

### **Pre-Islamic Arabia: Essay 1**

*How far was the social and religious situation in Arabia around 600 AD favorable to the rise of Islam?*

At first glance, the chances of unifying Pre-Islamic Arabia under one religion looked so remote, it could almost be declared impossible, in the opinion of Patricia Crone, a studier of Pre-Islamic Arabia and the rise of Islam. The people of Arabia had such weak inter-tribal relations that the region was not even unified under one governing body, and its people were divided up into tribes which consisted of only a few families. However, upon closer examination, one can find some factors of society which were favorable to the rise of one religion, and several of the Christian tribes living in the region were fairly certain that within a few centuries the whole of the region would become Christian (Crone). It was not Christianity that succeeded in unifying the region but an entirely new generation. Yet according to other sources, such as the historian Phillip Hitti, the region could not have been a more favorable region for the birthplace for Islam.

Firstly, to understand the reason that the Arabs chose to live under Islam rather than any other religion, we must first understand that these people were not ones open to foreign ideas. The region was difficult to penetrate due to its harsh climate and the isolation of the different tribes; the Sassanians and the Byzantines, the two prevailing hegemonies of the time, could not have conquered it even if they were interested. The Arab was not open to foreign ideas due to the fact that very little foreigners were able to penetrate the harsh climate upon which the Bedouins had adapted to. So the Arabs would have only trusted an idea that came from their own people, from inside their own region. The Prophet was one of their tribesmen and he understood their culture and way of life, and that was a factor which played to his benefit. To the Bedouin, a kinsman was of his same blood, and that relationship was highly praised in which a man belonged to his tribe and would die for his tribe, and the fact that Muhammad was of Arab descent made the tribesmen feel a certain sense of loyalty and trust. As one source quotes, “[Tribesmen] were supposed to stand together against the outsider” (Pre-Islamic Arabia), and that can be seen as the Arabs uniting against the Persians and the Byzantines. Hitti also brings up the point that it is “little wonder then that the Arab has rarely bent his neck to a foreign yoke”, illustrating his point that the harsh environment the Arabs adapted to functions as a means of preserving his culture, and isolating him from foreign ideologies, which all the more illustrates the fact that the only religious awakening that would effectively penetrate the region had to come from the inside.

Another aspect which one must consider would be the political situation at the time. The two rivaling empires, the Persian and Byzantine kingdoms, each bordered the Arabian Peninsula and prior to the fifth century only looked at Arabia as a buffer zone between the two rivals. During the fifth century, trade between India the Byzantine and Persian empires grew, and as the trade routes bordered the Arabian Peninsula, the kingdom’s interest in the region grew. With the threat of foreign conquest looming over

the Arabs, it is not surprising that a longing for unification began to grow amongst the population. Several sources tell us of the fighting nature that was in the Bedouin's blood, with several examples of the many *ghazws* amongst the Bedouin tribes, so one might not find it surprising that the Arabs may have been longing to wage a war against their neighboring hegemonies. Citizens of the Arabian Peninsula may have noticed the development of higher civilizations all around them, from the Phoenicians to the Romans, and noted the evolution of culture, then wondered why that Arabs were not capable of such accomplishments. This envy may have catalyzed a movement to unify the Arabian tribes into one supreme Islamic state, united by worshipping one deity and following one religion. (Crone)

The way the tribal society was set up in Ancient Arabia also paved the way for one leader, as the various tribes were accustomed to following one head, or *sheikh*, and members of the tribe would often have complete faith in the decisions and leadership of their one leader, and not question his authority. The idea that one person can head a tribe may have had a role in helping Muhammad gain the position of heading the Islamic state (Hitti).

The only form of cultural development at the time of the *Jahiliyah* period was the orally transmitted arts, namely poetry and story-telling. The Arabs were masters of the written word, and it was perhaps the culture that placed the most emphasis on the importance of poetry in the history of the world. The only way to transmit the conquests and news at the time was through poetic recitations, and the fact that the Koran is regarded as a poetic masterpiece, whose words could not be matched by the greatest poets of the time, was the reason that the people of Arabia were greatly affected by it. The way to reach the Arabs was by appealing to their appreciation of the poetic word, and that was what the Koran did.

The prevailing religion before Islam was one which worshipped many deities. Each tribe worshipped their own gods and goddesses, which further added to the isolation of the Arab tribes. The most popular goddess was that of Venus, who embodied the spirit of war (Pre-Islamic Arabia), also known as Allat. There is also evidence to suggest that the tribal deity of Quraysh was known as Allah, and to them he was the ultimate creator and omniscient provider, and therefore Islam did not provide a concept that was completely alien to the people of Arabia (Hitti). The presence of djinns is also something that is common between pre-Islamic religion and Islamic religion.

There is a contradictory fact in one of the sources, as Hitti mentions that the religion was never a priority with the Bedouins, nor is it today, as the Bedouin lives only in the present. We can take this statement to mean that Islam developed mainly in the sedentary areas around the oases, and that its main effects took place in those regions rather than with the Bedouin tribes. This detachment to religion, however, could have also been a positive factor in their conversion to Islam, since they were loosely attached to their former gods and goddesses and would not find converting religions something very difficult.

*Bibliography:*

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