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The social conditions and religious practices that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia

Beginnings of Islam

The religion of Islam **began during the seventh century CE** on the Arabian peninsular in the territory which is the modern day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Arabian peninsular is an extremely arid desert region with very little fertile soil. Other than in the immediate vicinity of scattered oases there is very little vegetation to speak of. Essentially it is a region dominated by sandy dunes.

Shepherds and merchants

The local tribes people led **semi nomadic lives** and were predominantly engaged as shepherds or in servicing the well established **trade routes** between the Indian sub-continent to the East and Northern powers of Syria and Egypt. The shepherd tribes were small and scattered, moving livestock between the desert oases where they could find feed for their animals. The Arabian cities were established along the trade routes and in addition to the service of the trade they were able to provide a livelihood for various trades and crafts associated with urban life.

Makkah and Madinah

The two major cities associated with the origins of Islam are the cities of **Makkah (Mecca) and Madinah (Medina)**. Makkah is about 80 kilometres from the Red Sea and lies in between the Mediterranean city of Gaza to the north and the city of Aden on the Indian Ocean to the south. Madinah is more than 300 kilometres further to the north. Makkah was a city founded on the trade routes between the Indian Ocean coastal towns and the great cities of Syria and Egypt

The religious affiliation of the Arab people was quite mixed. Predominantly they adhered to the **local nature religions** as well as those introduced along the trade routes from the Southern town of Aden to the Northern centres of Syria and Egypt.

Polytheism Judaism Christianity

There were also devotees of the monotheistic religions of **Judaism and Christianity** in the region, however, these were minority groups in most areas though quite well established nonetheless.

The local religions were mostly polytheistic and often associated with an element of nature. Frequently they had a well developed **cultic practice** with temples, priests, sacrificial rituals etc. Associated with these established religious practices there was often a **thriving industry** in the manufacture and **sale of idols** and other images used in the ritual practices of the religion.

Sacred City of Makkah

Makkah had significant status in religious terms due to the presence of the **Ka'bah** which had become a significant centre for religious devotion. Indeed, **Makkah could be regarded as a sacred city**. At the time of Muhammed there were believed to be over **350 altars or shrines to local deities**. The cult of the god "Ilah" and his offspring the goddesses "Al-lat", "Al-Uzza", and "Manat" was the most prominent in Makkah.

Worship at the Ka'bah

In and around Makkah, the most powerful tribe were the merchants known as the "Quaraish". Due to their wealth and power in the region, the **Quaraish** were able to control much of the economy in Makkah. They were able to regulate the activities of traders who came to Makkah and had control of the Ka'bah which enabled them to make enormous profits from the religious pilgrims coming to the shrines. These profits were reaped from maintaining a monopoly on the provisions required by those who had come to **worship at the Ka'bah**.

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hanifs

Among other tribes in the region, the influence and control of the Quaraish was often unpopular and in particular their **exploitation of religious pilgrims** was the source of some resentment. Among the opponents of the Quaraish were groups of **devout Arabs known as "hanifs"**. They sought to find purity of heart through long periods of reclusive reflection and meditation in the many desert caves surrounding Makkah.

Creator God

The hanifs had an abiding belief that among the many gods there was **one of supreme power and authority**, a creator god which existed separately from the rest of creation and had been revealed in the past through messengers such as Musa and Isa. It was from among the hanifs that the Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 CE.

The Principal Events in Muhammad's life

Born in 570CE

The **Prophet Muhammad** was born in the Arabian territory known today as Saudi Arabia in the year **570 CE**. Muhammad's father was Abdullah, son of Abd-al-Muttalib a highly esteemed hanif who lived near the city of Makkah. Muhammad's mother was Aminah who was widowed shortly after her marriage and before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

Legends concerning the birth of the prophet

Tradition indicates that Muhammad's **grandfather Abd-al-Muttalib was a visionary mystic** who among other things is reputed to have been show the location of an ancient water supply. The same water supply which the angel revealed to Hajar, wife of Ibrahim in ancient times.

Other legends surrounding the birth of Muhammad indicate that before he was born his mother heard voices indicating his greatness and that his birth heralded the beginning of a heavy downfall of rain breaking a long drought.

Death of Aminah

According to the custom of the times, Muhammad was given into the care of the Bedouin woman Halimah until his sixth birthday. At this time he was returned to the care of his mother Aminah. Sadly though, she died soon after leaving Muhammad an orphan.

Abu Talib

After the death of his mother Muhammad was cared for first by his **grandfather Abd-al-Muttalib** and then ultimately raised by his **uncle Abu Talib**, a merchant of considerable wealth and standing.

The tradition shows that Abu Talib had Muhammad work as a shepherd initially, however, after proving himself capable and trustworthy, Muhammad was inducted into the business affairs of his uncle.

Khadija

One of the merchants Muhammad met in the course of his travels was the **wealthy widow Khadija** who would ultimately become Muhammad's wife. Before their marriage, **Khadija employed Muhammad** as a kind of manager of her traveling caravan.

Birth of six children

When they married Muhammad was 25 while Khadija was 40. The **marriage lasted until Khadija's death some 25 years later**. The marriage of Mohammed and Khadija saw the **birth of six children**. Two sons Qasim and Abdullah who tragically died during their infancy and four daughters Zainab, Ruqaiyyah, Umm Kulthum and Fatimah.

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Ali and Zaid

In the household of Muhammad and Khadijah, two other children also lived. The first was **Ali, son of Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib** who had become destitute. The other was **Zaid ibn Haritha, a slave child**, given as a gift to Kahdija but ultimately freed by Muhammad and brought up as his own son.

Night of power

Muhammad's life became increasingly **focused on meditation and prayer** and the tradition indicates that he spent many long periods in solitude. Such was the situation when in his 41st year he experienced the life changing event known as the **night of power "Laylat-ul-Qadr"**.

Command to proclaim

The night of power occurred while Muhammad was praying alone in a cave on **Mount Hira**. He experienced a **voice calling his name and commanding him to proclaim "Iqra"**. A **scroll was revealed to Muhammad**, however, despite his other achievements, Mohammed remained illiterate and therefore could not read the writing on the scroll.

Angel Jibril

The **angel Jibril appeared the Muhammad three times** and ordered him to read aloud, each time he declared himself incapable of doing so. Suddenly in a powerful breakthrough the Prophet Mohammed sensed internally what the words were and he began to **proclaim them from his heart** without having the ability to read them.

Period of waiting

After Muhammad returned home he **told Khadija of the events**, however, initially she feared that it may have been a demonic experience. Later, after reassurance from her cousin Waraqa ibn Nufal **she accepted the message and became the first to believe**.

Despite the force of the initial revelation, Muhammad remained reticent about his experience and few people beyond his immediate family knew of the experience. He **reflected on his experience** for nearly two years before experiencing **further revelations**.

Further revelations

The angel Jibril appeared to Muhammad again with the command to proclaim the message "arise and warn! Glorify Allah! Make your garments pure! Give up all uncleanness. Give, without expecting any return. For the sake of your Lord, endure with patience!" (surah 74:1-7).

This revelation saw the **beginning of Muhammad's** preaching which he continued for the rest of his life, all the while receiving **further messages and instructions from Allah**.

Further messages from Allah

The Prophet Muhammad in obedience to the message he received began to preach to the people of Makkah. The message was essentially that there was but **one true God, Allah** and that the eternal destiny of humankind was tied to the **acceptance of the message preached by Muhammad**.

Preaching message of on true God

The message was emphatically monotheistic and allowed **no place for the worship of idols** so common among the people of Makkah. It was a message founded in the tradition of the prophets Ibrahim, Musa and Isa. Ultimately people had to choose to accept or reject the message, however, if they chose to reject it then the consequences would be dire.

The Prophet ridiculed in Makkah

Muhammad's preaching was not well received by the people of Makkah and he was widely ridiculed. Ridicule turned to hostility with the realisation that an acceptance of the Prophet's message would mean an end to the lucrative enterprise associated with the worship of idols in Makkah

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Escalating tensions and the year of sorrows

Tensions soon escalated in Makkah and some of Muhammad's followers were threatened culminating in the death of Bilal who is regarded as the first martyr of Islam. **Muhammad** himself would have been **in danger** but for the patronage of his uncle Abu Talib.

In 619 the Prophet Muhammad experienced what Muslims call **the year of sorrows**. In the course of the year both Muhammad's **wife Khadija and his uncle and patron Abu Talib died**. This left Muhammad vulnerable to the threats and persecution of his opponents in Makkah.

The night journey

During the year of sorrows and amid the persecution in Makkah, the Prophet Muhammad experienced another **great vision**. This vision is known as **the Laylat-ul-Mi'raj**. It refers to the extraordinary experience of the **night journey** where as the Prophet Muhammad lay sleeping he was **visited by the angel Jibril** who took him to **Jerusalem and then through the seven heavens** to finally see a vision of paradise and of hell. The experience culminated with the Prophet Muhammad being brought into the **presence of Allah**.

Daily prayer instructions

It was in the course of this night journey that the Prophet Muhammad received the instruction that people should **pray five times each day**. Accordingly this has been reflected in Muslim practice ever since.

Delegation from Yathrib

Soon after, while preaching in Makkah, Muhammad was approached by a **delegation from the city of Yathrib**. Muhammad was urged to come to Yathrib and advise them. He agreed to do so but only after they pledged to give their **full allegiance to Allah** and to turn away from evil.

Miraculous escape from enemies

The **journey to Yathrib was to be a perilous one**. Once out of Makkah, Muhammad's enemies could have easily killed him with impunity. On the journey Muhammad had to hide in a cave to avoid his pursuing adversaries.

Hijrah

The tradition tells that Muhammad's **enemies found the cave** where he was hiding, though miraculously **a spider had woven a web** across the entrance giving the appearance that no one had passed through. Thus the **cave was not searched** and Muhammad escaped and journeyed safely to Yathrib. The journey to Yathrib is known as the Hijrah which means the migration.

The first mosque

The Prophet received a very warm welcome when he arrived in Yathrib and he was quickly accepted as a wise and respected leader. In Yathrib Muhammad built a house which is **known as "masjid"** and is regarded as the **first mosque**.

Muhammad lived in this house with his wives whom he had married after Khadijah's death. It is believed that he married twelve other women. Of these only the youngest **Aishah** would be significant in the development of Islam.

Yathrib becomes Madinah

In embracing the message and welcoming the Prophet, **Yathrib was renamed as Madinah**. This happened in the year **622 CE** which subsequently came to be regarded as **year one in the Muslim calendar**. The dates are reckoned from this time and are designated with the letter **AH** which means **"after Hijrah"**.

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Over the next decade Muhammad worked with the people of Madinah. He was effectively their **political as well as religious leader**. During this time he developed a constitution for Madinah outlining the rights and responsibilities of Muslims and non Muslims in Madinah.

Revelation to face Makkah and Ramadan fast

His teaching incorporated the need for **regular fasting** as well as the requirement of the **regular prayer times** as revealed in the night journey. He arranged for **money to be collected and given to the poor**.

Following some conflicts with Jews living in Madinah, Muhammad established a treaty with them providing for their religious freedom in respect for them as followers of Musa. However, it was during this time that the Prophet Muhammad received the **revelation** that Muslims **should face Makkah when praying** and not Jerusalem as had been the previous practice. Likewise the custom of fasting on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur was to be replaced with **the Ramadan fast**.

While Muhammad was in Madinah **conflict continued** with his enemies in Makkah. After various incidents a **major battle was fought at al-Badr** when despite being greatly outnumbered, Muhammad's forces prevailed. This was followed by another **battle at Mount Uhud** where this time Muhammad's forces were defeated, though the Prophet escaped with only slight injuries.

Capture of Makkah

Following other battles and a short lived truce the Prophet Muhammad led the **definitive battle for Makkah in 630 CE**. He was easily able to capture Makkah and claim it in the name of Allah. Thus Makkah became the **holy city of Islam, dedicated to Allah**.

Two years later the Prophet Muhammad returned to Makkah on a pilgrimage and preached his famous last sermon on the Mount of Mercy. Shortly after returning to Madinah he became ill. Within a short time his illness worsened and his death came.

Death of Muhammad

According to the tradition, **the Prophet Muhammad died at 63 years** of age in 632 CE. He was buried in the room where he died which has now become a place of pilgrimage for Muslims.

The Prophet Muhammad as the final messenger is the model for Muslim life.

Example of surrender to the will of Allah

The word "**Islam**" means **surrender** and its meaning reflects the disposition sought after by all devout Muslims, namely surrender to the will of Allah. The Prophet Muhammad is regarded as the sublime **example of surrender to the will of Allah** and accordingly is seen by Muslims as a model for life.

There is no sense in Islam that Muhammad is other than a human being. Despite various legends and extraordinary events that surrounded his life, he was, nonetheless, human. Great care is taken in Islam to ensure that respect for the Prophet Muhammad does not become a form of worship. **Worship is for Allah only**.

This caution is expressed in the Qur'an "Muhammad is but a messenger; there have been many prophets before him, and they all died. (surah 3:144).

Tradition of the Prophets

The idea of Muhammad as the **final messenger** reflects the understanding in Islam that he stands in the long tradition of the **prophets proclaiming the one true God**. Most esteemed among these messengers are **Ibrahim, Musa and Isa**. Muslims believe that with the Prophet Muhammad, the process of revelation has culminated and accordingly he is to be regarded as the last of the prophets or the **final messenger of Allah**.

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Hadith and Sunna

There are a number of aspects of Muhammad's life which give witness to his total submission to the will of Allah and therefore provide **important guides for Muslims to follow**. The **traditions** of the actions of Muhammad are recorded in the **Sunna** while the traditions of Muhammad's teachings are recorded in the **Hadith**. Both these sources are helpful for Muslims in appreciating the significance of the Prophet's life and actions.

Wise and capable leader

In Muhammad's early life there is evidence that he was a **wise and capable leader**. He quickly earned the trust and respect of his uncle Abu Talib and soon after of the widow Khadija. Both found him to be **trustworthy, reliable and capable** in business affairs.

Even before receiving the revelation from the angel Jibril, Muhammad was living a life characterised by prayer and spiritual searching. He regularly took himself away for long periods of solitude and reflection.

Faith, trust and patience

Upon receiving the revelation from Jibril, Muhammad displayed a number of characteristics which are important for Muslims to develop. Firstly he **showed faith** and was prepared to place his **trust in the word of Allah** despite not knowing where it would lead. Secondly, he showed patience in waiting for the time to begin preaching. Although he experienced normal anxiety and uncertainty at this time he nevertheless **surrendered his will to Allah and waited**.

Fearless preacher

Finally when he was given the command to **preach the message** he did so **tirelessly and fearlessly**. Muhammad encountered great opposition among the people of Makkah. He was **ridiculed and persecuted** for his words. The requirements of the message created great hostility towards him, particularly from those in Makkah who made their wealth from the exploitation of the worship of idols and the cult of the Ka'bah.

Trust in Allah

Muhammad was once again required to **trust Allah** in the decision to **travel to Madinah (Yathrib)**. This was a perilous undertaking which put his life at risk, however, Muhammad recognised the importance of the commitment people of Yathrib had made to place Allah before all else.

Prudent and just leader

As a leader in Madinah, the Prophet Muhammad showed himself to be **prudent and just**. His rule was highlighted by **practical wisdom** such as the importance of forgiveness and overcoming anger. It also included elements of **integrity and fair dealing** such as the prompt payment of wages and avoidance of corruption. Further elements included codes for **sexual morality** as well as a reformist **social agenda** which addressed issues such as infanticide, respect for women and the abuse of slaves.

Care for the poor

Finally, the community under Muhammad's leadership had a clear responsibility to **care for its most vulnerable members**. The Prophet Muhammad ensured that the community followed practices where the **poor were supported** by the offerings of all Muslims and not left destitute as would have been the case in most communities of the time.

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The development of Islam after the death of Muhammad under the leadership of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs and the emergence of the Sunni and the Shi'a

Rightly Guided Caliphs

The period immediately following the death of Muhammad was included some uncertainty about the future leadership of Islam. The tradition tells of some confusion before **Abu Bakr**, Muhammad's trusted friend and associate took control. For the next 30 years the Muslim world was governed by four leaders known as caliphs, meaning successor.

These four were all close to Muhammad during his life and they are regarded as the leaders who ensured the **maintenance of Muslim orthodoxy** in the period after Muhammad's death. The first four caliphs are known by the Arabic term "**Rashidun**" which means **rightly guided**.

Abu Bakr

Abu Bakr was the father of Aisha

Abu Bakr was the father of Aisha, the youngest of Muhammad's wives. He became the **first caliph**. He was a wealthy man and was willing to put his personal fortune into the service of the Muslim community.

He had been a long time **friend and associate of Muhammad's**. He was the only person allowed to accompany Muhammed during the Hijra and was **entrusted by Muhammad** to carry out other important tasks during the Prophet's lifetime.

Restoration of stability

The most pressing task facing Abu Bakr was to **restore stability** to the region which had broken out in **widespread revolt** at the death of Muhammad. To put down this uprising took great effort and cost considerable resources. Most importantly, many Muslims were killed in the battles that followed.

Death of Huffaz and writing of the Qur'an

Among those killed were many of Muhammad's companions who had **memorised large portions of the Qur'an**. This loss created a potential crisis with the possible loss of the Qur'an which at this time was totally committed to memory.

Following the advice of Umar ibn al-Khattab, Abu Bakr began a process leading to the **first written version of the Qur'an**.

Abu Bakr's caliphate lasted until 634 CE when he died.

Umar ibn al-Khattab

Extension of Muslim empire

The second of the rightly guided caliphs was `Umar ibn al-Khattab. His **caliphate lasted from 634-644 CE** until his assassination. The death of `Umar highlighted the ongoing instability and risk in the period following Muhammad's death.

During the decade of `Umar's caliphate the Muslim empire was extended well beyond the Arabian peninsula. This empire now stretched through **Palestine and Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Persia to Armenia**.

`Umar was a **highly effective military leader** and political administrator who successfully managed what was now an enormous empire. Among `Umar's conquests was the **city of Jerusalem**.

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Dome of the rock

The tradition tells that on his arrival in Jerusalem he found that the site of the old **Jewish temple** was being treated as a rubbish dump. Distressed by this he began to clear the mess himself and was soon joined by others who worked with him until the "**holy rock**" was uncovered. This is now the site for the mosque in Jerusalem known as the **dome of the rock**.

Before his death, `Umar appointed a **committee of six** to choose the next caliph.

'Uthman ibn Affan

Conditions placed on Caliphate

The third caliph was 'Uthman ibn Affan . 'Uthman had been one of the six appointed to choose a successor to `Umar.

The decision did not come easily though as Ali first refused to accept the conditions of the caliphate placed on him by the committee. They insisted that Ali accept not only the Qur'an and Hadith but also the decisions of the two previous caliphs. Ali would not accept this final element and accordingly the caliphate was given to 'Uthman who was willing to accept the conditions.

'Uthman murdered

Under his leadership the Muslim empire continued to expand to the East. Despite his military success, the caliphate of 'Uthman continued to be controversial. He was accused of nepotism through appointing those of his own clan to key positions. He also rejected the suggestion that he should retire upon reaching the age of 80.

Example of surrender to the will of Allah

Finally, his management of the occupied Egypt was harsh and resulted in **great resentment**. He rejected the pleas of a delegation of Egyptian authorities for fairer treatment and publicly renounced their claims. Soon after he was **murdered by Egyptian assassins**.

The caliphate of 'Uthman lasted 12 years from 644- 656 CE.

Ali ibn Abi Talib

Son in law of the Prophet

The fourth of the rightly guided caliph's was **Muhammad's son in law Ali**. Many had thought that Ali would succeed the Prophet upon his death and of course **Ali was offered the caliphate in 644 after the death of `Umar**.

Now finally Ali became caliph, though it was not unanimous. Muhammad's wife Aisha had supported 'Uthman's cousin Muawiya for the position. Muawiya and Aisha were outraged that Ali did not seek to avenge the death of 'Uthman.

Internal tensions

Ali ruled from 656-661 CE. During this time the **internal tensions** in the Muslim community came to a head resulting in a kind of **civil war and political upheaval** which ultimately split Muslim allegiances. In 661 Ali, like his two predecessors was assassinated. Muawiya was chosen to succeed him, however, given the split in allegiances, the caliphate of Muawiya and those that followed are not regarded in the same light as the four rightly guided caliphs.

The divisions that surfaced during the time of Ali's caliphate are the basis for the existence of the Shi'ia and Sunni groups in Islam today.

Sunni and Shi'ia

Sunni 90% Shi'ia 10%

The two main groups of Islam today are known as **Sunni and Shi'ia**. The **Sunni group makes up about 90%** of the Muslims in the world today. The **Shi'ia group** makes up most of the **remaining 10%**.

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The differences between Sunni and Shi'ia Muslims are not theological or doctrinal. Rather they are essentially political differences centred around who should be recognised as the leader of the Muslim community.

Descendant of the Prophet

The **Shi'ia group** are those who believe that the leader of the Muslim's must be a **descendent of the Prophet Muhammad**. Their position derives from the group of supporters of Ali, the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs. They believed that it should have been Ali that succeeded the Prophet after his death and they supported Ali in the dispute with Muawiya. The choice of Muawiya after Ali's assassination was the trigger that led to the schism in Islam.

Chosen leader

The **Sunni group** believed that the leader should be **chosen** from among all the descendents of the tribe of Muhammad, the Quaraish tribe but not necessarily from the family of Muhammad.

Some tensions continue to exist between the Sunni and Shi'ia groups today. Many Shi'ite Muslims regard the Sunni majority to be less than sincere in their devotion and too accustomed to the comforts of the world. On the other hand Sunni Muslims sometimes regard elements of the Shi'ia group as extremist and fanatical.

Chosen leader

Shi'ia Muslims use the term **Imam** as a title for their leader as they believe the caliphate has been discredited with the election of Muawiya. Different factions within the Shi'ia group claim that there have been 12 or 7 Imams. In either case the group claims that the last Imam vanished from history without dying and now acts as a hidden force, appearing to faithful Muslims in times of need.

Sunni Muslims are likely to be critical of such beliefs seeing it as an addition to Islam and something which threatens its purity.