

Examine the variety of religious beliefs and practices found in the pre-Islamic context.

In Pre-Islamic Arabia, there were a great variety of religious beliefs and practices that were carried out by the Arabs. People held polytheistic views and worshipped many idols. "They worshipped stones, trees, idols, stars and spirits; in short everything conceivable except God" (Abul Ala Madudi)

The people of Pre-Islamic Arabia were animistic, in which they believed that rocks, trees and springs were inhabited by spirits and so worshipped them. The Arabs also believed that if they went on pilgrimage to the locations where the spirits were, and touched the object it inhabited, some of the holiness would rub off onto them. Because there were no holy literature and scarcely any formal worship or information about the Gods, there were few moral customs and the Arabs were very relaxed about their religion.

The Ka'ba housed at least 300 different idols and so Mecca was central to polytheistic beliefs at the time. The Arabs believed in an all powerful God called Allah (The chief god), who ruled over all the other gods such as, Allat (His Wife), Al-Mannat (the Goddess of fate) and Al-Uzzah (the Goddess of love). Bedouin polytheism (the dominant type of polytheism in Mecca) may have evolved from the polytheistic nature of the southern Arabian empire, as the Bedouins did believe that Allah was immaterial and that there were Gods in the sky. It was also compulsory for them to slaughter all meat in front of the gods as a form of sacrifice.

Meccan polytheism was supported strongly by trade and had scarce religious composition. "From the very beginning, religion was inseparable from trade" (M.A. Shaban). This was because of the position of Mecca and the Great Fair, which was held annually in the Ka'ba. Many caravans bought Asian products in the city, which were traded with ships from India and then sold off in other empires. The position of Mecca held a significant part in all of this as the city was approximately in between Aden and Syria and so the Meccans used to this to their advantage as it had a significant position on the trade route.

The Arabs were divided by tribes, and because trade was central to a Meccan's life, it was important that the business should be carried on, and it was traditional for the men to work, consequently, women were seen as 'second class' and had a lower status than the males. Because of this, the majority of Arab families desired boys to be born, and so baby girls were killed, as they may have been unwanted. This may also be due to the fact that once a girl gets married, a dowry is owed from the girl's father to the groom or his family. However, some families may have been poor and so could not afford to give money and so the only other option was death.

All in all, Pre-Islamic Arabia was a site of a great variety of different religious practices. In my opinion, Arabia was in need of a new religion and needed adjustment in order for it to become a prosperous province, and Islam offered that position.