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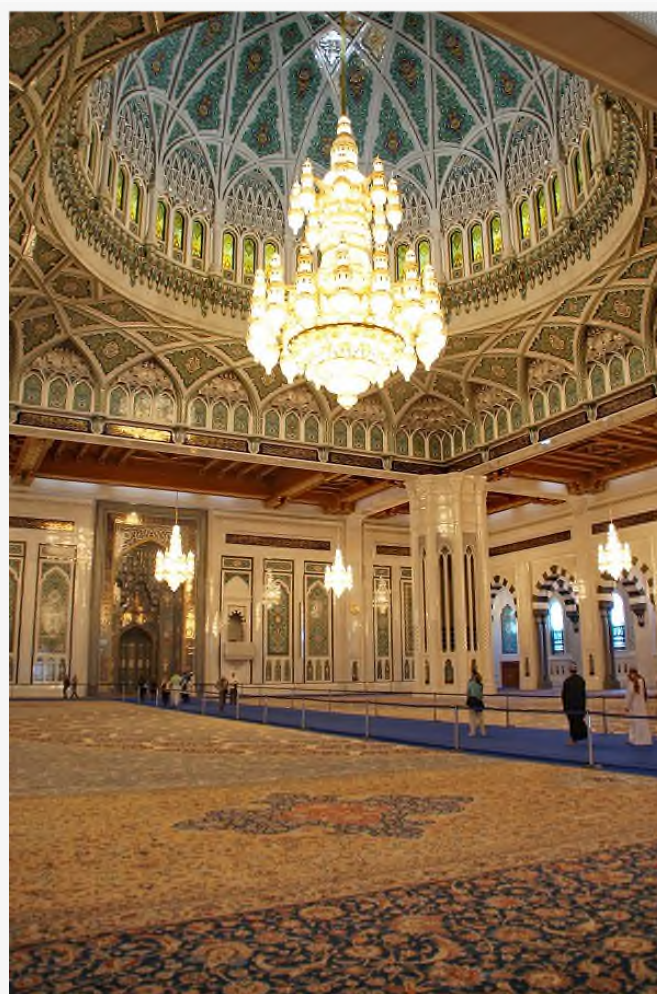
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## Religious Tolerance and Cultural Dynamics in Oman

By Frédéric Jarry

In mid-June 2017, the Mus'haf Muscat, the electronic version of the Koran, was presented to Muslim scholars and specialists in Muscat, capital city of the Sultanate of Oman. This initiative, which included the numerically encoding of the Arabic calligraphy, is open to all believers of Islam and also formed an opportunity to revisit the religious tolerance and cultural dynamics that prevail in Oman, the land of the third way of Islam, the Ibadite faith.

According to the thinking of French Orientalist Olivier Roy, fundamentalism and particularly Islamic fundamentalism, is linked to a rapid and violent deculturation of religions. Economic liberalism, the world of instantaneous information and the planetary web "deterritory", the slow and historically accumulated cultural strata that help form



western and eastern civilisations, have contributed to our present day geopolitics of chaos, Roy would have us believe.

The magnificent Sultan Qaboos mosque in Muscat

Religion, already destabilised by the philosophical and political changes of the last 200 years, is now immersed in a world increasingly “foreign” to its holy words.

A culturally “profane” world, pushed towards the exit gate, assuming and, or, creating its own radicalisation, religion today passes through a global “revival”, in the form of a new “purity”.

The Cold war and subsequent collapse of the USSR; the ongoing situation in the Middle East; mass immigration and the unstable oil market, contributed to establishing the context that has projected political, or more accurately fundamentalist Islam, into the international limelight.

To some, the events of 11 September 2001, Spring 2011 and January 2015 appeared to confirm the threat of Islam as a global threat. Deculturated, globalised, standardised, having lost the Spirit but not the Letter and with its undeniably stubborn norms, some denounced this religion as having become synonymous with violence and intolerance.



Muscat a city of light and enlightenment

Oman however, despite the karidjite origin of the Ibadite faith, shows the world an important “other” facet of belief in Allah providing, should we choose to heed the message, a perfect counter balance to the more widespread impression.

Muscat is the “hub” of pacifist Muslims. The Omani capital cultivates

a real cultural policy of openness and transparency thanks to an Islam strongly anchored in the history of this former maritime empire.

It is an Islam culturally anchored in a tradition; the first Ibadite imam settled in Nizwa in the 8th century. A tradition, revived, perhaps re-invented, by a progressive political project.

The new electronic Koran recently launched in Muscat is further proof of this open approach. “The idea is not to delve into the details of the Koran, nor to open oneself to the world, –

Islam has always done so – but to make possible a renewal for all in the breath of our sacred writings,” confirmed Oman’s Minister of Religious Affairs, Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salimi, (below).



Minister of religious Affairs Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salimi

“We know that the Koran is the origin of the sources of Islam. It represents all faith, for it is the book of God. The Koran is not only the book of Ibadism, it is the Holy Book for all Muslims in general. In the beginnings of Islam, each one wrote the Koran with his own hand, then with evolution, there was a turning point in civilisation with the arrival of the impression techniques. After printing, the time has come for electronics. The ministry has a point of view, which is to assert that the Koran must be available in all existing written means, and thus also electronically, in mosques. The electronic Koran that we present was carried out with the approval and after the verification of the Egyptian university of Al-Azhar.”



Members of the Greek Orthodox church are free to worship in Oman, which is well known for its enlightened tolerance of all peaceful world religions

Oman’s well-known horizontal architecture, which respects traditions and confirms the defence of a diversified, Islamic and non-Islamic heritage, is well-known and widely celebrated. “The mosques in Oman reflect all the cultures of Islam. Maghreb, Turkish, Shiite, Sunni, Gulf, etc.. It is this diversity that has founded the human wealth of Oman and which inspires its societal vision,” went on Abdul Rahman Al Salmi, a doctor of Islamic

art history, responsible for the magazine Tafahom, which means “tolerance” in Arabic.

Muscat even shelters a Christian church, a Hindu temple and a place of Buddhist worship. From the 3000-year-old fishermen’s tombs to the Portuguese colonial fortresses, including

old villages, everything is protected by the Omani authorities. Five UNESCO sites are located around Muscat, a far cry from the archaeological destruction we have seen by extremist groups in Iraq.

To return to Olivier Roy, it is indeed the coherence of the cultural project of Oman which is the best tool for the construction of a stable and tolerant Muslim state, “a sine qua non condition for the creation of a future democracy inspired of our majlis,” predicted Abdul Rahman Al Salmi.

“There is no doubt that this month (of Ramadan) has a special value among Muslims and Arabs in Oman. There is no doubt that religious freedom is an integral part of worship in our country because everyone in Oman worships Almighty God according to his religion. This freedom is encouraged through the actions of the ministry, and we also use it as policy and as a means of action,” observed the Minister of Religious Affairs.

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