

Describe the religious beliefs and practices in pre-islamic arabia essay sample

[Religion](#), [God](#)



In Arabia, the period before the emergence of Muhammad was a time of many different and varying religious practices.

To understand the religious beliefs and practices of the time, it is necessary first to have some basic appreciation of Arabia as a whole. The Arabian Peninsula can be divided into two distinct climactic and geographical zones: North and South. In the South was an area along the coast of the Arabian Sea that received regular rain and was heavily populated by sedentary populations living in cities and relying on agriculture. North of this area was one of the most inhospitable areas in the world. Its arid environment and rare precipitation meant that agriculture was impossible.

Thus, the inhabitants of this harsh area lived in a Nomadic tribal existence, wandering with their animals in search of water and scarce resources.

Despite this, there were 'towns' that developed around certain oases, and some tribes grew more settled here amongst the resources; although which specific tribe was settled there was often a cause for inter-tribal conflict and competition. Such towns became trade centres, as the main economy of Arabia was trade between South and North. The greatest example of this was Mecca: the centre of Arabian commerce owing to its prime location on the caravan routes and, as the name suggests (which means 'temple') the centre of pre-Islamic religious worship.

The majority of Arabs did not belong to any formal religion but believed in a combination of supernatural forces, some of which they identified as spirits and others as Gods. This is known as Bedouin polytheism. The spirits were believed to inhabit natural objects such as rocks and trees and to have

influence of human lives, whereas the gods were often identified with natural phenomena such as the sun, moon and rain. Many Arabs viewed the god of moon and travelling, named Allah (literally, "The God") as the ancestor and leader of the others, of which the goddesses al-Lat and Man'at also inspired popular religious cults.

Such diverse idolatry shows exactly how individual each Bedouin tribe was. Indeed, each tradition and emphasis was passed down through story telling and the 'Murawah' (community spirit) of the tribe. Perhaps the only aspect that these varying beliefs had in common was pilgrimage. Many tribes would make pilgrimage to Mecca, where the Ka'bah (meaning house of God) was situated. The Ka'bah was a temple-like building where the different tribes would present their respective idol as a representation of their deity. When Muhammad captured it in 630CE there were reportedly 360 different idols within the Ka'bah; this is the first and only suggestion of organised worship in pre-Islamic Arabia. More recently, some historians have rejected the idea of Meccan polytheism, claiming the subject of their pilgrimage was trade, not religion, and that the Ka'bah grew up as a consequence of their visitation. "From the beginning, religion was inseparable from trade" M. A Shaban.

The pre-Islamic Arabs did not have a detailed and moral and ethical code of the kind that was developed in Islamic, Christian and Jewish theology, nor did they commonly believe in life after death. Instead they were governed by rules of honour, courage and hospitality. In the absence of a belief in the afterlife, the primary way to attain immortality was to live heroic lives full of

extravagant acts of valour and generosity, which were then rendered into verse by tribal poets. The Arabs were in awe of the power of poetry and poets and viewed them as supernaturally possessed figures to be both feared and revered, not only as artists but also as tribal historians.

In addition to poets, two other figures carried great respect in pre-Islamic Arab society. The first was the soothsayer, who would foretell the future and attempt to solve problems as diverse as those of curing infertility and finding lost animals. The other was the judge, whose job it was to intercede in conflicts with a tribe, and, more importantly, between tribes, as a way of avoiding violence. All these offices hold relevance for early Islamic history because, during his career as a prophet, Muhammad displayed qualities of all three, enabling his critics to label him as a poet or soothsayer in order to dismiss his religious claims.

There were some instances of Judaism and Christianity in pre-Islamic Arabia. Many Jews had fled from the Babylonians, and later from the Romans into Arabia. Their presence was more dominant around the agricultural city of Medina than Mecca, and it is a possibility that Medina was a Jewish city and leader of a Jewish trade network. In addition, there was much evidence of early Christianity in Arabia. Monks and hermits would often be found wandering the desert and Muhammad's wife Khadijah had a Christian cousin.

Thus, it can be seen that socially, economically and in terms of religion, Arabia was certainly ready for change. This, in combination with the diversity of religious practice, is seen by many Muslim authors as God preparing the

way for Allah and the emergence of Islam. Indeed, only by studying Arabia at such a time can we appreciate the sheer sense of unification that Islam brought to Arabic life.