Towards United Values

Case Study Oman

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Preface

"Baraza" is a Swahili word meaning "council" or "meeting place." It is simply a place where people get together, share news and ideas, and try together to solve common problems. In this time of growing insecurity – fueled, among other things, by some media and social networks – we have created BARAZA as an institution dedicated to combating prejudice. With BARAZA we want to build a new and unencumbered community which promotes understanding between peoples, while remaining neutral in relation to religion.

There are thousands of efforts worldwide calling for acceptance of diversity. There are hundreds of religious and interfaith organizations fostering attitudes for living together in peace. There are dozens of governmental and international institutions promoting dialogue and mutual understanding. But Oman's initiative "Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence: Oman's Message of Islam" is unique. It was undertaken by a small team with a modest budget, without ambitions or expectations of grandeur. They created it with the belief that it could make a difference, because they were convinced by the power of the message.

That Oman's exhibition has been so well-received, and has brought together people from all walks of life, is due to its honesty, simplicity and sincerity. They do not threaten or admonish, but simply hold up their experience as an example of how people get along. People from the highest stations of academia, government, religion have been drawn together through their support of Oman's initiative, which then led to the creation of BARAZA: a group of motivated and like-minded individuals who are also convinced that through effective communications people and society can be changed for the better.

In that regard, we think it is crucial to publish the best of regional and national thoughts and dialogue, along with success stories, so that everyone can learn from them.

What follows is a look at Oman's tradition of peaceful coexistence with different cultures and religions – from different perspectives, from the inside and the outside, from the past and today.

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The Land of Security: Western Perceptions of Religious Tolerance in Oman

Abstract

Oman in 1970, with the advent of Sultan Qaboos bin Said to power, became a modern country. The Sultan worked on the establishment of a civil state based on the foundations of citizenship, equality and social justice. Education, health, human services and government positions, are available to all Omanies, regardless of their origins and sects. He also ordered the issuance of a cultural journal entitled Al-Tasamoh (tolerance), which began publication in 2003. Its main objective was to promote understanding and brotherhood among international societies. Religious tolerance, as we shall see in this paper, is deeply rooted in the Omani culture. This paper explores Western perceptions of religious tolerance in Oman. In the writings of Western travellers and missionaries, the theme of 'tolerance' will be traced.

1. Introduction

Oman has over 1,700 kms of coastline on the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, extending from the Strait of Hormuz in the north to Dhufar in the south. After 1650, when the Omanis ousted the Portuguese from Oman, Muscat, Sohar, Sur and Salalah were the most thriving cities along this littoral. However, Muscat was distinguished by a pre-eminence in trade and by security. This maritime city, according to its strategic location at the entrance to the Gulf, was always considered by European travellers to be the best seaport in Arabia. Its position, hidden among mountains, made it a perfect harbor for merchants, sail-

ors and adventurers. In the nineteenth century, it was frequented by European merchants, explorers, agents and representatives of the East India Company. Among the interesting topics that they covered in their travel accounts are, the tolerance of the people and their kind treatment of slaves and the 'civilized' manners of Sayyid Said bin Sultan, the 'Imaum of Muscat'. In this study, We will be looking at the perceptions of the religious tolerance of Oman in the discourses of British, German and American travellers and missionaries who visited the country during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

2. Said bin Sultan as a paradigm of tolerance

The Omani ruler, Sayyid Said bin Sultan (1791-1856) enjoyed a charismatic image in Western discourses. He was the Sultan of Oman from 1804 to 1856. In the eyes of the many Europeans who were familiar with him, Sayyid Said was not just an emperor from the 'East' but also a 'Noble Knight'. The poets and authors from the west praised his, nobility, handsomeness, courage, justice, tolerance, generosity and humility. These qualities are rarely attributed to leaders from the Middle East. This therefore states that Sayyid Said was a fair man who was not just loved and respected by his subjects but also by many people and societies all around the world.

An Italian traveller, Vincenzo Maurizi, who was also known as the Sultan's personal physician, described him with these words, "Seyd Said is a good looking young man, of moderate stature and florid complexion; his manners are lively and agreeable" (1984: 18). In 1816, a British explorer, William Heude, stated that the sultan was a "middle-aged individual with a lot of charm and charisma. He was well behaved, had a desirable appearance and most of all, he had

respect to any one, irrespective of age, sex or background" (1819: 26). In 1821, a Scottish novelist and traveller, James Baillie Fraser depicted him as follows: "The countenance of the Imaum is of a mild and pleasing expression. He assumed a gravity of deportment, which did not seem altogether habitual, and was far from bordering on austerity". (1825: 20)

Perhaps the most important qualities of nobility and civilization bestowed by Europeans lavishly upon Sayyid Said bin Sultan are reflected in the description of an English traveller, Robert Mignan, who visited him in 1825. Mignan placed the following description of the Sultan:

Syyud Said possesses the ‚suaviter in modo' in a superlative degree, and is a rigid observer of the forms of the Mohammedan religion: all his adherents speak of him with the affection of children to a parent. He dispenses justice in person; and take especial care that the laws shall be impartially administered. […] In short, he presents, in every way, such a contrast to all Asiatic rulers, that he is decidedly the greatest ‚lion' in the east. (1839: 235)

In 1831, Joachim Heyward Stocqueler, an English Jewish traveller, visited Muscat, and was officially received and hospitalized by Sayyid Said in his palace. Stocqueler describes the Sultan with these words:

He is a mild, gentlemanly looking man of about forty years of age, a warrior and a trader, a just governor and chivalric lover [...]. The people of Muscat, if not all the Arabs of the Arabian Gulf, hold the Imaum in great esteem. They affirm that he is just in his dealings and decisions, liberal of reward, anxious for improvement, and tolerant of the religions of other nations. (1832: 5)

Sayyid Said was tolerant to individuals of other religions. He also encouraged open trade to all people regardless of their nationalities, color or religions. This qualities asserted by many European and non-Europeans travellers who visited him in Muscat or Zanzibar. It is confirmed, for example, by an American businessman and diplomat, Edmund Roberts, who visited Sayyid Said in 1833. He was on a diplomatic mission to negotiate about trade agreements with him. Roberts hails the religious tolerance of the Sultan:

"All religions, within the Sultan's dominions, are not merely tolerated, but they are protected by his highness; and there is no obstacle whatever to prevent the Christian, the Jew, or the Gentile, from preaching their peculiar doctrines, or erecting temples". (1837: 358).

James Wellsted was among the Europeans who knew Sayyid Said and experienced his nobility, generosity and justice. Wellsted received special attention from the Sultan and his subjects. He visited Muscat in 1835, and travelled extensively in Oman under the Sultan's protection and generosity. From his experience, Wellsted describes the characteristics of the regime of Sayyid Said as:

The government of this prince is principally marked by the absence of all oppressive imposts, all arbitrary punishments, by his affording marked attention to the merchants of any nation who come to reside at Maskat, and by the general toleration which is extended to all persuasions: while, on the other hand, his probity, the wimpartiality and leniency of his punishments, together with the strict regard he pays to the general welfare of his subjects, have rendered him as much respected and admired by the town Arabs, as his liberality and personal courage have endeared him to the Bedowins. These splendid qualities have obtained for him throughout the East the designation of the Second Omar. (1978: 7-8).

Sayyid Said has enjoyed this bright image in the eyes of Europeans until the last of his life. A traveller, who witnessed the Sultan's nobility and generosity a year before his death was the French diplomat, Arthur Comte de Gobineau. He visited Muscat in 1855. Gobineau describes the Sultan at this stage of his age, saying:

> *Seyd Sayd held in his hand a long stick on which he leant while walking with great nobility and dignity. He looked old and his beard was very white. His eyes were black and gentle, the expression of his face very calm and his smile especially subtle and full of wit. His whole person radiated that kind of balance between different feelings which is in every country the mark and privilege of the well-bred man […] He was certainly a remarkable prince among minor sovereigns, fated by their lack of resources to be generally little noticed as rulers. By following a totally new path, he succeeded in making himself respected by some very powerful neighbors (Billecocq 1994: 199).*

3. Tolerance of Omani people

3.1 British Travellers

In 1816, Oman was visited by two British travellers, William Heude and James Sillk Buckingham. The former arrived in November, the latter in December. Both of them assert the multiculturalism of the Omani society. Heude, after speaking of the diverse races in Muscat consisting of Arabs, Jews, Hindus, Belushis, Turks and Africans, was astonished by the religious tolerance of this community: "The people of Maskat are extremely tolerant. They are also equally plain in their manners, [and] make little distinction in their conduct and deportment towards those of another religion" (1819: 23). Similarly, Buckingham, though he did not mention their religion, was highly impressed by their tolerance and civility:

One great distinguishing feature of Muscat, over all other Arabian towns, is respect and civility shown by all classes of its inhabitants to Europeans […] Here […] an English man may go everywhere unmolested […]
The tranquility that reigns throughout the town, and the tolerance and civility shown to strangers of every denomination, are to be attributed to the inoffensive disposition of the people, rather than any excellence of police, as it has been thought (1830: 417).

Captain Robert Mignan, a British traveller, who visited Muscat in 1820, was impressed by the people's religious tolerance and found them, though strict in practicing religion, "not bigoted nor intolerant", noticing that they could "hospitably" share their food with non-Moslems (1839: 239). Additionally, he remarks on their treatment of slaves, asserting, in agreement with the previous travellers, that the kindness with which the slaves were treated in Oman was "quite proverbial, and [spoke] much in favour of the character of the Arabians, who [were] the kindest and most considerate of masters". He not only asserts that slaves were well treated, but also states that his travels in Arabia convinced him that a slave might be happier and "more fortunate" than the peasantry of Europe (240).
Mignan tells us that the population of the city was around ten thousand, and that some of the people were Hindus from Bombay and Guzerat, who settled there as merchants and were "treated with great tolerance" (243).

In 1823, Captain William Owen, an English vice-admiral and sailor, sailed to Muscat on board the Leven to obtain permission from Sayyid Said, the Sultan of Muscat, to survey the coastline of Omani possessions in East Africa. Captain Owen provides another picture about the Arabs of Muscat regarding their religious tolerance. Two incidents that Owen witnessed in Muscat were enough to convince

him that "bigotry is not amongst the vices of Muscat". The first incident took place when Captain Owen presented the sultan of Muscat, Sayyid Said, with an Arabic copy of the Scriptures, with which the sultan "appeared much gratified" because the Bible is acknowledged by the Koran to be a holy book. The second occurred when Sayyid Said paid a sudden visit to Captain Owen and his crew on the Leven. The crew's preparation for this visit, as Owen says, was funny because, as there were many pigs on board, the crew decided to put them into the boats so that they might not insult the Sultan by their "profane appearance". The noise they made during this operation was enough to alarm every Muslim in Muscat "as if animated with the vulgar desire of offending the religious prejudices of the natives", but the scene, instead, provided much amusement to both the Muslims and the British (1833: 342).

In 1824, Captain George Keppel, a British traveller, visited Muscat while coming back from India to England. he characterizes the Muslims of Oman as follows: "They worship no saints; and have neither convents nor dervishes. They have a great regard for justice; and a universal toleration for other religions" (1827: 19-20).

The English traveller James Wellsted also speaks about the different races in Oman. He considers Muscat as a multi-cultural city in which several ethnic groups lived together respectably – Arabs, Persians, Indians, Kurds, Afghans and Belushis, practicing their beliefs and religions within an atmosphere of respect and freedom. Muslims, Jews and Banians all had their own mosques and temples. Indeed, Wellsted states that these mixed races were "attracted by the mildness of the government" and had settled in Muscat "either for the purposes of commerce, or to avoid the despotism of the surrounding governments". In 1828, he maintains, Sayyid Said Bin Sultan received a number of

Jews, who could not tolerate the tyranny of Daud Pacha in Iraq, with much consideration. Wellsted describes each ethnic group in Muscat separately. About the Afghans he notes that few of them made Muscat their permanent home, that they rarely entered into business, and that they were notable for keeping distant from other races. In contrast, the Belushis, he argues, mixed with everyone, and large numbers of them were employed as household troops for Sayyid Said. The Persians, he adds, were generally merchants. They traded in piece-goods, coffee, hookahs and rosewater and some of them manufactured swords and matchlocks. Due to the difference in their faith, Wellsted believes, the Oman Arabs and Persians rarely intermarried, but with the Belushis the Arabs were less "fastidious", because the Belushis often had Arab wives, and inhabited Muscat permanently. Moreover, Wellsted adds, there were more Banians in Muscat than in any other town of Arabia, and they

> *Possess[ed] a small temple, [were] permitted to keep and protect a certain number of cows, to burn the dead, and to follow, in all other respects, the uninterrupted enjoyment of their respective religious tenets, without any of that arbitrary distinction of dress which they [were] compelled to adopt in the cities of Yemen (1978: 14-19).*

Wellsted also observes that the same toleration granted to all other faiths was extended to the Jews of Muscat:

> *No badge or mark, as in Egypt or Syria, being insisted on: they are not, as in the town of Yemen, compelled to occupy a distant and separate part of the town, nor is the observance, so strictly adhered to in Persia, of compelling them to pass to the left of Mussulmans when meeting in the streets, here insisted on. Their avocations in Maskat are various, many being employed in the fabrication of silver*

ornaments, others in shroffing money, and some few retail intoxicating liquors (21-22).

William Gifford Palgrave visited Oman in 1863. He visited Hormuz and traversed the Coast of Oman reaching Suhar, and then sailed to Muscat. Palgrave devotes three chapters of his Narrative to Oman. His attitudes towards the area and its people are founded on the idea that the Omanis shared particular qualities with other Arabs in Arabia. His travels among Syrians, the Wahhabis and the natives of Oman led him to compare them in terms of doctrine, manners and customs. Palgrave concludes his image of the people of Oman with these words:

In disposition they are decidedly, so far as my experience goes, the besttempered, the most hospitable, in a word the most amiable, of all the Arab race. Toleration to a degree not often attained even in Europe, exists here for all races, religions, and customs; Jews, Christians, Mahometans, Hindoos, all may freely worship God after their own several fashions, dress as they think best, marry and inherit without restriction, bury or burn their dead as fancy takes them; no one asks a question, no one molests, no one hinders (1865: 265-266).

In order to appreciate such a positive picture, one should consider its historical dominion and its counterparts elsewhere in the East. The Wahhabis, for instance, have been considered by many travellers as "fanatical" and "barbarous". Palgrave, himself, narrowly, escaped death at their hands, as they did not tolerate any 'infidel' in their territories. Not only non-Moslems but also, as Palgrave proves in his narrative, other sects of Islam were targeted. Their bloody expeditions to Oman were directed, he argues, against the "enemies of God" and justified by the "infidelity of Oman". Thus, they were detested by the Omanis to

the extent that when Palgrave met with a native in Suhar, the latter told him "if matters came so far that either the Muslims or the English must be masters of our country, we should decidedly prefer the latter, or even the devil in person, to rule us, rather than the Muslims" (1865: 335-336).

Robert Binning, a British Arabist and traveller, stopped at Muscat in October 1850 during his travels to Persia and Ceylon. The tolerance and kindness of the natives is also remarked on by Binning. He found the British agent in Muscat, who was a Jew, treated with courtesy and called by the inhabitants "Master". He maintains: "I was much surprised to witness the great respect shown him by the Mahomedans of this place; for I had never before seen any son of Islam exhibit the least civility to one of his degraded race" (1857: 125-126).

Samuel Barrett Miles, the British Political Agent and Consul in Muscat during the period 1872-1886, made some observations regarding the manners of the natives in Oman. In common with most previous travellers, he was impressed by the hospitality and tolerance of the Omani people. In many places, he was received with a formal salute in which the ordnances were fired off several times in greeting; the sheikhs of Oman went out to the edges of their towns to receive him and the natives were dancing and shouting. This is the picture that Miles paints of his arrival in many places in Oman. At Mezara village, the sheikh "with a levity and humour uncommon among Arab shaikhs" put his hands on Miles's throat and affirmed he would suffocate him if he did not promise to spend a day with him and accept his hospitality. When he approached the village fort, "an old twelve-pounder gun" was fired off in honour of his arrival (Miles 1896: 533). At Buhla, as well, he was received and entertained with chivalric games. The performance, he explains, consisted of a show of horse-

manship, "twirling and firing their matchlocks at high speed, running races by twos with each other" (1910: 170). Miles concludes:

> *I was received with every mark of friendship and cordiality which the hospitable instinct of the Arabs could suggest, my reception here and at other places being a proof of the friendly feeling and high estimation with which the name of England is regarded in this country (1910: 165).*

He also praises his companions, who treated him during his travels throughout Oman with kindness and civility:

> *Indeed, throughout my excursions in Oman, I always had reason to be grateful to the Arabs of my escort, and not unfrequently to the local sheikhs, for their zeal and self-sacrifice on my behalf. They never resented the inconvenience and fatigue I often caused them, but deferred without question to my wishes as to the when and the whether; while on any occasion of unusual toil or danger, they seemed to regard my safety and comfort as a main point of consideration (1896: 531).*

Edward Firth Henderson, a British diplomat who spent most of his life in the Arabian gulf, visited Oman frequently during the second half of the twentieth century. One of the virtues that Henderson praised in the Omanis' manners was their tolerance. This characteristic was admired by most British travellers to Oman; Henderson's remark gives us a clear picture of the people of Ibri. At Ibri, Henderson was received kindly by its sheikhs and people. Although he was a Christian, they accommodated him in a mosque. "This is how they welcomed the first really foreign and non-Muslim group of any size to come to Ibri", he comments (1999: 185-186).

From January 1963 to July 1964, David Gwynne-James, a British soldier, served with the Sultan of Muscat's Armed Forces. In chapter nine of his book 'Memories without Letters', he provides a vivid picture of the "tolerance" virtue of the Omanis:

Looking back to the early sixties, we were indeed privileged to be Christian soldiers in a Muslim world. Not only were we able to acquire some understanding of Omani Muslim culture but in spite of our Christianity, we were made to feel welcome in their midst. Providing we respected their Islamic culture – and we had been well briefed on this beforehand – we were accepted without hesitation and with good grace. Our abiding impression of Omanis was of a people who were devoid of prejudice, intrigued by our presence and who genuinely wanted to like us (2001: 146).

This testimony is significant; it discharges the natives of Oman from "prejudice" and religious fanaticism, while the image of Arabs and Muslims in the west is stereotyped and associated with "terrorism". Gwynne-James not only contributes, with other travellers such as Thesiger and Henderson, to dispelling this "distorted vision" of Muslims, but also he criticizes the West for "cultivating" it, as he asserts:

For nearly a thousand years the Western world has cultivated a distorted vision of Islam which bears little relation to the truth. Even now western media seem intent on prolonging these flawed prejudices. Those of us who served in Oman find ourselves embarrassed by such distortions. When we speak up to counter them, we invariably invite disapproval. When Westerners can learn to welcome Muslims with the same generosity of spirit as Omanis welcome us, a proper respect for each other?s culture can follow. Once trust has the opportunity to take root, peaceful enterprise can prevail (145).

Here, in this passage he clarifies his argument:

> *Although few if any of us thought to analyse it at the time this generosity of spirit was rather remarkable in the context of medieval history. After all as a nation we had played a leading role in instigating a series of brutal holy wars against the Muslims of the Near East. Subsequently most Christian scholars depicted Islam as a violent and intolerant faith. In contrast to this trend, longstanding historical relationships between Britain and Muscat had helped to reduce such prejudice (146).*

Many travellers to Oman have criticized some vices of their own societies, but none of them has done so more overtly than Gwynn-James in this texts. Not only does he accept the idea that the West for a long time has "distorted" the image of Islam, but also he considers his years in Oman as a paradigm of mutual respect and 'peaceful enterprise' between East and West.

3.2 German travellers

Carsten Niebuhr, a notable German traveller, visited Muscat on January 3, 1765. A substantial part of his book Travels through Arabia, and other Countries in the East is dedicated to the analysis of Oman's ancient history, cultural traditions and economy. As history indicates, people's intellectual advancement usually correlates with their ability to appreciate the virtue of tolerance. The realities of today's world exemplify the soundness of this suggestion with perfect clarity. In backward countries, it is considered entirely appropriate to settle arguments with machetes; in civilized countries, psychologically adequate citizens settle arguments in court. Therefore, the fact that Niebuhrt describes Muscat's residents as religiously tolerant people does not come as a particular surprise:

Banians from India are settled in great numbers in the commercial cities. At Mokha they suffer many mortifications. But, at Maskat, among the tolerant sect of the Beiasi, they are permitted to observe the laws, and cultivate the worship of their own religion without disturbance. In Persia there are also some of these Indians; but the Turks, who are austere Sunnites, suffer none of them in their provinces. I never saw that the Arabs have any hatred for those of a different religion. They, however, regard them with much the same contempt with which Christians look upon the Jews in Europe. Among the Arabs this contempt is regulated. It falls heaviest upon the Banians; next after them, upon the Jews; and, least of all, upon the Christians, who, in return, express the least aversion for the Mussulmans. A Mahometan who marries a Christian or Jewish woman does not oblige her to apostatize from her religion; but the same man would not marry a Banian female, because this Indian sect are supposed to be strangers to the knowledge of God, having no book of divine authority (1792: 191).

As evidenced in Niebuhrt's account, Omanis tolerated not only those affiliated with different versions of Islam, but also non-Muslims, such as Jews: "The Jews dispersed through different cities have synagogues, and enjoy a great deal of freedom. They are fond of living together, and commonly form a village near every principal town. In Oman they are still better treated, and permitted to wear the dress of Mahometans" (1792: 192). According to the author, Europeans who lived in the area were in a position to benefit from the native population's sense of hospitality, as well:

In Yemen, Oman, and Persia, an European is treated with as much civility as a Mahometan would find in Europe. Some travellers complain of the rude manners of the inhabitants of the East; but it must be allowed that the Europeans often involve themselves in embarrassments

in these countries, by being the first to express contempt or aversion for the Mussulmans (1792: 240-242).

Thus, thanks to Niebuhrt's description of Oman's realities, eighteenth-century European readers undeniably got the long-forgotten taste of true orientalism as something simultaneously exotic and progressive.

3.3 American Missionaries

In 1889, three American missionaries: Samuel Zwemer, James Cantine and Philip Phelps established at New Brunswick, New Jersey, what they called the "Arabian Mission". The primary object of the enterprise was "the evangelization of Arabia". Its effort was applied directly among Moslems. Its aim, according to its announced plan, was to 'occupy the interior of Arabia' (Mason & Barny 1926: 196). The mission worked at first independently, but in 1894 it was adopted by the Reformed Church in America. The first station of the mission was established at Basrah in early August 1891, by James Cantine, then the Bahrain Station was launched by Samuel Zwemer in August 1893 and the Muscat station was set up by Peter Zwemer, the younger brother of Samuel Zwemer, in November 1893. The Arabian mission sought initially in Oman to convert the Omani Arabs to Christianity, and its missionaries did their utmost to achieve this aim through evangelism, preaching, Christian literature, education and medical work.

We find in their writings assertions of some aspects of the Omani culture, such as hospitality, friendliness and tolerance. We can find such declaration about hospitality as far back as Harry Wiersum's article on Muscat in 1900, in which he said: "The Arabs are a proverbially hospitable. Having letters of introduction from the Imam of Muscat

and Oman, we were treated right royally wherever we went" (1900: 9). Many travellers and missionaries have asserted this social aspect in Arabia, but Dr. Paul Harrison, one of the mission's persona, probably, was more impressed by the Omani hospitality; it is a dominant theme in his writings. He states, exaggeratingly, that "There are no Arabs like the Omanees. I doubt if such hospitality could be duplicated anywhere else in the world" (1922: 13). Interestingly enough, this concept of hospitality has been utilized by the missionaries themselves, in the way that they established a separate room, or Majles, in their station at Muscat, where they received some Omani tribal leaders with welcome coffee and Halwa, but for evangelization this time.

Along with this hospitality, the friendliness of the Omani people is also articulated by American missionaries. The early assertion about it goes back to Samuel Zwemer's visit to the interior of Oman in 1910, in which he concluded: "the people were very friendly, as they seem to be in every part of Oman, and gave us unstinted hospitality" (1911: 16). In 1934, Harold Storm asserted this character of the natives of Oman:

> *The Omani is most friendly in a general way to everyone. The men's majlises (meeting places) are freer than elsewhere, and no great division of social standing exists. Often in a sheikhs majlis slaves and masters, Bedouin camel-men and rich merchants meet on a common plane to have a friendly chat. This same picture can be found in other parts of Arabia, but in Oman, there is more of a democratic spirit. This creates a fine type and spirit of community brotherhood (1934: 265).*

The theme of religious tolerance is also quite frequent in American missionaries' writings on Oman. Paul Harrison, on his medical tours to the interior of Oman, was highly impressed by the tolerance shown by the Omani Arabs toward Christianity. He gives this testimony about their religious tolerance:

> *Oman is a district which forbids the use of tobacco just as Nejd does, but Oman is a land of tolerance and courtesy, which can hardly be said of Nejd. The visiting doctor is not an infidel and the son of a dog simply because he is a Christian. The religious faculty seems fresher and less hardened here than anywhere else in the whole of Arabia (1934: 268).*

The missionaries grounded this positive attitude towards the Arabs of Oman on the fact that the Omanis did not only accept and purchase many scripture tracts, but also they welcomed the missionaries very courteously. Indeed, the sultan himself has allocated lands for their churches in Muscat. Even the Ibadi Imam of Oman, Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Khalili, who was well-known for his resistance to any Western influence in Oman, greeted American missionaries hospitably in his residence at Nizwa, dialogued with them and appreciated their presence. Dr. Wells Thoms visited the Imam in 1941, accompanied by his fellow missionary Dirk Dykstra. He recalls:

> *He asked us numerous questions about our purpose in leaving our country to live and work in Muscat. When we answered him that Jesus, the Anointed one, whose followers we were, ordered his followers to go to all nations to teach men His doctrines, heal the sick and share with all men the good news of the Injil (the Arabic word for the Gospel), he said, "Do you believe that God is one? When we said "yes?" he said, "You are not an idolater or kafir, you are 'the people*

of the book'." We believe you are mistaken in some of your doctrines but we respect you because you fear God, the Praised and the Exalted one; therefore you may proceed in safety in our land? (Phillips 1971: 187).

4. Conclusion

The main feature of the Western accounts on Oman is the fact that their authors appear to pay particular attention to the qualitative essence of socio-political and religious dynamics within Omani society – hence, their admiration of Omanis'. religious tolerance. This can be explained by the fact that the Western visitors to Oman themselves had chosen to become open-minded people, as far back as the early sixteenth century during the time of the Protestant Reformation, which is best referred to as the intellectual by-product of the Western psyche. As rightly noted by Chaves and Gorski: „The Protestant Reformation brought substantial increases in religious pluralism and religious competition" (2001: 272).

Therefore, exposed to the ethnic and religious tolerance of Omanis, Western travellers could not help but see it as an indication of their cultured civilization.

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Muscat: Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2006
• *Night is Mine,* Poetry
Muscat: Oman Establishment for Press, News, Publication & Advertising, 2006
• *The lure of the Unknown: Oman in English Literature*
Beirut: Dar Al-Intishar, 2010
• *Modernity of our Ancestors: Gleams from Classic Omani* Poetry
Muscat: Oman Establishment for Press, News, Publication & Advertising, 2013
• *Like a Mountain Bird Watching the Collapse of the World,* Poetry
Beirut: Dar Fadhaat, 2013
• *Encyclopedia of Oman in Arab Heritage,* 3 volumes
Muscat: Bait Al-Ghassham, 2018

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The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Omans

The Government of Oman, in addition to protecting the religious rights of all people[1], both those practicing Islamic and non-Islamic religions, actively supports several substantial academic and policy-related initiatives to advance the cause of greater inter-religious understanding and peaceful coexistence both within the modern state of Oman and beyond. The dialogue that undergirds these initiatives has been broadly inclusive of leading scholars from each of the legal traditions within Islam, as well as scholars within each of the world's major religions from a variety of academic disciplines. It is hoped that the dialogue being supported by Sultan Qaboos, the Sultan of Oman, and Abdullah b. Mohammed al-Salimi, the Minister of Religious Affairs, will be informative in many contexts, particularly for other Muslim-majority nations which are seeking to balance two essential needs of the modern Muslim-majority state: remaining true to Islam, and remaining committed to the full inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities as governed both by Islamic standards and by the standards of human rights in international law. Many scholars of Islam argue that these goals are complimentary, that pluralism is both a natural quality of the contemporary Islamic state, properly defined, and an imperative for economic health and the maintenance of positive relations with western democracies.[2]

Religions are ever evolving. The idea that a holy text speaks definitively for every circumstance of human history may be a tempting idea for its simplicity, but is not so simply lived out. Islamic law is remarkably adaptable to new social environments. Nearly every legal tradition within Is-

lam incorporates rigorous and systematic processes which lead to the creation of new legal and religious guidance that is both consistent with the tradition and addresses social problems that have never before been encountered. Muslim scholars from most legal schools craft contemporary religious guidance for any number of new circumstances. How shall Muslims interact in healthy ways with smart phones? How shall communal understandings of financial systems designed to provide for the poor be maintained in capitalist economies? And how shall Muslims share governance in modern nation states with non-Muslim minorities? In particular, this last question of the incorporation of non-Muslim religious minorities in the modern state is one that Oman's intra-Islamic and inter-religious dialogue seeks to answer. Before introducing the dialogical program initiatives related to this question of inter-religious coexistence in more depth, I want to explore the origins of Oman's interest in advancing peaceful inter-religious coexistence in the state.

There is a mistaken assumption, predominantly held in Western societies, that Muslim-majority nations are either uninterested in or unsuccessful in fostering multireligious societies. This is due at least in part to the focus of media on the problem states. It might be surprising to know that most Muslim-majority nations protect religious minorities and the freedom of religion in some form, though there is substantial room for improvement in some states. Of the 57 member nations of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) all but 9 nations provide legal and constitutional protections for the freedom of religion.[3] Intolerance takes root and spreads in failed states where security is lacking, where balances of power are realigning and where fierce competition puts pressure on societies to create inflexible and impermeable alliances defined around the markers of human identity, whether ethnic, religious,

linguistic or tribal. Some of the states in which ideological intolerance serves the purposes of civil wars are Christian-majority, Buddhists-majority, Hindu-majority and secular nations. We must reject flawed analyses that unreflectively link ideological intolerance exclusively with Islam or with religion in general. Intolerance is a human tendency in any context of scarcity, whether religious or secular.

The political organization of the modern nation state is still relatively recent in human history. All nations are evolving legally as demographic shifts in ethnic and religious compositions of citizenry change. And no nation has achieved the perfect legal system of protections for, or lived practice of coexistence with religious minorities. In Greece's capital city of Athens the estimated 300,000 Muslims had no mosque in which to gather legally for prayer until mid 2014 when Greece's Council of State approved the construction of the first mosque.[4] In July of 2014, a European court upheld France's ban on wearing the niqab in public.[5] In November of 2009, Switzerland introduced a constitutional ban on the construction of minarets.[6] Even in the United States where the freedom of religion is a central value expressed in the first amendment to the Bill of Rights, the nation is still working out how religious life may or may not be expressed in public spaces, and where according to zoning restrictions houses of worship may or may not be constructed. All nations necessarily pass legislation which guides and sometimes restricts religious expression. And in all nations there is often a discrepancy between what the law protects and what the population accepts in practice. Oman's policies and practices are as open as many western nations'. In Oman Christian choirs are allowed to perform choral hymns in public spaces during the Christmas season. Hindus openly celebrate the festival to Lord Shiva and Shias perform rituals of mourning on the day of Ashura in the month of Muharram through the streets of Muttrah.

The same public displays of religious devotion are often restricted in many western nations that seek to keep public space free from religious expression. Among modern nations, Oman has fared well in this regard, having achieved notable legal, constitutional and practical protections for and broad cultural acceptance of the presence and participation of non-Muslim religions in public life.[7]

There is much debate about the factors that explain Oman's openness to non-Ibadhi, non-Muslim, even non-Abrahamic religions. Omanis often point out that their nation should not be considered exceptional in this regard, that Oman's approach to fostering peaceful intra-Islamic and inter-religious coexistence is simply an expression of God's intention for the practice of Islam. While I agree that the sources of Islam can be said to provide clear protections for the freedom of religious practice and peaceful coexistence, there are plenty of examples of neighboring Muslim-majority nations in the region which claim to base legal state structures on Islam and yet fall far short of offering the level of protection that Oman offers: the freedom to worship, the freedom to believe and the freedom to openly practice one's own religious laws, even if that religion is perceived to be polytheistic.

I hear the objection, mainly from westerners, that, because Oman is not a secular state, but instead has an official state religion – Ibadhi Islam – it cannot be considered to offer full inclusion of all religions in society. While it is true that as the official state religion, Iba¯d: ı¯ Islam forms the basis of the common law in Oman, the country does not operate as a theocracy. Adherents from all schools of Islam and all religions are free to follow their own interpretations of the sharia, their own religious laws. In 1997 Oman adopted and implemented a new basic law, which while based on sharia incorporates modern corporate,

civic and international law. Oman's approach to religious freedom is similar to that of England, which has an official state religion, the Church of England, and yet protects the freedom of religion for all creeds and faiths. Catholics in England are not second-class citizens to Anglicans from the Church of England, just as Sunnis or Shias in Oman are not second-class citizens to Ibadhis. Even many Hindus and Christians in Oman enjoy the rights of full and equal citizenship in the state.

While the Ibadhi school of Islam developed according to its own historical particularity and while there are differences between the Ibadhi creed, practices and jurisprudence and those of the Sunni and Shiite schools, there is also overwhelming agreement in most areas of theology and jurisprudence between the schools of Islam. The Ibadhi approach to jurisprudence, for example, is able to both borrow from and inform the other schools. It is important to understand the distinctions between the schools of Islam, and it is a preoccupation in any work of scholarship to define and categorize, though perhaps we should not make so much of the differences between Ibadhism and the other branches of Islam to the degree that we begin to think of them as separate systems. Ibadhism, I am often reminded in Oman, is simply a sound, rigorously scholastic, and rational expression of Islam.

Western expatriates and visitors to Oman often imagine that Oman's policies to protect and programs to promote religious tolerance are the sole result of Sultan Qaboos and his wise leadership. Sultan Qaboos has contributed substantially to Oman's protection of and provisions for religious minorities. While addressing the council of Oman in October of 2011 Sultan Qaboos said, "The more thought becomes diverse, open and free of fanaticism, the more it becomes a correct and sound basis for building

generations, the progress of nations and the advancement of societies. Inflexibility, extremism and immoderation are the opposite to all this and societies which adopt such ideas only carry within themselves the seeds of their eventual destruction."[8]

While Sultan Qaboos has promoted inter-religious understanding and protected the rights of worshipers from all religions, Oman's level of coexistence and tolerance with non-Muslim and even non-Abrahamic religions predates contemporary Oman by centuries. The Shiva Temple in the old city of Muscat was built over 200 years ago and stands as proof that Hindus and Ibadhi Muslims have coexisted peacefully in the capital city for generations. Professor Hilal al-Hajri in his article *The Land of Security: Western Perceptions of Religious Tolerance in Oman*, references the journals of Carsten Neibuhr whose book *Travels through Arabia, and other Countries in the East* was published in 1765. Neibuhr writes, "Banians from India are settled in great numbers in the commercial cities (in Oman)…they are permitted to observe the laws, and cultivate the worship of their own religion without disturbance."[9]

So, if Islam as it is practiced in many neighboring countries does not always lead to the level of positive religious coexistence that we see in Oman, and if Oman's open policies of religious pluralism long predate the current government, then there must be other factors at play which explain Oman's level of tolerance shown to religious and ethnic minorities.

The British Broadcasting Company's (BBC) World Service produced two radio documentaries in 2014 showcasing Oman's approach to peaceful inter-religious coexistence. The documentaries aired on April 5th and April 12th, 2014 in a program called "Heart and Soul."[10]

The first episode was called "Accepting the Other: Faith in Oman" and the second was titled "Ibadhi Islam." One of the questions the episodes sought to answer was: "What accounts for Oman's progressive policies of coexistence with non-Islamic religions and religious minorities?" BBC interviewer Mounira Chaieb opened the first episode with a compelling suggestion: ocean trade. The people of coastal Oman have been engaged in global commerce through advanced maritime transport for at least the past 4,500 years, long predating Islam. The coastal tribes of Oman formed essential trade alliances with civilizations along the Mediterranean coasts of North Africa and Southern Europe, along the East African and Indian coasts and into Southeast Asia and China. After the coming of Islam, a thorough system of Iba¯d: ı¯ jurisprudence guided these intercivilizational interactions. The region of the southern Arabian Peninsula now known as Oman has long been adept at navigating the careful way between an adherence to one's own theological and legal tradition and a respect for the diverse legal and theological traditions of other ethnic and religious trade partners. Oman has long understood that a careful fostering of religious tolerance translates into economic benefit.

Some assert that the history, the doctrines and the legal tradition of Ibadhi Islam have fostered, sustained and advanced Oman's approach to religious tolerance. The Ibadhi legal tradition can be shown to have codified Oman's relation to multiple schools of Islam and non-Islamic religions. Islam, as expressed in the Ibadhi school, informs and supports even if it has not necessarily created Oman's approach to religious tolerance.

It may seem strange that Iba¯d: ism, a branch of Islam historically associated with the Khawa¯rij, would have developed such an open approach to non-Muslim and es-

pecially non-Abrahamic religions. Khawa¯rij are known in the early period of Islam during the first civil war for their extremism toward non-Muslims and those Muslims whom they defined as unrighteous. There were an estimated twenty sub-groups within the Khawarij. Ibadhis were just as firmly committed to bringing about the purification of Islam as the other sub-groups of the Khawarij; however, they prohibited the persecution of Muslims and non-Muslims in the process. Dr. Kahlan al-Kharusi, the Assistant to Oman's Grand Mufti, wrote in his introduction to this issue that the seeds of the Ibadhi approach to inter-Islamic and inter-religious coexistence can be seen in the early distinction that formed between the Ibadhi followers of Abu Bilal Mirdas ibn Udayyah, who prohibited the persecution of Muslims who had become opponents, and the more extremist sub-groups of the Khawarij.

To the Khawarij, the very survival of Islam was at stake in the first *fitna* (civil war). They believed it was essential to clearly distinguish between righteous and unrighteous Muslims. Righteous Muslims were defined by their insistence on creating and maintaining a pure and just Islamic society, based primarily on the Quran, and a willingness to disassociate themselves, their tribes and the true expression of Islam from corrupt or compromised rulers. Unrighteous Muslims were defined by their association with either side of the civil war. Muslims who aligned with Ali b. Abi Talib, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed believed by some to be the rightful heir to the caliphate, were understood to be affirming Ali's acquiescence to Muawiya b. Abi Sufyan, an act which was, for the Khawa¯rij, an abdication of Ali's right to the caliphate and contravened a clear Quranic command to fight against rebels until they are subdued.[11] Likewise, Muslims who aligned with Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan were associated with the perceived corruptions under Uthman's caliphate. The

Khawarij separated from both sides, opting for a third way to preserve Islam in its uncorrupted form. The Khawarij went a step beyond disassociation with those whom they defined as unrighteous; they labeled them as non-Muslims and required their repentance or execution. To do otherwise, according to the Khawarij, would have risked further corruption of Islam. It must be made very clear that today's Ibadhis are not Khawarij. As the Ibadhi movement evolved, it eventually parted ways with the Khawarij.[12] The Ibadhi were equally convinced that true Muslims needed to disassociate from the perceived corruptions. Khawarij means 'those who exit'. In Ibadhi poetry khawarij seems to mean those who "go out" against tyrants.

The Ibadhis were in agreement that Islam needed to be purified and that at times an exit from or separation from Muslims whom they perceived to be unrighteous was necessary. However, they rejected any form of persecution of unrighteous Muslims in favor of peaceful coexistence. Abdullah b. Ibadhi, the early scholar for whom the school is named, said, "The faith of Islam is with us all…" which is interpreted to mean that all Muslims belong to the ummah, the community of Muslims.[13] Ibadhis were committed to the pure practice of Islam, but left the judgment of which Muslims were righteous up to God. In a very readable and informative introduction to Ibadhism, former director of Al Amana Centre in Oman, Michael Bos wrote, "(Ibadhis) lived peacefully among those with whom they disagreed. This is not to imply the Ibadhis were pacifists. They participated in conflicts between others over religious and political differences. However, their approach was more irenic and inclusive than the other Kharijites…This does not mean that Ibadhis viewed all schools of Islam as equal. They continued to advocate Ibadhism as the best and purest form. But at the same time, they advocated living peace-

fully within the diversity of the Muslim community. A prime example, past and present, is the Ibadhi acceptance of marriage to non-Ibadhi Muslims."[14]

This early history, detailing the emergence of the Ibadhi school, may illustrate another element contributing to Oman's contemporary approach to peaceful intra-Islamic and inter-religious coexistence. However, it should also be mentioned that the Ibadhis in Basara during the early formation of the legal and doctrinal tradition were not seeking to build a religiously pluralistic society, not in a way that we would recognize according to modern western standards of liberal democracy. These terms – pluralism, multi-faith, religious tolerance – are contemporary terms that cannot be imposed on a pre-16th century A.D. world. These terms have their origin in a Post-Enlightenment Europe which are, in the words of Adam Gaiser, "tied up with the project of a liberal humanist vision of globalization."[15] And yet the retelling of this early history is often cited today as a mark of Oman's enduring inter-religious tolerance. Narratives, even if reinterpreted by modern standards, perhaps reveal more about the current generation telling them than they do about actual historical events. Even if the early history is inadequate to explain current events in Oman, it is a living narrative that plays a role in Oman today and reveals the state's intention to maintain a climate of peaceful intra-Islamic and inter-religious coexistence.

In addition to the early history of Ibadhism, one of the core Ibadhi doctrines may also contribute to greater inter-religious pluralism in Oman. A central theological doctrine of Ibadhism which differs from other schools of Islam is the nature of the Qur'an as created by God at the time of its revelation rather than as eternal. The intent of this doctrine is to protect the notion of Allah's *tawhid* (unity) and to prevent Muslims from the potential error of

Qur'anic worship, or associating the words of the Qur'an or the Qur'an as a whole with God. Ibadhi doctrine asserts that to think of the Qur'an as eternal could lead to confusion about the essence of God. God's essence is indivisible. Nothing in the created order, including nothing that proceeds from God, can be thought of as associated with God. God alone is eternal, and God is one. If the Qur'an is thought of as eternal, there is also an exegetical implication, a danger of imagining that the texts float above and transcend history. On the other hand, if the Qur'an is understood to have been created at the moment of revelation, the revelation then remains, at least to some degree, historically contextual and simultaneously relevant to the Muslim community today. God's instruction is thought of as both historically particular—brought through Mohammed for the early Muslim community at a particular time, in a particular place, addressing particular circumstances—and at the same time the most relevant source for the current and timeless guidance of all humanity. Ismail Albayrak and Sulayman al-Shueili in their article in this volume, *The Ibadhi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis*, include a thorough discussion of *Asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation), an exegetical method which considers the historical circumstance in which a particular revelation was given. The method of Asbab al-nuzul may not have been applied by the earliest Ibadhi exegetes, though relatively early in the Ibadhi school, Hud b. MuHakkam (d.280/893), was applying this method to Qur'anic text interpretation asmany Ibadhi scholars did after him and continue to do today. If Qur'anic texts are interpreted in part with an attention to the historical circumstance of the text's revelation, then the few texts in the Qur'an which call for polytheists to be fought against and defeated are understood to be historically relevant to the small community of early Muslims who were being persecuted by the Quraish, a polytheistic tribe at the time of the text's revelation. If, on

the other hand, the Qur'an is thought of as eternal, above time, separate from any historical context, then not only is there a potential confusion of the texts with God's essence, but the texts seem to be speaking directly to contemporary situations. A text from Surat al-Tawbah, verse 5 is an example of one text which is routinely misused today by Islamist militias and fundamentalist groups to justify the killing and excommunication of non-Muslims from the regions in which they hope to form puritanical Islamic states.[16]

The Ibadhi approach to Qur'anic exegesis could serve to prevent this kind of egregious misuse of the texts. Pulled out of its historical context, texts like verse 5 from Surat al-Tawbah appear to contradict several other Qur'anic passages that insist on peaceful coexistence between the diverse nations and peoples God has created. An English translation from the Qur'an, Surat al-Hujurat, verse 13 reads:
"O mankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another (not that you may hate each other). Surely, the most honorable of you, in the Sight of Allah is (he, who is) the most righteous of you. Verily, Allah is All Knowing and Well-Aware (of all things)."[17]

The skilled exegete considers many dimensions of a text's revelation. When one of these considered dimensions is a text's historical context, the exegete will see that there is no contradiction between the Qur'anic theme, insistence on peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims, and the allowance for self-defense when the fledgling Muslim community was being persecuted by the Quraish. The Ibadhi exegetical application of Asbab alnuzul could be another brick in the foundation of the Ibadhi preservation of peaceful inter-religious coexistence.

Some of the rules of governance in Ibadhism may also influence Oman's contemporary approach to inter-religious coexistence. The Ibadhi practice of rejecting the preeminence of one tribe over another, leading theoretically to an equalization of tribes, is not unique to Ibadhism but is a shared value within all schools of Islam. What is unique is the extension of this value of tribal equality to the head of the Ibadhi state. While the Imamate in Oman often became dynastic, there was an intent to select a ruler based upon his scholarship, thorough knowledge of the sources of jurisprudence and demonstration of sound character, piety and righteousness. Sultan Qaboos certainly fits this description today. The ruler did not necessarily need to be descended from the Prophet Mohammed, as is required in Shiism, or to be a member of the Quraish, the Prophet's tribe, as is required of the caliph in Sunni Islam. The Ibadhi ruler was to govern regionally, and Ibadhi authority was to be decentralized. There was an expectation that the Imam would govern in consultation with local tribal authority. The formation of these rules of governance can best be understood as protection against the perceived corruptions that developed under Uthman's caliphate. Corruption is less likely when a ruler governs regionally, with consultative participation from the tribal leaders and based upon qualifications of scholarship and piety. An Ibadhi Imam could also be removed from power by the tribal elders. These rules of governance, in addition to preventing the kind of corruption that can accompany centralized governance in an empire, foster equality and consultative participation on a communal scale with diverse tribes and ethnic groups which can extend to religious minorities.

Some have asserted that the level of sensitivity that Oman demonstrates to religious minorities within the state has to do with an experience over 1,300 years of being a minority school within Islam. Fewer than 1% of the world's Muslims are Ibadhi, a ratio that has not changed significantly since the first century of Islam. The early Ibadhi school formed soon after the end of the first civil war in Basrah, where it experienced theological and political persecution as a minority movement during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The movement was then established in Oman where the population was engaging in trade relationships with the Indian Ocean rim countries: China, North Africa and Southern Europe. A pragmatic live-and-let-live approach to religious and cultural difference developed.[18]

Finally, there is a strong basis for greater inclusion of and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims which can be found in the late 19th-century jurisprudence of one of the most influential scholars and jurists in Oman from the 1860s through 1914, Nur al-Din al-Salimi (d. 1914). Nur al-Din's jurisprudence continues to influence Ibadhi legal opinion in Oman today. Relative to the Ottoman protections given to *ahl al-dhimma* in the late 19th century, Nur al-Din's jurisprudence advocates in some cases for greater coexistence with and protections for Christians, Jews and other non-Muslims in Oman. Similar to other Islamic schools of jurisprudence at the time, Nur al-Din al-Salimi supported the protection of the life and property of non-Muslims living in Oman. Non-Muslims inNur al-Din's jurisprudence have the right to practice their unique religious laws and doctrines, the right to privacy, the right to a fair trial, the right to travel freely in the Muslim state, and the freedom to lend and borrow. All of these provisions are not dissimilar to Ottoman protections extended to *ahl al dhimma* at the time. What does seem unique in al-

Salimi's jurisprudence is the right to neighborhood coexistence. Rather than living in separated ghettos, non-Muslims were allowed to live in the same neighborhoods with Ibadhis and to eat together and to consider the food of *ahl al dhimma* to be halal as long as the meat was slaughtered in observance of the one God. These protections also seem to have been extended beyond *ahl al dhimma* to include Hindus and other religious minorities.

Nur al-Din al-Salimi also advocated for the freedom of dialogue between schools of Islamic jurisprudence and religions. He was quoted as saying, "You will find us accepting truth from whoever brings it even if he is a hated one." And likewise, "We refuse the false from whoever brings it even if he is a beloved one."[19]

Oman's Minister of Religious Affairs, Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Salimi, the greatgrandson of Nur al-Din al-Salimi, said in a recent talk, "We endeavor to maintain a constructive and genuine dialogue with scholars and representatives of all belief systems (including atheism). The aim of exchange is to reflect on the foundations of our thinking, a common morality and a common sense of justice. For only when we are aware of these similarities and these form a basis for our actions, while accepting cultural differences, we and our children will enjoy a peaceful future."[20]

The goal of intra-Islamic and inter-religious dialogue in Oman is not conversion of the other nor is it agreement with the other. The participants in a dialogue, in order to be free to speak with integrity, must trust the safety of the encounter, that there are no hidden agendas. If one senses a hidden desire to convert the other, trust erodes and the dialogue either remains polite and superficial or ends. The purpose of inter-religious dialogue is deepened mutual understanding of the other, understanding both of significant

common ground and shared values between faiths but also of the distinctions. Appreciation of difference, a deeper mutual knowing of one another and a discovery of shared values is the goal.

Currently, Oman's Ministry of Religious Affairs has been fostering a substantial intra-Islamic dialogue between the many schools of Islamic jurisprudence (both Sunni and Shia) in an attempt to discover and derive common values between the Islamic legal *madhahib* (schools/branches) regarding current issues such as the inclusion of non-Islamic minorities in modern nation state governance, responses of Islamic states to fundamentalist militancy, and other pressing contemporary issues facing Muslim-majority governments region-wide. This dialogue has been taking place in an annual jurisprudence conference hosted in the capital city of Muscat each spring from 2002 to the present. The conferences have gained wide recognition and are attended by the leading jurists of all *madhahib*, Grand Muftis and Ministers of Religious Affairs from neighboring Muslim-majority nations. The format, paper presentations and corresponding group discussions, has enabled substantial discourse with each conference concluding in a set of jurisprudential recommendations. The results are significant, contributing to a contemporary corpus of *ijma* (consensus), which can become a resource for all Muslim jurists, and a source for the development of legal protections for and participation of religious minorities in other Islamic states.

Some of the papers presented over the years have included: *Jurisprudential Rules and Controls in the Face of Fundamentalism*: *A Look at Classification and Implementation* (Dr. Ridwan Al Sayyed) from the conference in 2004; and *Islamic Jurisprudence in Relation to Human Rights and Freedoms* (Dr. Said Bin said Al Alawi) from the conference

in 2010. The theme in 2010 was jurisprudence related to urbanization and environmental protection. In 2012, one of the notable papers was titled, Toward the Theory of International Relations in Islamic Jurisprudence (Dr. Ahmed Abou al Wafa). The theme of the jurisprudence conference in 2013 was inter-religious approaches to a global understanding of religious coexistence. Titles from the 2013 conference included: *Legislative Discourse in the Jurisprudence of Coexistence, Citizenship in the Islamic State With Diversity of Belief* (Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed bin Zahran Al Harrasi); *The Concept of Security in the House of Islam* (Dr. Mustafa Taseerytch); *The Rights of Foreigners in Islamic Jurisprudence and International Law* (Dr. Ahmed Maliki); and *Citizenship, Islam and Civil Society Building* (Dr. Nur al-Din Mokhtar Al-Khadami). These titles exemplify the substance and breadth of the intra-Islamic dialogue taking place in Oman.

Since 2004, Oman has also published one of the region's leading academic journals, a written platform for intra-Islamic and inter-faith dialogue. The academic journals *Al Tasamoh* and *Al Tafahom* are edited by Dr. Abdulrahman al-Salimi. Dr. al-Salimi invites leading scholars from the fields of political science, economics, law, sociology, theology, and Islamic studies to contribute articles about the religious dimensions of many relevant current issues; the relationship between religious identity and state formation; the place of religion in modern nation state governance; issues of pluralism in contemporary Arab states; and the role of religion in globalization and international conflict, etc. Scholars represent the many schools of Islam and the world's religions. The journals are published in Arabic with select volumes available in English and have a world-wide distribution. Some notable articles over the years include: *Towards Deepening Tolerance Among Muslims* (Mustapha Hamza); *The Right to Difference: Beyond*

Tolerance (Atef Ulabi) both in Al Tasamoh, volume 2, 2006; *Dialogue: Inter-Cultural Ethics, Reconciliation and the Right to be Different* (Abd-Al-Razzaq Al-Duwayy); *Citizenship: Nationalism and Cultural Pluralism in Contemporary Arab Though*t (Dr. Ridwan Al-Sayyid); *The Religio-Political Issue: Religion and the Secular State* (Abd-Allah Wudl-Abah), in volume 3, 2008; *Religion and Ethnicity: Between Globalization and International Conflict* (Abdulrahman Al-Salimi), in volume 4, 2009; *Identity and Pluralism in Contemporary Islam* (Muhammad Mahfouz), from a volume published in 2012. Over the years the journals have provided a format for substantial academic inquiry into the most pressing questions of Islamic and inter-religious coexistence as they relate to contemporary notions of statehood.

The intra-Islamic and inter-religious dialogue being fostered in Oman extends beyond the academic discourse of the conferences and publications to include experiential, face-to-face encounters via courses designed for key change-agents in the region: religious executives, clergy, journalists, constitutional lawyers, diplomats and government leaders from surrounding nations. These courses are offered through Al Amana Centre, an academy for the study of global Muslim-Christian relations based in the Sultanate of Oman and run in cooperation with Oman's Ministry of Religious Affairs and a group of ecumenical Christian denominations (Reformed, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches). The center provides accredited courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and training programs. The courses are designed to provide a context for experiential dialogue and mutual learning for the sake of: countering Islamophobia; challenging both orientalist and occidentalist frameworks; discovering common values; creating intra-Islamic and inter-religious initiatives to showcase legal and government structures which enable greater inclusion

of religious minorities in state participation; and the exploration of natural linkages between religion and diplomacy (namely, educating diplomats in religious literacy and training religious leaders in the intersection of religion and diplomacy). The center also serves as a coordinator for Oman's participation in Cambridge University's Interfaith Programme with the Faculty of Divinity.

Oman is in a unique position to present its particular brand of religious coexistence to other Muslim-majority nations, and indeed all nations of the world. The hope is that the unique policy solutions and widely held cultural support that Oman has fostered for religious inclusion can become a model for other contexts. As a way of sharing this model more broadly with the world, the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Oman, under the direction of the Minister, Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salimi, and Dr. Mohammed Al Mamari have created a traveling exhibition to showcase Oman's approach to fostering peaceful religious coexistence in an Islamic nation with a pluralist society. The exhibition has been on display in over 40 countries throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, South and North America, and has logged over six million visitors.

The origins of Oman's contemporary approaches to fostering intra-Islamic and interreligious coexistence and dialogue are complex and varied. Among the contributing factors are Oman's 4,500 year long history of maritime trade and international exposure, the sources of Islam, the Qur'an and sunna, the particular history, theology, exegetical approach and jurisprudence of Ibadhism, the leadership of Sultan Qaboos and his government, and the common law in Oman in which sharia dovetails with modern corporate, civic and international law and leaves room for followers of other religions to practice their particular law.

All of these factors work together to undergird the protection of peaceful inter-religious coexistence in Oman.

In the future, our world will be increasingly pluralistic. Gone are the days of homogeneity and religious uniformity in any region. The idea that our religions and cultures, western and eastern, Muslim and Christian are somehow easily definable and fundamentally opposed is a fallacy. The truth is that our religions and cultures and legal systems and social structures have been borrowing from one another, cross-pollinating, substantially overlapping since the beginning of Islam in the 7th century A.D. We must not acquiesce to uninformed, over-simplified and largely modern constructs of our perceived opposition.

And yet, to acknowledge our substantial similarities and long histories of mutual academic and inter-cultural influence is not to say that we are all the same. There are important root differences between our cultures and religions. States that have been shaped largely by a liberal, post-enlightenment form of western democracy differ in some substantial ways from states that identify as Islamic nations. There are differences, though the differences are not the stark contrasts wemight imagine.We must learn to coexist with difference.

So many regions of our world have much to gain from Oman's approach. There are serious abuses of religious power taking place in Northern Iraq and Syria where the selfnamed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its supporters are so egregiously failing to understand the need to incorporate coexistence in the state, an approach that will not succeed precisely because it is against Islam and because it is too violent to survive. Like an aggressive virus that kills the host it is living from, ISIS will not last long as a criminal mafia bent on religicide. Similar abus-

es abound in many African countries, including Nigeria, the Central Africa Republic, Mali, Sudan and in a growing sense Egypt, where Muslims and Christians have become divided due to misuses of religious identity as marks of neotribalism. And religious identity becomes confused with the conflict between Israel and Palestinians, a political conflict where proxy powers compete for territory, though the conflict is fueled by religious narratives. Security must precede coexistence.

Oman's approach will not apply in every context. The hope of the transferability of Oman's model of inter-religious coexistence within the modern Muslim-majority state is that it is a model which is deeply rooted in the Islamic sources and simultaneously sensitive to the contemporary pragmatic global reality, a context in which all of our nations are and will forevermore be ethnically, politically and religiously pluralistic. |

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[1] "All people" refers to both citizens and guest workers living in the state.

[2] See: Al Alawi, Dr. Said Bin Said. *Islamic Jurisprudence and Attention to Human Rights and Freedoms.* Published by The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), Sultanate of Oman, Jurisprudence Conference, April 2010. Awghal, Dr. Burhan Coor. *Islamic Jurisprudence and International Humanitarian Law,* Pub. MERA, Oman, Jurisprudence Conference, April 2011. Al Sayeed, Dr. Radwan. *The Jurisprudence Of Coexistence*

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[3] U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom Report for 2013.

[4] Lowen, Mark. BBC News Europe, *Athens, the EU Capital City Without a Mosque.* December 28th 2012 and Kalmouki, Nikoleta. Greek Reporter, *Council of State Allows for Mosque in Athens.* July 1, 2014.

[5] BBC News Europe, *European Court upholds French full veil ban.* 1 July, 2014.

[6] Langer, Lorenz. *Panacea or Pathetic Fallacy? The Swiss Ban on Minarets.* Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law. V. 43, Oct 2010, Number 4. p. 863. 2010.

[7] While Oman's protections for the freedom of religion are laudable, there are restrictions. Proselytization is illegal as is the defamation of any religion. These laws are intended to preserve peace between people of different faith traditions and prevent unrest. The prohibition of proselytization applies equally to all religions. Muslims are not allowed to coerce Hindus or Christians to convert, nor vice versa.

[8] Published in Sultan Qaboos' address to the Majlis Al Shura of Oman in October of 2011.

[9] Al-Hajri, Hilal. *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* ISSN: 2046-9578, Vol.15 No.II (2013)

[10] The two BBC radio documentaries on religious tolerance in Oman can be found at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p002vsn4.

[11] Qur'an 49:9.

[12] The Ibadhis understand the Muhakkima to have preserved the distinction between kufr as polytheism and kufr as a serious infraction that requires repentance. For Ibadhis, it was the later Khawa¯rij, the Azariqa, Najdat and others who departed from the

true path of Islam. This is when the Ibadhis became distinguished from the Khawarij.

[13] Ennami, Amr Khlifa. *Studies in Ibadhism*. "Al Ibadhiya." 1972, p. 33.

[14] Bos, Michael. "*Islam in Oman*", exhibition catalog. ISBN 978 90 7865 3 15 8. 168 pages, published by Museum Shop New Church. 2009.

[15] From a conversation with Adam Gaiser, at the Ibadhi Conference in Cambridge University, June 2014. Adam continued, "Before the religious wars in Europe between Catholics and Protestants, 'tolerance' was not a value. In fact, if you examine the inscription at the foot of Ferdinand and Isabella's tomb in Granada, Spain, you will find that it praises them for 'humbling the heretics and bringing low the Muhammedans.' In other words, in the 15th century it is exactly the opposite of tolerance that is valued in Europe (at least in Spain). These concepts developed in a particular period, and they continue to develop today: 'tolerance' today has a particular meaning that is tied up with the project of a liberal humanist vision of globalization. And for this reason you cannot simply pick up a piece of writing from the 19th century and conclude that certain values are being applied in Oman in the same way as they are today."

[16] Surat al-Tawbah, verse 5: "And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them [go] on their way. Indeed, God is Forgiving and Merciful."

[17] Ahamed, Dr. Seyed Vickar. English Translation of the Message of The Qur'an. Second Edition. Surat al-Hujurat, chapter 49, verse 13. Published by: Book of Signs Foundation. 2006. p. 295.

[18] Benichou Gottreich, Emily, and Schroeter, Daniel J. Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa. Indiana University Press. 2011. chapter 4, *"The Image of the Jews Among Ibadhi Imazighen in North Africa Before the Tenth Century"* by Mabrouk Mansouri.

[19] His Eminence Shaykh Ahmad ibn Hamad al-Khalili, Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, "The Overwhelming Truth: A Discussion of Some Key Concepts in Islamic Theology", Oman: Ministry of Awqaf & Religious Affairs 2002, p. 14.

[20] From a lecture given in 2014 at one of Oman's religious tolerance exhibitions.

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H.E. Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah

H.E. Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah
Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs

General debate of the 72. Session Of The United Nations General Assembly
New York, 23. Sept 2017

Statement of the Sultanate of Oman

Mr. President,

We would like at the outset to congratulate you and your friendly country, the Slovak Republic, on your election as President of the 72 Session of the United Nations' General Assembly.

We are confident that your vast experience and competence will enable you to steer the work of this session to a successful conclusion.

We are also delighted to express our appreciation to your predecessor **Peter Thompson** of the Republic of Fiji for the commendable efforts he has exerted during his presidency of the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly.

It is also our pleasure to congratulate HE **Antonio Guterres** on his election as Secretary General of the United Nations, wishing him all success in his noble tasks. We would also like to assure him of the Sultanate of Oman readiness to cooperate with him, and with all members of the United Nations, to achieve the noble goals and objectives, at the forefront of which is the maintenance of international peace and security.

Mr. President,

Earlier civilizations flourished in parallel with mankind belief in divine books, which created a set of values and principles for cooperation, coexistence, knowledge and scientific exchanges. We are of the view that religious

and cultural heritage, and values of civilizations do enrich and enhance the understanding of peace. Therefore, we should not overlook that heritage as an important means to disseminate the culture of peace and coexistence throughout the world.

In its foreign policy and international relations, the Sultanate of Oman adopts an approach that is based on supporting peace, coexistence, tolerance, dialogue and close cooperation with all nations and peoples. The Sultanate of Oman is also committed to the principles of right, justice, equality, non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states, and the settlement of disputes through peaceful means, based on the principles of the United Nations Charter and the rules of international law. This, without doubt, would boost confidence building measures and mutual respect of the sovereignty of states and good neighborliness in a way that enables states maintain security, stability and prosperity. Therefore, we call upon all states to support peace efforts, and join hands to spread peace as a global culture at all levels.

Peace and dialogue have become an inevitable necessity for humankind, and their realization is a collective responsibility. The United Nations, therefore, is vested with the responsibility to work forward. However, without the support of the international community, national and international interests cannot be enhanced. Both can only be achieved when we give the United Nations the strong role it requires to protect the world from conflicts and wars.

Political and economic conflicts represent a failure of the international system to support the least developed states. This state of affairs has created a lot of problems and conflicts, such as global migration, chaos, upheavals, troubles and instability in many parts in the world.

The economic slowdown and the drop in global trade have exasperated these problems more acutely in the developing world, which have negatively affected the consensus of states in WTO agreements. They have also limited the organization's ability to achieve its primary goals of building the capacities of the developing states in international trade. We believe that the demands of some parties to gain larger share in the global trade or to implement isolationist and protectionist policies would aggravate problems and increase tensions in the world. We think that it is highly important that the international community look for a new vision that would achieve justice, expand common interests and help developing states reach higher levels of sustainable development.

We also believe that we can only achieve the above goals, if the member states adhere to the principles of the United Nations charters and avoid unilateral decisions and policies. We stress the importance of giving the United Nations the lead again to take the peace process forward. Its agencies should play a more active role in the development process, in order to achieve the sustainable development goals.

We call upon all states to exert more efforts to help the United Nations restore its pivotal role in international relations. We also look forward to see the UN Secretary General, who enjoys vast experience and high competence, playing a more effective role in achieving the goals and purposes of the United Nations. The Sultanate of Oman

will fully support the Secretary General in his effort to reinforce the Organization's role in attaining international peace and security.

We also call upon the international community to spread the culture of dialogue and understanding to settle disputes and end tensions in the world by peaceful means, and with a spirit of responsibility and credibility. We, therefore, consider it essential for the international community to look into the causes of weakness in international policies and adopt a more effective approach to settle regional and international problems, climate change, and other issues that affect the security and stability in the world.

On this basis, the Sultanate of Oman invites the United Nations and the International Community to take up their responsibilities and strive to achieve peace, prevent conflicts and wars and settle difference, through dialogue and peaceful means. In this respect, my country renews its readiness to work with the United Nations to build a new world of security and stability.

Mr. President,

The world has been witnessing new transformations towards scientific and technological progress in a way that affects people's lives. Moreover, there has been a steady growth in population. Therefore, we stress the need to adopt a new perspective for a global partnership to benefit from advanced technology and scientific progress.

The global breakthrough that was achieved through the signing of Paris Climate change agreement is an important gain for humanity. It should be noted that several natural disasters that took place in the world should convince

all states that it is in their interest to adhere to the above mentioned agreement.

Mr. President,

The Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons indicated that the resolution adopted by the 1995 Review and Extension Conference on the establishment of middle East zone free from nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction remains in force, until it achieves its objectives. In this respect, my country supports the efforts of the international community towards the creation of a binding instrument that would cover the loopholes that emerged in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This document is highly important, as it helps the international community get rid of weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. President,

As it subscribes to goals of the United Nations, which provides for the maintenance of international peace and security, my country denounces terrorism in all its forms and manifestations whatever its justifications might be. It also reaffirms its supports to all efforts that aim at confronting and ending this scourge through taking the appropriate measures, based on the relevant Arab, Islamic and international resolutions, treaties and agreements.

Mr. President,

The world is facing real challenges. Therefore, there is a need to adopt a unified stand to achieve the aspirations of mankind. Hence, we think that harnessing the true concept of partnership and common destiny between the members of the international community is the most appropriate means to achieve this goal. We wish all success to the works of this session.

Thank you |

H.E. Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah
was born in Salalah in 1945. He studied in Kuwait and then worked for various Kuwaiti companies and government agencies. In August 1970, a month after the seizure of power, he, like many others who had studied and worked abroad during the period of stagnation under former ruler Sultan Said, was contacted by the new ruler, Sultan Qaboos, and asked to return to Oman. In 1971 he was a member of an Omani trust-building diplomatic tour to the Arab capitals. He was then sent to the Oman Embassy in Beirut, where he became ambassador in July 1973.
In 1974, he became State Secretary in the Foreign Ministry and took over its technical direction in 1982. In December 1997, he was appointed as the Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs.

Riaz Ravat
BEM

Oman – Spearheading an international drive for religious understanding and coexistence

"Religion is often connected with conflict. Religion inevitably discriminates between the righteousness of the 'true believer' and the unrighteousness of the rest. Discrimination in belief and values can extend much further to result in 'unbelievers' being treated differently, facilitating the process of 'othering', the drawing of boundaries around those considered insider and outsider" (Brewer 2018 p10). In these words the challenges of interfaith relations are set very explicitly. More often than not, the 'other' is born into a faith in the same way as the 'believer'. The framework is therefore set yet how this gives one 'righteousness rights' over others is questionable. Even if one were to willingly adopt a particular religious or belief path, this does not square the circle which is articulated in a verse in the Holy Qur'an – "Oh mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another." (Holy Qur'an 49:13).

If we are all God's creation, we have no right to exert a superiority complex over others. It is in this spirit that the Sultanate of Oman's work on exporting religious tolerance, understanding and coexistence is set.

Tolerance, Understanding & Coexistence

In 2012 whilst the UK basked in the glory of HM the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the hosting of the Olympic games, I came into contact with the Sultanate of Oman's 'Tolerance, Understanding & Coexistence' project when my home city of Leicester, hosted the UK's first exhibition. Little did I know that this was the start of my journey to discover a proud and remarkable country which is tucked away on the edge of the Middle East region.

In November 2016, to mark the UN Day of Tolerance, I had the privilege of addressing an audience in the magnificent Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in the capital city of Muscat. This fabulous place of worship is the heartbeat of Islam in Oman – and the embodiment of a people and nation, which values plurality and difference.

During my visits to Oman, I have witnessed churches bursting with congregations, a Hindu temple frequented regularly by Buddhists, a fledgling Gurdwara and national days when all parts and all peoples of the nation come together in celebration. There is a strong and inclusive Omani identity which bridges historical tribal factions. As Peterson (Peterson 2019) says, "Smaller variant communities are not excluded but are enfolded into the ethos by extension: other ethnic groups are incorporated into the matrix of tribal classification; religious differences are subsumed by policy and tolerance, as shown by the designation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, not Islamic Affairs. Oman traditionally looked to the Indian Ocean more than it did to the Arab world and its role as a melting pot is enshrined in its polyglot society with its overseas connections."

There is a strong and inclusive Omani identity which bridges historical tribal factions.

The wider region is faced with many challenges – political, economic, diplomatic, social and religious. Oman has not reacted to these challenges with anger but with ambition because this region has also exported to the world, some of the great world religions which to this day, have shaped the values, choices and habits, of millions of people. The time has now come, for this region to construct and distribute, a global pattern of peace, because all too often, we have seen religion being held in disrepute.

Oman is ideally placed to lead on this agenda, because it has an assured reputation.

Oman is ideally placed to lead on this agenda, because it has an assured reputation. When I speak to colleagues about Oman, they either speak positively or wish to know more about the country to form an opinion. When I tell them that this beautiful country, has churches, mandirs and gurdwaras as well as mosques; their appreciation rises further. When I explain that there are women serving in the government; they are astounded. When I tell Muslims in the UK that I have prayed in a Mosque where Sunni, Shia and Ibadhi have stood shoulder to shoulder; they are amazed. This does not happen by accident. This is because of the effective leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos.

In Oman religion is regulated by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA) headed up by His Excellency, Sheikh Abdullah al-Salimi. The Minister has said that, "We have three population groups on earth: the first, consisting of Christians, Jews and Muslims, who believe in one God and a holy book; the second, atheists, who have lost all confidence in religion; and the third group, representing a variety of religious and spiritual ideas. We endeavour to maintain a constructive and genuine dialogue with scholars and representatives of all these groups."

We endeavour to maintain a constructive and genuine dialogue.

It is through this structure that the Sultanate is strategically well placed to spearhead a new international drive for religious understanding and coexistence.

Geographically, Oman is in the same region as the Holy Land, its near neighbours include both Sunni and Shia heartlands, the world's largest democracy and the second largest continent.

Economically, Oman is a trading route to the world's most populous country and custom with Russia – the largest country in the world is rising.

Politically, Oman has an open and trusted relationship with many countries much further afield, including in Europe, the USA and South East Asia. Similarly to Oman, each of these nations and areas are homes to many different world religions and beliefs.

This makes Oman the perfect candidate to be the standard bearer of the message of interfaith harmony and co-operation. Indeed, the former US Ambassador to Yemen, Gerald Feierstein has described Oman as the "Switzerland of the Middle East" because whilst "the Middle East is becoming more turbulent, Oman fills the vacuum because its neutrality allows it to speak to all parties" (*Oman Observer* 2018).

Oman is on the edge of the Middle East but central to promoting peace.

Interfaith relations take place in many forms and guises, from the formal structured conversations between leaders, to the informal encounters between people in supermarkets or at the school gates. The word 'encounter' is central to promoting an environment, where inter faith relations can flourish. However, the continued success of inter faith requires new tools, as we get to grips with the increased richness of the tapestry which makes up our shared world.

In my time working in the field of interfaith relations, I have witnessed many international interfaith initiatives coming and going. There will often be a high profile launch which subsequently in terms of substance, then fades away. However, the numerous global challenges we face, have not disappeared. New audiences must be reached and hearts and minds must be influenced on a continuous basis.

The more we separate in our hearts and minds, the more we segregate in our actions.

In order for Oman to remain at the vanguard of interfaith relations, it must continue to create more arenas to act as places of encounter for dialogue. The approach must be societal and holistic. These spaces must range from schools to souks and hotels to health clubs. Diversity over uniformity is a given but the more we separate in our hearts and minds, the more we segregate in our actions.

As a British citizen, I am very proud that the United Kingdom holds a special place for Sultan Qaboos. Like His Majesty, His Royal Highness – the Prince of Wales, who has visited Oman several times, has championed interfaith for many years. His Royal Highness and indeed Her Majesty the Queen have spoken passionately about established religion in the UK having "a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths" (BBC 2012). On a wider note, Prince Charles has made reference to the importance of "building bridges" and to "dispel ignorance and misunderstanding" (HRH Prince of Wales 2014). Oman too has in effect, an established religion along similar lines and this identity must be an immovable legacy regardless of the leadership of this nation.

For Oman to pursue further tolerance and acceptance, similar efforts of intent across different equalities areas is required whether it be disability, race, gender or any other protected characteristic[1]. On the same token, civil society needs to be encouraged to flourish so that citizens are taking responsibility and helping to shape the kind of model society based on shared human values.

[1] Protected characteristics are the nine groups protected under the UK's Equality Act 2010. They are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

The 'Religious Tolerance' exhibition is often cited as an example of much maligned interfaith dialogue. Troll defines dialogue as "a process of shared learning, involving patience and careful attentiveness, but also open and critical questioning of each other and, occasionally, energetic protest" (Troll 2009 p2). Within the inter faith context, dialogue is where minds meet on a journey but the destinations can be so very different. There are formal and informal ways in which dialogue takes place. In fact dialogue as a concept can be "off-putting, [because it can be seen to] represent[ing] confrontation, formality, or [an] academic exercise" (Wingate 2005 p12). This view is reinforced by Ayoub who claims that the "dialogue of beliefs, theological doctrines and philosophical ideas…tends to be restricted to the academy" (Ayoub & Omar 2007 p68).

However, Oman has begun to address the scepticism of interfaith dialogue by moving from "attitudes such as fear, suspicion, rivalry, confrontation, indifference and separate worlds to dialogue, encounter, friendship, transformation and mutual witness" (Wingate 2005 p36). The exhibition has become a springboard to so many more ideas and initiatives which as Omani economy becomes more diversified, so too will the potential for exporting ideas about how humanity can learn to live well together in all its diverse forms.

Hans Kung has claimed that "There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions; and there will be no peace among religions without greater dialogue among them" (Kung 1991 xv). The Sultanate has managed to weave a mosaic together which has at its heart, an inclusive patriotism which seeks to stand out as a model nation in a region of much tension.

Whether we are policy makers, opinion formers, service providers or indeed communities, we need to robustly re-assess the impact of our actions, to stay true to the universal golden rules of treating others, as we would want to be treated ourselves.

The Sultanate of Oman offers a blueprint for the region and beyond – one that is optimistic, outward looking and hospitable. It is now time to impart and attribute – respect and infinite value, on all of God's creation. |

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Riaz Ravat BEM
has been an Advisor to Baraza since its inception. He is Deputy Director of St Philip's Centre – a leading UK charity which works to advance interfaith relations through education and engagement. He serves on Her Majesty the Queen's Public Service Honours Committee and is an Advisor to the UK Government in a number of areas where a focus on religious and belief issues is required. He is an executive member of the UK Government's Cross-Government Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group.

In addition, Riaz is a Deputy Lieutenant for HM the Queen in Leicestershire, a member of Liverpool Football Club's Equality & Diversity Forum, a Trustee of the Leicestershire & Rutland Community Foundation, Expert Advisor to The Richard Bonney Literary Fund, a member of the Leicestershire High Sheriff's Consultative Panel, Crown Prosecution Service Hate Crime Panel, Leicester Cathedral Council and Leicester College's Multi Faith Chaplaincy Service.

In 2013, Riaz was conferred a British Empire Medal by HM the Queen for services to interfaith understanding and later in the same year was named Alumnus of the Year by De Montfort University for 'uniting different cultures, races and religions'.

Riaz has completed one Masters' degree in Inter-Religions Relations (De Montfort University) and another in European Politics (University of Leicester). He read Politics for his undergraduate degree (Nottingham Trent University).

Mohammed Said al Mamari
Advisor, Minister's Office
Ministry of Endowments
and Religious Affairs, Muscat

Living Peaceful Coexistence in Oman

Whenever people find out that I am from Oman, I have been asked the following questions:
What makes Oman special? Why don't we hear much about Oman in the news or social media?

To answer these questions one has to look into the specific values, traditions and political visions of the Sultanate of Oman.

In this one world, where people of different backgrounds, ethnicity, cultures and religions are living together, where societies have become multicultural and full of diversity, establishing harmony has become crucial, and fostering peaceful coexistence has become vital.

In October 2003, H.E. Mr. Yousef Bin Alawi Bin Abdullah, the Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, addressed his speech to the 58th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, in which he stated the importance to conduct efforts "in the service of humanity and for the safety and security of the international community". He stated:

"Security and stability are a blessing. Under this blessing peoples can devote all their time and energy to building and development in all areas of life, and direct all their moral and material resources to create prosperity and advancement. That is why one of the most important duties of the state is to guarantee security and stability so that their peoples may live and have the peace of mind to be able to work, produce, build and reconstruct. But if security is disturbed and stability is shaken, what will ensue will be chaos and destruction."

Without peaceful coexistence the lasting peace of nations cannot be preserved, and a common ground between people cannot be established.

Lack of coexistence leads the way to violence, and it destroys the peace and stability of mankind. When people or even nations fail in their dialogue they become intolerant, and then they use force and aggression to support their opinion.

Lack of coexistence leads the way to violence, and it destroys the peace and stability of mankind.

The Middle East is faced with many challenges: political, economic, social and religious. These challenges must not cause us to react with anger but with ambition. This region has exported one of the great world religions which to this day has shaped the values, choices and habits of millions of people. This region should now construct and promulgate a global paradigm for peace.

For thousands of years Omanis have traded in peace with other cultures. Politically Oman has open and trusted relationships with all countries, including those further afield: in Europe, North America, Africa and the Far East. This makes Oman the ideal standard bearer of the message calling for mutual understanding.

Mirren Gidda, a reporter covering terrorism, crime and security for Newsweek International, wrote:

*"Oman has managed to stay out of disputes, maintaining good relationships with **Western allies and other Middle Eastern countries, including Iran.** And it has managed to fend off threats from ISIS and other extremist groups. In 2015, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at London's King's College found that not a single Omani had joined **the more than 20,000 foreign fighters battling alongside ISIS.**"*

(https://www.newsweek.com/2017/02/10/oman-sultan-qaboos-terrorism-isis-al-qaeda-548682.html)

She added:

"The country's efforts at staying out of the region's wars have paid off. In November, the Sydney-based Institute for Economics and Peace ***released its annual Global Terrorism Index,*** *which assesses the impact of terrorism on 163 countries on a scale of zero to 10. Just 34 countries scored zero. Oman was the only country in the Middle East among that grouping.* ***(The U.S.'s and the U.K.'s scores hovered around 5.0.)"*** *(https://www.newsweek.com/2017/02/10/oman-sultan-qaboos-terrorism-isis-al-qaeda-548682.html)*

The Sultanate is effectively handling all that is related to terrorism and sectarian intolerance. The Sultanate ratified the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism in 2011 and has set up a system for fighting money laundering and terrorist financing in 2002 in accordance with a Royal Decree.

The philosophy of Islam

The philosophy of Islam is based on principles of religious tolerance and the avoidance of violence and conflict. Other religious views or models of interpretation must be respected. Prayers in the mosques throughout the country are conducted with Sunnis and Shiites side by side with Ibadhis. Sunnis and Shiites have always lived in harmony and accord with the Ibadhis, who have always been and continue to be the majority in Oman. The communal prayer to God knows no theological disputes. Everyone must answer for himself before God.

The Basic Law of the State issued on 6th November 1996 and comprising 81 articles lays down a legal framework of reference governing the functions of the different

authorities and separating their powers. It also affords safeguards to guarantee the freedom, dignity and rights of the individual. This historic document sets out Oman's system of government and the guiding principles behind the state's policies and also details public rights and duties. Regarding coexistence, many articles in the Basic Law guarantee it, such as:

Article (10) *The Political Principles*
The Political Principles:
Reinforcing ties of cooperation and reaffirming friendly relations with all states and nations on the basis of mutual respect, common interest, non-interference in the internal affairs and adherence to the international and regional charters and treaties and the generally recognized principles of international law conducive to the advancement of peace and security among states and nations.

Article (12) *The Social Principles*
The Social Principles
Justice, equality, and equal opportunities between Omanis are pillars of the Society guaranteed by the State.
Collaboration and compassion are intimate bonds amongst the Citizens. The reinforcement of the national unity is a duty. The State shall prevent anything that might lead to division, discord or disruption of the national unity.

Article (17) *All Citizens are equal*
All Citizens are equal before the Law and share the same public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination amongst them on the ground of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile, or social status.

Article (18) *Personal freedom is guaranteed*
Personal freedom is guaranteed according to the Law, and it is not permissible to arrest a person, search, detain,

imprison, subject to residence detention, or restrict his freedom of residency or movement except in accordance with the provisions of the Law.

Every foreign visitor shall observe and respect the cultural values of the Sultanate

Article (35)
Every foreigner who is legally present in the Sultanate shall enjoy protection for himself and his property in accordance with the Law. He shall observe the values of the Society and respect the traditions and sentiments thereof.

There is nothing better than to spread messages of goodwill to all people. It is our strong belief that peace and stability can only be realised today in any society through dialogue and understanding. And we sincerely believe that by working together, we can achieve the goals of religious acceptance and peaceful coexistence, as stated by H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salmi, Minister responsible for Endowments and Religious Affairs. He says:

"We have three population groups on earth: the first, consisting of Christians, Jews and Muslims, who believe in one God and a holy book; the second, atheists, who have lost all confidence in religion; and the third group, representing a variety of religious and spiritual ideas. We endeavour to maintain a constructive and genuine dialogue with scholars and representatives of all these groups."

"The aim of the exchange is to reflect on the foundations of our thinking, a common morality and a common sense of justice. For only when we are aware of these similarities and they form a basis for our actions, while accepting cultural differences, will we and our children enjoy a peaceful future."

The Sultanate of Oman has been sharing its peaceful philosophy at home and abroad for centuries. Oman's

Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs has been promoting dialogue among nations for decades with initiatives like the Oman International Jurisprudence Conferences, which focus only on the similarities within the Islamic schools of thoughts. More than 20 conferences in the last 25 years have been organized. The *Al-Tafahom* magazine, a quarterly Islamic intellectual review, is published by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs and distributed in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The first issue was published in the winter of 2003. It contains academic articles by and for writers all over the world and from various intellectual orientations. It highlights the moderate trend in Islam in order to foster mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence on a global scale.

The Sultanate launched the exhibition "*Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence: Oman's Message of Islam*" in 2010 as one part of its comprehensive approach promoting these values. This was not a public relation campaign but a continuation of Oman's long-standing tradition of conducting dialogue and commerce with diverse communities and cultures.

Oman launched the Exhibition "Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence" in 2010

This exhibition has appeared in 125 cities in 37 countries since its inception in 2010. During the last ten years an international team has built a unique worldwide network, reaching almost all levels of society.

The 24 panels in this exhibition present aspects of a modern Arab country, and offers the visitor insights into the practice of Islam in daily life, an examination of contemporary Omani society and the role of women in society. The panels also highlight the long-standing tradition of peaceful coexistence between different faiths and ethnic communities, as evidenced by traveler's reports over the centuries.

To conclude, it is important to emphasise the following points:

- The peaceful coexistence in Oman has come about as a result of the mixture of a moderate yet orthodox interpretation of the religion, effective laws which guarantee and protect religious freedom, and the political will and effectiveness in dealing with terrorism and sectarian intolerance. The Omanis have consistently focused on building the nation while avoiding conflict and strife both at home and abroad.

- The attitudes of Omanis towards other peoples is due to the centuries-old traditions of tolerance and acceptance of other cultures and belief systems. Omanis adhere to their own beliefs while at the same time treating others with respect.

- The initiatives of the last decades are a necessary response to the effects on society of globalization. The teachings and traditional messages carried forward from Oman's past are diluted nowadays by modern media and are not reaching the younger generations. The custodians of Oman's traditions are now using new methods to inculcate old values. |

Mohamed Said Al-Mamari
is from Oman, has studied in the UK and Germany, and has a multicultural background. He has visited more than 60 countries, continues to accomplish his mission to support people in understanding each other and working together to build lasting peace. Al-Mamari is convinced that Tolerance can not be sustainable without strong mutual respect and open dialogue among people. Therefore, for many years he organized several initiatives and projects to enhance the Common Values which are shared by human beings. He works as Scientific Advisor to The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Oman, and is director of the global project "Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence: Oman's Message of Islam."

Florian Schroeder
Pedagogical director of the SABEL day schools in Munich, responsible for educational materials

Report on the German-Omani student exchange between the Sabel School Munich, Germany, and the Ahmad bin Majid Private School Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

Becoming Friends

In 2010, a group of nine students and four teachers from the Munich Sabel Realschule accepted an Omani invitation to undertake the first 14-day school visit to the Ahmed bin Majid Private School in Muscat, Oman. The aim of this visit was very simply to get to know each other.

The visit was a resounding success, and embraced by all. Afterwards, a delegation of Omani leaders from the Ahmed bin Majid Private School visited the Sabel School in Munich in 2011, and a regular student exchange program was agreed upon. In June 2011, the first Omani students came to Munich.

In the years since, the exchanges were hosted respectively in Muscat in 2012, in Munich in 2013, Muscat 2013, Munich 2014, Muscat 2015, Munich 2016, Muscat 2017, Munich 2018 and most recently, in 2019, in Muscat.

The guest students are provided accommodations with the local families, which is the most vital element and the secret to the success of this exchange. Nowhere else one does learn to know another culture as well as in the everyday life of a family. Another important component is the work on various projects conducted jointly by the students.

To date some 305 families have participated in the exchange. The exchange has meanwhile become an integral part of school life in both schools. The lessons learned through this exchange have become common knowledge at both pedagogical institutions, and have been integrated into the school curriculum. The exchange program enjoys the support of the students, parents, faculty and staff, thus making the project sustainable.

Determinations to conduct a successful exchange

The experience gained through these encounters leads to the following determinations to conduct a successful exchange:

1. The number of participants should be limited to 14 students.

2. A 10-day stay in the country is ideal, with a day for arrival and one for departure, in total 12 days.

3. One exchange per calendar year, to avoid the participants and institutions being over-challenged.

4. The younger the participants, the better, but at least13 years old. The students who are 16 or 17 years old are less receptive to new experience. (They are almost "too cool".)

5. Disciplinary measures should be taken only after a joint discussion among all responsible persons, and articulated exclusively by the respective principal responsible person of the school concerned.

6. Working together on a joint project of the exchange students is essential.

7. The joint project of the exchange students is to be organized by the visiting school's exchange group. Previous topics were e.g. "Tolerance" and "Tradition and Modernism."

8. The joint project work typically takes up most of 1 week. In the other week, cultural places are visited. In Oman, for example, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, an overnight in an oasis, and another overnight a Bedouin camp in the desert. In Munich, a weekend in the mountains, visits to interesting companies or factories, and project-relevant places such as a recycling center.

While there are many positive aspects to an exchange program, there are as well circumstances which must be considered:

The students need to be intensively prepared for the program in order to mitigate the cultural shock which, in a certain way, always sets in. Our 3-day program succeeds quite successfully.

The general response of the exchange is enormously positive.

The general response of the exchange is enormously positive. Families and students have a close and intense community experience. Everyone's personal horizon is greatly extended. This become instantly obvious, and in retrospect the achievements become ever more clear and solid. They range from developing linguistic competence in English, to getting to know different aspects of life and the unusual customs of the host country, to improved social competence of the individual.

The personal, human development extends beyond the young people to all of the participants and supporters of the exchange, which cannot be emphasized enough, and encompasses much more than the basic principle of getting to know one other.

We have these statements from the students:

"Mr. Schröder, they are like us, they just pray five times a day."
"Football, man, football is our common thing!"
"If you do not get out of the house in time, you do miss the train."
"Omani time is another time!"
"This hospitality is unimaginable for European conditions."
"When they are in Oman, then they are our sons!".
"Please send me another Omani student, that was so enriching for all of us!".
"Mustafa, now he eats a lot, thank God!".
"Mashallah, it is raining!"
"Nobody needs to tell us anything about Muslims!"

Many students and their families still have a close relationship, visit each other and are in contact. Others have fallen asleep. On both sides there was no family that would not participate in the exchange again or expressed any regrets.

Of course, this exchange concept is not free of problems. An open and very trusting relationship between the people in charge is indispensable.

The well-being of the individual student in the family always has priority. A respectful relationship with each other and "the truth of the other's face" is a basic requirement. As with the disciplinary consequences, the respective leaders of the country formulate the problems to the parents, should there be any.

An important part to be improved or achieved is to have an exchange with girls. This effort has been intensified by the German side with the help of the German Embassy in Muscat. The administrators on the Omani side were open-minded, but this led to difficulties with the parents. As a result, a planned exchange with girls had to be canceled. This was a major setback, but now efforts are being coordinated together, to create understanding and build trust with the parents.

We would like to thank the respective school administrators and management, the German-Omani Association, the German embassy in Oman, the PASCH program and the Omani Ministry of Education. They all support this exchange energetically and sustainably. |

Detailed information is available at
http://www.schueleraustausch-oman.de/en/

Florian Schroeder
Florian's educational background includes a 3-year training as a social worker in Bristol, UK. He specialized in working with children who had severe learning difficulties, mainly autism. From 1999 to 2003 he completed drama studies at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz, and in the following years performed at theaters in Graz, Vienna, Dresden and the German-Sorbian Volkstheater in Bautzen. He also appeared in some movies.

Returning to the pedagogical sector in 2008, he initially worked as a drama teacher at the Sabel Schule in Munich. Since 2011 he is the pedagogical director of the SABEL day schools in Munich, responsible for educational materials. In this context, he also developed a film class.

Florian is also the director of the school's international exchange programs, which includes an ongoing multi-year exchange program with the Sultanate of Oman, the first such exchange program between Germany and the Arabian peninsula.

Currently Florian is collaborating with Riaz Ravat and Sharen Ravat, Leicester, UK, on an international project for the non-profit NGO "BARAZA" creating a comprehensive social program, "Kompass," to develop and strengthen communications skills and promote acceptance of diversity in grades 5 through 10.