

A Study of the Relationship between Ibadi Muslims and Christians in Modern day Oman.

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Contents

	Page Number
Abstract	4
Author's Declaration	5
Chapter 1	6
1.1 Hypothesis	6
1.2 Research Questions	6
1.3 Introduction	6
1.4 Muscat 2019	7
1.5 Why this Research?	8
1.6 The Subject	10
1.7 A Brief Overview of Christianity in Oman	12
1.8 Impact of the Oil Industry	16
1.9 Political Context	17
Chapter 2	19
2.1 Literature Review	19
2.2 Religion in Islamic Countries	21
2.3 Weber	22
2.4 Geertz	25
2.5 Other Approaches to the Study of Islamic Societies	26
2.6 Tribal Influences	26
2.7 The Influence of Ruling Families	28
2.8 Technology	31

2.9 Other Literature Specifically on Oman	31
2.10 Conclusion of Literature Review	33
Chapter 3	35
3.1 The Methodology Used	35
3.2 Methodological Considerations	36
3.3 Semi-structured Interviews	38
3.4 Historiography	39
3.5 Theology	39
3.6 Challenges for the Researcher	40
3.7 Summary	43
Chapter 4	44
4.1 Ibadi Theology	44
4.2 Nur al-Din	47
4.3 Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ahmed al-Khalili	52
4.4 Introducing the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA)	54
4.5 The Constitution of Oman	56
Chapter 5	58
5.1 Christian-Muslim Encounters in Oman	58
5.2 The British	59
5.3 Varied Encounters	62
5.4 The Arabian Mission	63
5.5 Origins of the Arabian Mission	66
5.6 The Influence of Samuel Zwemer	66

5.7 Assessing the Impact of the Arabian Mission on Interfaith Relations in Oman	69
5.8 Modernisation	70
Chapter 6	72
6.1 A Local Omani Church?	72
6.2 Omani Acceptance of the Expatriate Church	77
6.3 The Roman Catholic Church in Oman	79
6.4 The Protestant Church in Oman (PCO)	81
6.5 How big is the Church in Oman Today?	87
6.6 The Role of the Sultan	89
6.7 Church-State Relations	92
6.8 Restrictions	93
6.9 A Disconnection	94
6.10 Interfaith Action in Oman	95
Chapter 7	98
7.1 Boundaries	98
7.2 A Nuanced picture	100
7.3 Tribal Culture	101
7.4 Conclusion	102
7.5 For Further Study	105
Acknowledgments	108
Appendix A. Interview Samples	109
Bibliography	119

A study of the relationship between Ibadi Muslims and Christians in modern-day Oman.

1.1 Abstract

Oman is often held as a model of religious tolerance in the Arabian Peninsula. The core hypothesis at the centre of this thesis is that, the religious freedom of the church in Oman is directly influenced by its distinctive prevailing school of Islam. The main research question is “How does the prevailing theology of Ibadi Islam impact the experience of religious freedom for Christian communities in Oman and how do the Islamic authorities relate to the Christian church?” By using interviews, historical and theological sources, this research concludes that other factors besides theology shape Oman’s distinct approach to interfaith relations. A part of this thesis will be highlighting the contemporary presence of the church in Oman, of which little is known. This is a unique contribution to knowledge about Christianity and Islamic relations in the Arabian Gulf.

Key Words: Oman, Islam, Christianity, Church, Ibadi, Ibadism, Religious Freedom, Rentierism, Interfaith, Mission,

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed ...

.... Date ...2nd June 2019

Chapter 1

1.1 Hypothesis

The core hypothesis at the centre of this thesis is that the religious freedom of the church in Oman is directly influenced by its distinctive prevailing school of Islam.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does the prevailing theology of Ibadi Islam impact upon Christian communities in Oman and how do the Islamic authorities relate to the Christian church?
2. What do these findings reveal concerning current and future models of interfaith relations in Oman?

1.3 Introduction

I think the biggest factor in the tolerance of the Omanis, is the Ibadi doctrine. Oman's people welcome strangers and foreigners, driven by their nature, religion and culture, irrespective of the foreigner's creed or religion. Oman's people are interested only in good morals and good behaviour and if someone manifests good character, and conducts themselves decently, we do not question them about their beliefs or religion, we leave that to God.

I have not heard that of a Christian who has been treated badly in Oman because of his religion or his faith. This has been the case since our ancestors and is still the case to date. For example, these days we find temples and schools in the Indian communities, as well as churches, and as far as I know, we have not heard of a single incident of Omanis ill-treating or denying others the right to practice their religions, as far as I know, and God knows!

(Omani scholar from the Ibadi Seminary in Muscat).¹

¹ Interview.ASS. 2015

1.4 Muscat 2019

The first thing you experience when you attend worship at the Ruwi church compound in Muscat is that despite the huge parking lot, there are no spaces left. The parking is chaos and one is lucky to find space, even by illegally parking on the kerb. This competition for parking spaces could be labelled decidedly unchristian....

The next noteworthy detail is the noise of worship. Different languages, different styles of music ranging from traditional hymns and chants through to chorus music played by contemporary bands. There is always more than one service taking place at any one time held in multiple rooms and halls, resulting in a constant to-ing and fro-ing of different groups of worshippers as they exit one space only to be replaced by another congregation.

Finally, you will notice that the church is truly international. Indian and Filipino worshippers far outnumber those from Western countries; in between there are Arabs, Africans (especially from Ethiopia and Nigeria) and Koreans. The compounds are shared between the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches. The biggest community by far is the Roman Catholic church. It hosts thousands of worshippers every week, with masses held in different languages. That is just one of the many denominations which meet in five locations in Oman.

For those unfamiliar with Oman, or indeed with the Arabian Gulf, the presence of a flourishing church community (or communities) comes as a surprise. The surprise is because western media tend to emphasize negative images from the Arabian Peninsula which convey narratives of the persecution of religious minorities and oppressive regimes implementing harsh systems of justice. There is a dearth of reliable information about the religious communities in the Arabian Gulf which is reflected in academia. This study therefore aims to be a unique piece of research which contributes to filling in the story of the church in the region, specifically in Oman.

1.5 Why this Research?

For the last 20 years, I have had the (occasionally uncomfortable) position of mediator in interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims in the Muslim majority countries of Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and most of the countries in the Arabian Gulf. As a Christian priest who has resided and worked in many of these countries as a visible representative of the church, it has been fascinating to experience the diverse way in which different Muslim authorities relate to the Christian communities in their midst. Despite the secular constitution of Turkey, my personal experience of Christian ministry there can only be described as fraught. In contrast, in my role as the Anglican priest in Abu Dhabi, my relationships with the ruling families in the UAE are very cordial.

This diverse range of experience has led me to wonder what factors determine the level of religious freedom granted by an Islamic government towards the local Christian community.

When I ask Gulf Arabs themselves, the usual answer I get is that it is economic concern which drives the quality of interfaith relations. A secure and diverse economy results in an openness to trade with the religious 'other'. Yet when one surveys the Arabian Gulf States, we do see significantly different levels of religious freedom for the church despite having similar economies. These restrictions, or lack of, appear to me to reflect the interpretation and application of the particular school of Islam to which the state subscribes. These range from the blanket ban on Christian worship in Saudi Arabia through to the much more permissive Bahrain, yet both countries have similar trading interests and economies. When I raise the possibility with Gulf Arabs that the Islamic convictions of the ruling families and their people might play a significant factor in their approach to Christians, I am immediately confronted with an abrupt dismissal of this suggestion. So, does Islamic theology determine the level of religious freedom of Christians in a Muslim country?

This question has provoked me to explore the subject in more detail and had led to the discovery that there is very little in the way of research in this area. This is especially so with regards to my chosen field of Oman.

I have chosen Oman as my subject country for several reasons. Firstly, Oman has a distinctive Islamic identity; it is the home of Ibadi Islam. It is the only country in the world in which Ibadi Islam prevails as the officially sanctioned state religion. Ibadism has unique features compared with other schools of Islam and these will be discussed in further detail later on in the thesis. As my focus in this study is to examine how Islamic theology impacts upon the Christian community, it would be interesting to see if there is a distinct difference in the interpretation of Islamic-sectarian thought which is manifested through government policy and behaviour.

Secondly, Oman neighbours the country in which I currently reside (the UAE), and so is easy to access. As an Anglican priest I am connected with colleagues throughout the region and can gain access to Christian leaders, some Islamic leaders and local university libraries.

Thirdly, when I travel back to the UK from the Arabian Gulf, I often speak at different churches and organisations about my work as a priest. A common refrain I hear is “We did not think the church would be allowed to exist in the Arabian Gulf”. I want to raise awareness that this is not the experience of the church in parts of Arabia.

My message is that there are Muslim countries in which the Christian church functions well, in an atmosphere of tolerance at worst and acceptance at best. Christians are not persecuted in these countries. Again, the response of people in the UK to this message is one of surprise. The question is raised again – “why does the Church suffer terribly in some Islamic countries and not in others?” Perhaps the answer lies in how governmental agencies interpret and practice Islam.

Finally, there is very little literature about the Christian community in Oman. I have a personal ambition too. Having already published books about the church in Kuwait and in the UAE – I wanted to expand my knowledge of the Church in other Gulf countries. All of this meets the demand of the academic requirement to contribute unique knowledge.

This study project therefore flows out of my professional interest in the region and a desire to contribute towards the literature on understanding the dynamics between the Muslim and Christian communities in the Arabian Peninsula. In doing so, I hope to uncover patterns of belief and behaviour that will shed some light in what the important factors are in creating a positive interfaith dynamic.

1.6 The Subject

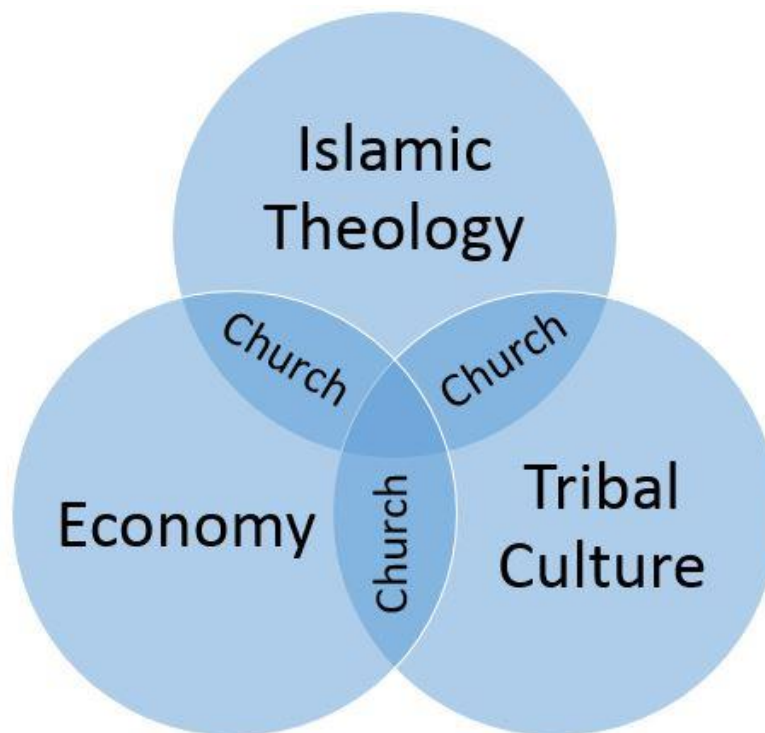
The growing field of Christian-Muslim relations has been the focus of attention due to recent global events. Since the events of 9/11, academics have explored the dynamics of Islamic countries through political and economic commentary, usually focussing on dysfunctional religious behaviour in the form of extreme religious violence.²

Yet in some of the Arabian Gulf states, the overwhelming salient aspect of life here is that despite being in the heart of the Islamic world (geographically and economically), the first-time visitor from the West is struck by the diversity of the population and the level of co-operation and co-existence between the different religious communities. This is all the more unexpected given that the local Islamic population is outnumbered by the expatriate community, who comprise substantial ethnic and religious minorities within the Arabian Gulf.³

² See Ulrichsen, K.C. (2011) *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*. London: Hurst & Company, Akbar, M.J. (2002). *The Shade of Swords. Jihad and the Conflict between Islam and Christianity*. London: Routledge, Atwan, A.B. (2015). *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*. London: Saqi Books and Feldman, N. (2003). *After Jihad*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux as examples of topics and approaches to this field.

³ According to the US State Department Reports on Religious Freedom in 2013 the percentage of Christians living in the following countries were as follows: Bahrain 9%, Kuwait 16.6%, Oman 4%, Qatar 17.2%, Saudi Arabia 8% and the UAE 9%. A conservative estimate is that there are almost three million

As my interest is primarily the interaction between religious communities, there is a theological component which possibly influences the behaviour manifested in the actions of the Islamic authorities (usually through the Ministry of Religious Affairs). As the literature review reveals however, I cannot examine interfaith relations without reference to economic and political context, and so this study will consider the impact of these factors on the experience of the Christian church in the concluding chapter. The literature suggests that, as well as Islamic theology, the discovery of oil and the influence of tribal culture led by dominant ruling families are significant factors which impact the relationship between the resident Christian communities and the Islamic authorities. A simple model conceptualising these factors is set out below. In later chapters I refer to these factors as the three *Ts*. Trade, Theology and Tribe.



Christians living in the Gulf Co-operative Council (GCC).
www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm. Accessed 29th May 2017.

The diagram above highlights that the presence of the church in the Arabian Gulf is not an urgent or pressing issue for the Islamic authorities in those nations. This is partly because the church consists of migrant workers and is therefore excluded from the political process, and also because Gulf Arab nationals who choose to follow the Christian faith are normally very discrete in their observance and so therefore keep the presence of the church in a quietist state. Instead, national agendas are dominated by economic concerns, developing and modernising infrastructures of state apparatus and confronting religious extremism within Islam across national borders, as well as within. Consequently, this means that Church-State relations are squeezed into the smaller spaces between the heavy weight concerns of tribalism, oil and Islamism.⁴

1.7 A Brief Overview of Christianity in Oman

The history of Christianity in the Gulf can be summarised in three stages.

The first stage dates back to the early expansion of Christianity, which sees the Church extend east towards Iraq and south into the Arabian Peninsula.⁵ The key evangelist would appear to be Saint Thomas, who according to tradition travelled to Babylon and then on from there to India.⁶

Meanwhile the church in Babylon (close to present-day Baghdad) established missionary dioceses which eventually extended all the way to China. This was known formally as the Assyrian Church of the East (sometimes described as Nestorian). Around the 3rd century, the Church of the East established two dioceses in Southeast

⁴ The evidence for this seems to be borne out by the minimum number of references to Christianity in the index pages of books about Oman. For example, Valeri, M. (2017). *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State* (Revised Edition) London: Hurst & Company, Funsch, L.P. (2015). *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, and Jones, J & Ridout, N. (2015). *A History of Modern Oman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Trimmingham, J.S. (1990). *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, Bin Talal, H. (1998). *Christianity in the Arab World*. London: Arabesque Intl. Betts, R.B. (1975). *Christians in the Arab East*. Atlanta: John Knox Press. Moffett, S.H. (2009). *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol 1*. New York: Orbis Books.

⁶ Mingana, A. (1926). *The Early Spread of Christianity to India*. Manchester: Keay, F.E. (1951). *History of the Syrian Church in India*. Delhi: ISPCK. Kuriakose, M.K. (1982). *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*. Madras: CLS. McBirnie, W.S. (1973). *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*. Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers.

Arabia.⁷ The first diocese was called Bet Qatraye and it covered what are now the East coasts of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar. The second diocese was called Bet Mazuniya, with its Bishop established in Sohar. This diocese covered the area of modern-day Oman and an unknown quantity of what is now the United Arab Emirates. Archaeologists are rediscovering ancient monasteries buried in the sands which appear to have been built along an ancient trading route⁸.

These dioceses were not remote from their mother Church but contributed fully in the rich theological and liturgical development of Assyrian Christianity.⁹ Ancient documents such as the *Chronicle of Arbela*, the *Vita Iona* and the *Chronicle of Seert*¹⁰ record the life of these ancient dioceses and shed light on various things, such as their daily routine of worship and regional disputes with their bishops. Although these documents were largely discovered in what is now Iraq and Persia, they make reference to the churches in the Arabian Gulf.

The second stage of Christian history in the Gulf is marked by a silence in church archaeological and textual records from AD 900. The successful expansion of Islam is the predominant theme in the region from the 9th Century onwards. Then 17th Century,

⁷ Baumer, C. (2006). *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London: I.B. Taurus. Moffett, S.H. (2009). *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol 1*. New York: Orbis Books. Jenkins, P. (2008). *The Lost History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Books. Parry, K. (ed) (2010) *Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

⁸ Potts, D. Al Naboodah, H. & Hellyer, P. (eds) (2003). *Archaeology in the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press. Fares, S. (2011). "Christian Monasticism on the Eve of Islam: Kilwa (Saudi Arabia – New Evidence". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Vol 22: 243-252. Langfeldt, J.A. (1994). "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in North-eastern Arabia". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. Vol 5. Pp 32-60. Carter, R.A. (2008). "Christianity in the Gulf during the first Centuries of Islam". *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*. 19:71-108. King, G.R.D. (1997). "A Nestorian Monastic Settlement on the island of Sir Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi. A Preliminary Report". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Vol 60. Part 2. Hellyer, P. (1998). *Waves of Time: The Marine Heritage of the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press.

⁹ Atiya, A.S. (2010) *History of Eastern Christianity*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. Brock, S.P. (2000). "Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye". *ARAM* 11/12. Kuwait. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. Loosley, E. (2002). *A Historical Overview of the Arabian Gulf in the late Pre-Islamic Period: The Evidence for Christianity in the Gulf*. Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey.

¹⁰ Hellyer, P. (1998). *Waves of Time: The Marine Heritage of the United Arab Emirates*. London: Trident Press. Colless, B. (trans). (2008). *The Wisdom of the Pearlers. An Anthology of Syriac Christian Mysticism*. Michigan: Cistercian Publishers.

witnessed the impact of European colonialism.¹¹ The arrival of the Portuguese in particular has left its mark in the form of castles, forts and stories of brutal oppression.¹² A struggle for the control of the Indian and far-eastern trade routes played out between the Portuguese, Dutch and British, with the Gulf Arabs very much watching on as bystanders. Eventually the British prevailed and went on to establish treaties with the various ruling tribes around the Gulf. This British era was carefully documented in Lorimer's *Gazetteer*.¹³ Yet, despite the presence of the Western colonial powers, there was no established church in the region as such. Christian ministers were usually passing through with no intention of settling in the region.

All this changed with the arrival of the Arabian Mission. It was led by two tenacious seminarians from the Reformed Church in America, Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine,¹⁴ who inspired many Americans to come and serve primarily through medical mission. Pioneer hospitals were set up in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman¹⁵. Their endeavours are faithfully recorded in the form of letters and prayer bulletins which are preserved in several volumes.¹⁶ The impact of the modern missionary movement has

¹¹ The main references from this period of time include a charming 9th century story, which tells of a giant fish terrorising the pearl fleets in the Gulf so much that they refused to sail, thus provoking the Christian pearl divers to pray. The answer to their prayers came in the form of small fish which lodged themselves in the gills of the giant menace and thus suffocated it to death. This reference is used to suggest that there was still a Christian presence in the Gulf in the 9th century (taken from Brock, S.P. (2000). "Syriac Writers from Beth Qatraye". *ARAM* 11/12. p. 95). Finally, the last minor reference to the 'priests of Beth Qatraye' is found in a collection of Syriac prayers written in the 12th Century (Found in Winkler, D.W. (2007) *Syriac Churches Encountering Islam. Past Experiences and Future Perspectives*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press. p. 53).

¹² Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing. Hawley, D. (1970). *The Trucial States*. London: George Allen & Unwin. Al-Qasimi, S.M. (1988). *The Myth of Arab Piracy in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.

¹³ Lorimer, J.G. (1915). *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*. 4 Vols. Calcutta: Superintendent of the Government Printing.

¹⁴ Cantine and Zwemer were inspired by their teacher Dr John G. Lansing back in the 1880s who taught at the seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Having studied theology and some rudimentary medical skills, they travelled to Syria to study Arabic for two years before arriving in Bahrain in 1892. They were to spend the rest of their missionary careers in the Arabian Gulf.

¹⁵ Scudder R. L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Harrison, P. (1940) *Doctor in Arabia*. New York: John Day Company. Mason, A.D. & Barny, F.J. (1926). *History of the Arabian Mission*. New York: RCA. Al-Sayegh, F. (1996). "American Missionaries in the UAE Region in the Twentieth Century". *Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol 32. Boersma, J. (1991). *Grace in the Gulf*. Michigan: Eerdmans. Calverley, E.T. (1958) *My Arabian Days and Nights*. New York: Thomas. Y. Corwell Company. Clarke, A. (1993). *Through the Changing Scenes of Life. 1893-1993*. Bahrain: American Mission Hospital.

¹⁶ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1988). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood.

not been fully assessed in the Gulf region, although the Arabian Gulf is referred to in the studies of Missiology by Robert Woodberry, who proposed a controversial macro theory in which he argued that the political and economic fortunes of some developing nations were profoundly influenced by Christian mission¹⁷.

The main significance of these medical missions, in my opinion, is that they spearheaded an acceptance of the Christian community amongst the local Gulf Arabs, and the first established congregations began their presence within the context of these hospital compounds. As the number of Christian workers expanded, new worship facilities were required, and so the government gave land to representatives of the growing Christian church. To this day, there are still congregations worshipping at the compound in the Oasis Hospital in Al Ain, and the Evangelical Churches in Kuwait and Bahrain are hosted on land adjunct to the original Missionary hospitals.

Today, the contemporary church reflects the international workforce drawn to the Arabian Gulf in search of economic security. For many expatriate Christians,

¹⁷ Robert Woodberry (see Woodberry, R.D. (2004). *The Shadow of Empire: Christian Missions, Colonial Policy and Democracy in Post-Colonial Societies*. Unpublished Thesis: University of North Carolina. Woodberry, R.D. (2006) "Reclaiming the M-Word: The Legacy of Missions in Non-Western Societies". *Review of Faith and Internal Affairs*. 4 (1): 3-12) examined the impact of Christian Missions on Non-Western societies and concludes that "when missionaries are independent from state controls (that is they can choose their own leaders and raise their own funds), they moderated, not exacerbated the negative effects of colonialism'. Woodberry also conducts a comprehensive economic survey and reaches the controversial conclusion that where Protestant Mission flourished, the economy and democratic reform were more likely to flourish. Certainly, we can see the influences of Mission in the field of Education in provoking nationalist movements in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria and in the abolition of slavery in the region. In the Arabian Gulf, American missionaries were behind the construction of the first hospitals in the region thus winning favour from the ruling families, however, the Gospel message of the missionaries though communicated, was never embraced by the Gulf Arabs in any significant numbers.

However, Woodberry's theory does not really lend itself to explaining interfaith relations in the Gulf for the following reasons. The activities of the missionary workers in the Gulf were under state control. The ruling families were involved in granting permissions and land and imposed restrictions on their activities. Secondly, democratic reform really never emerged in the Gulf with the possible exception of Kuwait which has since regressed, and its once promising parliamentary powers have been crippled by tribalism and corruption. Thirdly, although education was pioneered in the region, once the Gulf governments gained independence and started developing state infrastructure in the form of Ministries of Education, they swiftly enforced a conservative Islamic curriculum on students and removed expatriate teachers from defining the curriculum. Finally, Woodberry's theory detracts from the considerable achievements of the local rulers whose own vision, commitments to cultural identity and political negotiations were instrumental in reaping benefits for their people.

worshipping in a church congregation made up of their own compatriots, is one way in which they maintain their cultural identity and community links with their home countries,

1.8 Impact of the Oil Industry

With the discovery of oil across the Gulf region (chronologically Bahrain in 1932, Saudi Arabia in 1935, Kuwait in 1938, Qatar in 1939, the United Arab Emirates in 1958, and Oman in 1962¹⁸), the new economies demanded an influx of skilled and unskilled workers. Initially, the majority of these workers came from the Arab world, chiefly Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine and Egypt¹⁹. In time this gave way to thousands of workers arriving from the sub-continent and the Philippines. These new 'sending' nations contain a significant constituency of Christians. Malayalam speaking Indians²⁰ form the largest Indian sub-continental minority, with many devout Roman Catholic, Mar Thoma, Syriac Orthodox and Protestant Christians forming the bulk of the many congregations who gather in the Arabian Gulf. A new trend in the Gulf, following the tightening of rules and policies between Gulf countries and the traditional sending countries of India and the Philippines in the employment of domestic workers, is the arrival of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian community.

In addition to these workers are the Western expatriate community who function in the fields of education, medicine and technology, as well as providing consultancies in everything from training the military to retail shopping. There is also a visible diplomatic community. Westerners typically belong to the Evangelical and Anglican churches around the region.

Across the Arabian Gulf, ruling families²¹ have given land to the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Evangelicals, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Egyptian Coptic Orthodox, Mar

¹⁸ O'Sullivan, E. (2008) *The New Gulf: How Modern Arabia is Changing the World for Good*. Dubai: Motivate Publishers.

¹⁹ Dresch, P. (2006). "Foreign Matter: The Place of Strangers in Gulf Society" found in Fox, J.W. et al. (2006) *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge.

²⁰ The Malayalam language is a South Indian dialect spoken in Kerala.

²¹ All land given for the purpose of worship is gifted by the ruling families, and as such, religious freedom remains the prerogative only of the few leaders who typically belong to a ruling tribe, which does not

Thomas and smaller Christian movements such as the Brethren, Assemblies of God and Seventh Day Adventists.²²

1.9 Political Context

One distinctive feature of Gulf Arab societies (and I am specifically referring to the members of the Gulf Cooperative Council, known collectively as the GCC, which was formed in 1981) is that the majority of the population are excluded from the political decision-making processes. This is because the expatriate population are not entitled to become naturalised citizens and are seen as ‘temporary’ guests by the local native population. In addition to excluding expatriates, only a select number of their own citizens are allowed to participate in elections for political office, both as voters and as candidates.

With the rapid globalization of the Arabian Gulf, the work place typically exposes local Arab populations to an international and multi-faith work force. This results in numerous daily interfaith encounters between Christian and Muslims engaged in the economic enterprise. These market place encounters describe interfaith relations at the most fundamental level. For example, this would include negotiating the different religious calendars in a business environment in terms of staff booking holiday vacations and accommodating devout practices such as fasting during Ramadan, with work places providing discrete and screened off eating spaces for those who are not fasting.

Yet, what is clear on the ground is that there is a huge disparity in the experience of the Christian Church in the Gulf. At one end of the spectrum is Saudi Arabia, where there is no religious freedom and the Christian community functions as an invisible institution. They are tolerated as long as they remain under the radar of Islamic public awareness. On the other side of the spectrum is the United Arab Emirates who generously have given land for the building of over forty Christian centres of worship across five of the

necessarily follow the rules of primogeniture, but nonetheless ensures that power remains within the family.

²² Thompson, A. (2010). *The Christian Church in Kuwait: Religious Freedom in the Gulf*. Kuwait: Saeed & Samir.

seven Emirates (Umm Al Quwain and Ajman remain the exceptions), whereas in Oman the number of church centres is seven. It remains to be seen as to what prevailing influences shape the contours of Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. One scholar insists that interfaith relations in this region 'cannot be discussed only in theological terms but are to be understood in the context of local sociocultural dynamics and political considerations'.²³ This thesis proposes that Ibadi theology is the main influence on Christian Muslim relations in Oman today.

The challenge for me as a researcher was to find a methodology and a theoretical paradigm in which to analyse the findings of this study. To this end I used my literature review as a source for informing the shape of this study.

²³ Makris, G.P. (2007). *Islam in the Middle East: A Living Tradition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. p. 257.

Chapter 2

2.1 Literature Review

The literature review below highlights my search for an approach with which to analyse and understand Islam and Christianity in the region.

I started by looking at general studies in the region on a variety of issues. My hope that by zooming in from a larger landscape to a specific issue, I will sense what informs other researchers in terms of their theory and findings. Much of the traditional and emerging scholarly literature in the Arabian Gulf region tends to focus on geo-political issues including security,²⁴ human trafficking,²⁵ migrant labour²⁶ and examining the impact of the hydro-carbon industry.²⁷ The majority of these studies draw on hard, measurable data and use the method of quantitative research. However, the aforementioned research on human trafficking has had to depend on other methodologies. The data for human trafficking is more difficult to access due its criminality, and so it relies on more qualitative methodologies. Such methods help us to understand the situation of the victims. Thus, this latter approach leads to insight, whereas statistics and processes are insufficient in telling the experiential story of a trafficked person. Tools such as interviews, documentary evidence (court and police records) all have contributed to the analysis of this particular issue. This seemed to be a helpful approach to studying the experience of Christians in the Gulf region. Statistics alone do not reveal the relational dynamics between Christian communities and Islamic states,

²⁴ Ulrichsen, K.C. (2011). *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*. London: Hurst & Company. Long, D.E. & Koch, C. (1997) *Gulf Security in the Twenty First Century*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research.

²⁵ Kamrava, M.(2012a) *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf*. London: Hurst & Company. Kapiszewski, A. (2001). *Nationals and Expatriates: Population and Labour Dilemmas of the Gulf*. Dryden, NY: Ithaca Press.

²⁶ Longva, A.N. (1999). *Walls Built on Sands: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. Fox, J.W. et al. (2006) *Globalization in the Gulf*. London: Routledge

²⁷ ECSSR (2010). *Energy Security in the Gulf. Challenges and Prospects*. Abu Dhabi: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research. Hertog, S. (2010) *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and State in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Anthony, J.D. (1975). *Arab States of the Lower Gulf: People, Politics, Petroleum*. Washington, D.C: The Middle East Institute. Graham, H. (1978). *Arabian Time Machine: Self Portrait of an Oil State*. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Skeet, I. (1992) *Oman: Politics and Development*. London: Macmillan.

especially for countries where the church is not particularly a welcome guest. This calls for a more qualitative approach in understanding what happens behind the scenes between churches and governments.

The scarcity of written sources in English about the Arabian Gulf region is revealed in Netton's survey of Western literature. This included travelogues, academic studies, and political commentaries which were all summarised in a short chapter of 11 pages.²⁸ Although the literature has grown since the 1980s, there is still very little on our topic of interest for this research on modern Arabia.

A rare exception is the work by Horner who briefly surveyed the Christian presence in Arabia. At the beginning of the new independent nations in the 1970s, Horner noted that the character of the expatriate church was markedly dominated by 'Christians from South India, and that the majority of these were Roman Catholic. The non-Catholic Indians were largely Malayali Protestant groups. As numbers increased with further immigration from India, they divided into the communities of their origin and, in some cases, sent for Indian priests or pastors to serve on a full-time basis'.²⁹

A new recent and critical survey of religious tolerance in Gulf countries conducted by Khasan concludes that the church in the Gulf operates under an unacceptable climate of intolerance. He states that the restrictions imposed on the church contradicts the values of globalism, not least those held by the World Trading Organization³⁰ which most of the GCC countries have signed a pact with.³¹ The assumption that Khasan makes is that economic forces should inform the Islamic treatment of non-Muslim

²⁸ Netton, I.R. (1986) *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*. London: Croom Helm. pp. 43-54 .

²⁹ Horner, N (1978) "Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula". *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*. No.2. pp. 53-63.

³⁰ The WTO emphasizes a non-discrimination clause. That "country should not discriminate between its trading partners and it should not discriminate between its own and foreign products, services or nationals". https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/what_stand_for_e.htm. Accessed January 20th 2019.

³¹ Khasan, H. (2016a). "Christianity's Claim to the Birthplace of Islam". *Stratfor Journal* 23/04/2016. Khasan, H, (2016b). "Religious Intolerance in the Gulf States" *Middle East Quarterly* Summer 2016 Edition. Accessed March 21st 2018.

minorities. Clearly this is not the case, suggesting that an understanding of Islamic theology and its outworking through state mechanisms would be a place to start. In summary so far, there is very little literature which specifically addresses Christian-Muslim relations in the Gulf and given the variety of countries in the region it is virtually impossible to give a clear picture. On the one hand Islamic law and norms clearly prevail, but the experiences of Christian communities vary, even within the same country. This survey is at least hoping to provide a more nuanced understanding of Christian-Muslim relations in Oman.

2.2 Religion in Islamic Countries

I have highlighted that there is very little in the general English literature of the Gulf that specifically outlines the religious formation of Islam in those countries, and in particular their relationships with the Christian community. The closest studies we are aware of in which the relationship of the Christian community residing in an Islamic context is examined are studies by Gabriel³², who analyses the Christian community and their interfaith relations with the Muslim community in Pakistan and in Sarawak; Van Gorder,³³ who focuses on Persian Christianity and interprets their experience in the context of international relations; and a historical survey by Griffith,³⁴ who investigates primarily the Levantine Christian communities. These studies draw heavily on written historical and contemporary sources and use sociological concepts for their theoretical and analytical components of research.

In terms of studies of Christianity in the Middle East and their relationships with the Islamic authorities, the best-known ones are Cragg³⁵, Griffith³⁶, and Betts³⁷. All of these however focus on the historical native Arab Christian communities in Egypt and the

³² Gabriel, T. (2007). *Christian Citizens in an Islamic State. The Pakistan Experience*. Aldershot: Ashgate. Gabriel, T. (1996). *Christian-Muslim Relations in Sarawak, East Malaysia*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing House.

³³ Van Gorder, A.C. (2010). *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran*. New York: Lexington Books.

³⁴ Griffith, S.H. (2008). *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³⁵ Cragg, K. (1991). *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*. Westminster: John Knox Press.

³⁶ Griffith, S.H. (2008). *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³⁷ Betts, R.B. (1975). *Christians in the Arab East*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.

Levant with scarce reference to the Arabian Gulf. The one exception is Trimingham³⁸ in his magisterial *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, which among other things highlights the tribal influence upon the movement of religion. Other general surveys focusing on interfaith relations include Goddard³⁹ in his *History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Within these wide-ranging historical narratives of Christian Muslim encounters include conflict. Goddard discusses the role of religion in these historical conflicts and suggests other factors which contribute to inter-communal violence.

One fascinating study examined the impact of Wahhabi theology on gender roles, comparing and contrasting the role of women in Saudi Arabia with women in the other Gulf States.⁴⁰ This drew on a variety of methodologies including historical sources, observation and interviews in order to assess the impact of Islamic theology on day to day living.

2.3 Weber

In contrast to the view that religion was held captive to the prevailing economic structures in society, Weber, in his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,⁴¹ sought to demonstrate how religion shaped the economy. Weber is particularly relevant to this study as he is the first sociologist to seriously engage with analysing Islam.⁴² In particular Weber sought to understand Islam within the local economic climate.

³⁸ Trimingham, J.S. (1990) *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban.

³⁹ Goddard, H (2000). *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.

⁴⁰ Doumato, E.A. (2000). *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴¹ Weber, M. (1930) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.

⁴² Weber (1864-1920) is widely regarded as one of the founders of the modern discipline of sociology. He particularly argued for an interpretive approach to studying societies rather than relying solely on empiricism. He pioneered this approach in the study of religion which since has inspired many other studies. His best-known work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was written in 1905.

Thus, according to Husain,⁴³ a necessary religious condition which allows capitalism to prosper is a 'world ascetic ethic'.⁴⁴ Ascetism and capitalism do seem to be paradoxical concepts, yet the Weberian approach argued that the two were entwined, that religious beliefs determined the mode of economy. The capitalist model requires a disciplined ethic, in which gratification for success is delayed through investment back into the economic enterprise. Financial success was seen as a mark of God's favour. Weber attempted to test his hypothesis by going on a cross cultural tour including India, China and the Islamic world, especially the Middle East. He concluded that the Eastern religions did not have the pre-requisite conditions to foster capitalism. With regards to Islam, Weber identified the salient features as paternalistic tribalism with a militaristic ethos and an economy which can be compared with feudalism. Wealth was acquired in tribal societies more often than not, through raids and invasions. This leads Husain to conclude that 'Islam appeared to Weber in a purely hedonistic spirit, especially towards women, luxuries and properties'.⁴⁵

According to Weberian analysis, the emergence of Islamic empires also failed to produce a *laissez faire*⁴⁶ market due to the heavy dependence of dynastic rulers upon fickle military powers and religious scholars (*ulama*). The consequence is a historical trail of dynastic *coups* in which the main benefactors were the landowners and merchants. They were frequently courted by the sultans in a dance in which the ruling bargain enabled the merchants and landowners to retain their wealth in exchange for their loyalty to the throne. All of this meant that the main institutions in society were neither geared towards allowing free enterprise nor encouraging mass production requiring large labour populations.

Other applications of Weberian theory relate to his three typologies of authority. One author argues that the role of the *ulama*, the clerics who define and apply Islamic law, is

⁴³ Husain, S.A. (2003). "Modernism, Secularism and Islam: A Discourse on Mutuality and Compatibility". *The New Age*. Dhaka Daily, Bangladesh. 7 June 2003.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁴⁶ Refers to the capitalist ideal of a free and open trading environment.

to be 'technicians of the routine cults',⁴⁷ and as such they embody all three forms of authority outlined by Weber: traditional, charismatic and legal rational. This makes the role of Islamic leaders in a Muslim society a 'collective actor'⁴⁸ with significant influence.

Can we apply Weberian analysis to the study of Islam in the Gulf?

The answer to the question above would seem to be a cautious yes, but it would have to take into account the following criticisms.

Weber's understanding of Islam has been critiqued by a variety of authors. His earliest detractor was Becker⁴⁹ who showed that 'it was mistake to see Islam as being totally hostile to economic activity'.⁵⁰ Other critics include Said⁵¹ who saw Weber as heavily influenced by orientalist scholarship. That is, subscribing to a dichotomous worldview which promoted ontological differences between East and West. In contrast, Montgomery Watt⁵² and Arnold⁵³ paint a very different picture of Islamic expansionism being primarily a result of trade and peaceful preaching, rather than conquest. This latter point of view is supported by Von Grunebaum's⁵⁴ scholarship, which highlighted the prevalence of economic terminology in the Holy Qur'an, thus promoting a religion which is comfortable with the world of commerce. The reality is probably somewhere in between these two extreme views.

Despite these critiques, Weber's theory and approach towards Islam continued to appear in further studies. For example, we can clearly see Weber's influence in Clifford

⁴⁷Mouline, N. (2014). *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. p. 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p. 2.

⁴⁹ Becker, C.H. (1924) *Islamstudien. Vom Werden und Wesen der islamischen Welt*. Leipzig.

⁵⁰ Translated by Endress, G. (2002) *Islam: An Historical Introduction. Second Edition*. Edinburgh: The New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys. Edinburgh University Press.

⁵¹ Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁵² Watt, W.M. (1983). *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

⁵³ Arnold, T.W. (1965). *The Preaching of Islam*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf.

⁵⁴ Von Grunebaum, G.E. (1970). *Classical Islam. A History, 600-1258*. London: Barnes & Noble.

Geertz's classic comparative study between the Islamic societies of Indonesia and Morocco⁵⁵.

2.4 Geertz

One difference between Weber's approach and Geertz's is that the latter sought to use the anthropological method of 'thick description' as a means of understanding the subject society from an insider point of view, whereas Weber was very much the outside observer, looking upon Islam from a Western perspective.

The work of Geertz in particular caught my attention because of his compare-and-contrast approach between Indonesia and Morocco. His method is one that I was interested in applying to this research, when I was originally exploring looking at Qatar and Oman as my comparative subject countries.⁵⁶

Geertz highlights how the different histories and the formation of Islam in each country shape the institutions and ethos of society. Through his fieldwork as a participant observer, he was able to pick up on some distinctive manifestations of the Islamic faith which he directly encountered. In addition to this, he surveyed historical sources and questioned his subjects through the use of open interviews.

Geertz's study highlights the economic environment and how it shaped the Islamic identity in two very different parts of the world – Morocco and Indonesia. This study therefore persuaded me to pay careful attention to the emergence of Islam in my subject countries, the distinctive social institutions which arose as a consequence and the evolution of Islam in that nation in terms of theology and practice. This requires a historical awareness and the use of 'thick description'.

⁵⁵ Geertz, C. (1968). *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵⁶ Unfortunately, during my initial studies, Qatar became embroiled in a dispute with other members of the GCC resulting in isolation. The risk to a researcher living in the UAE entering Qatar to conduct research on what is already potentially a sensitive topic was deemed too great to continue with the original research proposal.

More recent anthropological studies, particularly from Oman, highlight the effect of economic factors upon Muslim communities. The impact of the discovery of oil upon an Omani village is discussed by Eickelman,⁵⁷ who in his anthropological research highlights the massive shift in expectations and lifestyle of the ordinary Omani villager. A similar study by his wife⁵⁸ also highlights the impact of oil from the perspective of Omani women. This anthropological body of research has been expanded and brought up to date by the work of Limbert,⁵⁹ who also analyses the impact of oil on the identity and religion of Omani women.

2.5 Other Approaches to the Study of Islamic Societies

Since Geertz's seminal study, there has been an explosion of sociological and anthropological studies examining Islamic cultures.⁶⁰ These broaden out the study of Islam from its religious and economic setting and examine other significant factors including cultural institutions and tribalism.

2.6 Tribal Influences

The role of tribes as an influence on cultural identity and religion is still an understudied area, although Al-Zoby et al insist that this is the core social structure on which everything else is built upon in Arab Gulf States. Thus, the tribal families are 'the oldest surviving organizational institution in the Gulf' and it is insisted that 'compliance with unwritten tribal rules and customs is still recurrent even at present times and equals to the prevailing rule in the GCC'.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Eickelman, D. (1983). "Omani Village: The Meaning of Oil". *The Politics of Middle Eastern Oil* Peterson J.E. (ed). Washington DC: Middle East Institute.

⁵⁸ Eickelman, C. (1984). *Women and Community in Oman*. New York: New York University Press.

⁵⁹ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁶⁰ See Dupret, B et al. (2012). *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

⁶¹ Al-Zoby, M.A. & Baskan, B (eds). (2014). *State-Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States*. Berlin: Gerlach Press. p. 142.

Gellner's⁶² work in particular is pertinent due to the fact that he explores the interplay between tribes and rulers, and in his introductory long essay attempts to fuse the theories of David Hume and Ibn Khaldun.⁶³ The sociological concept of a 'segmented' society, in which a small minority exerts control over the majority, is used by Gellner to describe Islamic tribal society. He explores how religion and its rituals are used to legitimise power, using Morocco in particular as a case study. The best description of a segmented society in an Arab context is provided by Evans-Pritchard who wrote:

Each section of a tribe, from the smallest to the largest, has its Shaikh or Shaikhs. The tribal system, typical of segmentary structures everywhere, is a system of balanced opposition between tribes and tribal sections from the largest to the smallest divisions, and there cannot therefore be any single authority in a tribe. Authority is distributed at every point of the tribal structure and political leadership is limited to situations in which a tribe or a segment of the tribe of it acts corporately . . . There cannot, obviously, be any absolute authority vested in a single Shaikh of a tribe when the fundamental principle of tribal structure is opposition between its segments, and in such segmentary systems there is no state and no government as we understand these institutions.⁶⁴

As Oman is described as tribal in origins and make up, the latter comment is revealing in raising the question "how in view of the segmentalism of tribal structure, did one ruling family come to predominate over a society which in theory would never allow such a thing to happen?" It is argued that Rentier State Theory provides a possible explanation of how a tribal segmented society could morph into a state with central government dominated by a single ruling family. Renter State theory describes how a dominant mode of production (in the Arabian context the oil industry), can be exploited by a minority as a tool of political control. This may provide a rationale for religious freedom or not as the case may be. Religious freedom is seen as a necessary

⁶² Gellner, E. (1981). *Muslim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶³ Hume, D. (1969). *Treatise of Human Nature*. London: Penguin Books, and Ibn Khaldun. (Ed). Dawood N.J. (Trans) Rosenthal, F. (2015). *Al Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶⁴ Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1949). *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 31.

prerequisite for a diverse economy as they would need to cater for a diverse workforce. Whereas tight control of a singular state economic asset resulting in massive rentier wealth, means the rulers would feel less need to provide a pluralist model of society. I will discuss more about this in the final chapter of the thesis.

2.7 The Influence of Ruling Families

The power of the ruling families therefore seems absolute. A study by Herb⁶⁵ examines the role of the ruling family and how they relate to state mechanisms, concluding that the oil economy has introduced a new dynamic into the Gulf States. Prior to the oil economies he argues that the ruling families were in a precarious position and subject to rapidly changing tides of allegiances, usually the threat being from within their own family, or from the merchant families who used their financial clout in return for political favours. With the rapid development of state structures,⁶⁶ alongside the revenues generated by the oil industry, the threat from merchant families diminished considerably and the rulers-maintained stability within their own ranks by placing family members into key ministerial positions in the developing state structures. This diminished the threat from within the family and consolidated the tribal interest in maintaining the status quo. Herb however seems to downplay the historical mechanisms in which the ruling family draw upon tradition to maintain their power, including cultural and religious sources of authority. He admits that rentier wealth on its own does not create stability, and he refers to Libya as a case in point.⁶⁷ He argues that Libya's ruling family lost control because they did not integrate family members into the state structures and essentially the family squandered any meaningful platforms for interacting with the wider society.

⁶⁵ Herb, M. (1999). *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*. New York: State University of New York Press.

⁶⁶ The unexpected withdrawal of Britain from the Gulf region thus accelerating independence combined with the windfall from the oil industry meant that the ruling families had both the motivation and capacity to rapidly install state structures to both facilitate the emergence of a modern state and to ensure their benign leadership was seen as essential by their citizens.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 253.

Linz's work on authoritarian regimes seems to be directly applicable to Oman and other Gulf monarchies. For example, Linz's definition of the prototypical authoritarian system postulates that:

The personalistic and particularistic use of power for essentially private ends of the ruler and his collaborators makes the country like a huge domain. . . The boundaries between the public treasury and the private wealth of the ruler become blurred. He and his collaborators, with his consent, take appropriate public funds freely, establish public oriented monopolies, and demand gifts and pay-offs from business for which no public accounting is given.⁶⁸

In such an economy, the power of the ruling families is formidable. Even as Gulf societies become more bureaucratically mature with the emergence of state institutions and government ministries, these are often led by members of the ruling families or trusted associates. This restricts the dynamics of social-class based activism.

Another useful discussion is Khuri's work on *Imams and Emirs*⁶⁹. He argues that what separates mainstream Sunni Islam economically and politically from the smaller sectarian schools was that the Sunnis tended to dominate centres of trade and were better placed for establishing macro infrastructure for governance because their tradition was established by virtue of being a majority. In contrast, the sectarian groups tended to be more provincial in their origins and centres of influence, and defined their theology in opposition to the mainstream Sunni or governing authorities. Economically, the smaller sectarian groups tended to be gathered around agrarian or village cottage industries. Although he refers to the Omani Ibadi tradition repeatedly in his text, Khuri did not really explain the anomaly (according to his theory) of how Ibadism as a minority Islamic sect became the mainstream Islam for the nation. The real value of his work, however, is the understanding of how Islamic theology shapes the fragmented character of Arab tribal society. This is in contrast to Rentier State Theory which implies that the religion is subject to the forces of the local economy.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 152.

⁶⁹ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books.

The prevailing (and evolving) sociological theory for understanding social dynamics in the Arabian Gulf is Rentier State Theory.⁷⁰ Rentier State Theory was popularised by Mahdavy's⁷¹ study of Iran and was further developed by Beblawi & Luciani,⁷² Hertog⁷³ and Gray.⁷⁴ In essence, the theory proposes that the lucrative oil and gas economies have empowered an elite to control their societies according to their whim. This theory is derived from Marxian dialectics, where in 1860 Marx discussed the observation that there is a privileged ruling class who benefit from renting out property and thus gain capital without actually producing anything or being engaged in labour.⁷⁵ Coming back to the theory itself, the literature generally suggests that in an Arabian Gulf context, the hydrocarbon industry has created rentier states across the region, where privileged ruling tribal families effectively act as bourgeoisie elites in the form of neo-patriarchy.⁷⁶ A crude portrayal of Gulf politics is that the rulers 'buy out' their citizens in a ruling bargain which promises a share in and access to wealth in exchange for their submission and commitment to maintaining the status quo - or to restate in Vandewalle's memorable formulation - "the reverse principle of no representation without taxation".⁷⁷ Rentier State Theory has also been used to describe the perpetuation of tribal patriarchal culture.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Davidson, C.M. (2012). *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company. Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

⁷¹ Mahdavy, H. (1970). "The Patterns and Problems in Economic Rentier States: The Case of Iran" Found in Cook, M.A. *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷² Beblawi, H & Luciani, G. (1990). *The Rentier State in the Arab World*. London: Routledge.

⁷³ Hertog, S. (2010). *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and State in Saudi Arabia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁷⁴ Gray, M. (2011). "A Theory of Late Rentierism in the Arab States of the Gulf" *Georgetown University Centre for International and Regional Studies Occasional Papers*, No. 7.

⁷⁵ Davidson, C.M. (2012). *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company. p. 6.

⁷⁶ Sharabi, H. (1992). *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 160.

⁷⁸ Ross, M. (2008). "Oil, Islam and Women". *American political Science Review*. 102, No.1.

2.8 Technology

The emergence of new technologies and the global market is the theme of Green's work in which he examines the interchange of religious ideas in 'terrains of exchange'.⁷⁹ He described religious groups as 'firms' who follow strategy and intentionality in their travel and exchange of technology, often with the purpose of propagating their faith. In particular, he looks at the development of the printing press and its early use by the Evangelical movement rooted in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, who sought to flood Muslim lands with their ideas. Green catalogues how the Muslims in return appropriated the same technology and concepts of the Christians, and fought back using printing technology to reinforce their own message. Underlying this movement are governments seeking to understand and deploy this new technology for their own agenda of furthering trade and boosting their knowledge economy.

In Oman's case we see this demonstrated in the Christian missionary strategy of using technology and knowledge in healthcare as a tool to propagate their faith. In response, the Omani regime were quick to recognise both the opportunities and threats of this knowledge and responded by nationalising the health sector and recruiting medical professionals to teach their own citizens to be providers of health care. Some of the first medical trainers in the nationalised health service were the missionaries, thus perpetuating an honourable interfaith exchange.

2.9 Other Literature Specifically on Oman

Literature referring to Oman will be highlighted in the chapters ahead. However, in the English language, Ibadi Islam is becoming more documented. One of the earliest records made available in English was Razik's⁸⁰ historical overview. This historical magnum opus however focussed more on inter-tribal relationships rather than interfaith relationships. There are fleeting references to battles and conflicts with the Portuguese 'Christian' forces but that is the sum of it.

⁷⁹ Green, N. (2014). *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*.. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸⁰Razik, S. (1871). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman*. (Trans, Badger, G.P. 1986). London: Darf Publishers.

An apologetics (defensive) approach to the origins of Ibadism is provided by Mu'ammār.⁸¹ This text is aimed largely at other Muslim readers who may hold a disparaging view of Ibadism. The overall effect is one of self-aggrandisement, as Mu'ammār aggressively asserts the historical primacy of the school of Ibadism over the other Islamic schools of jurisprudence.

The leading expert of Ibadi history and theology in the English language is Wilkinson,⁸² an Oxford scholar who has published about Oman since the 1980s up to the current day. Much of his work is focussed on tribal history and conflict, and although he goes with considerable depth into the Ibadi religion, it is again from a historical and evolutionary perspective and he does not really engage with the question of Omani interaction with people of other faiths in the light of their theology.

Gaiser sets out the development of Ibadi Islam in four stages: secrecy (*al kitman*), manifestation (*al-zuhur*), defence (*al difa'*), then the giving of oneself to Allah to fight for Islam (*al shira*).⁸³ These formational stages of the Imamate are shaped by intra-religious forces in which the Sunnis and Shia despised and persecuted those of the Ibadi School. A question raised by Gaiser's work is "which stage of the Imamate allows space and priority for inter-faith relations?" This is a question worth exploring, especially with regards to interactions with the Christian communities. The question can be rephrased to address intra-faith relations in the GCC, especially given the bitter history of rivalry between the Wahabis and the Ibadis. It is worth noting that in the other GCC countries, Ibadi literature is restricted if not banned from the market place. To counteract this, Oman has sponsored a series of conferences in which they invited scholars from other Islamic schools to engage constructively in dialogue.

⁸¹ Mu'ammār, A.Y. (2007). *Ibadism in History: Volume 1: The Emergence of the Ibadi School*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

⁸² Wilkinson, J.C. (1987). *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: CUP. Wilkinson, J.C. (2010). *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*. Oxford: OUP.

⁸³ Gaiser, A.R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP. pp. 10-11.

The main study on Omani-Christian relations from a Christian perspective is written by Rev Ray Skinner, a former Anglican Chaplain based in Muscat.⁸⁴ Skinner's study reviews Christian Muslim relations in Oman. He presents a somewhat rosy picture of a people whose practice of Islam predispose them to warm relations with non-Muslims. However, the bulk of his text dwells on theological issues which are not specific to Oman. For example, he writes a chapter about the so-called Gospel of Barnabas. His work produced in 1994 is now 25 years old, and since that time no other book exists that has attempted to cover the same area.

A lot of literature written about Oman comes from travellers, missionaries, diplomats and soldiers.⁸⁵ Some of these are written from a particular cultural (orientalist) perspective and their insights are coloured by their colonial agendas and assumptions.

When it comes to Islamic theology, the majority of the commentaries (*tafsir*) remain in Arabic. A survey of the formation of Ibadi Islamic theology is presented by Ennami⁸⁶ and a compilation bibliography of Ibadism can be found in Custer's seminal offering.⁸⁷

2.10 Conclusion of Literature review

What is clear is that the literature review highlights that the economic factor continues to be the predominant concern of scholars and is perceived to shape Islamic relations with the religious 'other'. As one scholar said '[i]t is an eternal truth that a country's political

⁸⁴ Skinner, R. F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. The author was Anglican chaplain in Oman during the late 1980s. This book is his Master's degree thesis.

⁸⁵ Examples include: Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Innes, N.M. (1987). *Minister in Oman*. Cambridge: Oleander Press Ltd. Skeet, I. (1992). *Oman: Politics and Development*. London: Macmillan. Alston, R. & Laing, S. (2012). *Unshook Till the End of Time. A History of Relations between Britain & Oman 1650-1970*. London: Gilgamesh Publishing. Mann, M. (1994). *Trucial Oman Scouts: Story of a Bedouin Force*. London: Michael Russell Publishing Ltd. Cawston, A. & Curtis, M. (2010). *Arabian Days: Memoirs of Two Trucial Oman Scouts*. London: Michael Curtis Publishers.

⁸⁶ Ennami, A.K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

⁸⁷ Custers, M.H. (2008). *Al-Ibadiya. A Bibliography. Volume 1. Ibadis of the Mashriq*. Musqat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

direction is driven by the state of its finances'.⁸⁸ The access to and control of monetary funds gives more choices for how rentier states develop socially, and politically—especially in international policy.

Yet all these factors need to be accommodated within a religious framework, in which the rulers of Gulf seek to validate and legitimise their decisions as permissible under divine writ. Thus, the prevailing Islamic theologies enable a historical and contextual response to geo-political realities, whilst at the same time providing a bedrock from which to guard conservative religious sensibility. To understand and support this view, an examination of the theological discourse from Oman is essential. This is because the ruling families and the leading personalities play a huge part in shaping the destiny of their nations, not least because their power is 'real power'. Oman's monarchical political structure for example, has been described as 'authoritarian'.⁸⁹

The literature review suggests that the best methodology for understanding the research question is one that draws on an interpretive approach rather than a purely empirical tool. This is because Weber and Geertz highlight the importance of understanding the historical economic context of Islam in order to analyse contemporary religious and cultural behaviour.

This involves an examination of the arrival of Islam in Oman and a need to search for events and encounters between the Muslim and Christian communities, which may reveal underlying influences which inform such encounters. One of those influences appears to be theology. This study will therefore look at the role of Ibadi theology in shaping the Omani response to Christianity.

⁸⁸ Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing. p. 241.

⁸⁹ Kamrava, M. (2013). *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. London: Cornell University Press.

Chapter 3

3.1 The Methodology Used

This study aims to look at the influence of Ibadism on Christian-Muslim relations in Oman, especially in examining the level of religious freedom experienced by church communities. I start by reviewing Ibadi theological sources in English to see if there has been a consistent approach to engaging with Christianity.

Over a period of three years I interviewed a number of Christian bishops, priests, pastors and missionaries from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox churches in Oman, and also interviewed English speaking Omanis (some from the Ministry of Religious Affairs) in person and by email. In total fifteen Christian leaders, including bishops, local pastors and missionaries were interviewed, and five Islamic leaders, mainly from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), were interviewed too. All the interviewees were active in leadership roles in their religious communities and engaged with interfaith encounters either through participating in the church-state mechanisms set up by the government, or through engaging in intentional interfaith activities such as scriptural reasoning.

I describe the contemporary state of the church and the way in which the Omani government regulates and interacts with the Christian community today. There is very little in writing on the church in Oman and its relations with the government, and as such it is ripe for further study.

In the discussion, I highlight other factors which may play a significant role in impacting Christian Muslim relations in Oman, especially the roles of the economy, the personality of the ruling family and tribal customs.

Given the widespread diversity in the region in terms of the experience of the church, the researcher is curious as to what factors leads some countries to permit the freedom of worship for religious minorities and why other countries restrict religious freedoms

and even actively persecute them. This has led to the formation of the following hypothesis:

“Despite the prevailing belief that the economy is the dominant factor driving the behaviour of Arab Gulf States, country-specific Islamic beliefs are central to defining the experience of and the relationships with the Christian Church and community.”

The literature research highlights that religion may be only one factor influencing interfaith relations. This requires an awareness of other dynamics at work, particularly in the realm of economic and tribal forces. However, it is difficult to establish cause and effect.

So, for example, the fact that Christian communities are being granted land and permission to worship in Oman could be a result of theological conviction, but it may also be an outworking of a ruling bargain in return for contributing to economic success.

3.2 Methodological Considerations

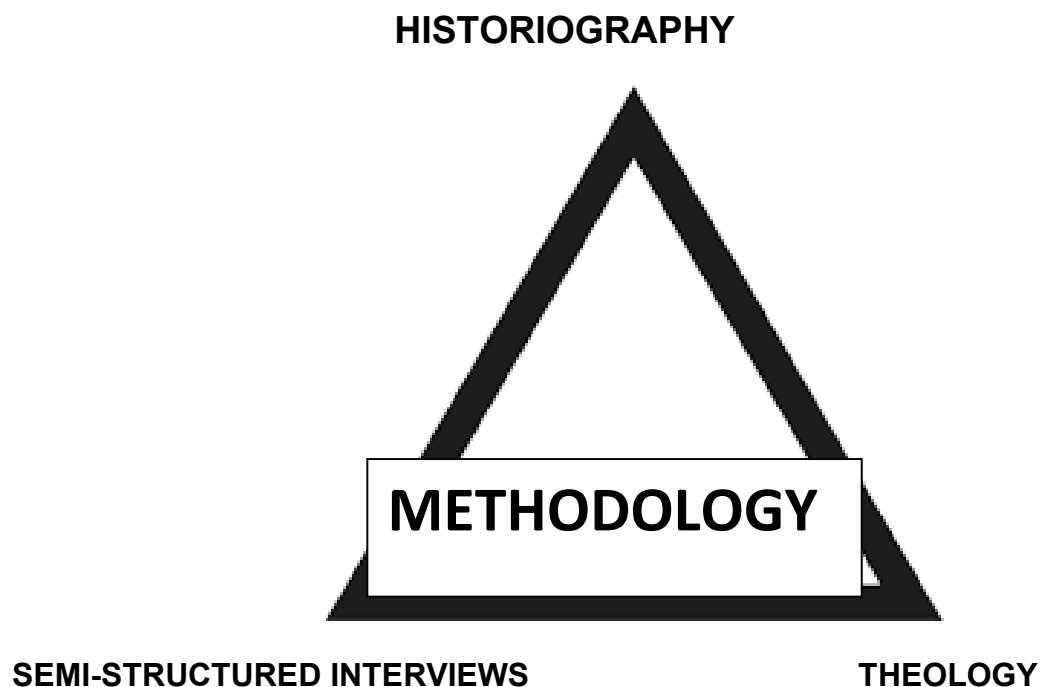
The subject and nature of Christian Muslim relations requires a variety of research methods to understand it. Because this is a field of study which is in its infancy at present, these methods primarily fall under the qualitative school of research. Cresswell defines qualitative research as

An inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Cresswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. London: Sage Publications. p. 15.

Cresswell goes on to define five main 'traditions' in qualitative research as biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study.⁹¹ All these fall under the methods used by interpretivists who seek to understand the data from the perspective of the human subjects being studied. Most sociological, historical, anthropological and even theological studies use one or more of these traditions to create a framework of understanding.

The role of quantitative data and statistical analysis has been examined. Measurable data such as population demographics, oil income, and other measurables such as column inches in local newspaper coverage and number of court cases relating to religious intolerance all face the same problem. They are descriptive and would not necessarily indicate causal factors. The intention of this study is to understand the experiential dimension of Christian Muslim relations. We apply three methodological approaches which are represented by the diagram of the triangle below.



⁹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 4-9

3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

With semi-structured interviews, the main benefit is that it allows for a more flexible and fluid process than that associated with the structured approach. Semi-structured interviews are designed to allow themes to emerge from the responses during the interviews and enable the interviewee to introduce elements that might not have previously been anticipated. This requires the interviewer to have a more developed level of interpersonal skills⁹² and can rely on the ability to establish rapport or to 'pause, probe or prompt appropriately'.⁹³ This approach however offers the potential to embrace a broader context through 'more or less open-ended questions'.⁹⁴ The semi-structured approach leads to a more interactive encounter with the subject, where the content and questions used may vary from interview to interview. This method was chosen for this study as it provides the opportunity to generate contextually rich data. The main flaw with this approach is that it does not allow for a consistent categorization of data which could be used for reliable comparative analysis. This is a reflection that we are dealing with the stuff of human interactions, which are difficult to quantify in any meaningful way according to the scientific method.

In this study, I will be interviewing leaders of the church in Oman and using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A) to collect data, with the aim of understanding what it is like for Christians who worship in these countries today. The questionnaire focussed on relationships with the government authorities and seeks to understand any restrictions or limitations for the Christian community in any aspect of their ability to worship. (See Appendix for a sample of the questionnaire).

However, as the literature review highlights, religion never exists in a vacuum and the experience of Islam and Christianity needs to be framed within the historical and cultural

⁹² Opie, C. (2004). *Doing Educational Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

⁹³ Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. et al (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students & Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc. p. 141.

⁹⁴ Flick, U. (1998). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. p. 94.

context of their host nations, with particular attention given to tribalism and the economy.

3.4 Historiography

A historical analysis will survey the advent of the contemporary church in Oman, drawing upon church and local historical resources from a variety of sources. These include church records, historical monographs, diplomatic records and media reports.

The historical approach applied to this study is best summarised by Corrie Block in his published PhD thesis on Christian Muslim relations.

In practical terms, this entails a reporting of events and interpretations, commenting on their probability from a historical or empirical perspective, including traditional narratives, and not from any singular theological position. A non-reductionist approach to history is therefore undertaken, that is; the presentation of history of what is most probable in the mind of the historian given the materials available, including traditional narratives⁹⁵

As the subject of this study is religion, we will be focussing on historical data, in as much as they relate to the encounters between Muslims and Christians.

3.5 Theology

The focus of the study is to examine if Ibadism as a school of Islam can offer any distinct contribution in the area of religious freedom. Oman is unique as it is the only Islamic country which has officially co-opted the school of Ibadism⁹⁶ as a national religious identity marker (Ibadi Muslim communities are also found in Zanzibar and some North African countries, but they are a minority). A lot of extant Ibadi theological

⁹⁵ Block, C.J. (2014). *The Qur'an in Christian Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations*. London & New York: Routledge. p. 3.

⁹⁶ Wilkinson, J.C. (1987). *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: CUP. Gaiser, A.R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP.

writings were generated in a North African context and as such do not address the concerns of the Muslim community in Oman itself. Omani theological writings that have been translated into English are the main source of information for this study and this clearly is a limitation, both due to the selectivity of the material and the content being mediated through the translator's ability and world view.

Yet, there is a growing body of English material generated by the Omani authorities which is disseminated for use in the West as part of their diplomatic relations outreach.⁹⁷ This has shed light on the "official" use of Ibadi theology in relating to non-Muslims.

Finally, the semi-structured interview method will be conducted to explore the present experience of the Christian community. Interviewees will be drawn from the leadership of the churches in Oman and long-term residents. The interview data will be examined for useful and relevant concepts which may inform the experience of the churches in their relationships with the respective host government.

3.6 Challenges for the Researcher

Arabic is the dominant language of the Gulf States and there is much which is recorded in the oral tradition, as well as theological texts which have yet to be made available in the English language. Ibadi texts are still largely in Arabic and the texts remain themselves difficult to access.

An understanding of Arabic is widely regarded as the most basic tool any scholar of Islam requires. This researcher is painfully aware of his lack of Arabic expertise.

A heavy dependence on Islamic sources translated into English as an attempt to capture the authentic Muslim voice can be seen as a major shortcoming of this work.

⁹⁷ See for example: Al-Khalili, A.H. (2002). *The Overwhelming Truth: A Discussion of Some Key Concepts in Islamic Theology*. Muscat: Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. Al-Salmi, A. (2016). *Religious Tolerance: A Vision*. Hildesheim, Germany: OLMS.

Related to this is the fact that many of the leading Islamic scholars in Oman and Qatar do not speak English, proving to be the most over-riding challenge for this researcher. However, that this research is being attempted at all (given that the researcher's Arabic is inadequate to the task) is a result of the fact that a great deal has already been made available in English. There are the historical archives of the India Office which administered the Persian Gulf in the early days of Empire, as well as an outstanding source of information in Lorimer's *Gazetteer*.⁹⁸ There are several tafsir which have been translated into English (see Literature Overview) and interviews with Arabic speaking scholars will also be interpreted.

Access to Islamic sources will be through the Islamic authorities and ministries who oversee the educational resources and Imams in the country. In Oman this is the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and in Qatar this is the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.

As a priest in the Anglican Church, who has resided in the region for thirty years, he has access to a wide ecumenical network and is personal friends with many of the mainstream Christians leaders and some Islamic leaders due to active involvement in interfaith relations..

Other challenges are also linguistic in nature. The churches in the Gulf are multi-national and multi linguistic. This means that I have only accessed those churches and pastors who speak English. The stories of the Indian, Arab, Korean and Chinese churches can only be told more fully with access to those languages and as such this survey of the churches is far from complete.

⁹⁸ Lorimer, J.G. (1915). *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*. 4 Vols. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.

Another limitation of the methodology used in this research is that it can never prove causality between two or more sets of criteria. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the data is not commensurable and is based on a very small sample, defined arbitrarily by the researcher's access to those subjects. Secondly, there is always a possibility that there is another set of criteria which influences outcomes of which we may not be aware of.

For example, Foley⁹⁹ in his work moves away from just looking at Islam and oil as key actors in Gulf State behaviour. He includes chapters on technology and women. The increasing empowerment of women through education is another feature of modern Gulf life. There is a growing literature reflecting the impact of women in the Gulf,¹⁰⁰ including the way in which the roles of Western missionary women challenge society both in Arabia and in the West.¹⁰¹ For example, the first lady medical doctors in the Gulf were American missionaries who went onto teach and educate Arab women in primary healthcare. Other missionaries set up the first schools for girls in the region thus preparing the first cadre of Western educated Arab women. The impact of that education for these Arab women in the domestic and public arena is yet to be fully assessed. This is a fascinating and ripe area for further study.

Technology, in particular, has gained the attention of academia due to its role in the so-called "Arab Spring" uprising, in which social media was employed as a tool to mobilise popular sentiment against the ruling regimes.

⁹⁹ Foley, S. (2010). *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Maliki, A, Kaufer, D, Ishizaki, S, & Dreher, K. (2012). *Arab Women in Arab News: Old Stereotypes and New Media*. Doha: Bloomsbury, Qatar Foundation Publishing. Bristol-Rhys, J. (2010). *Emirati Women: Generation of Change*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers. Pinto, V.C. (2012). *Nation-building, State and the Gender Framing of Women's Rights in the United Arab Emirates (1971-2009)*. London: Ithaca Press. Wikan, U. (1991). *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Benedikter, T. (2010). *Leadership and the Emirati Woman: Breaking the Glass Ceiling in the Arabian Gulf*. London: Lit Verlag.

¹⁰¹ Tuson, P. (2003). *Playing the Game: Western Women in Arabia*. London: I.B. Tauris. Doumato, E.A. (2000). *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press. Calverley, E.T. (1958). *My Arabian Days and Nights*. New York: Thomas. Y. Corwell Company.

Surveying the entire history of Christianity in the life of a nation is beyond the mandate of this work. So, the focus will primarily be on the 1900s with the arrival of the first western missionaries and the subsequent oil discoveries, followed by modern statehood. That said, there will be a brief background to early Christianity in the region, by way of comparison between the pre-Islamic Gulf Arab society and their response to the church, and the modern, contemporary Gulf Arab society's response to the Christian community. This study therefore focuses on the interaction between the Church and the local people in Oman and Qatar, with a view to understanding the historical, theological and cultural context in which these encounters take place.

Although the research methodology is predominantly qualitative there will be some quantitative data and this is provided by the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity based at the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in the USA. This data records the growth of the Christian community in Oman over the years since the 1960s onwards and so is a possible measure against the backdrop of economic trends.

3.7 Summary

In summary, this thesis will examine the interactions between Islamic theology and other possible factors upon the expatriate Christian church in Oman and Qatar. The structure of the whole research is outlined below:

Chapter 1. Introduction

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Chapter 3. Methodology

Chapter 4. The Theology of Ibadi Islam in relation to Christianity

Chapter 5. Encounters between Christians and Muslims in Oman

Chapter 6. The Contemporary Experience of the Church in Oman

Chapter 7. Analysis and Conclusion

Chapter 4

The law of Oman with regard to religious freedom: Allah Almighty says “there is to be no compulsion in religion”, and “you have your religion and I have mine”.

So, anyone can practice his religion as he wishes, privately or in his place of worship, without bothering other people and their faith.¹⁰²

4.1 Ibadi Theology.

One of the main challenges for this study is that there is little material available for analysis which can speak definitively of an Ibadi perspective. The Ibadis use many of the *tafsir* which are used by the Sunni. For example, they use the *tafsir* of Zamakshari, who was of the Mutazilite sect of Khawarij.¹⁰³

According to Glassé, the distinctive features of Ibadi Islam (besides their election of an imam who receives communal affirmation for his piety and leadership ability) are that:

They hold that the Koran is created, whereas the mainstream of Islam holds the Koran to be the uncreated word of God.¹⁰⁴ Otherwise, apart from a sectarian spirit due to historical isolation from other communities, there are today only minor differences between the Ibadites and the mainstream orthodox Sunni Islam.¹⁰⁵

In speaking of Ibadi sources of authority, Jamal Nasir, an international lawyer and barrister explains that the Ibadis ‘base their doctrine on the Qurán, the Sunna, and the consensus. They extend the Sunna beyond the sayings and deeds of the prophet to

¹⁰² Scholar from the Ibadi Seminary in Muscat Interview. ASS. 2015.

¹⁰³ Sirhan, I.S. (trans by Ross, E.C.) (1984). *Annals of Oman*. Cambridge: The Oleander Press. p. 114.

¹⁰⁴ The debate surrounding the doctrine that the Qurán is the uncreated word of God reflects a parallel Christological debate within early Church over the nature of Christ. This has led to the view that contrasting the Bible with the Qurán is unhelpful, rather a more fruitful dialogue would emerge if we focus on a comparison of the Qurán with the person of Christ. See Christenson, J. (1977) *The Practical Approach to Muslims*. Marseilles: NAM, p. 316.

¹⁰⁵ Glassé, C. (1989). *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*. London: Stacey International. p. 165.

include those of the first two Patriarchal Caliphs, Abu Bakr and Omar. To those three over-riding sources they add analogy and inference where no text exists'.¹⁰⁶

Albayrak and Al-Shueli note that 'of the major works of *usul al-tafsir* (methodology of Qur'anic exegesis) recommended for students at the Islamic Studies Institute in Muscat, Oman, there is not a single source written by a an Ibadi scholar.¹⁰⁷ They suggest the reason for this is the Ibadi preoccupation with juristic concerns. They seem to confirm a prevailing view that the Ibadis have no distinctive contribution to the Islamic sciences and drew heavily on earlier Sunni sources.

This view is flatly rejected by Ennami¹⁰⁸ who demonstrated that there were very-early Ibadi sources, supporting the view that Ibadis were the first to put the traditions of the companions and followers of the prophet into writing.

Some of the leading Ibadi scholars found in the literature are Salih ibn-'Ali, Sa'id ibn-Nasir, 'Ali ibn-Muhammad, Hilal ibn-Zahir, and 'Abdallah ibn-Humayd al-Salimi.¹⁰⁹

So, what is distinctive about Ibadi *tafsir*? According to Albayrak and al-Shueli in their comprehensive review of the Ibadi *Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis*,¹¹⁰ their first observation and surprise is that there is very little *tafsir* that exists in writing. In trying to discover why this is the case, they conclude that Ibadis were more interested in social development and reform of society, and so they focused on more concrete disciplines such as philosophy (*kalam*) and jurisprudence (*fiqr*). The political unrest which prevailed during the formation of early Ibadi theology (third/ninth to the fifth/eleventh century)¹¹¹ meant that they were struggling against opponents and were under enormous pressure, and so did not have time to compose exegesis; when they did write exegesis their readership was small, they were too poor to publish what

¹⁰⁶ Nasir, J.J. (1986). *The Islamic Law of Personal Status*. London: Graham Trotman. P9.

¹⁰⁷ Albayrak, I. & al-Shueli, S. (2015). "The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis." *Muslim World*. Vol 105, No 2. pp. 163-193.

¹⁰⁸ Ennami, A.K. (2008). *Studies in Ibadhism*. Muscat: Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs

¹⁰⁹ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 372.

¹¹⁰ Albayrak, I. & al-Shueli, S. (2015). "The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis." *Muslim World*. Vol 105, No 2. pp. 163-193.

¹¹¹ Wilkinson, J.C. (1987). *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 8-12.

they had written and there were natural disasters (sources were lost in fires, floods and so on). In addition, they mention that there is no Hanafi or Maliki exegesis either, thus their exegetical works belong to others, and so Ibadis prefer to use other exegesis instead of wasting effort on duplication. A more honest answer was provided by the Grand Mufti of Oman when he admitted that Ibadis 'simply neglected this discipline.'¹¹²

As mentioned earlier, the Ibadi school is the only school in Islam today which holds onto the concept that the Qur'an is created as opposed to uncreated, although this conviction is rarely stated as baldly as above. This flows from their conviction (previously outlined by the *Mutazilite* school in Baghdad during the 8th to the 10th centuries) that only God is eternal and they commit the sin of *shirk* if anything outside of God is given a divine attribute. However, the subject of the nature of the Qur'an is not a dominant issue in theology for Ibadi scholars. Rather than immerse themselves in a messy dispute (which would carry parallels to the Christological debates over the status of Jesus' nature, in the early church), they simply declare that the Qur'an is revealed by God and avoid divisive debate.¹¹³

Another distinctive feature of Ibadi Islam is the role of the imamate in leading the Islamic community and the conviction that potentially any devout worshipper can acquire this role. Khuri emphasises this belief in the following words;

The Ibadis do not build shrines, tombs for holy men, spiritual retreats or assemblies, monasteries or edifices. Instead they have sanctified the whole community. They are the 'Calvinists' of Islam par excellence, continuously searching for, building and amending the divine city. Branching off from Sunni Islam, and originally part of the Kharijii movement, they believe that 'there dwells an imam in every soul'. In other words they are a community of imams or potential imams.¹¹⁴

One of the challenges for the contemporary scholar is accessing Ibadi texts, and these are slowly entering into academic circles. In a collection of very early Ibadi theological

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 193

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 165.

¹¹⁴ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. p. 73.

treatises, written by the Omani theologian Abu I-Mundhir Bashir bin Muhammad bin Mahbub (died around 908 AD), there is virtually no mention of the Christian community or faith. The only reference to them is in passing comments on enemies and dhimmis. Rather his preoccupation is with inter-Muslim alliances, debates and conflicts. Where he alludes to non-Muslims, his stance reflects a bellicose attitude towards external non-Muslim enemies, who are seen to be a military threat to the House of Islam. Yet he also allows that non-Muslims can be partners in trade and diplomacy, as well as that non-Muslims can assist Muslims in warfare, even against (wayward) Muslim enemies.¹¹⁵

4.2 Nur al-Din

The most prominent Ibadi scholar at the turn of the 20th century was known by the honorific title Nur al-Din (light of the faith) Al-Salimi. He was born in 1869 near Rustaq¹¹⁶ and received a traditional religious education. Although blinded at the age of twelve he continued his studies in Rustaq, a centre of Ibadi scholarship, where he stayed for 22 years. He led a revolt against Sultan Faysal in Muscat and succeeded in establishing an Imamate in 1913. Nur al Din's popularity as a leader and spokesman was at the same time when the country was in a serious economic crisis during 1862-1914.¹¹⁷ He was a prodigious writer who covered jurisprudence, tafsir, and documented Omani history. In 1910, Omanis living in Zanzibar wrote to him to ask for legal and theological guidance on dealing with the encroaching colonialism of the British and others on the East African coast. Nur al Din's reply contains a robust response to Christian presence in Ibadi territory. He addressed the presence of Christian missionary schools in Zanzibar, Western dress codes and the learning of their languages, trimmed beards and Christian occupation of the land of Islam.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Al-Salimi, A. & Madelung, W. (2011). *Early Ibadi Literature: Abu I-Mundhir Bashir b. Muhammad b. Mahbub. Kitab al-Rasf fi I-Tawhid, Kitab al-Muharaba and Sira*. Morgenlandes: Harrassowitz Verlag.

¹¹⁶ Rustaq is a fortified town located in the Al Hajir mountain range in the Omani interior. It's defensive position and it's relative closeness to Muscat, provided a base for disruptive tribal leaders.

¹¹⁷ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 96-97.

¹¹⁸ Ghazal, A. (2015). "Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism: Modernity and Religious Authority in the Indian Ocean." *Muslim World*. Vol 105. No 2. p. 242.

While the forceful language employed by Nur al-Din was primarily directed at the perceived evils of modernism, he certainly used hostile rhetoric when speaking of Christians. He believed that ‘Zanzibar was occupied by Christians, by trickery and deception in order to steal the Islamic religion after stealing their lives. Consequently, ignorant and sinful Muslims followed them, adopting their dress, speaking their languages, attending their schools and assisting them in their courts that served injustice.’¹¹⁹

The question of Missionary schools was particularly relevant to Nur al-Din as he would have only been too aware of the presence of the American missionaries setting up schools and hospitals in Muscat – a development he held the Sultan responsible for and one of the reasons why he led a rebellion against the former. In his reply to the petitioners in Zanzibar, he drew heavily on the work of Yusuf al-Nabhani¹²⁰ who had already written about the effect of Christian Missionary schools in Palestine and in Beirut. Nur al-Din quoted approvingly from al-Nabhani’s work, only disagreeing on his solution which was to leave the country to the Christians. Instead, Nur al-Din called for the Zanzibaris to fight and reclaim the land for Islam.¹²¹ In this way, Nur al-Din models himself as a warrior leader who saw ‘Christian Europe as the archenemy infiltrating Muslim lands militarily or diplomatically, as well as with a deceitful modernity. This modernity he feared was erasing all boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim.’¹²² In particular, when it came to the issue of Western languages, Nur al-Din was adamant that Arabic be the language of all Omanis, as their identity was not primarily an ethnic one but a religious one. The failure to keep Arabic central meant that the Omanis would not have access to the Qur’an and the Hadith.

Finally Nur al-Din reminded the Zanzibaris that the ‘Qur’an and the Sunna prohibit Muslims from co-operating with Christians in their unjust rule’.¹²³ He in turn was warned

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 243.

¹²⁰ Al-Nabhani, Y. (1901). *Hadha Kitab Irshad al-Hayan fi Tadhiri al-Muslimin min Madaris al-Mubashshirin*. Beirut.

¹²¹ Ghazal, A. (2015). “Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism: Modernity and Religious Authority in the Indian Ocean.” *Muslim World*. Vol 105. p. 244.

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 246.

¹²³ *Ibid.* p. 248.

about a 'certain priest travelling in Oman and visiting it's villages, documenting Omani geography with the sinister goal of facilitating missionary work inside Oman and carrying books defaming Prophet Muhammed and Islam',¹²⁴ all of which we know to be true from the annals of the Arabian Christian Mission records.¹²⁵

The position then at the turn of the 20th century is that the Imamate were hostile towards the British and the Europeans who were seen as a clear threat to Islam (on account of their Christian religion), and due to the resistance of the imams were able to maintain the independence of Oman. This meant that as the European powers never colonised Oman as they did in other countries, the Omanis were able to maintain their culture and traditions. The theology of Nur al-Din, with regards to relations with Christians, seems to be more nuanced¹²⁶ as Leonard highlights:

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 to 1914, Nur al-Din. His jurisprudence continues to influence Ibadi legal opinion in Oman today. . . . he advocates in some cases greater coexistence with and protections for Christians, Jews and other 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 . . . what does seem unique to Nur al-Din's jurisprudence is the right to neighbourhood coexistence. Rather than living in separated ghettos, non-Muslims were allowed to live in the same neighbourhood with Ibadis, to eat together and consider the food of *ahl al dhimmi* to be halal as long as the meat was slaughtered in observance of the one God.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 248.

¹²⁵ The missionaries recount in their journal the publication of a controversial tract which contrasted the sinfulness of the prophet Muhammed with the sinlessness of Jesus. Not surprisingly this provoked considerable anger from the Omanis. See *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling* (1944). The Arabian Mission: Archive Edition. Oxford: Redwood. p. 6.

¹²⁶ The apparent contradiction between Nur Al-Din's hostile views and eirenic views towards Christians could be explained that in the former case he was writing to the Muslim community in Zanzibar which was under clear occupation by a Western colonial power. Whereas the latter comments referred to the Omani context, which was mainly autonomous when it came to managing domestic affairs.

These protections seem to have been extended beyond *ahl al dhimmi* to include Hindus and other religious minorities. Nur al-Din also advocated for the freedom of dialogue between schools of Islamic jurisprudence and religions.¹²⁷

Another interesting feature of Ibadi Islam emerged in a recently translated document written by the theologian Nur al-Din, who stated that in the absence of a mosque, Ibadi Muslims can pray to Allah in a church or synagogue.¹²⁸

Landen too picks up on this remarkable level of tolerance when he notes that ‘the Ibadis were moderate enough to respect even the legal testimony of a non-Ibadi against an Ibadi. Marriage with non-Ibadis and inheritance by non-Ibadis were also allowed. Christians were regarded with unusual tolerance, it being said that God had called them to their particular belief just as God has called the Muslims to theirs. This tolerant attitude was particularly strong in coastal Oman where there was more contact with foreigners.’¹²⁹

When it comes to Ibadi *tafsir*¹³⁰ methodology, the use of *asbab al nuzul* (the historical context of the revelation) is little used.¹³¹ Rather, Ibadi scholars, such as Khalili, tend to focus on the narratives in the Qur’an as a main source of teaching, defending the repetition of stories in the text as a didactical tool.¹³² The use of *‘isra’iliyyat* literature (Jewish textual sources) to shed light on understanding the Qur’an has a mixed use in Ibadi theology, but generally is shunned by modern Ibadi scholars. Sheikh Khalili claims that ‘early exegetes who used *‘isra’iliyyat* extensively are tolerated today, or at least

¹²⁷ Leonard, D.R. (2015). ‘The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman’. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No.2. pp. 266 -278.

¹²⁸ Francesca, E. (2014). *Ibadi Theology: Rereading Sources and Scholarly Works*. Hildesheim. Zurich, New York: Olms-Weidmann.

¹²⁹ Landen, R.G. (1967). *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 50.

¹³⁰ *Tafsir* refers to commentaries on the Qur’an. These were largely informed by and shaped by the methodologies advocated by specific schools of Islam. Some schools advocate an exegetical method which took into account the historical circumstances of a specific revelation, a methodology described as *asbab al-nuzul*.

¹³¹ Albayrak, I. & al-Shueli, S. (2015) “The Ibadi Approach to the Methodology of Qur’anic Exegesis.” *Muslim World*. Vol 105, No 2. 163-193. p. 171.

¹³² *Ibid*. p. 175.

their position is understandable, but today's commentators should not be tolerated if they use *'isra'iliyyat*.¹³³

In an email interview with a scholar from the College of Islamic Sciences, based in Muscat, he writes describing a long history of tolerance between the Omani people and people of non-Muslim faith, noting that even the Hindus have their temples in Oman. When asked about the theological basis of this tolerance he exposit:

The biggest factor in the tolerance of the Omanis is the Ibadi doctrine, because it is based on justice and the right to equality. It promotes respect for human rights and not harming others. To desist from bad, to believe in word and action and the belief that sin will lead to hell. . . . In addition, Ibadi teachers advocate unity and tolerance.¹³⁴

In other words, Ibadi theology is the main reason why Oman is open to the religious other. How this impacts the discourse of human rights outside of religious freedom would be an area for further study.

Although Islam is a missionary faith, much of the history of Ibadi missionary work, especially in East and North Africa, seems to focus on either lapsed Ibadis or on the elite of their subject people, especially if intermarriage is taking place.¹³⁵ There was a reluctance to convert slaves in their colonies as this would shift the economic dynamic significantly as Islamic law discourages owning Muslims as slaves.¹³⁶

Another study highlighted the difference in methods used by Ibadi missionaries when reaching out to Muslims of a different school with those who were of a non-Muslim background. With the former, the emphasis was on teaching the Muslim convert the

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 176.

¹³⁴ Interview ASS. (2015).

¹³⁵ Limbert notes the concern that Omanis have about marrying their daughters into a family who have the right tribal and social status and this meant that converts from outside of this system are simply disregarded. Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil. Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Omani Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹³⁶ Wilkinson, J.C. (2015). On Being an Ibadi. *Muslim World*. Vol.105. pp. 142-156.

rituals of Ibadism whereas with the latter, the emphasis was on learning the Ibadi doctrine.¹³⁷

4.3 Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Khalil

When asked who was the most influential representative of Ibadi theology in Oman today, one of my interviewees stated:

“I believe the great scholar Sheikh Ahmed Bin Hamad Al-Khalili is an Omani scholar who leads all Omani people, from every sect and every area. That is because he is truly a Muslim scholar who understood Islam morality and values. He managed to bring the Omani people together, and win their hearts and trust. This is the case for any Muslim who can understand true Islam and reflect it on reality - where he would only seek for the wellbeing of humanity, and would do his best to prevent any harm or mischief. The Prophet (PBUH), said “the best of people are the ones who help people”.¹³⁸

As Mufti of the Grand Mosque, Al-Khalili is ‘appointed by the ruler, his responsibilities include advising citizens on private matters of religious conduct and advising the state on religious issues.’¹³⁹

In his memoirs, the Anglican Bishop, Right Rev John Brown¹⁴⁰, describes his meetings with the Grand Mufti of Muscat throughout the 1990s. Although he did not speak English, the Mufti, Al-Khalili was well versed in the early Christological debates and in Reformation theology. He told the Bishop that Christianity was now politicised and far removed from its original message. He stated that English Christians were more like Hindus at heart (idolaters) and tried hard to convert the Bishop to Islam. He spoke knowledgeably of Martin Luther (although rather confusingly the translator was speaking of Martin Luther King).¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Kondo, Y. (2015). Ibadi Discussions on Conversion and Commitment. *Muslim World*. Vol 105. pp. 224 – 231.

¹³⁸ Interview. ASS (2015).

¹³⁹ Ziaka, A. (Ed). (2014) On Ibadism. Hildesheim, Germany: OLMS. p. 157.

¹⁴⁰ Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf from 1986 until 1996.

¹⁴¹ Brown, J. (2012). *Mainly Uphill. A Bishop's Journey*. Sleaford. UK: Clearprint. pp. 175-176.

Bishop Brown reveals the intense scholarship of Al-Khalili and contrasts it with the modern clergy's somewhat laissez faire attitude to historical theology. He notes:

Thus many clergy in Western Christianity who consider the early centuries of Christian conflict as times of semantics and wasted opportunities need to consider how seriously Muslims take these matters, especially the definitions of the Sonship of Christ. There is a vigour in Islamic theology which is easy to dismiss as simplistic, but clergy who stopped reading and thinking seriously about the Person of Christ as soon as they left theological college would not make good Christian apologists.¹⁴²

Unfortunately, much if not all of Grand Mufti Al-Khalili's theological thought remains in Arabic. The main access we get to his writings in English are mediated through the religious diplomacy of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. In the last 10 years, however, Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed al Salmi (a descendant of the famed blind scholar Nur al-Din Al-Salmi discussed above), in his role as the interfaith ambassador for the Omani government, has done much to promote a better understanding of the Ibadi faith on the global stage. His most recent work focussed on religious tolerance.¹⁴³

Al-Salmi speaks of the Ibadi theological response to the Christian community as taking two approaches. The first is to invite Christians to worship together with the Muslim community and second is a call on Muslims to treat Christians fairly. He cites suras 3:64¹⁴⁴ and 29:46¹⁴⁵ to support this dual approach.¹⁴⁶

Embedded in this view is a humility which insists on people dealing with one another with respect, dignity and equality. However, Muslims must remain true to their faith and

¹⁴² *Ibid.* p. 316.

¹⁴³ Al Salmi, A. (2016). *Religious Tolerance: A Vision*. Hildesheim, Germany: OLMS.

¹⁴⁴ Sura 3:64. O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah.

¹⁴⁵ Sura 29:46. And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 212.

not compromise their beliefs.¹⁴⁷ Al-Salmi cites Sura 5:82-83¹⁴⁸ which affirms that Christians are closest to Muslims because of their learning and previous reception of divine revelation, and stresses the importance of the 'common word'¹⁴⁹ ethos which seeks the agreement of Christians and Muslims that they have both been called to celebrate the unity of God.¹⁵⁰

Conflict between Christianity and Islam thus is caused by a confluence of theological and political interests. The antipathy between Muslims and Christians is essentially caused by misunderstandings held by Muslims that Christians are polytheists and therefore idolaters, and that Christians see Muslims as supporting a heresy which diminishes the role and identity of Christ. These views have encouraged the polemical literature and attitudes which Al-Salmi feels are contradictory to the teachings of the Holy Qur'an.¹⁵¹ Al-Salmi argues that these narratives have been co-opted by political powers who seek to assert hegemony and ultimately have led to the suggestion of a "clash of civilizations". The Omani experience of this began first with the Portuguese occupation of the coastal areas in the 15th Century and then with the colonial power of Britain, who intervened in Omani affairs when they judged it was in their interests to do so.

4.4 Introducing the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA).

The Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs was the first government organisation set up to oversee the religious concerns of Oman. As the number of non-Muslim expatriates increased along with the economy,¹⁵² the limitations of applying Islamic law and

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 212.

¹⁴⁸ Sura 5:82-83. You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah ; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, "We are Christians." That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.

¹⁴⁹ A 'common word' refers to a Qur'anic verse, sura 3:64, which says "O people of the Scripture. Come to a common word between us and you". which formed the title of an open letter sent to Pope Benedict calling for mutual respect between Christians and Muslims. For the whole text of the Common Word letter see Thompson, A. (2011). *Christianity in the UAE*. (Dubai: Motivate Meda. pp. 179-194.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 214.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 218.

¹⁵² See Table on *Statistics for the Church in Oman* on page 87 for an overview of population statistics of the Christian expatriate population.

theology to the non-Muslim community became increasingly problematic. In response to this, as well as the new constitution of 1996, a new ministry was created. They renamed the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Justice to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA). The Ministry of Justice became an organization in its own right. This happened in 1997.

The primary role of the MERA is to provide imams, teachers and oversee their training for the mosques. It also oversees the building and maintenance of mosques throughout the land.

Their goal is to have a policy of not approving more than one mosque within one and half kilometres of another in order to avoid competition. This is because alliances and friendships would be displayed through mosque membership and attendance. Men would sometimes switch mosques when there was a dispute, making a point of displaying their differences and arguments through their unwillingness to pray together.¹⁵³

Intriguingly, the MERA also have oversight of approving the *wakil*, the legal agents who manage the water distribution of the village *falaj* system.¹⁵⁴ In an arid and desert climate, the wise and diplomatic management of water as a scarce resource is essential for maintaining harmony in the villages.

In addition to this they also have the responsibility of monitoring and supervising the non-Muslim community's religious requirements. Given that the school of Ibadi Islam has little to say about the Christian faith, the MERA chose to work closely with the non-Muslim communities who were recognised by royal decree. On the Christian front these included the Roman Catholic church and the Protestant Church of Oman (PCO). The Orthodox churches have never been recognised formally by the Omani government, so they were co-opted under the umbrella of the PCO. We will write more on how the MERA relate to the Churches in the next chapter.

¹⁵³ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. p. 41.

¹⁵⁴ Jones, J & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p. 56.

More significant is the question of the influence of Ibadi theology on the identity of the Omani people. In particular, the founding constitution of the state appears to permit freedom of religion (see below), but it does not specify Ibadi Islam as the “norm” which informs the laws of Oman.

4.5 The Constitution of Oman

The Omani constitution was ratified into law in 1996. The impetus for the late arrival of the Constitution seems to be derived from a near fatal accident involving Sultan Qaboos in 1995.¹⁵⁵ The subsequent fears and uncertainty over the future of Oman encouraged Sultan Qaboos to enshrine the values and identity of Oman and ensure its continuity by passing the constitution. (Sultan Qaboos came to power on the 30th July, 1970 after a coup in which he took control over a bitterly divided nation. Through the exercise of tribal diplomacy, shrewd strategy and military successes, Qaboos triumphed in uniting Oman under his leadership). The relationship between the Sultan and Ibadism is symbiotic, the one depends on the other when it comes to the application of the constitution. In particular there is a clause referring to a process which would ensure a smooth succession after Sultan Qaboos.

Embedded in the constitution is the apparent commitment to protecting religious freedom, articles 28 and 29 in particular are relevant to the Christian community.

Article (28) The freedom to practice religious rites according to recognised customs is protected, provided it does not violate the public order or contradict morals.

Article (29) The freedom of opinion and expression thereof through speech, writing and other means of expression is guaranteed within the limits of the Law.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Limbert, M. (2010). *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory and Social Life in an Oman Town*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. pp. 173-174.

¹⁵⁶ Taken from Walsh, P.N. (ed.) (2013). *Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Muslim Majority Countries. A Comparative Analysis*. New York: Nova. Pages unnumbered.

The inclusion of religious freedom in the constitution is carefully checked by the clause 'provided that that it does not violate public order or contradict morals'. This is understood to be a reference to Islamic law as defined by the Ibadi school. This suggests that there is a clear boundary circumscribing religious freedom for Christians in Oman. Discerning this boundary however has been problematic for this researcher.

In the government media controlled discourse and in talking with Omani subjects, I have noticed that they take great care to downplay any implied sectarianism. They speak of Islam as one religion as opposed to Ibadism. Care is taken not to identify Sunni and Shia forms of Islam present in Oman, rather there is an emphasis on national unity, one which could be compared to the British slogan of "under God and under Queen". The role of the sultan is clearly one of being a unifying symbol.

Chapter 5.

5.1 Christian – Muslim Encounters in Oman

During the 16th century, the Portuguese¹⁵⁷ were ruthless in pursuing total control over their trading routes, conquering under the banner of Christianity (as defined by the Roman Catholic church at that time) and King. Given the bitterly divided intra-Islamic conflict going on in Oman at that time, both between the Imamate and the Sultan and between the different tribal confederations. The Portuguese were able to control the coastal towns and maritime trade within a short period of time.¹⁵⁸ With their superior weaponry, strategically placed forts, the use of torture and a ruthless passion fuelled by the desire for financial success, coupled with a Christian-based world view that it was part of their mission to ‘civilize’ the world,¹⁵⁹ Omanis experienced Christianity as the religion of the powerful.

Given this primary negative exposure to Christians via the Portuguese Navy and Marines, it is surprising that there was any good will remaining towards future Christian outsiders and it would certainly explain any hostility and suspicion that the missionaries encountered in the 19th century. Could the general lack of hostility in today’s context imply that there is something inherent within Ibadi theology that over-rides previous experiences of the religious ‘other’, regardless of whether they were positive or negative experiences? Or alternatively, does the Omani forbearance of religious minorities simply reflect an economically pragmatic trading philosophy rooted in a long maritime history? The following two chapters seek to examine these questions by looking at more recent

¹⁵⁷ There are very few references in English documenting the Portuguese presence in Oman. The best known one is Serjeant, R.B. (1974). *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast: Hadrami Chronicles*. London: Clarendon Press. Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing, makes some references to Portuguese literature as does Floor, W. (2015). *Muscat: City, Society and Trade*. Washington DC: Mage Publications. Yet much remains in the Portuguese language.

¹⁵⁸ See Heard-Bey, F. (2004). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Media. Hawley, D. (1970). *The Trucial States*. London: George Allen & Unwin. Jones, J & Ridout, N. (2015). *A History of Modern Oman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Badger, G.P (trans). (2010). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman by Salil Ibn Razik*. Whitefish, Montana: Reprint by Kessinger Publications.

¹⁵⁹ Stephens, H.M. (1897). *Albuquerque: The Early Portuguese Settlement in India*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.

Christian historical encounters and then documenting the experience of the contemporary church.

5.2 The British

In an interview,¹⁶⁰ an American scholar suggested that the most significant factor in the Omani attitude toward Christianity was the rise of the British as a naval power in the region. He argued that the status of the Christian church in Oman today is a direct result of the British control of trade, and their involvement and engagement with the ruling family. The following examines the evidence for this opinion.

The prevailing regional power in the Arabian Gulf during the next two centuries was a result of competing Western nations seeking to secure a lucrative trading shipping route between India, the Gulf and the West. After the Portuguese Navy dwindled, the Dutch dominated the seas establishing colonies to the East, particularly in Indonesia. Their supremacy was soon challenged and replaced by the British. When it came to the Arabian Gulf, the British were not really interested in establishing colonies.¹⁶¹ Instead, they were seeking to protect the shipping routes of the East India Company, seeking to secure this through the use of treaties with the local Arab rulers. The British also brought with them a different experience of the Christian religion to the Omanis. This time, instead of invasion and violence, Christianity was present in the context of trade and shipping.

The earliest example we have of this is Philip Wylde, a representative of the East India Company, when he concluded a treaty with the Imam Nasir bin Murshid at Sohar in 1645, which included the clause: '*That we may have license to exercise our own religion*'.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Interview with JW (Feb 2017).

¹⁶¹ See the following for a comprehensive description of the British Presence in the Gulf. Onley, J. (2007). *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth Century Gulf*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kelly, J.B.(1964). *Eastern Arabian Frontiers*. London: Faber & Faber. Floor, W. (2007). *The Persian Gulf: The Rise of the Gulf Arabs. The Politics of Trade on the Persian Littoral. 1747-1792*. Washington, D.C. Mage Publishers.

¹⁶² Skeet, I. (1974). *Muscat and Oman: The End of an Era*. London: Faber & Faber. p. 212.

The Omanis also inserted (reflecting that this was a more equal partnership in which the Omanis could have a say about their own affairs) that '[n]o Christian shall have any license in any part of this Kingdom, besides the English to supply this port'.¹⁶³

In short, there was a mutual economic benefit for the English Christians to be allowed to worship within Oman. In practice, the Christian presence was mainly limited to the coastal region known as the Al-Batinah. There was still a deep antipathy towards the Christian presence and this sometimes led to extreme consequences as the following story reveals:

Richard Blakeney visited Muscat in 1814; he tells us in a *Journal of an Oriental Voyage*¹⁶⁴ that the forts were in a ruinous state, and that when a sailing boat capsized and the Royal Navy rescued thirty-two passengers, the eight Omani women among them were put to death¹⁶⁵ since they had been seen by Christians¹⁶⁶

During the 18th and 19th Centuries, a series of treaties were signed between the Omani Rulers and the British in the Gulf, consolidating British interests in the Arabian Gulf. This was often at the expense of the Ottoman Empire who also considered the Arabian Gulf as part of their domain. Local Arab rulers were often in a predicament of not knowing who to defer to in matters of regional interests. By the time of the oil discoveries however, the Ottoman Empire was in decline and there was little they could do by way of responding to British military might. By the 20th Century, the main consistent power in the region therefore was Great Britain, who patrolled the Gulf with the Royal Navy. Reverend Pennings of the Arabian Mission sums up the political context of the British arrival and presence:

The English gained the balance of power by the suppression of piracy during the years 1808 until 1865, which has finally ended in a state of affairs strongly

¹⁶³ Skeet (1974). *Ibid.* p. 212.

¹⁶⁴ Blakeney, R. (1841). *Journal of an Oriental Voyage* London.

¹⁶⁵ This anecdote is hard to take at face value given the value that Omanis traditionally give to their women. Is this an example of an imperialist and orientalist narrative which exaggerates native barbarity?

¹⁶⁶ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. p. 10.

resembling a protectorate. During the last year the affairs of the Gulf have been the subject of much political discussion, seeing Russia is supposed at times to cast a longing eye towards the Gulf of Persia. On the other hand the English would hardly be expected to welcome a rival here owing to the proximity of India . . . The Gulf is growing in importance because of the Baghdad Railway, which promises to become a reality at last.¹⁶⁷

During this time, the policy of the British was mainly to leave the local ruling tribes to manage their own affairs, only intervening if called upon by the leading sheikh, or if their own trading interests and shipping routes were threatened. This meant that tribal culture and traditions continued uninterrupted. The British also made a nominal attempt to respect Islam as the following vignette demonstrates:

Captain W.F. Owen, commanding H.M.S. *Leven*, visited Muscat in December 1823. In his narrative of *Voyages to explore the Shores of Arabia, Africa and Madagascar*¹⁶⁸ he describes how when Sayyid Sa'id was due to come on board, the crew hung pigs brought for meat in nets over the side to avoid offending the Sayyid's Islamic sensibilities. Their squealing resounded all around the harbor, amusing everyone including the Sayyid, who courteously received from Owen a Bible in Arabic, offering in exchange a gold hilted sword.¹⁶⁹

The Omanis have a strong religious and cultural awareness and they were determined to maintain this as part of their historical identity. Despite the Omanis being invaded by the Persians, the Portuguese and the British:

what they lost through religious dogma was gained through cultural dictum, the 'myth of origin'. They believe that they are the lords of the land, the original inhabitants of the territory, a right that has been passed on from one generation to another since ancient times. . . And to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population in Oman, they wear a dagger in the centre of the waist, a symbol

¹⁶⁷ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1913). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 84:20.

¹⁶⁸ Owen, W. F. (1833). *Voyages to explore the Shores of Arabia, Africa and Madagascar*. London: R. Bentley.

¹⁶⁹ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. p. 13.

of manliness and freedom. The Baluch in Oman make the dagger and the Ibadis wear it.¹⁷⁰

5.3 Varied Encounters

So what did Christians experience in the early part of the 20th Century? The experiences varied as the summary below reveals.

Christian travellers in remote parts of Oman would report different responses from the interior tribes, who would address them as *nasarani*, which is one of the Qur'anic terms used for Christian. Wilfred Thesiger, the legendary explorer who travelled through the empty quarter, reports that there were quite a few times when he had to move through the region by stealth as there were extreme tribal elements who would kill him outright simply because he was '*Nasarani*'.¹⁷¹ Further north in the Gulf, Eleanor Calverly, a missionary doctor with the Arabian mission, described how she would be followed through the streets by taunting children chanting the word *nasarani* as a term of abuse.¹⁷² Sir Percy Cox on his travels through the interior of Oman noted how he was addressed by the local people.

They always applied to me the word '*Nasarani*'. For instance "Good morning O Christian" or "Hey Christian there is no road that way". The term did not appear to be used disdainfully, as the speakers were quite friendly, and I took it to be a relic of Wahhabi fanaticism,¹⁷³ which was predominant in this district in the last century.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. p. 74.

¹⁷¹ Thesiger, W. (2007 Centenary Edition). *Arabian Sands*. Dubai: Motivate Publishers.

¹⁷² Calverley, E.T. (1958). *My Arabian Days and Nights*. New York: Thomas. Y. Corwell Company.

¹⁷³ Omani history reflects a struggle between the tribes who subscribed to Ibadism and those who endorsed the Saudi sponsored version of the Hanbali school of Islam which came to be described as Wahhabi. See Badger, G.P (trans). (2010). *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman by Salil Ibn Razik*. Whitefish, Montana: Reprint by Kessinger Publications for an Omani recollection of Wahhabi violence. For amore general introduction to the Wahhabis see Commins, D. (2009). *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*. London: I.B. Tauris. Also Delong-Baas N.J. (2004). *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. At the heart of Wahhabism was a demand to return to the purity of original Islam and among other things this was interpreted as a call by some to eradicate people of other religions. This clearly did not bode well for Christian-Muslim Relations. They were equally hostile to other expressions of the Islamic faith especially the Sufis.

¹⁷⁴ Ward, P. (1987). *Travels in Oman*. London: The Oleander Press Ltd. p. 315.

It would be easy to dismiss the historical encounters as anachronistic accounts due to the modernization of Oman, but in 1979 Dale Eickelman, an American scholar, described his experience in a remote town in the interior of Oman. He was invited by the tribal Sheikh to his guest house, along with several other visitors from outlying villages. Eickelman describes the following morning:

Well before dawn, these other visitors rose for morning prayer, and one of them asked me if I intended to perform my ablutions. 'Not yet' I replied, and went back to sleep. Some minutes later the Sheikh prodded me gently with the muzzle of his machine gun. In Oman, after all, it is bad manners to touch a sleeping person with one's hands, and the Sheikh was a model of politeness. 'Are you sick?' he asked. Half asleep I mumbled I was Christian and that we pray differently. The Sheikh was puzzled. They had no cause to think about any faith other than Islam and such terms as 'Muslim' and 'Christian' scarcely entered their minds.¹⁷⁵

The conclusion one draws from these anecdotes is that much of what informs Christian-Muslim encounters in Oman is reflected in the amount of exposure the two groups have to one another. The latter story suggests that even in modern day Oman, Christian-Muslim encounters are limited in the interior of Oman and that mutual awareness of each other is only of interest and relevance in the port cities which engage in international maritime trade.

5.4 The Arabian Mission

The modern history of the church in Oman flows out of the work of a remarkable group of men and women who came to Oman when it was still a poor and undeveloped country, with no wealth to speak of. Set against the backdrop of British imperial interests, these American visitors navigated a path that set them apart from the colonial agenda.

¹⁷⁵ Found in Ziaka, A. (ed). (2014). *On Ibadism*. Hildesheim, Germany: OLMS. p. 152.

Instead of seeking to oppress the Omanis through colonialization, economic exploitation or military might, they believed they might win their hearts and souls through Christian mission. These were the missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Church in America. They came to serve in the region under the umbrella of what became known as the Arabian Mission. The motivation of the missionaries was deeply theological. They had a deep conviction to fulfil the great commission of Jesus Christ which was ‘to go into the world and make disciples of all nations’.¹⁷⁶ Hitherto, Arabia was seen as a neglected mission field and Islam was seen as a challenge to the church. Their mission to evangelise was partly motivated by the Biblical belief that once all the nations had received the Gospel, it would then usher in the return of Christ as Messiah and thus the Gospel would ultimately triumph over Islam. The initial efforts of the missionaries therefore focused on evangelism and distribution of the Bible and tracts in Arabic. Polemical encounters between the missionaries and local imams saw an emphasis on the role of theological apologetics in debate, a tactic in which the local Islamic leaders were quick to respond to and develop their own resources to counter the claims of Christianity.¹⁷⁷ The massive failure of this “proclamation” strategy, in that there was no mass conversion of the local Arabs to Christianity, led the missionaries to a different theological strategy. Instead the emphasis shifted from “proclamation” to “service”, and the resulting caring and compassionate ministry of the medical mission finally led to some fruit in the form of a very small number of conversions. Even then, in an interview with an Omani scholar,¹⁷⁸ the scholar argued that there were no converts who were properly recognized as Omani by him. Those who did convert from Islam to Christianity were those who were on the periphery of Omani society and tribal life, such as lepers and converts who were from slave families or Arab families from outside of Oman.

The records of the Arabian Mission are largely documented in newsletters sent home to its supporters in the USA and in reports of its church councils, which are bound together in the volumes referred to in this work as *Neglected Arabia/Arabia Calling*.¹⁷⁹ As primary

¹⁷⁶ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁷⁷ Green, N. (2014). *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with AM (May 2014).

¹⁷⁹ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling 1892-1962. The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. (1988). Oxford: Redwood.

documents, we can understand that their main function was to raise prayer awareness and sympathy for the mission's cause which would result in American readers giving financially. In short, it was a tool for fund raising, with the ultimate aim of creating a church for Omani converts from Islam. With this in mind, the critical reader would look for bias in how the work of the mission is presented and how Islam is portrayed. The potential for misrepresentation of missionary endeavours would have been restricted by the flow of regular visitors from the USA, who came to report and assess the work and ethical code held by the Christian workers, who would clearly be in violation of their values if they were exposed as lying or exaggerating in their narratives back home.

Yet, the missionaries were by-and-large diligent and intelligent in recording their observations, albeit with a Western perspective.¹⁸⁰ The academic and intellectual vigour required of the medical profession in the USA meant that the missionaries naturally applied the same standard of learning to their reporting of Islamic history and observations of contemporary culture. They represented the best of the orientalist scholarship which was later so savagely criticized by Edward Said.¹⁸¹ There were, however, blind spots in their reporting. For example, the records of the Arabian Mission largely ignore, or only superficially acknowledge, the experiences of their staff from India, and do not provide many first-hand reports from their Arab colporteurs.

So where did the Arabian Mission come from and how did they relate to the Omani people?

¹⁸⁰ The Missionary reports portray "the natives" as in need of the Gospel message, the abject poverty, the need for medical aid, the description of Islam as an anthropological curiosity all reinforce the subconscious superiority of Western education and culture held by a number of authors. The image of the Islamic world as 'backwards' and 'lost' is reinforced in the minds of their readers in the USA.

¹⁸¹ Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books. Said exposes the uncritical assumptions held by Western commentators. For example, in the vocabulary and concepts used to refer to the "Middle East". East of where? The "Middle" in relation to what? There is commonly no attempt by Orientalist scholarship to insert themselves into the mindset and perceptions of the people who are merely the objects of Western study.

5.5 Origins of the Arabian Mission

The Arabian Mission was the brainchild of John Lansing, who was the Professor of Old Testament languages at the Seminary of the Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey. In this role, he was able to pass on his enthusiasm and knowledge of the Arabic language and his desire to see the Gospel go to Arabia to the students under his charge.¹⁸²

Three of these students were to rise to Lansing's challenge to travel to Arabia as missionaries. They were James Cantine, Samuel Zwemer and Philip Phelps in 1889. Of these three, Samuel Zwemer went onto becoming the tireless public figure of Arabian missions. With a prodigious output of scholarly and personal writings which informed the American public about Islam and Arabia, as well as a somewhat reckless schedule of medical outreach journeys across the Arabian Gulf (he was not a trained medical doctor), Zwemer pioneered the way for other (qualified) medical practitioners to follow him out into the mission field.

5.6 The Influence of Samuel Zwemer

Zwemer was instrumental in educating the Western public of the intricacies of Islamic theology and pioneered the Western study of Islam through his writings, not least through the widely respected academic journal *The Muslim World*. In an age where few Americans travelled outside of the USA, the writing of the missionaries became a significant window in which not only prayers supporters and the general public viewed the Islamic world, but it also became source material for academia. As Zwemer became more immersed in Arabia, so his understanding and sympathy for the local people grew. In a National geographic article, he described the Sultan and the Omani people in the following terms:

They are remarkably free from fanaticism, simple in their habits, and wonderful in their hospitality. Most of them belong to the Abadi sects which has many beliefs

¹⁸² Scudder R. L. (1998). *The Arabian Mission's story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans. p. 139.

in common with Christianity, and the experience of our missionaries has been that the people are not only accessible, but willing to learn, and many of them not only eager for medical help, but for teaching.¹⁸³

In particular, the missionaries were a conduit to the West in first highlighting and then understanding the distinctiveness of Ibadi Islam. In the early days of the Mission, their awareness of the Ibadis was still evolving as the following letter reveals:

The sect native to this region is designated by the name of Abadha, which is one of the six divisions of the Khawajri, or "Seceders." The Khawajri first came into existence in AD 655-660 when Ali was Khalifah. Later they took refuge in Oman. Someone has named this sect the "Calvinists of Islam".¹⁸⁴ Their doctrines are gloomy and morose, hard and fanatical. Many of them are strict fatalists and hold that only that God has decided as to their lasting fate, but because of this decree their life here, whether for good or for evil, is not to be taken seriously into account. They declare that of the seventy-three sects of Islam theirs only is the orthodox, and the general body of Moslems are unbelievers. . . In practice they are more liberal, and largely so because of their sinful natures and appetites. . . They are quite liberal sometimes in the interpretation of the Koran. Many passages interpreted literally by other sects are by them declared to be figurative. On the whole they hold less strongly to the commentaries and traditions, and are therefore more easily approached on many subjects. Their ceremonies are much simpler than in other sects, and there is less external display on occasions such as the birth of a child or funerals.¹⁸⁵

Zwemer is also acknowledged to have been a vital contributor to the evolving theology and praxis of Christian Mission. A crisis provoked by the chaos of the First World War caused many theologians to rethink their somewhat sunny optimism for the future growth of the church and their assumed colonial advantage in bringing the Gospel to

¹⁸³ National Geographic (1911) January. pp. 88-89.

¹⁸⁴ The interpretation of Calvin's doctrine of predestination led to church communities characterised by legalism and dogmatism. Such beliefs emphasized "right" behaviour which was linked as a prerequisite for salvation.

¹⁸⁵ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1904). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. Vol 50:7.

developing nations. Samuel Zwemer led the charge that 'against the backdrop of the brutality of World War I and ensuing economic depressions, traditional nineteenth century missionary methods were inadequate'.¹⁸⁶

The first Western missionary who sought to be intentionally resident in Oman is widely believed to be a former Anglican Bishop. The Right Reverend Thomas Valpy French did not last long in Muscat, but his brief foray had lasting impact. The only other resident Christian in Muscat at that time was recorded to be a retired Indian doctor.¹⁸⁷

Shortly after arriving in Muscat, Bishop French wrote to the Church Missionary Society in 1891 describing his experience of the Omani people.

There is much outward observance of religious forms; there are crowds of mosques; rather a large portion of educated men and women too; the latter take special interest in religious questions, and sometimes lead the opposition to the Gospel. They have large girls' schools and female teachers. There is a leper's village nigh at hand to the town. I occupied for the second time this morning a shed they have allotted to me, well roofed over; and these poor lepers, men and women gather in fair numbers to listen. Chiefly however, I reach the educated by the roadside or in a house portico, sometimes even in a mosque, which is for me a new experience. Still there is considerable shyness, occasionally bitter opposition. Yet bright faces of welcome sometimes cheer me, and help me on and I am only surprised that so much is borne with. I have made special efforts to get into the mosques, but most often this is refused. The Moolahs and Muallims seem afraid of coming to help me on in my translations, or in encountering with me the more difficult passages in the best classics. This has surprised me and disconcerted me rather, but I have been saved in the main from anything like depression.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Vander Werf, L.L. (1934). *Christian Mission to Muslims*. Pasadena: William Carey Library. p. 254.

¹⁸⁷ Birks, H. (1895). *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French*. London.

¹⁸⁸ *Church Missionary Intelligencer Journal*. May & July 1891: 350.

5.7 Assessing the Impact of the Arabian Mission on interfaith relations in Oman

Some commentators point to the medical work of the missionaries as being the singular, most-important contribution to the development of the church in Oman.¹⁸⁹

The influence of the hospitals at Matrah and Muscat were felt across the jointly held territories of the Sultan and the Imam, as people would undertake many days travelling in order to receive medical attention from the mission hospitals.¹⁹⁰

The *Neglected Arabia*¹⁹¹ journals contains photographs of some of the unfortunate patients who travelled in the heat, by camel or donkey, across mountains and harsh terrain, in order to receive relief from their pain.

Skinner was reviewing specifically the medical work of the Arabian Mission, but in truth the impact of the Mission went far beyond the walls of the hospitals.¹⁹²

In a poignant reflection on the golden anniversary of the Mission, Zwemer writes a summary of what had been accomplished in the first fifty years:

From 1889 until the present year, no less than eighty missionaries went to Arabia under our mission for longer or shorter terms of service. Seven hospitals have become centres for ever widening influence, so that in one year 237,000 received physicians' care. Hundreds of Arab children have gone out from our schools and have built of what they have learned of Christian teaching into the lives of their people. Tens of thousands of copies of the scriptures have been distributed and thousands of religious books to leaven the thought life of the Arabs. . . . There is a marked decrease of fanaticism everywhere.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Skinner, R. F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. Scudder R. L. (1998) *The Arabian Mission's story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmans.

¹⁹⁰ Skinner, R. F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press.

¹⁹¹ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1904). The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition. Oxford: Redwood.

¹⁹² Skinner, R. F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press.

¹⁹³ Zwemer, S & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. p. 140.

5.8 Modernisation

The influence of the Mission was manifested in many ways, not least through the introduction of modern medicine, education and a pioneering use of technology. All this drew the fascination, support and sometimes superstitious fears of the local people. The Sultan himself endorsed the medical innovations brought into his country. Dr Thoms recalls that 'the Sultan's visit to inspect the X-ray machine was commemorated by an X-ray picture of his and the doctor's hands in a firm and friendly clasp. An electric generator, the gift of Hope College students, supplied power for the entire hospital. An electric knife added greatly to the operating room equipment'.¹⁹⁴

Western technology continued to trickle in – a cause for comment by Zwemer when he describes the changes in his own career.

Lastly, we now face entirely different conditions from those that existed fifty years ago. Everything has changed, except for the natural scenery and the climate. Even these have been modified by western civilisation and architecture. The camel has given way to the motor car; the palm tree is dwarfed by the wireless station; the radio set and the cinema are taking the place of the majlis and the coffee shop.¹⁹⁵

The impact of the American Mission on Christian Muslim relations is significant. The memories of the Omani people, both on the coast and in the interior, are ones of deep abiding affection. The Director of the Al Amana Centre¹⁹⁶ recalled in 2014 how he and an American student were travelling through the interior when the student required urgent medical attention at a local village clinic. When the villagers heard that they were linked with the American Mission they came in their droves to visit and support the two Americans as they recuperated. The Director recalls with amazement the latent

¹⁹⁴ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1940). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 192:11

¹⁹⁵ Zwemer, S & Cantine, J. (1938). *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer Days fifty Years Ago in Arabia*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company. p. 144.

¹⁹⁶ The Al Amana Centre is the main surviving ministry of the RCA Mission to Arabia in Oman today. Started as a school for rescued slaves by Peter Zwemer, the building is now home to an interfaith dialogue and peace making centre.

gratitude for the memories of the American medical tours which came into the interior from the Mission's Matrah hospital.

This reflects a similar experience decades earlier, when Wells Thoms travelled to the interior at the request of the Imam. Along the way, he discovered that the wife of his guide had been treated by his father some 28 years earlier. 'When I told her he was my father, she wept for joy. She said they had never known a man like him.'¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1943). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. Vol 1:3.

Chapter 6.

6.1 A Local Omani Church?

Despite the restriction by royal decree that there should be no proselytization, the Oman branch of the Arabian Mission was the only one across the region that established a church for the indigenous peoples. There is, however, a tantalising suggestion that native Christians were already present in the region. In a description of a meeting between the native Christians and Anglicans who had come over from the Asian sub-continent for the express purpose of consecrating the burial ground of Bishop Thomas Valpy French, they also 'at the request of the native Christians consecrated their new burial ground which was given by the Sultan for that purpose a short time ago'.¹⁹⁸ We do not know who these 'native' Christians are who clearly preceded Thomas Valpy French. That they were known to the sultan is evident by the favour he showed them in granting land.

In time the missionaries built up two congregations, there was one in Muscat and one in Matrah. The weekly pattern of worship is described as below:

The Muscat-Matrah Christian community is happily church centred. We all worshipped together in Muscat on Sunday mornings, separated from Matrah by three miles. The responsive reading was announced a week ahead and then read every day in morning prayers. The group participated well in hymn singing. Even semi-literate members of the congregation were enthusiastic participants. Sunday afternoon on the veranda of the Knox Memorial Hospital in Matrah, the gospel was preached to hospital patients and their friends and families. Ministers, doctors or convert staff led. A similar service was held in the Muscat hospital. Sunday evening hymn sings in both places closed with Bible reading and prayer. Leper and tuberculosis patients with their relatives had their own service on Monday afternoons under the shade of a tree.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1900). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. p. 3.

¹⁹⁹ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1958). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 246:12.

In a rare vintage documentary of the Arabian Mission called *Wells Thoms: Missionary*,²⁰⁰ we get a view of the early Omani church congregation gathering outside under the shade of a tree, listening to scripture reading, using book holders to keep the Bible off the dirty ground.

Perhaps it is the leper colony which is the most inspiring and compassionate ministry in which the Mission engaged. The success of the mission here may be a reflection that there was no opposition from the Omani people to this ministry. This could reflect the apathy towards the leper colony, who are marginalized as “outsiders”, resulting from the fear caused by their pitiful physical condition.

Despite the veneer of success in planting an indigenous church, there were deep rooted problems inherent in these congregations which contained the seeds for their eventual demise. Lewis Scudder²⁰¹ highlights some of the issues:

All but one of the Matrah Christians were Persian or Baluch with a Shia' background. They were emotional, volatile, superstitious and more or less amoral, and they understood us, the missionaries, better than we understood them. They had inexhaustible resources for getting what they wanted.

In Muscat on the contrary, most of the Christians were older Arabs. Those few who were of Persian background toned down their emotionalism and adjusted to a more Arab way of life. All of them worked for the Mission School, the Church or the Women's Hospital. Muscat Christians were quieter, more dignified, more polite, stricter to morals and much more apt to do what was right without consulting the missionaries. They were independent. If they didn't want to come to church, they didn't care what the missionaries thought, and they looked down on the Matrah folk who always did what they thought was expected of them, while at the same time resenting the fact that Matrah people earned bigger

²⁰⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2UwDIT7EuQ>. Accessed 20th February 2016.

²⁰¹ Scudder was born in 1941 to missionary parents who served in Kuwait. He lived in Arabia during a time of massive political and economic upheaval. His love of the Arab people and their language saw him remain in the region, serving in various countries including Lebanon, Kuwait, and Bahrain. He went onto to write the definitive history of the Arabian Mission. See Scudder R. L. (1998). *The Arabian Mission's story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdman.

salaries. These two groups never really united and got along. We tried to make them one community, but we never succeeded. On the surface things looked good, but underneath we always had two communities each of which considered itself superior.²⁰²

The makeup of the Arab congregation was recalled as mainly non-Omani Arabs. In an email, one missionary worker recalls:

I do not recall any link to Omani tribes in the Muscat church. There was, however, one clear divide between those who lived in Matrah and those who lived in Muscat. Most of the Matrah crowd were of Persian origin, some of whom had come from Bahrain to help the missionaries and were of Shi'a background. A few others from Matrah had a Baluchi background. The only exception that I can recall to the Persian and Baluchi backgrounds were the lepers who converted. The Muscat Christians were Arab but I'm not aware of any tribal origin unless, for some reason they lacked it or were distant from it, and therefore it was easier to convert. The two groups were like oil and water, and at times a challenge for the American missionaries.

The Autumn 1958 issue of *Arabia Calling* (#246) cover picture of the consistory of the Muscat Church speaks a lot of the divide. The members were:

Mubarek - Matrah, Persian background originally from Bahrain

Rubaiya - Muscat, Iraqi Arab who married an Omani Arab convert (Mariam)

Khoda Rasoon - Matrah, Persian background originally from Bahrain (he eventually returned to Bahrain and became a Shi'a religious leader)

Wadia - Muscat, Arab but, if memory is correct, had been a slave. His wife did not convert.

Hajar - Matrah, Persian background

²⁰² Scudder R. L. (1998). *The Arabian Mission's story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son*. Michigan: Eerdmann. pp. 222-223.

Lateefa - Muscat, Arab (daughter of Rubaiya & Mariam)

Note how carefully divided the consistory was; i.e. 3 members from Matrah, 3 from Muscat.²⁰³

The list of names revealed above actually shows that although some of the Christians were Omani citizens, in the sense of having an Omani passport, none of them were from mainstream Omani tribal families. They were from migrant communities, had a slavery background and non-Ibadi backgrounds.

This suggests that the Omani tribal norms were strong enough to prevent conversion from Ibadi Islam to another faith.²⁰⁴ Christianity in the West often stressed the importance of the individual choosing to convert, without the need to refer to the wider family or community. That concept is simply alien in a tribal culture where all important decisions are made by consensus, with the family and tribe being consulted through various forms of the “shura”.

This fledgling Christian community was never a big one. There was never a mass conversion from Islam, but rather a trickle of one or two converts over time. As late as 1958, the Mission could only report that ‘[t]wo converts from Islam were Baptized at Easter 1957, making a total of twenty-nine baptized converts. There are fifteen Christian children who represent the future of church and who explain our deep concern for their education’.²⁰⁵

One subject interviewed for this research recalls growing up as a child in this church. He was the son of the pastor, and recalls that

what made the church unique was that on any given Sunday most of the people were Muslim. They came to the church because they believed the pastor was a man of God and they were interested to hear what he had to say. They were not

²⁰³ Private email sent by PK (August 2nd 2016).

²⁰⁴ The nature of family and tribes with their close bound relationships and the zealous guarding of family reputations (honour) is a formidable threat to any Omani who wants to step outside tradition and adopt a new identity. Social exclusion would normally impact a convert's marriage options, job prospects etc.

²⁰⁵ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1958). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. 246:13.

interested in becoming Christian which was very difficult.²⁰⁶ There were lots of obstacles to overcome if they became Christian not least the threat of being ostracised by their family and friends.²⁰⁷

The first modern church building was recorded in the *Neglected Arabia* archive as the Consistory of the Muscat church, and was intended to be a home for the indigenous Omani congregation. This old Mission Church built in the 1930s was dedicated to the memory of Peter Zwemer. Later on, the Matrah hospital built a chapel in 1956 which is still used by expatriate congregations to this day.

The ambition and concern of the American Mission was that:

They look forward to the day when there shall be a truly national Church of Christ in Oman. A church of Arab Christians working with the world wide church. . . we need responsible national leadership. What can we do as a Mission to develop such leadership? What do we leave that is permanent, lasting, should we leave tomorrow? The church MUST be indigenous.²⁰⁸

Mr Kapenga, a church pastor in Oman²⁰⁹, wrote to his supporters of his confidence for the future church. 'As for the future, the church in Muscat will live on even though the Mission would move out. Quite a few Christians will also move out, but a remnant of Omanis would remain, stand firm, sure in their faith and devoted to Christ'.²¹⁰

The ambitions of the Mission for a national church to date never came to pass. The Consistory has gone now and the fledgling Omani congregation that worshipped there has long since dissipated. Among several reasons given for the demise of the Omani congregations was the failure of the Mission to establish local leaders; the final pastor or

²⁰⁶ The religious laws of Oman include apostasy which discourages Muslims from converting to other faiths. The reality is that the state rarely intervenes in such cases. The experiences of converts are largely shaped by the reaction of individuals in the family who may draw unwelcome and hostile attention to the convert.

²⁰⁷ Interview with PK (2014).

²⁰⁸ *Neglected Arabia / Arabia Calling* (1988). *The Arabian Mission. Archive Edition*. Oxford: Redwood. Vol 250. pp. 8-9.

²⁰⁹ Jay Kappenga served in Oman from 1948 until 1983 as a pastor. He championed the need for ordaining local Arab Christians and the failure of the Arabian Mission to act on this as an essential requirement for the long term future of the Arabic language church ultimately led to its decline.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 249:9.

priest of the Omani congregation was an Egyptian²¹¹ who was culturally out of step with his Omani charges.²¹² The new reign of Sultan Qaboos brought a fresh impetus to define the Omani identity in terms of being Ibadi Muslim. The Omani Christians were made to feel that they were an anomaly in the light of the new patriotism and national religious identity which Sultan Qaboos brought with him.

6.2 Omani Acceptance of the Expatriate Church

What the missionaries did not anticipate however, was the rise of the expatriate church. Until 1970 the number of expatriates in Oman, especially from the West was very small. The missionaries held worship services in which members of the military, diplomatic corps or oil and gas workers would occasionally attend. A flavour of what the mission meant to the early expatriates is caught in the memoirs of former British diplomat, Neil McLeod Innes, when he describes how back in the 1950s:

for the religious side of Christmas we relied as usual upon the Mission who had their customary carol sing-song in the house as well as regular services. They welcomed us to these as to services throughout the year, including communion. The Dutch form of Communion was nearer to the Presbyterian than to the Anglican, but Wells Thoms or Jay Kapenga would ask us to suggest hymns and sometimes I read a lesson. Only once in my years there did an Anglican priest hold a service.²¹³

To understand the position of the church in Oman today, it needs to be understood that the work of the Arabian Mission has been crucial in terms of winning the good will of the Omani people and encouraging their openness to the 'religious other'.

A letter from Sultan Qaboos records the appreciation of the Omani people for the work of the Mission hospital:

²¹¹ Limbert records the Omani antipathy towards Egyptians in her anthropological study of an Omani town. "Many teachers and doctors were Egyptians . . . and the animosity between Egyptians and Omanis was hardly hidden or subtle. Egyptians were considered arrogant and stingy" (Limbert 2010:108).

²¹² Interview with PK (2014).

²¹³ Innes, N.M. (1987). *Minister in Oman*. Cambridge: Oleander Press Ltd. pp. 248-249.

In recognition of the humane and valuable assistance, which by the selfless endeavour of your Mission has been available to our people in such generous measure over the years, we wish to inform you of our gratitude in the past and open support in the future.²¹⁴

The letter goes on to inform the Mission that there would be no customs duty to be imposed on any goods, medicines and other articles required by the missionaries. Furthermore, the Sultan promised financial assistance by investing in the premises of the medical complexes. The letter closes with clear parameters set out by the Sultan who instructs the Mission:

We feel sure that you will always bear in mind that being a Moslem country we do not accept public evangelism of other faiths and, despite our stated intention of encouraging you in the vital and humane work you are carrying out in the field of health we must make it clear to your Mission that public evangelism is forbidden.²¹⁵

The timing of this letter is significant. Sultan Qaboos had been enthroned only one month earlier (23rd July, 1970). He is quick then to affirm the medical work of the Mission and sees the value that they give to the Omani people. It was alleged at the time of his ascending the throne there were only two hospitals²¹⁶ in the country. It was

²¹⁴ Private letter from Sultan Qaboos sent to the Chief Administrator of the American Mission in Muscat dated August 15th 1970. A copy of this letter is in the document collection of this researcher.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 2.

²¹⁶ B. R. Pridham, a former soldier and British Foreign Office diplomat turned academic, records the following. "Although the general charge against Sultan Sa'id is that medical services barely existed until 1970, there have been varying estimates of the scale of deprivation. We have statements that there were only two hospitals in the country, that there was only one, and that there was none at all run by the Ministry of Health. Estimates of health centres similarly ranged from nil upwards, Hospital beds were thought to be as few as 12, even though that figure seems excessive from a source which believes there were no hospitals or health centres. It is also maintained that there was no preventative medicine or public health facilities.

The reality was rather different. Only one post-1970 official publication out of many came closer to the truth by recording that in 1970 there were five hospitals, 39 clinics and dispensaries, 276 beds, 33 doctors and ancillary health workers. American missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Church opened their first hospital in Oman 1892 and continuously maintained one after 1907. By 1954 their hospital in Muttrah had 150 beds and their women's hospital in Muscat 75 beds. There were in addition, the British Consulate Hospital in Muscat with 12 beds (a charitable foundation providing treatment to all), the hospital of the Evangelical Mission in Buraimi, two military hospitals and the oil company hospital with 20 beds". (found in Netton, I.R. (1986) *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States*. London: Croom Helm. p.140.

essential that he be seen to begin his rule with some rudimentary healthcare still in place and indeed encouraged the Mission to expand their healthcare provision with his direct investment. The economic aspirations of the young Sultan led him to address the Christian zeal of the missionaries by bluntly insisting they resist from public evangelism. The ruling bargain was clear – you can have a Christian presence as long as you do not offend the traditions and expectations of my people. The culture of shame and honour meant that the missionaries had to avoid anything that would damage the Sultan's commitment to the Islamic faith of his people. Failure to maintain this would have meant that the Sultan would have no choice but to close the hospitals and remove the presence of the missionaries altogether.

The prestige of the Arabian Mission was further enhanced by the recognition of the work of Dr Don Bosch. As a specialist surgeon who worked in Oman for most of his medical career, he saved many lives at a time when medical services were limited. He was the first American to be awarded the Order of Oman by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said in 1972 for his service to the country. In addition, upon his retirement the Sultan ordered that the Bosch family have a retirement home built in their favourite cove, where they used to go sea shell hunting (Don Bosch is a published conchologist).²¹⁷

6.3 The Roman Catholic Church in Oman

When we look at the contemporary church in Oman, the churches are essentially split into two main groups by the Omani government. These are namely the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Every other denomination has to find a way to fit under these two umbrellas in order to have a presence in Oman.

The Roman Catholic church in Oman traces its origins to the Portuguese presence, but as late as 1975 did not have a resident chaplain. Instead, a Capuchin father, Fr Eugene Mattioli, used to visit from Bahrain every two weeks and spend three to four days in Muscat and other centres.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Bosch, D. (1989). *Seashells of Southern Arabia*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing. Also Bosch, D. (1982). *Seashells of Oman*. London: Longman Group.

²¹⁸ Horner, N (1978). "Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula". *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*. No.2. p. 59.

The modern Church of St Peter and St Paul was consecrated on the 4th November 1977 on land donated by Sultan Qaboos. The church's building project was completed by Fr Maddi Barnaba of the Capuchin order who had served faithfully as a priest in the region. Fr Barnaba had experience building churches and congregations in Bahrain, Aden and Abu Dhabi before replacing Fr Barth in Oman in 1984. Fr Barth was an American in the Capuchin order, and he was the first Roman Catholic resident priest. Prior to the church opening, Fr Barth hosted and conducted services in a two-room house without electricity or water supply. Long term Catholic residents in Oman recall celebrating Mass at Bait al-Falaj, under a makeshift canopy erected beside the home of the priest. The seating was crude and rustic, and consisted of a dozen or so wooden logs. Fr Barth was a rugged pioneering priest, who traversed great distances over Oman in order to visit his dispersed congregations. He would regularly visit Sohar, Nizwa, Fahud, Rustaq, and Salalah.²¹⁹ Today however, the priests are advised by the authorities not to take masses in the interior. This advice is still in keeping with the legal requirements for non-Muslim communities to only worship in existing church buildings and compounds. Christians gathering for worship in the interior then face a choice. They can travel to the urban centres where they may worship legally, or gather in a manner that does not disturb the peace or excite suspicion from the authorities.

In 1995, the Church of St Peter and St Paul was extended in order to accommodate up to two thousand worshippers at any one time. It was dedicated and blessed in its present form by Archbishop Jean Louis Tauran, the Vatican Secretary for Relations with States. This was an inter-state event involving the invitation and participation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Prior to 1987, in order to accommodate the growing numbers of Roman Catholic Christians, the Church of the Holy Spirit was consecrated in Ghala. The Bishop had met with Sultan Qaboos and appealed for more accommodation for the Roman Catholic Christians. The new church was completed in 1987 and included, as a symbol of continuity, a stone from the ruins of a sixteenth century Franciscan Monastery which

²¹⁹ <http://holyspiritchurchoman.com/aboutus.php> Accessed 17/08/2015.

was placed on the foundation.²²⁰ Qaboos, as well as gifting the land to the church, also donated a full pipe organ (the only one in Oman at that time). In addition to the church, the Holy Family Recreational Centre was constructed and included a basketball court, hall, classrooms and a grotto honouring 'Our Lady of Lourdes'.

Roman Catholics in Oman number around 55,000 (about 2% of the total population)²²¹, with a membership largely derived of worshippers from the Indian sub-continent and the Philippines.

Today there are four parishes with a total of seven priests. These consist of the Church of St Peter and St Paul in Ruwi, the Church of the Holy Spirit in Ghala, the church of St Anthony of Padua in Sohar and the church of St Francis Xavier in Salalah.

The Roman Catholic church has a strong and positive relationship with the Omani government, which was evident in His Majesty's support for the community in the aftermath of the disastrous Cyclone Gonu which struck the Sultanate on June 6, 2007, as well as the consequent floods which severely damaged the church building and its surroundings. The church on recovering gave thanks to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, for his benevolence and support to the church during and after Cyclone Gonu.

6.4 The Protestant Church in Oman (PCO)

The Church was set up by royal decree as a partnership between the Anglican and Reformed Church in America denominations.

The church buildings are clearly identifiable and Christians can be seen in the public domain – for example Church choirs have the freedom to sing Christmas carols in some of the big hotel lobbies. The churches are also allowed to advertise their services through the pages of local media and internet websites.

The Protestant Church in Oman, which is constitutionally a shared ministry between the Anglicans and the Reformed Church of America, also host numerous congregations

²²⁰ Horner, N (1978). "Present Day Christianity in the Gulf States of the Arabian Peninsula". *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*. No.2. pp. 53-63.

²²¹ Figures taken from the website of the church found at <http://holyspiritchurchoman.com/aboutus.php> Accessed 17/08/2015.

who reflect the diversity of the Protestant Christian community. A leaflet I picked up on my visit to Oman towards the end of 2018 highlighted some of the larger groups who use the facilities.

These included the Mar Thoma church, a church denomination that emerged in the 19th Century through the work of Western missionaries in Kerala, who persuaded members of the Indian Syrian Jacobite Orthodox church and the Mar Gregorius church to place a greater emphasis on the centrality of scripture and evangelism. This led to the formation of the Mar Thoma church as we know it today. The Mar Thomas church is a curious blend of Orthodox liturgy and rituals, threaded with a Protestant theology of the Bible and mission. Mention is also made of the Arab Protestant congregation who are mainly drawn from Egypt and the Levant. The Church of South India (CSI) also gathers here, using a liturgy similar to the Anglican tradition but in various Indian languages including Tamil and Malayalam.

The Brethren church, a formal and conservative group, hold several meetings in various languages and are defined by their lay-led ecclesiology. In contrast, the Pentecostal tradition is well represented though the Bread of Life Fellowship, Oman Pentecostal Assembly and (the mainly Filipino) Oman Christian Fellowship, which all emphasize contemporary worship and the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Reference is also made to the Evangelical groups who place greater stress on Biblical exposition as the main feature of their worship, and these include those of the Baptist tradition and the Full Gospel Church (which also meets in the Tamil language). The Presbyterians also gather here, and notably there is one that worships in the language of Urdu, catering for the needs of the Pakistani Christian community.

The Indian community are by far the largest group of Christians who are visible in all of the compounds. They represent the full diversity of India herself, worshipping in Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Malayalam and Kannada.

Then finally, there is the Anglican congregation who, in partnership with the Reformed Church in America, host an informal contemporary worship service along with a more traditional liturgical eucharist.

While on a recent visit to Oman at the beginning of 2019, I was privileged to witness the opening of the newest church in Muscat, the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox church, which was built in an already crowded compound next to the Greek Orthodox church and the Roman Catholic compound.

There are four main sites of Christianity in Oman today and they are Ruwi, Ghalah, Sohar and Salalah. Historically there used to be worship centres in old Muscat and Matrah. The church buildings are discrete with no visible marking on the exterior and are set off the main roads so that one needs to know where to look in order to locate them. The main impression of the church buildings and communities is one of maintaining a low profile in the wider community out of respect for Islamic sensitivities. The oldest place of worship, in Matrah, is still being used to this day.

The Protestant Church of the Good Shepherd was dedicated in 1989.²²² The name 'Church of the Good Shepherd' was chosen deliberately in order to minimize the gap between the local Muslim population. The etched window shows hands bearing a sheep, rather than using a cross as a symbol. This was due to the influence of the Middle East priest-scholar, Ken Bailey, explaining that the Good Shepherd rescuing the lost sheep was a symbol predating the cross in the imagery of the Christian church.²²³

²²² Skinner, R. F. (1992). *Christians in Oman*. London: The Tower Press. p. 74.

²²³ From private correspondence with Ray Skinner 26/08/2015.



Map showing church locations in Muscat

The map above shows the current sites of Christian worship in Muscat which are permitted by the Omani government as of 2019.

The map below shows all the current churches for the whole country of Oman. The immediate conclusion one comes to is that all the churches are located on the coastline, in cities with a well-established port and maritime trading history.



Map marking the current location of churches in Oman

Attempts to plant churches in the interior of Oman, especially in places like Nizwa and Rustaq, have always been met with difficulty. There is a quiet and consistent narrative of Christians meeting in homes in the Nizwas being persistently discouraged from doing so, with any perceived disobedience leading to law enforcement officials being called in.

Several times for instance, the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) instructed the Protestant Church of Oman and the Roman Catholic church that worship

is only permitted in official places of worship on the coast. Even meeting in homes for Bible study groups was strongly discouraged by the Omani authorities. While several Christian groups have chosen to ignore this advice, it means that there is no visible or official presence of any church in the interior of Oman. This raises the question “why are churches allowed on the coast but not in the interior?” Does this imply that there are two forms of Ibadi Islam, in which one is more tolerant than the other, and that these are shaped by their geographical position?

The church is allowed to advertise its location, and indeed there are prominent sign boards which can be seen from the roads, pointing to the location of the churches. A visit to any of these church compounds today will reveal major issues with car parking and crowd control. Buildings which were built for an expatriate population of thirty years ago are hopelessly overcrowded. In narrow corridors, hundreds of Indians jostle jowl by cheek with Filipinos, Europeans and African Christians from many different traditions. Organ music from one congregation blends in the air with the rhythmic clapping and drumming which bursts out of another room, and the sound of chanting from an ancient liturgy adds to the cacophonous atmosphere of worship. As soon as one congregation concludes their worship, they leave the hall only to be replaced by another congregation who will worship in yet another language or tradition. During the course of a typical Friday (the main day off for most workers in Oman) literally thousands of worshippers congregate throughout the day.

Why did Oman construct church compounds and insist that Christians were only allowed to worship there? Perhaps one reason is a practical advantage from a security point of view. By keeping the Christians all in one compound, it allows for both their safety to be easily catered for and also for it to be easier to monitor any undesirable behaviour that might emerge within the church. It is not without advantage for the Christians to gather in one place. For the expatriates, the Church proved to be one of the main meeting grounds on where they could meet, not only to worship together, but to also socialize and share news.

When comparing countries in the Arabian Gulf, a common trend is the clustering together of multiple churches and congregations into one area of the city. Unlike

Western cities where church buildings are seemingly scattered at random throughout the landscape, the Middle East has a tradition of gathering distinctive communities into clearly defined geographical 'quarters'. This also applies for trade and commerce. One only needs to see that often all the mobile phone vendors are gathered on one street, or that there is a gold souk where all the jewellers are clumped together, or think of the Armenian or Greek quarters in Jerusalem or Damascus. Is this feature of Middle Eastern city landscapes simply passed on into the Gulf through Levantine Arab-expatriate consultants, brought in to oversee the expanding urbanization of Gulf States?²²⁴ This segregation also seems to apply to residential neighbourhoods which are often cluster around nationalities, thus a local (Omani) neighbourhood would see limited interaction with expatriate neighbours or vice versa. This creates a bubble effect in which an expatriate can spend years in Oman with little interaction with an Omani citizen.

6.5 How big is the Church in Oman today?

According to the Omani census figures released in 2016, the total population is around 4.5 million people, of which 2.1 million are expatriate worker residents. The Christian community constitute 6.5% of the total population, meaning that there is roughly around 250,000 Christians living in Oman today. In my mind this figure is too high, for two reasons. Firstly, the statistics in the table below suggest a more modest growth rate, and secondly, the decline in the global economy has led to a massive loss of employment opportunities for expatriates in the Gulf as a whole, resulting in many being required to leave the region as their residence status in Oman is linked to their employment.

²²⁴ Arabic speaking expatriates formed the first cadre of professionals recruited to develop Oman. This is largely due to the absence of English speaking Omanis, and also because the Syrians, Iraqis and Lebanese already had decades of regional experience in the oil industry and international commerce.

<u>Denomination Name</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2010</u>
	<u>Begun</u>				
Anglican Church (D Cyprus & the Gulf)	1910	1,100	5,000	5,600	6,400
Arab indigenous churches	1968	25	2,400	2,800	3,300
Bread of Life Church	1993	-	500	710	1,000
Brethren Assemblies	1960	100	350	410	490
Catholic Church (VA Arabia)	1508	470	52,300	63,000	73,900
Church of South India	1970	-	1,000	1,200	1,500
Coptic Orthodox Church	1970	1,000	6,200	6,300	6,500
Filipino Christian Fellowship	1993	-	1,300	1,700	2,300
Mar Thoma Syrian Ch (D Behya Kerala)	1968	150	2,000	2,900	4,300
Muslim-background believers	1950	300	200	200	200
New Christian Fellowship	1993	-	500	600	730
Oman Christian Fellowship	1992	-	1,200	1,400	1,700
Orthodox Syrian Church of the East	1976	-	5,400	5,500	5,700
Pentecostal Fellowship	1990	-	800	1,000	1,300
Protestant Church in Oman	1889	500	1,000	1,100	1,200
Revival Prayer Fellowship	1994	-	700	1,000	1,500
Seventh-day Adventist Church	1970	-	80	60	50
St Thomas Evangelical Ch	1975	-	710	990	1,400
Syriac Orthodox Church	1980	-	2,200	2,200	2,200
other charismatic house groups	1976	-	1,400	1,500	1,800
other independent churches		200	652	792	713
Total		3,850	88,257	103,695	121,088

²²⁵ Statistics courtesy of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at the Gordon Conwell Seminary 2014.

The most reliable statistics for church attendance figures would appear to be those produced above. The figures are derived from a variety of sources, including government census figures, interviews with church pastors, the US State Department annual report on Religious Freedom and the comprehensive prayer guide called Operation World.²²⁶ The resulting figures, when all is said and done, are still rough estimates, but because of the multiple sources and the lack of any real hard data, these statistics must suffice.

The table above clearly shows a significant growth in the number of members attending churches in Oman between 1970 and 2010. This is not growth through conversion, but rather reflects the pattern of immigration. 1970 marks the ascension of Sultan Qaboos to the throne and signals a significant change in the history of Oman.

These figures also reflect the economic status of Oman. The discovery of oil triggered off a spike in foreign workers entering into the country and many of these were Christians. Despite the obvious impact of the oil industry, there was a widely shared belief that oil was in limited supply and this drove a rapid modernization program, thus necessitating in yet more foreign workers entering the country in order to facilitate the building of the new infrastructures.²²⁷ The table above then matches roughly the development of the oil industry. The big push in the early 1970s led to Christians arriving in significant numbers, then as the oil industry surged in the 1980s, the expatriate population swelled to fill roles not only in the oil sector but in supporting services including the education, health, construction and retail industries.

6.6 The Role of the Sultan

Down in Salalah, the Sultan gave land for an ecumenical Christian project in which once again the Roman Catholic church rubs shoulders with the Protestants week by week in their worship services, held mainly on a Friday.

This ecumenical dimension is in fact unique to Oman. Nowhere else in the Gulf has a ruler decreed that there must a partnership between the different churches when it

²²⁶ Johnstone, P & Mandryk, J. (2001). *Operation World*. Franklin: Authentic Lifestyle Publishers.

²²⁷ McBrierty, V. & Al-Zubair, M. (2004). *Oman: Ancient Civilization: Modern Nation*. Dublin: Trinity College Press.

comes to the sharing of land and to ecumenical decision-making structures. In an interview with a prominent regional leader for the Reformed Church in America, he states that 'the Sultan was convinced that ecumenism was important and he chose the Anglican and the Reformed Church in America to form an equal partnership'.²²⁸ As it turned out, this proved to be a happy arrangement, mainly because the two parties already had a track record of ecumenical partnerships. Another possible reason suggested as to why these parties were favoured by the Sultan is because he saw them as representatives of a Christianity that parallels his own Ibadi Islam, in terms of their moderate and middle way approach to their co-religionists. As a Bishop suggested:

Our churches try to be a bridge to other churches of different Christian traditions and I think the Ibadis do the same. For example their intra-faith dialogues in which they engage with Shia and Sunni about many political (not just religious) subjects from a position in which they are open and moderate towards the other streams of Islam mirrors the work of the Anglican church in her ecumenical relations with the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.²²⁹

Another obvious suggestion for why the Sultan chose this partnership is that he wanted to honour the work of the RCA, and also honour the British with whom he and his family have had such a long relationship with. One expatriate who grew up in Oman recalled that 'the Sultan had a soft spot for the British Anglican church because of a vicar and his family who cared for him when he studied at school in the UK. They became his surrogate parents and he had a very positive experience. . . and this attitude has trickled down into society'.²³⁰ This openness and fondness for the British could have also been inherited from his father who 'speaks, reads and writes letter perfect English, is of modest stature, neat in appearance and extremely polite and courteous to visitors and guests. He is a devout Muslim, but not fanatical. Though completely Arab, the Sultan has great affection for Great Britain . . . and listens to the BBC'.²³¹ The evidence

²²⁸ Interview with DH (2014).

²²⁹ *Ibid.* DH Interview.

²³⁰ Interview with PK (2014).

²³¹ Phillips, W. (1971). *Unknown Oman*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban.

for this influence is provided by Beasant who described the family, Philip and Laura Roman, who looked after the Sultan before he went to Sandhurst:

They had a curious brand of suburban, right-of-centre, white Anglo-Saxon values and prejudices so typical of those so beloved by much of England's middle class. Laura Roman ran a Spartan domestic regime; Calvinistic in a way which reflected many of the spiritual and social values espoused by the Islamic faith. There was no television set in the Roman's household, with both husband and wife frowning on the social excesses so frequently to be seen on the small screen. It was a routine kind of hospitality but one which the Sultan-in waiting never forgot.²³²

If anything, this anecdote from above shows how personal relationships with the ruler can unwittingly impact on government policy for the future.

In an interview with a Bishop, further evidence on the Sultan's commitment to the Christian community emerged when the Bishop recalled an encounter with the Sultan, who explained to the religious leaders present why he allowed churches in Oman:

He told us about staying with a vicar in England where he created a prayer room for the young Sultan. The Sultan decided that if the vicar as a Christian leader would allow him space to pray - then I will return the favour and allow Christians to pray in my country.²³³

The personality and whims of a monarch are something which cannot be measured or compared in sociological studies in the Gulf States, but clearly they can have a huge impact on setting the tone for religious freedom.

It is worth noting that the Sultan gave land to the church on a site which had political and emotional significance for his British allies. The first main church site is in Ruwi where a Roman Catholic church and the Protestant church share a large compound. This was built around a British military graveyard which is the resting place for casualties of the fighting in Oman during the 1950s and 60s. All this points to the

²³² Beasant, J. (2013). *Oman: The True Life Drama and Intrigue of an Arab State*. Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing. p. 172.

²³³ Interview with BPH (2017).

recognition by the Omani authorities of the contribution made by the British in shaping modern day Oman.

6.7 Church – State Relations

The government oversight of the church today comes under the mandate of the MERA. The latter institution morphed in 1997 from being the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Justice, in order to embrace the wider responsibility of overseeing all the faith communities in Oman. So, the MERA oversees the activities of all the mosques, churches and Hindu temples in the country.

One of the ways in which the MERA exercises control over the faith communities is that anyone who has a teaching role in their community of faith is required to have a 'preacher's license'. This is unique to the Gulf. In practise, it is a straightforward process to get a preacher's visa, and to date 'no one has heard of a preacher being denied a visa for the church'.²³⁴ This approach has been defended on the grounds that religious teaching is a profession and, like other professions, there is a duty of care from the government to make sure that the public are being served by duly qualified practitioners. To guard against inappropriate preachers gaining access to the pulpit, the MERA avoids micromanaging matters of the church by inviting the Protestant Church of Oman (PCO) to be an advisory body on deciding who should be granted visas. This can be quite a sensitive task, especially if a Christian group asks the Ministry for a visa for a new preacher because they have split from their original denomination in an acrimonious dispute. While the PCO is often anxious to prevent split groups as a matter of the theological conviction that the unity of the church should be paramount, the MERA often chooses to issue the visa because they simply do not want to get drawn into intra-Christian disputes. The result of this reluctance to be drawn into the internal affairs of the church is that Oman allows a greater religious freedom than even the church herself.

One unfortunate side effect of the required collusion between the churches and the MERA is that any unusual activities, or activities outside of services which are hosted by

²³⁴ Interview with DL (2014).

the church such a Christian concert or an event bringing in an outside speaker, would require permission from the authorities in writing. This has led to a degree of self-censorship and even competition between the churches of informing the government of activities hosted by others. For example, at an interfaith event hosted by the Roman Catholic church (with the full knowledge of the MERA) in 2019, another church reported the event to the authorities as an expression of their concern that this event may be unauthorized.

6.8 Restrictions

There are, however, restrictions upon the activities of the Christian church. The first is a clear prohibition on evangelising to Muslims. The second concerns the freedom to meet in private homes in order to have religious teaching. So, for example, Bible study groups and fellowship groups that are hosted in a member's house are discouraged. One reason for this is that it is easier to monitor religious activities if they are held in the officially sanctioned places of worship.²³⁵ In another interview, it was stated that the law of Oman does allow for freedom of thought and religion, meaning that technically Omanis are free to follow any religion. Yet, for both Omanis and expatriates there is a caution about any public expression of their faith. Recently a small group of Omani citizens requested the use of a small worship hall, causing some concern as to how welcome this would be to Omani authorities. Members of the expatriate Christian community 'expressed fear that the sight of Omani citizens entering church properties would result in legal action being taken against them.'²³⁶

One major concern now for the Anglican and the Reformed Church in America overseers of the PCO is the trend of congregationalism (a model of church in which the ultimate authority comes from locally elected members of the congregation) moving away from their liturgical heritage and episcopal oversight, and moving towards an ecclesiology which is non-hierarchical and locally based. The fundamental problem with this drift is that it is moving away from the vision established by royal decree under which the PCO remains subject. This move to congregationalism has become a source

²³⁵ Interview with DH (2014).

²³⁶ Interview with JM (2017).

of considerable conflict, to the extent where the Omani government authorities are now being invited (although the MERA are deeply reluctant to be drawn into what they see as an internal dispute) to intervene in local church politics. Yet the historical issues of land, finance, and responsibility are core to the responsible management of such a huge church enterprise in a sensitive religious context.

6.9 A Disconnection

For outside observers with a historical perspective, the role of the church in Oman has shifted a long way from her roots in serving the Omani people through medical mission. There is a visible disconnect which sees the church congregations existing in cultural isolation from the Omani people, and this does not bode well for future Omani Christian Muslim relations. The one bright light on the horizon is the growing profile of the Al Amana Centre, which continues to discretely work alongside with the Omani authorities in providing rich interfaith encounters in the form of international educational encounters. Through a variety of programs offered to the local church, visiting seminarians, religious leaders from the West and diplomats, the Al Amana Centre seeks to bridge the cultural and religious worldviews between Christians and Muslims.

A former director of the Al Amana Centre recently published an article outlining some of the factors which have led Oman to a policy of interfaith engagement and inclusion.²³⁷ He concludes:

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

²³⁷ Leonard, D.R. (2015). 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No.2. pp. 266-278.

law. All of these factors work together to undergird the protection of peaceful inter-religious coexistence in Oman.²³⁸

The same author points to the current climate of openness through the work of the Al Amana Centre. He said:

Christians who work for the Al Amana Centre in Muscat are regularly invited to contribute to issues of leadership training for imams and constantly encouraged to have a public profile in promoting Christian presence in religious encounters. I find that when I am open about my faith I am respected more and trusted more than if I were to be discrete and diplomatic.²³⁹

In conclusion, he expressed his conviction that Oman was unique in the Gulf for creating a space for Christians under its legal framework, which itself is shaped by the ethos of Ibadi Islam which allowed Christians to have the 'freedom to worship, or pray using their own liturgy, theology and practices. In other words, they are not under sharia law. This is because the Ibadi Muslim community, shaped by their pragmatic trading experience have created a legal system which blends Shariá law with Civic and Corporate law and international maritime laws'.²⁴⁰ What is absent in his conclusion is the role of the Sultan, who's experience of Christianity has clearly informed and shaped his policies in granting land and freedom of worship, particularly to the Reformed church in America and the Anglican church communities.

6.10 Interfaith Action in Oman

The ministry of the Al Amana Centre,²⁴¹ which was originally a school set up by the Arabian Mission more than one hundred years ago, has now morphed into an interfaith project of the Reformed Church in America. Through facilitating exchange visits between Omani and American students, the Al Amana Centre seeks to bring Christians and Muslims together in order to 'promote good between religions' There is also a

²³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 278.

²³⁹ Interview with DL (2014).

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* DL Interview.

²⁴¹ <http://www.alamanacentre.org>.

strategy to disseminate knowledge of Islam through academic journals, by hosting scholars and delivering 'Scriptural Reasoning'.²⁴² The Al Amana Centre is distinctive as it is the only Christian-led interfaith initiative in the Gulf Co-operative Council (GCC) region. Although Christian led, it has a close working relationship with the MERA and is a valued partner in facilitating the occasional local government initiated or sponsored interfaith projects.

The purpose of interfaith dialogue in Oman, according to Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Salami, (who is the great grandson of Nur al Din al-Salami) is to 'reflect on the foundations of our thinking, our common morality and our common sense of justice. For only when we are aware of these similarities can and these form a basis for our actions, while accepting cultural differences, we and our children will enjoy a peaceful future'.²⁴³

Meanwhile, the Omani MERA has a Minister for interfaith and they produce a magazine called *Al Tasamoh*, an Islamic Cultural journal which includes interfaith relations as part of its brief. One question arises from this. Why did Oman see the need to appoint an interfaith Minister? Is this motivated and informed by purely theological concerns or are there other reasons?

Apart from a few domestic programmes in partnership with the Al Amana centre,²⁴⁴ the bulk of the interfaith work carried out by the MERA is outside of Oman. They were represented most recently at the US State Ministerial on Religious Freedom held in Washington DC in June 2018.

²⁴² Ford, D.F. & Pecknold, C.C. (2006). *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Scriptural reasoning is the exercise of inviting people from another faith to read a selected piece of scripture and "feedback" to the group what they see in the text. Without seeing the text through the prism of interpretation familiar to the other, new insights are gleaned from what the outsider sees.

²⁴³ Quoted from Leonard, D.R. (2015). 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No.2. pp. 275-276

²⁴⁴ These include student and seminarian exchanges, particularly with the USA, scriptural reasoning classes and cultural immersion experiences. *Ibid.* p. 277.

Omani involvement in local interfaith events is limited. The Al Amana centre often hosts scriptural reasoning groups, and whilst there is huge interest from the Christian community to participate, Omani participation is often hit-and-miss with a very small number of individuals who often find themselves outnumbered by the Christian presence. While this limited involvement from Omani citizens could be due to a lack of linguistic and theological expertise. Although the MERA is the official body appointed to oversee religious events, nonetheless their involvement seems subject to the approval of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It seems then, that interfaith activity overseas has a higher priority than domestic events.

A significant portion of the MERA's activity is devoted to intra-Islamic dialogue.²⁴⁵ This fits in with the quietist approach to diplomacy that Oman is noted for.²⁴⁶ This work draws together Sunni and Shia and aims to find mutual agreement on issues such as 'the inclusion of non-Islamic communities, and responses of Islamic states to fundamentalist militancy'.²⁴⁷ This activity suggests then that the pressing need of the hour for the Omani government is not interfaith relations but intra-faith Islamic relations.

Today, the Omani government describes their commitment to pluralism as an outworking of a policy which they call *al 'aish al mushtarak*, (the literal translation of this phrase is 'living together'), which is the theological expression of Islamic tolerance.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Leonard, D.R. (2015). 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No.2. p. 276.

²⁴⁶ Jones, J & Ridout, N. (2012). *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

²⁴⁷ Leonard, D.R. (2015). 'The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-Religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman'. *The Muslim World*. Vol 105, No.2. p. 276.

²⁴⁸ Al-Salmi, A. (2016). *Religious Tolerance: A Vision*. Hildesheim, Germany: OLMS. p. 259.

Chapter 7.

This study has examined the question that Ibadi theology is the distinctive influence which shapes the religious freedom of the church in Oman. The evidence is mixed. On the one hand there is support for this theory, as seen in the BBC radio show *Heart and Soul*, broadcasted in 2015,²⁴⁹ which suggested that Ibadi Islam has a history and theology that is predisposed to a tolerant Islamic society. The presence of a thriving Christian community and a well-established Hindu temple all point to an inclusive Islamic society.

7.1 Boundaries

However, there are boundaries. These pertain to the freedom to change one's religion, proselytizing, the right to marry into another religious community and to hold religious meetings outside of a place of worship. All these are consistent with practices in other Islamic societies who subscribe to different schools of Islamic law. There does not seem to be anything which highlights a distinctly Ibadi approach other than the context of Oman.

In a report evaluating persecution of Christians in Oman, the Open Doors USA organization concluded that religious freedom is a serious concern in Oman because:

Public proselytizing is forbidden; evangelism is a private affair. Reportedly, some converts and expatriate Christians involved in proselytization were called in for questioning.

Oman has deported expatriate Christians, primarily because of their open witness, which Islamic law prohibits.

Legally distributing any religious literature requires permission from the Islamic authorities.

²⁴⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01wgccw>. Accessed 10th March 2017.

The government pays a salary to some Sunni imams (Muslim leaders) but not for religious leaders in the Shia sect or non-Muslim religions.

Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the government, which then approves and controls the leases of buildings.²⁵⁰

The problem with such reports from Christian NGOs is that they gloss over the bigger picture. The casual reader of such a report will conclude that Oman is an unpleasant context for the church and would not appreciate the reality that thousands of Christians worship every week without fear of persecution. The number of Christians who fall foul of the government for any perceived infringements of Omani law are miniscule. The number of Christians who are involved with the sometimes frustrating, arcane and opaque bureaucracy of government is again no more than 30 individuals. The vast majority of Christians worship in their facilities blissfully unaware of any difficulties. The other problem with such reports is that they focus on the negative encounters. As one interfaith director dryly commented '[t]hey get more money if they tell stories of persecuted Christians'.²⁵¹

Oman does not have religious freedom then in the sense that anyone can believe or behave according to their individual conscience. The UN Charter of Human Rights and Religious Freedom would be rejected by conservative Muslims as a Western construct that stands on a platform of human reason rather than divine revelation. The latter clearly trumps the former. This suggests that theology then has some role in determining the limits of religious freedom within an Islamic context. The question is to what degree?

Interviews with Omani Islamic leaders stress their conviction that Ibadi Islam is the main source of all that informs their culture and practice. As one interviewee said, '[t]o be Omani is to be Muslim. . . an Ibadi Muslim.'²⁵² The theme then that emerges from interviews is that the religious climate in Oman is deeply influenced by Ibadi theology. However, given that my sample was small, and the subjects were all religious

²⁵⁰ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/oman/> Accessed 09/03/2019.

²⁵¹ Interview ARK (2018).

²⁵² Interview. SNM (2015).

professionals employed by a government ministry, this may simply be a reiteration of the “party line” to be presented to foreign enquirers like myself. Access and linguistic limitations meant that this researcher was restricted in capturing the voice of a wider Omani demographic. There was a reluctance for “ordinary” Omani citizens to speak to me about the subject of religion, and any response they made was guarded. Whether this wary behaviour points to a lack of religious (and political?) freedom for *Omani* citizens is a matter for speculation. Or, it could simply point to a modest reluctance to speak of things where they feel they do not have expertise.

7.2 A Nuanced Picture

The evidence suggests a more nuanced picture of religious freedom in Oman. This study has shown that tolerance for the ‘other’ was clearly present on the coastal centres of maritime trade (and historical sources indicate that this has been the case for more than a century), suggesting that this is the main reason that all the churches in Oman today are in seaport cities. So, it could be argued that the limited presence of the church is more a product of mutual pragmatic economic interests rather than Islamic dictate.

The simple fact is that there are no places of non-Muslim worship in the interior implies some validation for the view that there are two forms of Ibadi Islam - that of a moderate Ibadi Islam in Muscat contrasted with a more conservative and stricter expression of Ibadi Islam found in the interior. Does this simply indicate that the level of interaction between different populations is what influences attitudes of tolerance, with the port cities inevitably experiencing a greater diversity of religions?

And does Ibadi theology have a major influence on the treatment of Christian communities in Oman?

According to Khuri, “no, not really”, instead he suggests that:

The civil, legal and behavioural restriction that distinguish Muslims and non-Muslims living in an Islamic state are only part of a wider and more comprehensive inequality that affects the relationship between strong and weak, dominant and dominated, irrespective of religious affiliation. What is thought to

be a religious system is in fact also a social pattern. Field work²⁵³ has revealed that the dominant group imposes upon the dominated the very stratifications which the Muslims impose on non-Muslim dhimmis. The dominant Sunni tribes in Bahrain forbid the dominated Shi'a peasants from carrying arms, riding horses or being recruited into the army or police force. The same behaviour is seen in the Ibadis who impose upon Sunni Baluchis. Ibadis also do not allow the testimony of non-Ibadis to be accepted in their courts.²⁵⁴

7.3 Tribal Culture

It has also been suggested that Arabian tribal norms, which predate Islamic culture, are another influence. As Gaiser²⁵⁵ argued in his survey of the imamate²⁵⁶, all the different expressions and states of the imamate can be found in pre-Islamic cultural and tribal precedents. One example of this is in the area of hospitality. The Ibadi scholar Nur al Din, when writing about hospitality, advised and ruled that Christians can live in the same neighbourhood, and this is celebrated as an example of Ibadi Islam's largesse towards other faith communities. Gaiser argues that this may simply be a reflection of the famed hospitality ethic of the desert dwelling Bedouin, which predates Islam.²⁵⁷ Islam of course, emerged within the tribal heartlands of the desert dwelling Arabs, so the symbiotic relationship between the Islamic faith and Bedouin culture is not surprising.

One of the major challenges for this research was obtaining an Islamic perspective on the Christian presence in Oman. However, one of the first challenges I faced was a deep reluctance from those I interviewed in Oman to articulate their Islamic convictions. It became apparent that theology is clearly seen as the domain of the *'ulama* (religious scholars) and that even those who were knowledgeable in Islam deferred to the scholars. Even among the scholars, the most common response I got when asked to

²⁵³ Khuri, F.I. (1981). "Social Authority in the Tribal Structures of Arabia". *Al-Fikr al-Arabi*, Vol 22:75-87.

²⁵⁴ Khuri, F.I. (1990). *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam*. London: Saqi Books. p. 88.

²⁵⁵ Gaiser, A.R. (2010). *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers. The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibadi Imamate Traditions*. Oxford: OUP.

²⁵⁶ Gaiser's use of the word imamate refers specifically to the Ibadi constructs of power connected to the rule of the imam. See p. 4.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 143

give their opinion was to quote earlier commentators of the Qur'an. This vexing predicament was explained to me as a manifestation of the ingrained Omani ethos of modesty, combined with a genuine reverence and respect for their elders and scholars. This trait, which I found endearing and frustrating in equal measure, meant that my interviews only unearthed a fraction of material for which I had hoped would enlighten this study.

Another sensitive area was the topic of Omani converts to Christianity. The official line presented to me by Omani Muslims was that there were no Omani Christians. . . ever. When I persisted to present some evidence to the contrary (like the names of the worshippers in the Arabic language congregation meeting in the church in Muscat and Muttrah), there was evasion and denial. This seems to contradict the theological conviction that there is "no compulsion in religion". Unless there is a common understanding in the *tafsir* (Ibadi, Sunni or other) which delineates the limitations of "compulsion in religion" (which would require trawling Arabic sources), then this contradiction can show either the influence of theology or its absence. The simplest conclusion is that the concept of Omani identity is so bound up in Ibadism, that the possibility of being anything else is anathema.

7.4 Conclusion

The hypothesis posed at the beginning of this study was "that the religious freedom of the church in Oman is directly influenced by the distinctive prevailing school of Islam".

The assumption behind this hypothesis is that we would find a distinct Ibadi approach to relating to the Christian church that would be different from how other schools of Islam would treat the Christian communities within their jurisdiction.

There is no dispute that the church is present in Oman. It is large and flourishing and, on the surface, religious freedom is a lived reality. Dig deeper and we see that the religious freedom is prescribed by geographical limitations (churches only allowed on

the coast²⁵⁸), a high level of bureaucratic control which determines which pastors and priests are allowed residence and ministry visas, and other restrictions pertaining to marriage, proselytization and conversion.

However, the limitation of religious freedom is not unique to Oman. We find similar environments across other countries in the Middle East and in other Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. They vary in the matter of which government body is responsible for implementing these restrictions, but sharia law is largely consistent across the schools of Islam when it comes to the religious freedoms granted to Christians and Jewish communities.

The distinctiveness of Ibadi theology then lies in their understanding of the nature of the Qur'an, the understanding of the imamate and a particular history, which has created an Islamic culture that negotiates different political contexts. For example, the imamate can stay hidden and emerge only when the political climate allows it. This theology has emerged in the context of tribal conflict, intra-Islamic rivalries, invasion by foreign powers and the waxing and waning of the Sultan and his empire.

This distinct Ibadi doctrine thus provides a religious narrative for the identity and culture of the Omani, and it is currently sustained and perpetuated by the personality cult of Sultan Qaboos. As such, the interviews with Omanis revealed their belief that Oman is distinct in their policy of religious freedom, one that is unique to Ibadi Islam.

In practice, the variation of the experiences of the church reflects not so much an Islamic theological commitment to religious freedom, but rather the level of *freedom to worship* which the state decides to grant the Christian community and other religious groups.

²⁵⁸ There is a possibility that this may simply reflect the demographics of the Christian population. It is unlikely that there be a sustainable population in the interior which would lead to the emergence of a visible church apparatus.

With regards to interfaith dialogue and relations, the Omani model is limited. Domestic events are tightly controlled and risk averse. Their high-profile involvement in overseas events potentially skews the reality of religious freedoms which actually exist on the ground, and like several of their GCC neighbours, their public discourse of tolerance is tempered by a politics of appeasement to their most conservative members of society. The risk aversion in domestic interfaith events seems to highlight a fear that is rooted in their failure to make a distinction between education and proselytization.

The level of freedom to worship seems to reflect the level of trust generated by the Christian community. This trust is generated through Christians serving the nation, initially in the form providing medical care, education and introducing emerging technologies to the benefit of the local people. In Oman, the level of trust is also generated through a long history of trade – an industry which is largely based in the coastal regions, leaving the interior district largely insulated from the presence of foreigners.

In conclusion, this study finds that the level of religious freedom experienced by the church in Oman is not influenced by a distinct outworking of Ibadi theology that is mediated through government mechanisms. Rather, the freedom to worship experienced by the Christian community and others is the result of economic forces and more pragmatic political concerns. It is clear to me that the Rentier State Theory is a model which can be applied to understanding the development of Christian Muslim relations in Oman, and this merits further study.

However, this study shows that there is, as yet, an untapped mine of Ibadi theology, which needs to be brought into the mainstream academia through more translation projects of sources which may shed light on the Ibadi understanding of the Christian community.

7.5 For further study

This means further study is merited in this area, perhaps along the line of McAuliffe's methodology. McAuliffe²⁵⁹ did an in-depth survey of tafsir about Qur'anic Christians. Taking just seven verses from surats al Baqarah, al 'Imran, al Ma'idah, al Qasas and al Hadid which speaks of the *nasara* (a Qur'anic term used for Christians), she proceeded to review and analyse commentaries ranging from the first Islamic commentaries through to the Middle Ages and on to modern and contemporary exegesis. Her approach seeks to gain an Islamic understanding of the topic by excluding Christian commentary. She writes that her approach:

. . . brackets all previous conceptions of Christianity, or mentally erases all prior knowledge of the religious community known as Christians. The reader is then encouraged to approach the information offered by the Islamic commentators, as they address the Qur'anic verses under consideration.²⁶⁰

Such an approach suggests that we look at some of the classical commentaries on these verses and then examine specifically Omani sources on the same suras in order to discover any authentic Ibadi distinctions.

Like the McAuliffe study, five specific verses from the Qur'an could be the focus of this theological study.²⁶¹ These verses include two which represent positive statements

²⁵⁹ McAuliffe, J.D. (1991). *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 9.

²⁶¹ The five verses chosen for this study:

Sura Al-Baqarah (2): 62.

Verily; those who believe and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

Sura Al-Ma'idah (5):82.

Verily, you will find the strongest men in enmity to the believers the Jews and you will find the nearest in love to the believers those who say "We are Christians" That is because amongst them are priests and monks and they are not proud.

Sura Al-Ma'idah (5):48.

And we have sent down to you the Book confirming the scripture that came before it. So judge among them by what Allah has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging away from the truth that has come to you. To each among you we have prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah had willed, He would

about the Christian community specifically. Two verses hint at a pluralist understanding of the world and seem to address the fact of other religions. The final verse contains a negative statement about Christians and Jews in particular.

The positive verses were taken from a selection of verses identified by McAuliffe²⁶² in her authoritative study *Qur'anic Christians* in which she focussed on seven positive verses about Christians, and the commentary of the classical tafsir regarding them.

The pluralist verses were chosen from a selection identified by Asrafuddin, Haleem and Hirji in three different studies.²⁶³

The final verse that condemns the Jews and Christians was listed by McAuliffe in her previously mentioned survey. We included a negative verse in order to see if theologians provided a context for this verse and to see if they affirm the positive verses over the negative one.

The intention would be to see how Ibadi theologians dealt with the themes raised by these verses and how they were applied.

In order to further the possibility of hearing an authentic Ibadi voice, this study could be supplemented by interviewing (semi-structured interviews) state sanctioned Islamic leaders, who will be asked to expand on the practical applications of the authoritative texts which inform their expression of Islam.

have made you one nation, but that he may test in you what He has given you: some compete in good deeds. The return of you all is to Allah; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ. *Sura Yunus (10):99.*

And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So will you then compel mankind, until they became believers.

Sura Al-Taubah (9):30.

And the Jews say, 'Uzair is the son of Allah and the Christians say Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths, resembling the saying of those who disbelieved afore time. Allah's Curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth!

²⁶² McAuliffe, J.D.(1991) *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶³ Asrafuddin, A. (2009). "The Hermeneutics of Inter-faith Relations: Retrieving Moderation and Pluralism as Universal Principles in Qur'anic Exegeses". *Journal of Religious Ethics*. 37: 2. pp. 331-354. Haleem, M.A. (1999). *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*. London: I.B. Taurus. Hirji, Z. (2010) *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam. Historical and Contemporary Discourse Amongst Muslims*. London: I.B. Taurus Publishers.

This study however, can only be, and must be conducted in Arabic in order to access the full range of sources, both textual and human.

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Appendix A – Interviews Samples

Guiding Questions for Muslim Subject

- 1) How do you think Omani people feel about the presence of the Christian expatriate community in Oman?
- 2) What is the law of Oman in relation to religious freedom?
- 3) What historical events have led to the celebrated tolerance of the Omani people?
- 4) How do you think Christian Muslim relations can be strengthened in Oman?
- 5) Do you have personal encounters with Christians in Oman which have been memorable for either good or bad reasons?
- 6) Who are the leading Omani Ibadi theologians which most Omani people would regard as authoritative?

Subject. ASS. 2015

English	Arabic
<p>Answer 1</p> <p>Oman's people welcome strangers and foreigners, driven by their nature, religion and culture, irrespective of the foreigner's creed or religion, Oman's people are interested only in good morals and good behaviour and if someone manifests good character, and conducts themselves decently, we do not question them about their beliefs or religion - we leave that to God.</p> <p>Oman's people have lived side by side with migrants from India, who are mostly Buddhists (Banian). These traders were treated as normal members of society by the Omanis, without any discrimination and received good treatment (more than others) because they exhibit good manners and trustworthiness.</p>	<p>جواب 1</p> <p>طبيعة العُمانيين وتكونهم الديني والثقافي بصفة عامة يرحبون بالغريب ويتقبلونه ويحترمونه مهما كانت عقيدته ودينه، ما يهمهم الأخلاق وحسن المعاملة فمتى ما وجد في الإنسان حسن الخلق، والتعامل الجيد فلا يسألون عن اعتقاده ودينه ويكلونه لله. وقد عايش العُمانيون مهاجرين من الهند وأكثرهم بوذيون (بانيان)، وكان هؤلاء تجارا، وكان العُمانيون يعاملونهم كأفراد من المجتمع دون تمييز وربما فضلوه عن غيرهم لحسن تعاملهم وثقتهم بهم.</p>

<p>Oman also maintained good relations with other foreigners, such as the Christians in oil and other companies. They found the Omanis to be good neighbours, who treated them nicely.</p> <p>I have not heard that of a Christian who has been treated badly in Oman because of his religion or his faith. This has been the case since our ancestors and is still the case to date. For example, these days we find temples and schools in the Indian communities, as well as churches - and as far as I know, we have not heard of a single incident of Omanis ill-treating or denying others the right to practice their religions, as far as I know, and God knows!</p>	<p>كما تعايشوا مع الاجانب النصرى في شركات النفط وغيرها، ولم يجد هؤلاء من العمانيين إلا حسن الجوار وحسن المعاملة، ولم اسمع أن نصرانيا أوزي في عمان من أجل دينه أو نصرانيته، هذا ما أدركنا عليه آباءنا من قبل وهو الآن حاضرا مشاهدا. فمثلا هذه الأيام تجد للجاليات الهندية معابد ومدارس، وللنصارى كنائس ولم نسمع أن مسها أحد من العمانيين بسوء أو أنكروا على اصحابها شيئا من ممارساتهم الدينية، حسب علمي، والله أعلم.</p>
<p>The law of Oman with regard to religious freedom: Allah Almighty says “there is to be no compulsion in religion”, and “you have your religion and I have mine”.</p> <p>So, anyone can practice his religion as he wishes, privately or in his place of worship, without bothering other people and their faith. However, I don't know much about the secular laws.</p>	<p>ج2</p> <p>قانون عمان بالنسبة للحرية الدينية قول الله تعالى (لا إكراه في الدين)، وقوله (لكم دينكم ولي دين)، وأن للإنسان أن يمارس معتقده كما يشاء في خاصة نفسه، وفي معابده، دون المساس بمعتقد الآخر، أما القانون الوضعي فليس لدي عنه فكرة.</p>
<p>C3 I think the biggest factor in the tolerance of the Omanis, is the Al-Abadi doctrine, because it is a doctrine based on justice and the right to equality and respect for human rights and not harming others and to desist from bad an examination, as well as to believe that faith in words and action, and Sin</p>	<p>ج3 أعتقد أن العامل الأكبر في تسامح العمانيين، هو المذهب الإباضي، لأنه مذهب قائم على العدل والحق والمساواة واحترام الإنسان، وحرمة الأذى والكف عن السوء والمعاصي، وأيضا يعتقدون أن</p>

<p>(including harming people and their rights) could lead to hell. And that the work of this life is based on cooperation between every human and his brother, and that faith is defined by the way your treat people. What concerns us with regard to people is how they treat us and their morality, and we leave their faith and religion to Allah,</p> <p>In addition, Ibadi preachers advocate unity and tolerance, they do not advocate chaos and rejecting others.</p> <p>In addition, the political system in Amman is based on unity and tolerance and accepting others.</p>	<p>الإيمان قول وعمل، وأن المعصية (ومنها إيذاء الناس وأكل حقوقهم) تدخل النار. وأن أعمال الدنيا قائمة على التعاون بين الإنسان وأخيه الإنسان، وأن الدين المعاملة، ولنا من الناس أخلاقهم ومعاملتهم، ونكل أمرهم إلى الله في عقيدتهم ودينهم.</p> <p>وأيضاً علماء الإباضية دعاة وحدة وتسامح وليسوا دعاة فتنة ونبذ الآخر.</p> <p>وأيضاً النظام السياسي في عمان قائم على الوحدة والتسامح وقبو الآخر.</p>
<p>I believe that the relationship between the religions in Oman is quite strong - and could be strengthened further if we educate people about the importance of accepting others. According to the law of God, faith or doctrine is a matter of choice. No one can be forced to embrace any faith. The judgment is up to Allah. According to Islam, every human has rights - as well as his neighbour - irrespective of his faith. No one should be harmed because of the faith he embraces. This type of education could contribute to strengthening relations between religions.</p> <p>On the other hand, people of other religions have to respect the country's culture wherever they live. Certain behaviour could upset the locals – such as women wearing indecent clothing, being careless about the norms and</p>	<p>اعتقد أن العلاقة بين الأديان في عمان قوية، ويمكن أن تكون أكثر قوة بتثقيف الناس وتوعيتهم بقبول الآخر، وأنه في قانون الله أن العقيدة اختيار محض من الإنسان نفسه، وأنه لا يكره أحد على معتقد، وأن الحساب بيد الله، وأن القانون في الإسلام أن للإنسان حقوق، وللجار حقوق مهما كان دينه، ولا يجوز أن يؤذى أحد من اجل الدين. هذه الثقافة والوعي ربما يزيد من العلاقة بين الأديان</p> <p>وفي المقابل لا بد أن يحترم اهل الأديان الأخرى عادات البلد وثقافتها وأخلاقها، فخرج النساء شبه</p>

<p>morals of the local people, taking most of the big vacancies in companies etc.</p>	<p>عاريات، وعدم المبالاة بعبادات اهل البلد وأخلاقهم، واستيلاء بعض هؤلاء على النصيب الأوفر من الأعمال الكبيره في الشركات وغيرها، مما يثير حفيظة اهل البلاد.</p>
<p>Not really, I do not have any memory of any encounter in Oman. However, I have in other countries. My interaction with Christians in countries I have been to, like UK and USA has been quite pleasant. They have good moral standards, respect the law and observe human rights.</p> <p>Personally, I have great respect for countries like the USA and EU because they have discipline and respect the law, as well as respect human rights irrespective of the individual's faith or place of origin - Which also reflects the true values of Islam. (Although there are certain imperfections, no place is free from these). Nevertheless, most of my memories are quite positive.</p>	<p>ج5</p> <p>لا، ليس لي أي ذكرى في عمان، أما في بلدان أخرى فلم نجد ممن عايشناهم من النصارى وغيرهم في بريطانيا ولا في أمريكا إلا الذكرى الجميلة الحسنه والخلق الحسن والالتزام بالقانون والنظام، واحترام الإنسان.</p> <p>وأنا شخصيا أحترم كثيرا بلدان أوروبا وأمريكا لما فيها من نظام والتزام بالقانون وحقوق الإنسان، دون نظر إلى دينه وبلده، وهذا هو خلق الإسلام الحق، (نعم هناك بعض التجاوزات التي لا تخلو منها بلد)، ولكن في الغالب كل ذكرياتي حسنه.</p>
<p>I believe the great scholar Sheikh Ahmed Bin Hamad Al Khalili, is an Omani scholar who leads all Omani people, from every sect and every area. That is because he is truly a Muslim scholar who understood Islam morality and values and managed to bring the Omani people together, and win their hearts and trust. This is the case for any Muslim who can understand true Islam and reflect it</p>	<p>اعتقد أن العالم الكبير الشيخ احمد بن حمد الخليلي هو العالم العماني الذي ينقاد له العمانيون اجمع من جميع المذاهب والمناطق، لأنه بحق عالم مسلم وعى أخلاق الإسلام ومثله، واستطاع أن يجمع العمانيين وأن يكسب ودهم وثقتهم، وهكذا حال</p>

<p>on reality - where he would only seek for the wellbeing of humanity, and would do his best to prevent any harm or mischief. The Prophet (PBUH), said “the best of people are the ones who help people”</p>	<p>المسلم الذي فهم الإسلام الصحيح وتمثله واقعا، لا يسعى إلا لخير الناس ومنفعتهم ويحاول بقدر ما استطاع أن يكف الأذى ويدفع الشر عنهم، وقد قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم (خير الناس أنفعهم للناس)</p>
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Guiding Questions for Christian Subjects

- 1) What is your Church background in Oman?
- 2) Which Omani authorities did you work with?
- 3) Did you face any restrictions as a Christian?
- 4) What has been your experience of Ibadi Islam?
- 5) How would you describe the relationship between the Omani people and the Church?
- 6) What events come to your mind when you think of Christian Muslim relations in Oman?
- 7) What contribution have Christians made to Oman?
- 8) What legal challenges have you faced?

Subject: PK. 2014

AT	Interview with PK on 15 November 2014 in Muscat. PK is a member of the Al Amana Board and a long-time resident in Oman.
AT	Can you tell me a little bit about your background to Oman and what your experience of the Church here?
PK	Ok. I was actually one month old when I came to Oman in 1948 when I was brought to Oman in 1948 by my parents who had come eight months earlier to serve the Church in Oman. They were to replace a couple who were retiring by the name of Dirk and Minnie Dykster, and at that time one of the unique things there was a three year overlap so that they learned and abide from the experiences from the Dyksters who had served in the area or in the Middle East for at least 40 years, and so I grew up here as a child and the international community was extremely small my friends were the kids on the street. The first language I really spoke was Arabic because my parents were both working and so the people I was around all day long were could only speak Arabic so actually that was my first language and then I learned English of course trying to relate to my parents (laughs).
AT	
PK	When I was, after a number of years when I was aged 10 I was then sent to India for schooling. So in a sense I lost my contact with er with very hospitable open

	people of Oman. What I can say that might be of interest is that my father was a pastor and the Church was permitted to be here there has been quite a long history of the RCA being active and Dad was the pastor of the Anglican Church that was why he was here. What made that Church unique was that on any given Sunday most of the people were Muslim. They came to the Church because he was a man of God and were just interested in hearing what he had to say they weren't going to become Christian necessarily as a matter of fact it was very difficult to become a Christian because they weren't interested in trying to have what the call Christ Christians who you know saw it an advantage by becoming Christians and the pastor had no part in the decision the Christian members were took anybody who was interested to task telling them and really making sure that they understood what was going to happen if they became a Christian.
AT	
PK	Potential ostracisation, some ostracisation was from society some things like that but they knew what they were getting into which is rather interesting as a Church.
AT	Who gave permission to your parents and to the RCA at that time to operate?
PK	I am not sure exactly but at that time the Sultan anything ended up on his desk the final say was from him he did it the question is why he allowed the mission, I think the medical work was so important there was no other hospital in the country so in a sense he tolerated a few other people along with the doctors the doctors sort of said well we have to have our pastors you know are leaders are the religious side of things so that was natural. Their mission community was kept small at times like for example they had a school but unlike say Bahrain they could not bring in teachers like from Palestine in Bahrain we had school there we had many teachers from Bethlehem Bajal you know the Christian towns of Palestine they could never bring them into Oman.
AT	
PK	So they, the Christian presence in the form of missionaries was very limited er and we were limited in where we could go in Oman at least during my parents time the Muscat environment we were allowed to be in to go to a place like Nis***** and if they did they were in a sense they were 'breaking the law' and understanding the rules Nis***** was a hard place to get to because there were no roads. (Laughs) there weren't.
AT	What were the restrictions the RCA faced in the early days then?
PK	Well it kind of went, where there were ups and downs, I think as far as the Sultan was concerned there wasn't a problem but he was under a lot of pressure from some of the people in the interior who had strong feelings about Christianity

	because they sometimes tried to impose their ideas that they should not be allowed but the coastal Arabs were much more open they were the traders, they related to other parts of the world so weren't as threatened by it as the interior people who were more isolated. That's similar to the Saudi experience, ***** experience, their isolation made them less tolerant of the other whether they were people of colour or they were people of other faiths or languages that kind of thing.
AT	Is there anything in Ibadi Islam which is distinctive to other Islam when it comes to dealing with people with other faiths.
PK	I don't know that much about Ibadi Islam. My parents always talked about it as they were the Quakers of Islam they were very peaceful people but that, that's a phrase I keep reading in my father's letters. They are Quakers, and we had a relationship with the Quaker community but the Quakers of Islam were very accepting so Ibadi minarets I didn't realise this my sister just told me that when my parents first came here there were almost no Mosques with minarets. It was a poor country may be, may be that was the reason but they were just simple rooms where you went to pray.
AT	
PK	All the pretence that later has come in fancy mosques was minarets is much more it's a new manifestation probably imported from places like Egypt
AT	Where there any particular incidents or events which you think shaped the relationship between Christians and Muslims either positively or negatively?
PK	I can't think of any you know one of the projects my parents did in their latter years they worked, they drove all over the country in a land rover, camping and meeting weavers and my father very clear that he was a man of God. That was the kind of the phrase he used. He was a priest of like the Iman of the Christian community he was very open and they, they were very accepting of that, a matter of fact when they came back after 10 years after retirement they were out, some way out in the middle of the country and meeting with his family and when the kids came out and saw them coming they said "the man of god is coming" that was a phrase they used. They had no trouble in accepting that they weren't, in that sense they weren't threatened by them, it was very interesting they didn't say "oh we have got to shut this guy up no he is just a man of god" and we can learn from them.
AT	Ok, over the years you seen the expatriates Church grow and grow and grow how do you, how do you feel that the experience of a local Church today be expatriate Church today, how much do they owe to the past.
PK	Well the past you know the Church was established and had a presence unfortunately I don't know the politics of it all one of the sad things was that there

	<p>was actually a convert church in Oman. 30/40, 30/40 people were converts and went to Church Omanis were not Lebanese Christians that happen to live here or Egyptian Christians that happen to live here these were almost Omanis but once the Country opened and the others came they made a decision to bring a Egyptian Pastor and immediately the Egyptian Pastor only focused on his own people the Egyptians at the expense of the local Christians and they finally drifted away and now I am not aware of any Omani that is actually a Christian</p>
AT	
PK	<p>And if they are they are not welcome in that Church they may emigrate they may have become Christians and are living in Denmark or Britain or the United States but they are not members of the Arab Church here anymore or make of the PCO</p>
AT	<p>How would you describe the relationship today then between the Church and the Omani people?</p>
PK	<p>I think one has to go to the very top to the Sultan, the Sultan has a soft spot to the Christian Community because of a family, a pastor and his wife in England who took care of him, took him in, were his surrogate parents and he had a very positive experience and so he is not at all interested in you know being negative and I think that has trickled down into, into the society.</p>
AT	<p>The personality of a ruling family is really important.</p>
PK	<p>It's very important and many of the present leaders their fathers were very close friends with the mission community. People who are now being named as potential successors like three of them was say ***** ***** was someone my dad played tennis with, he came to our house for tea, you know we related to them on a daily basis and as neighbors, I don't know how much the kids picked that up but definitely their fathers had a good relationship with the mission community.</p>
AT	<p>So, what sort of compromises do you think Christians make living and worshipping in Oman with the regard to their faith?</p>
PK	<p>Good question I am not sure my concern, my real concern is I don't think the vast majority of Christians really realise, they know they are in an Islamic Country and they just carry out their faith separately. They don't, they don't speak about it openly I think that part of that is due to fear that they might lose their jobs but which I feel is unfortunate and wish there could be more dialogue, more sharing of, not necessarily to convert each other but just to develop an understanding of each other. To me the world needs people who understand each other and is less dangerous,</p>

AT	Yeah.
PK	If it's that way.
AT	There's no, what legal situation in the terms of the Christian Church here are there restrictions?
PK	<p>There are restrictions er the Ministry for example house Churches are not allowed but at the same time they have allowed Churches to exist but they want to know about them and they kind of, they are under, everybody Protestants you know have a group that speaks out for them, the Catholics have a group that speaks for them, the Orthodox have a group that speaks for them and they want the Christians to have peace with the rest of the other Christian community through for example the PCO, the PCO for the Protestant community and the PCO the government would like them to seek the house Church and you know keep them in line rather than the government having to keep so they enforce the rule that there be no house churches and the PCO is consulted as far as visas are concerned for pastors that kind of thing so a little different from may be Bahrain where there is a lot of Christians that are more open and they kind of set up their own congregation and somehow managed to survive but here I don't think it would happen but the Church is visible in a quiet sort of way in Bahrain its more visible you can have crosses on the building and everybody knows that it's a Church here it's a building but you don't have outward appearances but you can find a Church.</p>
AT	What was the Christianity in Oman before the RCA mission?
PK	<p>I really don't know for sure there might have been going way back in time even before the advent of Islam, Oman has always been a trading nation connected to the world so there might have been some Christians or course when the Portuguese were here as a matter of fact where the fort it's now in fact hidden, Fort Jallah in Muscat there was a little room for worship and one of our British friends who was in the military knew about it and because he found remnants of the cross and everything else in that room. I suspect that it has been defaced and gone at this point but it was there.</p>

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