

Pat Lancaster reports from Muscat

Oman: an oasis of tolerance

Anyone who has travelled to the countries of the Gulf will tell you the same thing: Oman is not a typical Gulf country. It's not something that is easy to 'put your finger on' but it's very definitely there, a distinct 'difference' between here and anywhere else in the Gulf region.

When its ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said came to power in 1970, the country was not internationally well known, largely because of decades of social and economic mis-management by his predecessor.

The country was without any real infrastructure; few roads, schools or hospitals existed.

Today, it is a very different story. Oman is known – and loved – by people around the world. Many have spent holidays there, the sultanate features prominently as a luxury travel destination, others have done business there, some know it by reputation alone.

In the often turbulent Gulf region, Oman has the enviable status of being a nation where security and stability are a given. A country where tolerance is less of a recommendation and more of a watchword for the way Omanis interact with the rest of the world.

Historically, Omanis were seafarers and traders. Many analysts attribute this age-old interaction with the rest of the world as the foundation underpinning the sultanate's somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude to domestic life and



Photograph by Jean-Marc Damry

OMAN'S MINISTER OF AWQAF & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS, SHEIKH ABDULLAH AL SALIMI (LEFT) OUTLINES IBADISM, A MODERATE ISLAMIC SECT

Far Right: Sultan Qaboos (L) met with Iran President Rouhani (R) in an attempt to mediate between the Islamic Republic and the US

international relations. Others look more closely at its religious leanings.

The vast majority of Omanis are Ibadi Muslims, a sect little known in the rest of the Arabian Peninsula.

Although Ibadism dates back from shortly after the death of the prophet Muhammed, its spread throughout Oman has been described as “essentially the triumph of theology over tribal feudalism and conflict”, a depiction which retains relevance in the contemporary world of today.

Oman not only allows people of other religions to practice their faith in the sultanate but has allocated a prime plot of land in the capital city of Muscat where a number of churches serve a thriving Christian congregation.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salimi, Oman's Minister of Awqaf & Religious Affairs observes that this tolerance of other religions is very much a part of the ethos of Ibadism.

“The problem is that the image of Islam is sometimes distorted in the West. It is a problem that we must both, Muslims and non-Muslims share the responsibility for.

“As Muslims, we must take responsibility for not projecting a sufficiently positive image of Islam but the western media has to answer for failing to project the many positive values of Islam and relying instead on false stereotypes. Of course some people have been influenced by extremists but these extremists are not representative of Islam as a whole, they are a tiny – a very tiny – percentage.”

I mentioned to Sheikh Abdullah recent media reports of western Muslims travelling to Syria to fight on the side of some of the extremist groups that have entered the fray. A situation, he agreed, is regrettable does nothing to improve the image of Islam worldwide.

“Through admonishing these young people and through our preaching we would hope to persuade them not to engage in these acts. We strongly believe it is our duty to instruct them not to interfere

in the internal affairs of other countries. We need to try to help reconcile these feuding groups. Unfortunately not everything is crystal clear to those outside Syria, there are now so many factions involved we are not sure who is right and who is wrong but, as Ibadis, we want to bring people to enter a dialogue, to help them reach some sort of reconciliation.”

I wondered whether Ibadis, who describe their reli-



gion as being ‘moderate’ could be doing more internationally to highlight this moderate stance?

“We are working on propagating a moderate view of Islam through a number of outlets: we sponsor media events; conferences, seminars and symposia all over the world and our the Ministry of Religious Affairs regularly publishes two magazines promoting tolerance and greater understanding. In this way we are trying to promote common sense in relation to the Muslim identity, which seeks peaceful solutions to problems.

In recent months Oman has established itself as a negotiator between Iran and the West, specifically the United States, in trying to bring about some sort of resolution to the nuclear armaments situation. I wondered if this new role as mediator is one we might be seeing more of in the coming months.

“As Omanis and Ibadis, we are doing what we are supposed to do in maintaining good relations with our neighbours. In this part of the world we have Arab neighbours, Indian neighbours, Persian neighbours and we try – and have always tried – to foster good relations between all these peoples. If we can help, we are happy to do so but it is not our policy to interfere in other people's internal affairs and we do not allow other people to interfere in our own internal affairs”.

But, I asked, haven't the Omanis have been involved in trying to find a solution between Iran and the West?

“We do not deny that we have played a role in trying to help relationships between Iran and the West. Being in this part of the world we feel it is part of our moral mandate to do whatever we can to maintain peace. If any part of this region goes to war we are all affected. We do not want that so our efforts and our overriding agenda is to bring about peace in troubled areas if we can do so, and this has always been the policy of the Sultanate. We believe there are lots of things that can be worked on to bring peace to all regions of the world and in trying to help achieve these ends, we are only doing what we are supposed to do, according to our beliefs and values.

So, does this make Ibadi Muslims different to other followers of Islam?

“As Ibadis we believe that all Abrahamic religions are one, in terms of theology and doctrine. But in terms of jurisdiction there are differences and these differences have developed and diversified in response to contextual and historical changes in the world.

“Ibadis are not greatly different from other Islamic schools of thought except in terms of jurisdiction.”

Sadly, as we have all seen in recent months, what should unite Muslims often appears to divide them, Muslims are fighting and dying in support of one strand of Islam or another, most notably Shi'ites and Sunnis. What can be done?

“We don't accuse other schools or sects of being intolerant but in our teachings we do highlight the fact that intolerance should not be the norm, that justice should be the purpose that underlies all Islamic sects. Essentially, we have only one message to promote to our Muslim brothers, that they strive to ensure they uphold moral values and the cause of justice in their conscious and unconscious thoughts and deeds.” ■