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

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The Government of Oman, in addition to protecting the religious rights of all people², 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.³

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² "All people" refers to both citizens and guest workers living in the state.

³ 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 With The Other, and The Evolution of Islamic Jurisprudence In The Present And In The Future*. Pub. MERA, Oman, Jurisprudence Conference, April 2013. Anani, D. Ibrahim Mohammed. *The Governing Principles Of The Islamic Declarations Of Human Rights*. Pub. MERA, Oman, Jurisprudence Conference, April 2013.

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 Islam 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 multi-religious 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.⁴ 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

⁴ U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom Report for 2013.

the construction of the first mosque.⁵ In July of 2014, a European court upheld France's ban on wearing the *niqab* in public.⁶ In November of 2009, Switzerland introduced a constitutional ban on the construction of minarets.⁷ 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.⁸

There is much debate about the factors that explain Oman's openness to non-Ibāḍī, 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 – Ibāḍī Islam—it cannot be considered to

⁵ 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.

⁶ BBC News Europe, *European Court upholds French full veil ban*. 1 July, 2014.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

offer full inclusion of all religions in society. While it is true that as the official state religion, Ibādī 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 Ibādīs. Even many Hindus and Christians in Oman enjoy the rights of full and equal citizenship in the state.

While the Ibādī school of Islam developed according to its own historical particularity and while there are differences between the Ibādī 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 Ibādī 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 pre-occupation in any work of scholarship to define and categorize, though perhaps we should not make so much of the differences between Ibādism and the other branches of Islam to the degree that we begin to think of them as separate systems. Ibādism, 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."⁹

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 Ibādī 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

⁹ Published in Sultan Qaboos' address to the Majlis Al Shura of Oman in October of 2011.

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.”¹⁰

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.”¹¹ The first episode was called “Accepting the Other: Faith in Oman” and the second was titled “Ibādī 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 Ibādī jurisprudence guided these inter-civilizational 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 Ibādī Islam have fostered, sustained and advanced Oman’s approach to religious tolerance. The Ibādī 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 Ibādī school, informs and supports even if it has not necessarily created Oman’s approach to religious tolerance.

It may seem strange that Ibādism, a branch of Islam historically associated with the Khawārij, would have developed such an open approach to non-Muslim and especially non-Abrahamic religions. Khawārij 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

¹⁰ Al-Hajri, Hilal. *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences ISSN: 2046-9578, Vol.15 No.II (2013)* ©BritishJournal Publishing, Inc. 2013.

¹¹ The two BBC radio documentaries on religious tolerance in Oman can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p002vsn4>.

as unrighteous. There were an estimated twenty sub-groups within the Khawārij. Ibāḍīs were just as firmly committed to bringing about the purification of Islam as the other sub-groups of the Khawārij; 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 Ibāḍī approach to inter-Islamic and inter-religious coexistence can be seen in the early distinction that formed between the Ibāḍī 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 Khawārij.

To the Khawārij, 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 Qur'an, 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 Khawārij, an abdication of Ali's right to the caliphate and contravened a clear Qur'anic command to fight against rebels until they are subdued.¹² Likewise, Muslims who aligned with Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan were associated with the perceived corruptions under Uthman's caliphate. The Khawārij separated from both sides, opting for a third way to preserve Islam in its uncorrupted form. The Khawārij 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 Khawārij, would have risked further corruption of Islam. It must be made very clear that today's Ibāḍīs are not Khawārij. As the Ibāḍī movement evolved, it eventually parted ways with the Khawārij.¹³ The Ibāḍī were equally convinced that true Muslims needed to disassociate from the perceived corruptions. Khawārij means 'those who exit'. In Ibāḍī poetry khawārij seems to mean those who "go out" against tyrants.

The Ibāḍīs 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. Ibāḍī, 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

¹² Qur'an 49:9.

¹³ The Ibāḍīs understand the Muhakkima to have preserved the distinction between kufr as polytheism and kufr as a serious infraction that requires repentance. For Ibāḍīs, it was the later Khawārij, the Azariqa, Najdat and others who departed from the true path of Islam. This is when the Ibāḍīs became distinguished from the Khawārij.

belong to the ummah, the community of Muslims.¹⁴ Ibādīs 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 Ibādism, former director of Al Amana Centre in Oman, Michael Bos wrote, “(Ibādīs) lived peacefully among those with whom they disagreed. This is not to imply the Ibādīs 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 Ibādīs viewed all schools of Islam as equal. They continued to advocate Ibādism as the best and purest form. But at the same time, they advocated living peacefully within the diversity of the Muslim community. A prime example, past and present, is the Ibādī acceptance of marriage to non-Ibādī Muslims.”¹⁵

This early history, detailing the emergence of the Ibādī 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 Ibādīs 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.”¹⁶ 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 Ibādism, one of the core Ibādī doctrines may also contribute to greater inter-religious pluralism in Oman. A central theological doctrine of

¹⁴ Ennami, Amr Khelifa. *Studies in Ibadism*. “Al Ibadhiya.” 1972, p. 33.

¹⁵ Bos, Michael. “Islam in Oman”, exhibition catalog. ISBN 978 90 7865 3 15 8. 168 pages, published by Museum Shop New Church. 2009.

¹⁶ From a conversation with Adam Gaiser, at the Ibādī 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.”

Ibādism 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. Ibādī 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 Ibādī Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis*, include a thorough discussion of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), an exegetical method which considers the historical circumstance in which a particular revelation was given. The method of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* may not have been applied by the earliest Ibādī exegetes, though relatively early in the Ibādī school, Hūd b. MuHakkam (d.280/893), was applying this method to Qur'anic text interpretation as many Ibādī 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.¹⁷

The Ibādī 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

¹⁷ 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."

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)."¹⁸

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 Ibādī exegetical application of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* could be another brick in the foundation of the Ibādī preservation of peaceful inter-religious coexistence.

Some of the rules of governance in Ibādism may also influence Oman's contemporary approach to inter-religious coexistence. The Ibādī practice of rejecting the preeminence of one tribe over another, leading theoretically to an equalization of tribes, is not unique to Ibādism 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 Ibādī 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 Ibādī ruler was to govern regionally, and Ibādī 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 Ibādī 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

¹⁸ 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.

minority school within Islam. Fewer than 1% of the world's Muslims are Ibādī, a ratio that has not changed significantly since the first century of Islam. The early Ibādī 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.¹⁹ Minority status cultivates sensitivity to other minorities.

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 Ibādī legal opinion in Oman today. Relative to the Ottoman protections given to *abl 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 in Nur 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 *abl 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 Ibādīs and to eat together and to consider the food of *abl 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 *abl 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."²⁰

Oman's Minister of Religious Affairs, Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Salimi, the great-grandson 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,

¹⁹ 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 Ibādī Imazighen in North Africa Before the Tenth Century" by Mabrouk Mansouri.

²⁰ 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.

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.”²¹

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 *madhāhib* (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 *madhāhib*, 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*

²¹ From a lecture given in 2014 at one of Oman’s religious tolerance exhibitions.

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 Thought* (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 inter-religious 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 Ibādism, 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 we might 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 self-named 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 abuses 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 neo-tribalism. 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.