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Querying Polygamy Award

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Islamic teachings and being a Muslim are two different things, and are obviously not always identical. An Egyptian Muslim reformer, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who worked on sociopolitical reform within Muslim societies, was amazed by the freedom and democracy in his exile living in Paris. He commented that "Muslims are in Egypt, but Islam is here".

An ulema and leader of an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in a small city of Jombang, East Java, was invited to visit the United States.

It was his first direct encounter with the American people. He was amazed by this "new world". "I saw many Islamic teachings practiced there: Cleanliness, discipline, punctuality, and even trustworthiness," he shared with his community back home.

Then he told them that one day his group was taken to a village in Massachusetts, where he saw a farmer selling his fruit produce, apples and pears, just by laying them on a table on the side of the street. The farmer put a price sign and a small box where his buyers could put the money. He left, and only came to see it once in a while.

The East Javanese teacher was puzzled. How come people did not take the fruit and just walk or drive away? In Indonesia, with this mode of business, all the fruit would have disappeared and no money would have been collected.

Another story happened in Amsterdam. An Indonesian student, waiting for a tram at the stop, unwrapped a piece of candy. He chewed the candy and threw away the small wrapping paper. An elderly lady gently reminded him, "Did you drop the candy paper?"

The student was ashamed, picked it up and threw it in the dustbin.

There are many more such stories. But what is the lesson behind them? These stories show that many Islamic teachings are mere rhetoric within many Muslim societies. Who cannot recite the hadith stating that cleanliness is half of faith in God? Who does not know that stealing is sinful in Islam? Who will deny that Islam has been revealed to bring liberation and freedom especially to oppressed groups including women? But these teachings have apparently remained jargon among many Muslims. The reality is far from these ideals.

But again, how do these stories relate to the topic of this article on the Polygamy Award?

Last Friday, Puspo Wardoyo, the owner of the Restoran Wong Solo franchise who has four wives, presented the "Polygamy Award" to people who have more than one wife. The organizers initially claimed that they were waiting for a response from the Vice President Hamzah Haz, who himself reportedly has three wives. The Vice President apparently did not give any respond to the invitation.

They understand that Islam respects women and grants them the same rights as men as explicitly mentioned in various verses of the Koran. They understand that Islam is a religion that brings a mission of liberation and salvation. They understand that Islamic teachings, when condensed, are a reflection of justice, equality, peace and welfare.

But why are certain Muslims now promoting polygamy, which is an insult to women's dignity and a humiliation to Indonesian women?

Muhammad Abduh was an early champion of legal and educational reforms to improve the status of Muslim women. The critic of polygamy and its negative effect on the Muslim family, argued that polygamy had been permitted as a concession to prevailing social conditions in Saudi Arabia at the time of the Prophet.

Abduh offered a modernist interpretation of the Koran which concluded that the Koran (al-Nisa/4, 3 and al-Nisa/4, 129) was in fact in favor of monogamy, since within the teachings of the Koran to have more than one wife was contingent upon equal treatment and impartiality, both of which are a practical impossibility. Muhammad Abduh's interpretation was adopted by many Islamic reformers.

The voices of Muslim reformists such as Muhammad Abduh and his teacher Jamal al-Din al-Afghani are constantly challenged by Muslim fundamentalists pioneered, among others, by Hasan al-Bana, founder of the Ikhwanul Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) of Egypt, who claimed that a woman's place was in the home and their primary roles was as mother, wife, and housekeeper; social mixing between men and women was prohibited.

Another defender of polygamy is Abul A'la al-Mawdudi, founder of Jami'at-i Islami of Pakistan, who contended that one of the basic human rights was to respect a woman's chastity. To preserve chastity, women must be kept housebound and in purdah.

But if Muslims read the Koran with an open mind, without any gender bias, by placing human beings as the subject rather than the object in interpreting the religion, and by focusing on humanitarian issues faced by Muslim societies in real life, then, it is possible to manifest the Islamic mission of justice, liberation, equality and welfare.

The verses on polygamy, when read in a spirit of liberation and justice from the perspective of the oppressed object (woman) not the subject (man), and with a comprehensive understanding without taking half the line and dismissing the other half, will prove that Islam basically promotes monogamy.