

Bridging the Gulf

Bringing Religions and Cultures Together

Can Oman become a model of interfaith tolerance for other Muslim nations?

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This has been a tremendous spring for Al Amana Centre. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) came to record a radio documentary examining Oman's particular approach to religious freedom. Al Amana Centre was featured as a part of that story.

The documentary has been broadcast as part of a program called *Heart and Soul* and aired this April in two half-hour episodes. You can listen to the program by going to the BBC website, then type in "Heart and Soul" on the website search engine and then click on the "episodes" tab. Scroll down to find the episodes titled: "Accepting the Other: Faith in Oman" and "Ibadi Islam". Or, you can find the episodes at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p002vsn4>.

The BBC interviewer, Mounira Chaieb, asked a compelling question: "Can Oman become a model of interfaith tolerance for other Muslim nations?" Oman's constitution and basic law protect the freedom of religion for all citizens and guest workers in the country. Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, the adherents of all religions are free to worship, to practice their own religious law and to believe in their own doctrine.

In some ways, Oman's provision of religious freedom is not particularly exceptional. Nearly every nation of the world provides constitutional and legal protections for the rights of religious minorities. Most Muslim-majority nations also provide this global human right. Even when a constitution names Islam as the state religion, there are provisions in these constitutions for the protection of religious freedom for non-Muslims. In most cases governments abide by these constitutions. However, of the 50 or so Muslim-majority nations in the world¹, there are some nations whose track re-

cord of protecting religious freedom is egregious. According to the most recent Freedom of Religion Report of the US State Department, religious freedom in Saudi Arabia is neither recognized nor protected under the law and the government severely restricts religious freedom for non-Muslims and non-Sunnis. According to the State Department reports other Muslim-majority nations with relative restrictions on religious freedom include: Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, some states within India, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Indonesia, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, and Algeria. What you may have noticed about these countries, which in some cases severely restrict religious freedom and in other cases moderately inhibit religious freedom, is that almost all of these nations are neighboring countries to Oman.

Oman is something of an oasis of religious freedom, a spring in a desert of relative intolerance. Many western nations criticize Oman for not going far enough in its protection of religious freedom. While it is not illegal to change one's religion in Oman, proselytization is illegal. Though, the prohibition of proselytization is equally applied. Muslims are also not allowed to proselytize among Christians for example. This is the way that Oman seeks to limit tensions and maintain peace between the religions.

Relative to its neighbors, Oman's approach to the freedom of religion is exceptional. The thought of the BBC World Service is that the Omani model might inspire neighboring Islamic nations to adopt a similar approach to the protection of religious freedom. What could potentially make Oman's model so attractive to neighboring countries is that they have managed to balance particularism with inclusivism. What I admire

about Oman and its neighbors is their depth of devotion and yet in other countries there seems to be a correlation between deep devotion and intolerance. Groups that are strongly committed to their religious faith and convinced of its truth often suspect that inclusivism means compromise. Oman's model of religious co-existence shows that one can both fully embrace a particular belief and claim it as ultimate truth while simultaneously allowing room for those who disagree.

There are three common and ineffective models of inter-religious coexistence in use around the world:

1. The amalgamation model.

Proponents of this model believe that all religions are essentially the same. Peace is made through agreement. The purpose of dialogue for amalgamationists is consensus. In the case of Islam and Christianity, there is significant common ground between our two faiths, but the amalgamation model obscures the distinctions, which are vastly important.

2. The ghettoization model.

This model is perhaps the opposite of the amalgamation model. It asserts that the religions are mutually exclusive and unable to coexist. Peace in this model is achieved through segregation. This model sees Islamic and Christian civilizations inevitably destined for a clash.

3. The avoidance model.

This model is perhaps a middle ground between ghettoization and amalgamation, but is still not a helpful solution. This model affirms that coexistence of the religions is possible. It recognizes our common humanity and values: family, work, education, etc. This model advocates that people of differing religions come together around their common humanity. The acknowledgement of our common hu-



manity can be a very effective first step of inter-faith understanding, particularly when the participants are framing the other as enemy. However, peace in this model is achieved through avoidance of the topics in disagreement. Proponents of this model say that we can work together, study together, live as neighbors and be at peace with each other as long as we don't bring up the subject of religion and our differing beliefs. The problem with this model is that it keeps relationship superficial. A healthy model of religious coexistence must allow for substantial engagement. What makes a topic controversial or a belief passionately held is precisely that it reveals a core value and touches the deepest part of our being. We are not truly relating if we cannot bring our full selves, and especially our most deeply held convictions to our relationships with others.

There is a fourth alternative:

4. **The dialogical model** is a healthy model of religious coexistence. Peace is made through deeper mutual understanding. Differences are acknowledged. Through dialogue the religions talk about common ground, but also talk substantially about that which is distinct, unique and passionately held. The end of dialogue is not necessarily agreement. The truth as one sees it can be brought to the table of dialogue. The exchange

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of deeply held convictions can be shared openly. Nothing need be compromised in the particularity of one's own convictions, and yet there is a willingness to learn about the convictions of the other. There is a respect and freedom offered to the other to be who they are apart from one's own convictions.

In the Christian faith, as in Islam, engaging the dialogical model does not require a compromise of our beliefs. Engaging in a dialogue that accepts the other as a child of God is precisely what Christ models for us. To respect and honor and love and befriend and listen to and seek

to understand one of another faith is part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Oman is a case study in the dialogical model. Oman maintains a balance between particularism - adherence to a conservative expression of Islam, and simultaneously allowing those who profess other religions, to worship freely, believe, follow their own distinct religious laws and customs and to dialogue about their convictions.

Dr. Kahlan Al Kharusi, Oman's Assistant Grand Mufti, said in the BBC documentary, "Ibadis (the type of Islam practiced in

Oman) are presenting a model of being moderate, but at the same time conservative. In terms of the role of Ibadis, they promote dialogue between different people and at the same time they adhere to the Islamic principals of morals and values." Those of us from western nations might be tempted to think that there is nothing at all exceptional about the balance that Oman maintains. Most of our countries allow for the free practice of all religions and the free discussion of ideas. In the context of the Muslim-majority nations in and around the Arabian Peninsula, Oman's approach is indeed exceptional. Oman's

model has the potential to be a trend-setter in the region.

Peace and Blessings,



Doug

¹This figure varies between 48-52 depending on the report and variations in census taking.



A Prayer for our Students

O God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer:
Even as you created each one,
Continue to create in them a heart for your Kingdom
A Kingdom of peace for all
A Kingdom of justice for all
A Kingdom of joy for all

O God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer:
Even as you have redeemed each one,
Continue to show them the ways you will use them as examples of your love
Through relationships with family and friends
Through interactions with strangers
Through fellowship with people of all walks of life

O God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer:
Even as you have sustained each one,
Continue to sustain them as they go from Oman
To the places they call home
To new challenges and changes
To the people whom you have called them to serve

O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
We commit to you our students
And thank you for letting them bless us
And pray that they may be light to the world

Amen

Justin Meyers

Volunteering at Al Amana Centre

It has been such a privilege to serve as a volunteer at the Al Amana Centre over the past few months. The Centre is a busy and stimulating place with undergraduate students in residence over the spring semester, visiting groups from a range of countries and individual visitors who come to experience the beauty of Oman.

The lectures I've been able to attend are always interesting, informative and thought-provoking. My interactions with Omanis have resulted in new friendships to be cherished. In traveling far and wide over the past many weeks, I've more-or-less mastered Oman's road system - quite different than what I am used to and I've discovered new delights around practically every corner. I've learned a few new Arabic phrases such as 'abu-saaber' as another way to refer to a donkey and the newly coined and chic word 'robe' which normally means yogurt to refer to feeling 'cool'.

The staff here are all amazing, each in his/her own unique way, a joy to be working with. Being a volunteer and able to step back a little and observe how the Al Amana Centre

works - how it is impacting Oman and the world beyond for the good - is a humbling experience. It's not that there are no problems to be faced; it's the dedication to finding God-centered efficacious solutions that will satisfy all parties that matter. It may appear to be a little disorganized at times to those not well informed, but it is a deeply professional and committed endeavor to build understanding between Christians and Muslims in today's Middle East. In partnership with the Reformed Church in America, its Board of Directors and the government of the Sultanate of Oman, Al Amana Centre stands as a testimony to the benefits that occur when people come together to learn about each other and join in efforts to improve our world.

I urge your support for the Al Amana Centre in prayer and, when possible, by donating to help cover its expenses.

Gary Brown

Ma'Salaamah (goodbye) Dr. Alex....

When Dr. P.C. Alexander, a Consultant in Child Health at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) Hospital in Muscat, arrived in Oman over a decade back, little did he know at the time what was in store for him! Over the years, Dr. Alex, as he is affectionately called, served the Lord in numerous ways. Not only did he earn the professional respect of his colleagues and the Omani students he taught at the University, but he also found his niche within the expatriate community. He served on the Church Council, the Management Committees of the Indian School Muscat, the Ecumenical Council for Charity (ECC), the St. Luke's Medical Guild (a voluntary, ecumenical effort run by the churches catering to the medical needs of blue collar workers) and led the medical outreach of the Charity Wing of the Indian Social Club. I have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Alex on several of these committees.

I first met Dr. Alex at an ECC meeting at the Al Amana Centre in 2003. He, along with Mike Worthing, a Geologist from SQU, were among the founding members. They started what eventually grew into the ECC in 2001 when they raised support for a young worker from a cleaning company who was suffering from renal failure and hence needed a kidney transplant. The amount required for the procedure was around US\$ 10,000. Once Dr. Alex and Mike raised the funds to support this case, they realized that there were many others like Kumar (in whose name they started the fund) who required help. Thus, the ECC took shape and thanks to Michael Bos, the Director at that time, came under the umbrella of the Al Amana Centre, as its charitable outreach program. Through the ECC, financial support is raised to assist low income workers facing problems that are beyond their means. For example, for some, a death in the family or health problems can lead to grave financial difficulties.

Dr. Alex has always been an active team player. It is therefore with deep sadness that we bid him farewell as he returns to India to take up another assignment there. Whilst we are sorry to see him go, we do believe that his experiences in the Gulf will be beneficial as he understands the practicalities of better informed migration. After all, he walked the talk! He knew what our Lord meant when He said: "whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me." (Matt:25:10)

Bridget Ganguly



Visitors to the Al Amana Centre

We have had many visitors to Al Amana Centre this winter and spring. In February a German documentary film crew came to Al Amana Centre and recorded several interviews of our staff and students. Al Amana Centre will be featured in this German documentary on religious coexistence in Oman.

On 17 February, the Al Amana Centre welcomed Baroness Warsi, UK's Senior Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Minister for Faith and Communities at the Department for Communities and Local Government along with the British Ambassador to Oman, Jamie Bowden. Baroness Warsi addressed the students from the Semester Program and engaged in a Question and Answer session.



The BBC Heart and Soul documentary team arrived on 24 February to spend a week recording the two radio programs which were broadcast in April.

Between 25 February and 6 March, a delegation of 11 church people, students and professors from Württemberg and Bavaria in Germany, were entertained by Doug and Justin. They had a packed program in Muscat and enjoyed a weekend trip to Wahiba Sands.

The week of the 16 March saw three Global Studies Directors coming to look at the Semester Program and the facilities offered by Al Amana. The group consisted of Dr Doug Kindschi from Grand Valley State University, Michigan, Mr Vincent Peters from Bethel University, Minnesota and Ms Linda Schroedermeier from Dordt College, Iowa.

Confronti is an Italian organisation that engages in interfaith dialogue and has a long history of being leaders in this field. From 18 – 27 April, Al Amana is hosting a group from Confronti who are looking at Oman: the treasures of tradition and the challenges of modernity.

Gulf Churches Fellowship

The second meeting of the Gulf Churches Fellowship took place in Abu Dhabi between 20 and 22 January 2014. Twenty seven Church leaders and observers met at St Andrew's Church to consider the concept paper and by-laws, to elect an Executive Committee and to listen to presentations on: Mapping Global Christianity; Conducting a demographic Study and Directory of Gulf Churches; Documenting Abuses of Migrant Workers and Developing Audio Devices Containing Information About Labor Law.

The Executive Committee met at the beginning of May and again in the Fall to plan the next Fellowship meeting in January 2015.

First Year in Oman

My family and I are wrapping up our first year living in Oman. We have started to make a home here, we have begun to build friendships, and we have immersed ourselves in the joys and frustrations of learning to live in a new culture, a new land, a new climate, and a new society.

Being new, and seeing things with new eyes, here are a few things I have learned, in no particular order:

Being a Christian here in Oman is less about theological preferences, worship preferences and doctrine and more about being a body of believers worshipping together. You worship together not because of your particular beliefs but because of the shared belief that Jesus is Lord.

Muslims and Christians can live together quite well. Some of my new best friends, who will be my friends for the rest of my life, do not share many of my beliefs. Friendship and fellowship are not defined by shared religion or belief, but by our desire to be in relationship to one another. We can live with difference.

When jumping 40 feet from a cliff into a wadi, don't hold your arms out perpendicular to your body.

When New Yorkers say "how about this heat?" on a 95F day...they don't know what they are talking about...

Hospitality is a way of life.

Regular prayer, with others, is something I would wish for all Christians.

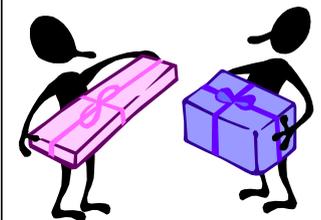
My children don't get tan, they get pink.

Doug Leonard is an artist, in many ways and mediums.

Parking a car can be an art form.

God is god, of all kinds of people.

Justin Meyers
Director of Education



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info@alamanacentre.org

and we will forward our bank details.