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Religion of the Arabs during the Age of Ignorance: A Qur'anic Perspective

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Abstract

During the age of ignorance, people in Arabian Peninsula consisted of various religious groups with a variety of cultures and customs. Most of them were polytheists. They worshipped stones and trees. Statues of pagan gods were installed around the Ka'bah, the structure that was originally intended to honor the One and Only God of the universe. All Arabs whether Ibrahimites or heathenish came for annual pilgrimage to Makkah. No one bothered about the cultural merging between monotheism and paganism. People in the northeast were fire worshippers under Persian influence. The Christian faith at the northwest hardly reached people in the Peninsula, while that of Judaism traversed from the southwest and remained exclusively active in Yemen and Yathrib (contemporary Madinah). This very research paper is going to shed light on the religion of the Arabs which was prevalent among them during the age of ignorance.

Key-Words: Angels, Divinity, Idolatry, Jin.

1. Introduction

Since the religion of the Arabs during the age of ignorance was idol-worship, which is against human nature, reason and logic. The Jahilliyah period is regarded as the darkest period of human history because during Jahilliyah period, the Arabs did not worship Allah, the One and Only. In fact most of them worshipped idols and believed in more than one God. The Arab Jahilliyah society lived chaotically as there were no Prophets and holy books that could be used as guidance in their life at that time. Their good manners were almost non-existent, for example they were cruel, proud and stubborn. With the advent of Islam in the year 610 C.E, the Arab *Jahilliyah* society started to change. All aspects of their life were shaped by the Islamic *Tasawwur* (worldview) which encompassed aspects of *Aqidah* (faith), *Ibadah* (worship) and

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[Index in Cosmos](#)

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Akhlaq (manners). In this research paper, an attempt has been made to illustrate the religious beliefs and practices by focusing on idolatry, divinity of angels, and divinity of Jinns during the *Jahilliyah* period in an analytical way.

2. Religion during the *Jahilliyah* Period

2.1 Idolatry.

The Arabs were undoubtedly indifferent towards religion and had a very little idea of religion whatsoever. They had an idea of All-Supreme Power controlling the Universe, His wrath and favour, the Life after death and the angels. But all these ideas had been adulterated with idolatry. The *Jahiliyyah* period in the Arabian history presents a very dark picture of religious debasement. The Pre-Islamic Arabian society was essentially polytheistic: they worshiped multitude of gods and goddesses. Though they believed Allah to be the Supreme God, but His worship was neither obligatory nor common. The Holy Qur'an eloquently testifies the fact that the unbelievers and polytheists of Arabia did not deny the existence of one Almighty God. Qur'an says:

*"If indeed you ask them who created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon (To His Law), they will certainly reply, "Allah" How are they then deluded away (from the truth)?"*¹

The Qur'an again says:

*"And if indeed thou ask them who it is that sends down rain from the sky, and gives life herewith to the Earth after its death, they will certainly reply, "Allah!" Say, "praise be to Allah!" But most of them understand not".*²

*"And if you ask them, "who created the heavens and the earth? They will certainly say, "Allah." Say, all praise be to Allah".*³

The Qur'an further says:

*"And When Allah is mentioned alone, the hearts of those who believe not in the Hereafter shudder, and when those (whom they worship) besides Him are mentioned, behold they are filled with joy".*⁴

The unbelievers imagined that they could earn the pleasure of Allah by making offerings to small gods who serve as the intercessors through which the worshiper could come in contact with Him. Qur'an, referring to this notion of the unbelievers, says:

*"We worship them only that they may bring us near to Allah".*⁵

Idolatry, in fact, touched new heights. So much so that even Ka'bah which was rebuilt by Ibrahim (AS) for the worship of One God was filled with 360 idols including Lat, Manat and Uzza.

The Holy Qur'an has vehemently repudiated such foolish ideas and declared in unequivocal terms:



“Have ye seen Lat, and Uzza and another? The third (goddess) Manat? What! For you the Male sex, and for him the female? Behold, such would be a division most unfair! These are nothing but names which ye have devised, ye and your father, for which Allah has sent down no authority (whatever). They follow nothing but conjecture and the souls desire! Even though there has already come to them Guidance from their Lord!”⁶

The stones to which reverence was displayed by the Arabs were called as *asnab*. Whenever these stones resembled a living form they called them idols (*Asnam*) and graven images (*awthan*). The act of circumambulation around them was called circumrotation (*dawr*).⁷ Angels, stars, ‘Jinns’ (spirits) and all the rest of the objects of veneration found in polytheistic faith adored as divine being by the Arabs. The Angels were thought to be the daughters of God whom they sought to advocate with Him on their behalf. Jinns were regarded as the co-sharers of Almighty Allah in the practical control of the world. Al-Kalbi reports that Banu Malih, a branch of the tribe of Khuza’ah, worshiped the Jinns, and Sa’id reports that the tribe of Himyar worshiped the sun; the tribe of Kinana adored the moon; the tribe of Tamim worshiped Al-Dabaran; the Lakhm and the Juzam, Tai, Banu Qais and Banu Asad worshiped Jupiter, Canopus, the Dog-star and Mercury respectively.⁸

2.2 Divinity of Angels

The Holy Qur’an vehemently repudiates the baseless pagan belief of Arabs to hold angels as the family members of Allah. Qur’an says:

“What for you the males and for Him the females? This indeed is an unjust division!”⁹

Qur’an further admonishes that:

“Surely those who believe not in the Hereafter, name the angels with female names”.¹⁰

The Qur’an further negates the false belief to associate angels and prophets as the co-sharers of Allah by taking them patrons. Qur’an says:

“And He would not instruct you to take angels and prophets for Lords and Patrons”.¹¹

To imagine goddesses (female gods) or mothers or daughters to Allah was particularly a high level blasphemy on the part of those people who held the female gender contemptuously. When a tidings of the birth of a daughter is given to them, they lament and their face is darkened with grief and fury. They hanker after sons. With what mentality can they attribute daughters to Allah? Qur’an, referring to the profane beliefs of pagans, explains that:

“Yet they attribute to some of His servants a share with Him, truly is man clearly unthankful. What! Has He taken daughters out of what He Himself creates, and granted to you sons for choice? When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of a daughter) what he sets up as likeness to (Allah) most Gracious, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief. Is then one brought up among trinkets, and unable to give a clear account in a dispute (to be associated with Allah)? And they make into females angels who



themselves serve Allah. Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be written down and they will be questioned. And they say, "If it had been the will of the Most Gracious, we would not have worshiped such (deities)!" Of that they have no knowledge! They do nothing but lie!"¹²

Any attribution to Allah of ideas derogatory to His Unity and His supreme height above all his creatures is likely to degrade our own conception of Allah's Universal Plan, and is condemned in the strongest terms. The Arab pagans called angels daughters of Allah, while they themselves were ashamed of having daughters and longed for sons as multiply to their power and dignity. Yet they, in explicit departure of their own philosophy, opted to choose daughters for Allah. Qur'an, replying the pagans in their own coin, says:

"Now ask them their opinion: Are the daughters for your Lord and sons for them? Or did We create angels females, while they were witness? Behold, they say of their own invention. Allah has begotten children, but they are liars! Did He (then) choose daughters rather than sons? What is the matter with you? How judge you?"¹³

There is the strongest irony in the above verses of Holy Qur'an and the sanity of pagans has been questioned and their mental derailment has been manifested in the wake of their irrational, illogical, untenable and utterly false belief of associating female off springs to Allah. These people also held that angels will intercede with Allah for their worshippers. But their false plea has been rejected in the most forceful terms in the Qur'an which states that:

"How many so-ever be the angels in the heavens, their intercession will avail nothing except after Allah has given leave for whom He pleases and that he is acceptable to Him. Those who believe not in the Hereafter, name the angels with female names. But they have no knowledge therein. They follow nothing but conjecture; and conjecture avails nothing against Truth".¹⁴

The angels will be asked on the Day of Resurrection about this:

"On the Day He will gather them all together, and say to the angels, "Was it with you that these men used to worship?"¹⁵

2.3 The Divinity of the Jinns

The Arab polytheists deemed the Jinns to be the close associates of Allah and established a kinship between them and Allah. In the Qur'anic context, man is created from clay while Jinns from the flame of fire. Qur'an says:

"He created man from sounding claylike unto pottery, and He created Jinns from fire free of smoke".¹⁶

The Qur'an rejecting the profane beliefs of Pagans, explains how the Jinns will be asked and what will be their reply?



“And they have invented a kinship between Him and the Jinns: But the Jinns know (Quite well) that they will be brought before Him. Glory to Allah! (He is free) from the things they ascribe (To Him)!¹⁷

The Qur'an, further negating the false arguments of polytheistic Arabs, says:

“Yet they make the Jinns equals with Allah, though Allah did create the Jinns; and they falsely, having no knowledge, attribute to Him sons and daughters, praise and glory be to Him! (for He is) above what they attribute”.¹⁸

Shibli Nomani contends that “when travellers stopped somewhere in transit, they first sought protection of the Jinns of that place. At certain dangerous places they even made offerings to the Jinns and one such place was Barahim. In this way they hoped to protect themselves from the mischief of the jinn”.¹⁹ Qur'an, very eloquently puts down the plea of polytheists by saying:

“Verily those to whom you call besides Allah are the servants, the likes of you. Call upon them and let them listen to your prayer, if you are (Indeed) truthful”.²⁰

Deified men are not real men, but false ideas of men. They cannot help themselves, how can they help others?

3. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that during the *Jahiliyyah* society of Arabs, the rejection to any form of religion could be due to a few factors. The Arabs did not believe the Prophets and Messengers sent by Allah in the period before on one hand and there was no particular Prophet or Messenger and holy book that were sent specifically for them on the other hand. There were some quarters that brought back external religions into Makkah. For example: Umr bin Luhayy who had gone to Syam and saw the Balqa' sect who were worshipping idols and thus brought back the religion of idol-worship to Makkah. The effect was that Makkah became the centre for worshipping idols at that time. The religious sect on the other hand could be categorized into 5 sections that is polytheists, monotheists, atheists, Christians and Jews. Besides that a part of the Arab *Jahiliyyah* society practiced animism such as belief in the spirits, protector, unseen powers, sun worshipping and tree worshipping.



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- ² Al-Quran, Surah Al-Ankabut, 29: 63
- ³ Al-Quran, Surah Luqman, 31:25
- ⁴ Al-Quran, Surah az-Zumar, 39:45
- ⁵ Al-Quran, Surah az-Zumar, 39:3
- ⁶ Al-Qur'an, Surah An-Najm 53: 19-23.
- ⁷ Abdul Hameed Siddiqui, *The Life of Muhammad*, (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd., 1975), p. 30.
- ⁸ Ibid. pp. 19-20
- ⁹ Al-Quran, Surah al-Najm, 53: 21-22.
- ¹⁰ Al-Quran, Surah al-Najm, 53: 27
- ¹¹ Al-Quran, Surah Al-i Imran, 3: 80
- ¹² Al-Quran, Surah al-Zakhrof, 43: 15-20.
- ¹³ Al-Quran, Surah as-Safat, 37: 149-153.
- ¹⁴ Al-Quran, Surah an-Najm, 53: 26-28.
- ¹⁵ Al-Quran, Surah Saba, 34: 40.
- ¹⁶ Al-Quran, Surah al-Rahman, 55: 14-15.
- ¹⁷ Al-Quran, Surah as-Saffat, 37: 158-159.
- ¹⁸ Al-Quran, Surah al-An'am, 6:100
- ¹⁹ Allama Shibli Nomani, Syed Sulaiman Nadwi, *Sirat-un-Nabi*, Trans. Vol-IV. Eng: Rafiq Abdur Rahman, (Karachi: Darul Ishaat), p.171.
- ²⁰ Al-Quran, Surah al-A'raf, 7:194

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