8.3: Culture and Religion in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Learning Objective

- Explain the significance of polytheism and monotheism in pre-Islamic Arabia

Key Points

- Before the rise of the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, most Bedouin tribes practiced polytheism in the form of animism and idolatry.
- Three of the ruling tribes of Yathrib (Medina) were Jewish, one of the oldest monotheistic religions.
- Christianity spread to Arabia after Constantinople conquered Byzantium in 324 CE, and it was adopted by several Bedouin tribes.
- Poetry was a large part of tribal culture and communication, and it was often used as propaganda against other tribes.

Terms

**monotheism**

The belief in the existence of a single god.

**idolatry**

The worship of an idol or a physical object, such as a cult image, as a god.
animism
The worldview that non-human entities (animals, plants, and inanimate objects or phenomena) possess a spiritual essence; often practiced by tribal groups before organized religion.

Ka’aba
A building at the center of Islam’s most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca, al-Hejaz, Saudi Arabia. It is the most sacred Muslim site in the world.

polytheism
The worship of or belief in multiple deities usually assembled into a pantheon of gods and goddesses, along with their own religions and rituals.

Overview
Religion in pre-Islamic Arabia was a mix of polytheism, Christianity, Judaism, and Iranian religions. Arab polytheism, the dominant belief system, was based on the belief in deities and other supernatural beings such as djinn. Gods and goddesses were worshipped at local shrines, such as the Kaaba in Mecca. Some scholars postulate that Allah may have been one of the gods of the Meccan religion to whom the shrine was dedicated, although it seems he had little relevance in the religion. Many of the physical descriptions of the pre-Islamic gods are traced to idols, especially near the Kaaba, which is believed to have contained up to 360 of them.

Other religions were represented to varying, lesser degrees. The influence of the adjacent Roman, Axumite, and Sasanian empires resulted in Christian communities in the northwest, northeast, and south of Arabia. Christianity made a lesser impact, but secured some conversions in the remainder of the peninsula. With the exception of Nestorianism in the northeast and the Persian Gulf, the dominant form of Christianity was Monophysitism. The Arabian peninsula had been subject to Jewish migration since Roman times, which had resulted in a diaspora community supplemented by...
local converts. Additionally, the influence of the Sasanian Empire resulted in the presence Iranian religions. Zoroastrianism existed in the east and south, and there is evidence of Manichaeism or possibly Mazdakism being practiced in Mecca.

**Polytheism in Pre-Islamic Arabia**

Before the rise of Islam, most Bedouin tribes practiced polytheism, most often in the form of animism. Animists believe that non-human entities (animals, plants, and inanimate objects or phenomena) possess a spiritual essence. Totemism and idolatry, or worship of totems or idols representing natural phenomena, were also common religious practices in the pre-Islamic world. Idols were housed in the Kaaba, an ancient sanctuary in the city of Mecca. The site housed about 360 idols and attracted worshippers from all over Arabia. According to the holy Muslim text the Quran, Ibrahim, together with his son Ishmael, raised the foundations of a house and began work on the Kaaba around 2130 BCE.

The chief god in pre-Islamic Arabia was Hubal, the Syrian god of the moon. The three daughters of Hubal were the chief goddesses of Meccan Arabian mythology: Allāt, Al-'Uzzá, and Manāt. Allāt was the goddess associated with the underworld. Al-'Uzzá, “The Mightiest One” or “The Strong,” was a fertility goddess, and she was called upon for protection and victory before war. Manāt was the goddess of fate; the Book of Idols describes her as the most ancient of all these idols. The Book of Idols describes gods and rites of Arabian religion, but criticizes the idolatry of pre-Islamic religion.
Relief of the goddess Allāt, one of the three patron gods of the city of Mecca. Before the rise of the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, most Bedouin tribes practiced polytheism in the form of animism and idolatry.

Monotheism in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Judaism

The most well-known monotheists were the Hebrews, although the Persians and the Medes had also developed monotheism. Judaism is one of the oldest monotheistic religions.

A thriving community of Jewish tribes existed in pre-Islamic Arabia and included both sedentary and nomadic communities. Jews migrated into Arabia starting Roman times. Arabian Jews spoke Arabic as well as Hebrew and Aramaic and had contact with Jewish religious centers in Babylonia and Palestine. The Yemeni Himyarites converted to Judaism in the 4th century, and some of the Kindah, a tribe in central Arabia who were the Himyarites’ vassals, were also converted in the 4th/5th century. There is evidence that Jewish converts in the Hejaz were regarded as Jews by other Jews and non-Jews alike, and sought advice from Babylonian rabbis on matters of attire and kosher food. In at least one case, it is known that an Arab tribe agreed to adopt Judaism as a condition for settling in a town dominated by Jewish inhabitants. Some Arab women in Yathrib/Medina are said to have vowed to make their child a Jew if the child survived, since they considered the Jews to be people “of knowledge and the book.” Historian Philip Hitti infers from proper names and agricultural vocabulary that the Jewish tribes of Yathrib consisted mostly of Judaized clans of Arabian and Aramaean origin.

Christianity

After Constantine conquered Byzantium in 324 CE, Christianity spread to Arabia. The principal tribes that embraced Christianity were the Himyar, Ghassan, Rabi’a, Tagh’ab, Bahra, and Tunukh, parts of the Tay and Khud’a, the inhabitants of Najran, and the Arabs of Hira. Traditionally, both Jews and Christians believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for Jews the God of the Tanakh, for Christians the God of the Old Testament, the creator of the universe. Both religions reject the view that God is entirely transcendent, and thus separate from the world, as the pre-Christian Greek Unknown God. Both religions also reject atheism on one hand and polytheism on the other.

The main areas of Christian influence in Arabia were on the northeastern and northwestern borders and in what was to become Yemen in the south. The northwest was under the influence of Christian missionary activity from the Roman Empire, where the Ghassanids, residents of a client kingdom of the Romans, were converted to Christianity. In the south, particularly at Najran, a center of Christianity developed as a result of the influence of the Christian kingdom of Axum based on the other side of the Red Sea in Ethiopia. Both the Ghassanids and the Christians in the south adopted Monophysitism. The spread of Christianity was halted in 622 CE by the rise of Islam, though the city of Mecca provided a central location for an intermingling of the two cultures. For example, in addition to the animistic idols, the pre-Islamic Kaaba housed statues of Jesus and his holy mother, Mary.
Nomadic Culture and Poetry

Like later cultures in the region, the Bedouin tribes placed heavy importance on poetry and oral tradition as a means of communication. Poetry was used to communicate within the community and sometimes promoted tribal propaganda. Tribes constructed verses against their enemies, often discrediting their people or fighting abilities. Poets maintained sacred places in their tribes and communities because they were thought to be divinely inspired. Poets often wrote in classical Arabic, which differed from the common tribal dialect. Poetry was also a form of entertainment, as many poets constructed prose about the nature and beauty surrounding their nomadic lives.

Music

Arabian music extended from the Islamic peoples in Arabia to North Africa, Persia, and Syria. Although the major writings on Arabian music appeared after the dawn of Islam (622 CE), music had already been cultivated for thousands of years. Pre-Islamic Arabian music was primarily vocal, and it may have developed from simple caravan songs (huda) to a more sophisticated secular song (nasb). Instruments were generally used alone and served only to accompany the singer. The short lute (‘ud), long lute (tunbur), flute (qussaba), tambourine (duff), and drum (tabl) were the most popular instruments.

An ‘ud. The ‘ud was one of the instruments used to accompany singers. Pre-Islamic and post-Islamic music was important for poetry and oral traditions.
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