamy has been prevalent in various societies from time immemorial. Perhaps it originated in societies where a demographic imbalance existed between the two sexes. Polygamy

was seen as inevitable to keep such societies from dying. The Islamic stipulation is said to be due to this factor.

According to the *Ethnographic Atlas Codebook*, of the 1231 societies noted, 186 were monogamous. 453 had occasional polygyny, 588 had more frequent polygyny, and 4 had polyandry. Polyandry is where the woman is allowed to have more than one husband.

Some of those who continue to practice polygamy today still do so for religious reasons. They often live in their own communities and tend to find their additional spouses within their own communities or networks of like communities. This can involve daughters of polygamous families entering into arranged marriages with older men who already have a number of wives. This is commonly called daughter swapping. Marriage age can be young and sometimes below the legal minimum. Young men may be forced to leave the communities so that more women are available to be married to older polygamous males. It is also not uncommon for fairly close relatives to marry, leading to inbreeding, though part of this comes from the difficulty of keeping track of the complex net of familial relations.

Some sects that practice or at least sanction polygamy are the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Latter-day Church of Christ and the Apostolic United Brethren. These sects tend to aggregate in communities where

its intellectual backers in the West. Philip Kilbride, an American anthropologist, in his 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



Shyamon Jayasinghe



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**16 Bellerive Avenue Mount Waverley**  
Tel : 9544 7189 Mob 0418 531 620 Fax : 9562 5503