

HOW THEY REFORMED

Religion, and most especially the religion of Islam, is a way of life based upon belief and understanding which seeks to reform the characters of its adherents and the ethos of their societies and communities. To grasp how profound a reform Islam achieved, it is worthwhile to reflect on the norms prevailing in pre-Islamic Arabia. Here is one particularly chilling account by a Makkan polytheist:

One day I took up my arms—my arrows and sword—to participate in a raid. However, the owners of the flocks we attacked overwhelmed us and set out to chase us in the desert. Five of us were shot in the back with arrows and killed. On returning to Makka, we discussed why our arrows had failed to hit their target. We were angry with the gods whose idols we carried with us because they had not given us any help.

One of my nieces whose father had been killed in an earlier raid was growing up in my care. I took her to the desert and bound her to a date-palm and used her for target practice. It was normal for orphan girls to be used in this way. I did not hit the target as I wished and so became convinced that the gods were determined not to give us good fortune on that day. However, I made another attempt the following day and hit the target at the first attempt. Concluding that the gods were now in favor of it, we set off on a raid to the lands where flocks pastured.

That sort of barbarity characterized not only the Arab polytheists but much of humankind lived before the advent of Islam. A Turkish poet describes it vividly:

The civilized part of the world suffered corruptions worse than those prevailing nowadays. Mankind excelled in rapaciousness, If there was one 'devoid of teeth', his brothers tore him up to eat. Anarchy prevailed in all corners of the world.

Islam radically transformed those who accepted it and once-rapacious people who killed one another for racial motives became as brothers.