

Polygyny, Islam, and terrorism

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[written originally in 2006 and revised until 2010; presented as written to Billy E. Frye (1934-2017), former Professor of Zoology and Dean of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan; and subsequently Emory University's first Provost]

I am going to try to start constructing an essay to you (BEF) here on something I have been pondering a while that involves human behavior, evolution, religion, terrorism, and therefore the current world scene. I am doing this mainly just because I want to. I will discuss it at lunch today with my two main co-workers, David Lahti and Andy Richards, and this essay will be a warm-up to what I say to them and what I propose. As I write it here it will probably be a mess, and very incomplete, partly because I have no idea how to organize it and partly because of critical lacunae in my knowledge. But here goes:

As Sir Ronald A. Fisher pointed out in 1930, natural selection on sex ratios is not affected by breeding system. Regardless whether a species or a society is polygynous, polyandrous, or monogamous, sex ratio selection in humans continues to produce approximately equal numbers of males and females at birth. There are slight deviations, and there are some slight effects of polygyny, but they are really side issues, and so slight as not to concern us here.

The whole topic of sex ratios is extremely involved and complex, because it includes differential mortality between the sexes from embryonic stages up to adulthood, differences in performance by parents that are in poor condition and excellent condition, respectively, (i.e., differences in the relative value of the sexes when the sexes require different amounts of resources to be maximally reproductive, etc.), and other factors. But the basic reason for Fisher's original argument is that half of the genes in any population (or individual, in biparental species) come from males and half from females. This means that, regardless of breeding system, males and females are equally valuable (genetically -- i.e., in terms of natural selection). As a result, whenever the population sex ratio becomes biased in one or the other direction, parents who (for genetic reasons) produce more of the (newly) more valuable (less abundant) sex outreproduce everyone else until the balance is shifted the other way.

These facts mean that when polygynous marriages are permitted in humans, several things happen. The first is that a certain proportion of young men are disenfranchised with respect to marriage partners. They either can obtain none, or acquire mates only when they are older -- in some polygynous societies (e.g., Australian Aboriginals) typically not until their forties. They may be able to help this situation by currying favor with the powerful polygynous men. The polygynous men are powerful for various reasons, including the fact that they are the ones with daughters that can be traded (or sold) for high compensation to men who don't have wives but are willing to use themselves -- as flunkies or "soldiers" or whatever, or who are the sons of other influential polygynous men; or who have harems already, and wealth or power or influence of sorts valuable to the guy who has daughters to give. And, of course, the daughters tend to be given, or "sold" at very young ages -- often 7-9 years. More on that -- somewhat repetitively -- just below.

The above effect on young men is not trivial. For example, consider Saudi Arabia, possibly the most polygynous of all Middle Eastern countries. Someone told me there are 700 Saudi men who are called crown princes because they are directly descended from the fellow who was the "founder" of the "nation." If all of these crown princes have four wives -- the supposedly maximum number -- 2100 young men would be disenfranchised with respect to access to a marriage partner at the appropriate ages. Now think in terms of, say, 25,000 polygynous men -- 25,000 to 75,000 young men would be disenfranchised.

Also, as I already said, in polygynous societies the men who acquire harems become relatively wealthy and powerful, and part of this results from their production of daughters and their control of daughters. Such men are not only sources of women for other men in general (and vice versa), but are also more able to acquire mates from other powerful polygynous men for their own sons, and this increases their power even further (by resulting in extended families that function as coalitions). Polygynous men thus tend to become centers of power and wealth. For this reason their sons have good reasons to be loyal to them, which further increases their power. All of this further disenfranchises the young men who are not connected to powerful polygynous men.

The system as described so far tends to create local more or less autonomous, or even inter-hostile tribes, or other such groups, and to prevent strong government at higher levels. Competition and strife go on between such local groups. Pastoral societies have been among the most ferocious societies in the world, wherever in the world they were, and whatever their hereditary or “racial” backgrounds. The young men tend to be fighters in competitions between tribes, and in some polygynous societies with particular kinds of religions they are sent to monasteries. Aggressiveness is enhanced by the fact that the land on which grazing occurs is typically not privately owned, causing conflicts over who can graze (and live) where, and a certain amount of surreptitiousness regarding who moves where and who takes their herds where, and when.

This system cannot work unless women are potently “controlled,” can be treated as items of barter, as wealth, to be used by powerful men as they see fit. In all polygynous societies, women are so treated, and in some the rules about the behavior and dress of women are extreme and rigid. Of course, this means that not only young men without connections but women *a fortiori* are treated as second- or third-class citizens – actually, as if they were slaves or animals or property. And, not incidentally, promiscuity and homosexuality are both capital offenses under Islam, in Saudi Arabia, as is adultery (by women).

Obviously, those who profit most in such a society will have problems in keeping the whole system in place. As one might expect, the practices just described are sanctioned by religion. Subjugation of women, the right of older men to be polygynous, and the necessity for young men to be kept in their place are made sacred. And the control is made more definite when religion is made virtually synonymous with “government” – the government of whatever unit is being considered.

So long as such societies remain poor, as was the case with grazing or pastoral societies across the Middle East, their conflicts are local, and folks in other societies were not deeply troubled by the entire situation.

When such societies become wealthy, as has happened almost suddenly – and excessively -- in the Middle East because of western society's appetite for oil, and the distribution of oil in the world, an entirely different situation generates. The powerful men become more powerful and more polygynous. They create and live in sumptuous quarters, literally palaces. Pitched conflicts with local neighboring societies may become less frequent. The disenfranchisement of young men with respect to marriage, however, continues, and even may be exacerbated. What, exactly, do the young men do now? Partly because of the exacerbation, so long as religion remains it becomes even more important for the wealthy polygynous men.

A main feature of religion is that its tenets can be made sacred because their reality depends solely on human wishes and actions. This feature tends to cause religion and its rules to be stable—sometimes. It also causes divergences between different, sometimes neighboring governmental or societal units that have restricted flows of information and customs between them. This situation leads to peoples living adjacent to one another who see themselves as different—in ways that are sacred to them. The more religion becomes involved in the “government” of these sorts of local cultures, the more exaggerated this situation becomes.

Again, consider Saudi Arabia. I don't know how wealth is distributed, but it is fairly clear that there is no middle class to speak of, and the government does not run on funds supplied by voting taxpayers. It seems likely that the crown princes control most of the wealth.

So long as polygyny continues, wealth is likely to be controlled centrally, middle classes can be virtually absent, voters will be non-existent, and young men will be disenfranchised both with respect to marriage and with respect to jobs and climbing that ladder of affluence. Can it be surprising in such a culture that one of the promises to suicide bombers and other willing martyrs is said to be that religion promises them 72 virgins in Heaven after their martyring act?

A young Iraqi woman I knew as a student married a Saudi descended directly from Bedouin nomads. When her father learned of their budding relationship he obtained a butcher knife from the kitchen and took her into a bedroom, under threat of death, which would have been his right because she was promised to his brother's son. Luckily for her, her cousin did not wish to marry her. Her father did not speak to her again until she bore a son. That event changed their relationship again. Both the young woman and her husband attained Ph.Ds at the University of Michigan, the man in fisheries (he was at that time the only fisheries biologist in Saudi Arabia!) and the woman in education. She wrote her thesis on how women are treated in Saudi Arabia with regard to education, and was highly critical of the system there. Some time later, when she visited Lorrie and me, with her husband and their two little kids on a return visit from Saudi Arabia, she had a different view. She said, rather loftily, that American women didn't understand how wonderful is a woman's life in Saudi Arabia. "Why should I care that I am not allowed to drive! I have a Cadillac and a driver awaiting me any time I wish to go!" And other things of a similar nature... Of course, she and her husband had attended the University of Michigan on Saudi government funds that were evidently quite generous—with no middle class, property-owning people to pay taxes; no elections of governmental representatives; and oil revenues controlled by the "governing" family because the property from which it comes remains in their hands.

Now suppose a fellow like Osama Bin Laden comes along and exploits those disenfranchised young men—giving them the opportunity to become fierce warriors, to take risks in efforts to become grand heroes, to travel to other countries, even to become suicide bombers and other martyrs on the way to Heaven and their own personal 72 virgins—to become "acclaimed" and heroic. What should we expect the controllers of the wealth of a Saudi to do in this circumstance? Many of the young men who might be troublesome to them are now going elsewhere, conducting attacks on others, not in their homeland, which would affect them. Maybe the reaction will be to surreptitiously finance people like Bin Laden (at least it was earlier, if not now), and also to look away and remain vague about it all. And to be sure to reinforce the synonymy of religion and government.

Aren't these the puzzling things that are going on with respect to Saudi Arabia, the country that provided nearly all of the young men who brought down the World Trade Center towers? The country that claims to be our best ally but looks away often enough to cause considerable perplexity in this country?

All of this is influenced by sex ratio selection—something simple from evolutionary biology that is entirely unknown to everyone immediately engaged in all the most important events going on in the world. Indeed, it's entirely unknown, or completely misunderstood, by practically everyone.

Ah, me! I have to quit this and try to make some decorative little silhouette drawings to strew across the tops of the pages of my "Playin' Cowboy" book. Take care.

Dick

[In response, Billy wrote a letter to Dick, partly asking what he sought to achieve in writing such an essay. Dick responded with six points and a final manifesto:]

Hi, Billy:

In response to your questions about what is my point in the essay, I will for now state some conclusions, which is easier than giving an introduction. Here may be a start:

1. Multiple problems involving some of the worst things going on in the world at the moment are tied up in the relationship between polygyny, Islam, and the suppression of women and disenfranchisement of young men.
2. If you wish to diminish terrorism—and create a democracy out of a non-democracy—the best way to proceed is to find ways to generate ladders of affluence and to make them climbable by everyone, including women and young men.
3. One of the most important aspects of moving in this direction—for reasons given in the essay—is to seek changes that will tend to reduce the frequency of polygynous marriages—and, obviously, to do it peacefully rather than violently.
4. For reasons given in the essay, we should also seek ways to separate government and religion, everywhere; and also to resist tendencies (everywhere) to establish, confirm, or strengthen political boundaries when they are intended to separate peoples of different religions.
5. We cannot expect to generate and maintain a democracy when the land remains under governmental control. Governments that operate with funds provided by natural resources from government-owned land are not likely to change the situation or trim their budgets. Instead they will continue to strip resources to generate ever greater wealth among those prominent in government. This practice impoverishes the people living on the land, who may even be completely ousted, and causes the populace gradually to become the enemy of the government—and vice versa. The result is increasingly severe dictatorship, aided by a larger army, designed to be loyal to the dictator or the government, and to serve the government against, not for, the citizens of the country.
6. A polygynous dictatorship with virtually no limits on its wealth has a significant likelihood of becoming one of the more dangerous governments on the planet.

Long live socially-imposed monogamy, private ownership of property, government supported by property and income taxation, and frequent democratic (one person, one vote) election of legislative and executive components of governments designed and maintained to serve the people.

Edited by D. Lahti, 2018.