

‘The Land of Security’: Western Perceptions of Religious Tolerance in Oman

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Abstract

Oman in 1970, with the advent of Sultan Qaboos bin Said to power, became a modern country. The Sultan worked on the establishment of a civil state based on the foundations of citizenship, equality and social justice. Education, health, human services and government positions, are available to all Omanies, regardless of their origins and sects. He also ordered the issuance of a cultural journal entitled *Al-Tasamoh* (tolerance), which began publication in 2003. Its main objective was to promote understanding and brotherhood among international societies. Religious tolerance, as we shall see in this paper, is deeply rooted in the Omani culture. This paper explores Western perceptions of religious tolerance in Oman. In the writings of Western travellers and missionaries, the theme of 'tolerance' will be traced.

Keywords: Oman, British Travellers, German Travellers, American Missionaries, Religious Tolerance

1. Introduction

Oman has over 1,700 kms of coastline on the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, extending from the Strait of Hormuz in the north to Dhufar in the south. After 1650, when the Omanis ousted the Portuguese from Oman, Muscat, Sohar, Sur and Salala were the most thriving cities along this littoral. However, Muscat was distinguished by a pre-eminence in trade and by security. This maritime city, according to its strategic location at the entrance to the Gulf, was always considered by European travellers to be the best seaport in Arabia. Its position, hidden among mountains, made it a perfect harbor for merchants, sailors and adventurers. In the nineteenth century, it was frequented by European merchants, explorers, agents and representatives of the East India Company. Among the interesting topics that they covered in their travel accounts are, the tolerance of the people and their kind treatment of slaves and the 'civilized' manners of Sayyid Said bin Sultan, the 'Imaum of Muscat'. In this study, We will be looking at the perceptions of the religious tolerance of Oman in the discourses of British, German and American travellers and missionaries who visited the country during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

2. Said bin Sultan as a paradigm of tolerance

The Omani ruler, Sayyid Said bin Sultan (1791-1856) enjoyed a charismatic image in Western discourses. He was the Sultan of Oman from 1804 to 1856. In the eyes of the many Europeans who were familiar with him, Sayyid Said was not just an emperor from the 'East' but also a 'Noble Knight'. The poets and authors from the west praised his, nobility, handsomeness, courage, justice, tolerance, generosity and humility. These qualities are rarely attributed to leaders from the Middle East. This therefore states that Sayyid Said was a fair man who was not just loved and respected by his subjects but also by many people and societies all around the world.

An Italian traveller, Vincenzo Maurizi, who was also known as the Sultan's personal physician, described him with these words, "Seyd Said is a good looking young man, of moderate stature and florid complexion; his manners are lively and agreeable" (1984: 18). In 1816, a British explorer, William Heude, stated that the sultan was a "middle-aged individual with a lot of charm and charisma. He was well behaved, had a desirable appearance and most of all, he had respect to any one, irrespective of age, sex or background" (1819: 26). In 1821, a Scottish novelist and traveller, James Baillie Fraser depicted him as follows: "The countenance of the Imaum is of a mild and pleasing expression. He assumed a gravity of deportment, which did not seem altogether habitual, and was far from bordering on austerity". (1825: 20)

Perhaps the most important qualities of nobility and civilization bestowed by Europeans lavishly upon Sayyid Said bin Sultan are reflected in the description of an English traveller, Robert Mignan, who visited him in 1825. Mignan placed the following description of the Sultan:

Syyud Said possesses the 'suaviter in modo' in a superlative degree, and is a rigid observer of the forms of the Mohammedan religion: all his adherents speak of him with the affection of children to a parent. He dispenses justice in person; and take especial care that the laws shall be impartially administered. [...] In short, he presents, in every way, such a contrast to all Asiatic rulers, that he is decidedly the greatest 'lion' in the east. (1839: 235)

In 1831, Joachim Heyward Stocqueler, an English Jewish traveller, visited Muscat, and was officially received and hospitalized by Sayyid Said in his palace. Stocqueler describes the Sultan with these words:

He is a mild, gentlemanly looking man of about forty years of age, — a warrior and a trader, a just governor and chivalric lover [...]. The people of Muscat, if not all the Arabs of the Arabian Gulf, hold the Imaum in great esteem. They affirm that he is just in his dealings and decisions, liberal of reward, anxious for improvement, and tolerant of the religions of other nations. (1832: 5)

Sayyid Said was tolerant to individuals of other religions. He also encouraged open trade to all people regardless of their nationalities, color or religions. This qualities asserted by many European and non-Europeans travellers who visited him in Muscat or Zanzibar. It is confirmed, for example, by an American businessman and diplomat, Edmund Roberts, who visited Sayyid Said in 1833. He was on a diplomatic mission to negotiate about trade agreements with him. Roberts hails the religious tolerance of the Sultan: "All religions, within the Sultan's dominions, are not merely tolerated, but they are protected by his highness; and there is no obstacle whatever to prevent the Christian, the Jew, or the Gentile, from preaching their peculiar doctrines, or erecting temples". (1837: 358).

James Wellsted was among the Europeans who knew Sayyid Said and experienced his nobility, generosity and justice. Wellsted received special attention from the Sultan and his subjects. He visited Muscat in 1835, and travelled extensively in Oman under the Sultan's protection and generosity. From his experience, Wellsted describes the characteristics of the regime of Sayyid Said as:

The government of this prince is principally marked by the absence of all oppressive imposts, all arbitrary punishments, by his affording marked attention to the merchants of any nation who come to reside at Maskat, and by the general toleration which is extended to all persuasions: while, on the other hand, his probity, the impartiality and leniency of his punishments, together with the strict regard he pays to the general welfare of his subjects, have rendered him as much respected and admired by the town Arabs, as his liberality and personal courage have endeared him to the Bedowins. These splendid qualities have obtained for him throughout the East the designation of the Second Omar. (1978: 7-8).

Sayyid Said has enjoyed this bright image in the eyes of Europeans until the last of his life. A traveller, who witnessed the Sultan's nobility and generosity a year before his death was the French diplomat, Arthur Comte de Gobineau. He visited Muscat in 1855. Gobineau describes the Sultan at this stage of his age, saying:

Seyd Sayd held in his hand a long stick on which he leant while walking with great nobility and dignity. He looked old and his beard was very white. His eyes were black and gentle, the expression of his face very calm and his smile especially subtle and full of wit. His whole person radiated that kind of balance between different feelings which is in every country the mark and privilege of the well-bred man [...] He was certainly a remarkable prince among minor sovereigns, fated by their lack of resources to be generally little noticed as rulers. By following a totally new path, he succeeded in making himself respected by some very powerful neighbors (Billecocq 1994: 199).

3. Tolerance of Omani people

3.1 British Travellers

In 1816, Oman was visited by two British travellers, William Heude and James Silk Buckingham. The former arrived in November, the latter in December. Both of them assert the multiculturalism of the Omani society. Heude, after speaking of the diverse races in Muscat consisting of Arabs, Jews, Hindus, Belushis, Turks and Africans, was astonished by the religious tolerance of this community: "The people of Maskat are extremely tolerant. They are also equally plain in their manners, [and] make little distinction in their conduct and deportment towards those of another religion" (1819: 23). Similarly, Buckingham, though he did not mention their religion, was highly impressed by their tolerance and civility:

One great distinguishing feature of Muscat, over all other Arabian towns, is respect and civility shown by all classes of its inhabitants to Europeans [...] Here [...] an English man may go every where unmolested [...] The tranquility that reigns throughout the town, and the tolerance and civility shown to strangers of every denomination, are to be attributed to the inoffensive disposition of the people, rather than any excellence of police, as it has been thought (1830: 417).

Captain Robert Mignan, a British traveller, who visited Muscat in 1820, was impressed by the people's religious tolerance and found them, though strict in practicing religion, "not bigoted nor intolerant", noticing that they could "hospitably" share their food with non-Moslems (1839: 239). Additionally, he remarks on their treatment of slaves, asserting, in agreement with the previous travellers, that the kindness with which the slaves were treated in Oman was "quite proverbial, and [spoke] much in favour of the character of the Arabians, who [were] the kindest and most considerate of masters". He not only asserts that slaves were well treated, but also states that his travels in Arabia convinced him that a slave might be happier and "more fortunate" than the peasantry of Europe (240). Mignan tells us that the population of the city was around ten thousand, and that some of the people were Hindus from Bombay and Guzerat, who settled there as merchants and were "treated with great tolerance" (243).

In 1823, Captain William Owen, an English vice-admiral and sailor, sailed to Muscat on board the *Leven* to obtain permission from Sayyid Said, the Sultan of Muscat, to survey the coastline of Omani possessions in East Africa. Captain Owen provides another picture about the Arabs of Muscat regarding their religious tolerance. Two incidents that Owen witnessed in Muscat were enough to convince him that "bigotry is not amongst the vices of Muscat". The first incident took place when Captain Owen presented the sultan of Muscat, Sayyid Said, with an Arabic copy of the Scriptures, with which the sultan "appeared much gratified" because the Bible is acknowledged by the Koran to be a holy book. The second occurred when Sayyid Said paid a sudden visit to Captain Owen and his crew on the *Leven*. The crew's preparation for this visit, as Owen says, was funny because, as there were many pigs on board, the crew decided to put them into the boats so that they might not insult the Sultan by their "profane appearance". The noise they made during this operation was enough to alarm every Muslim in Muscat "as if animated with the vulgar desire of offending the religious prejudices of the natives", but the scene, instead, provided much amusement to both the Muslims and the British (1833: 342).

In 1824, Captain George Keppel, a British traveller, visited Muscat while coming back from India to England. He characterizes the Muslims of Oman as follows: "They worship no saints; and have neither convents nor dervishes. They have a great regard for justice; and a universal toleration for other religions" (1827: 19-20).

The English traveller James Wellsted also speaks about the different races in Oman. He considers Muscat as a multi-cultural city in which several ethnic groups lived together respectably – Arabs, Persians, Indians, Kurds, Afghans and Belushis, practicing their beliefs and religions within an atmosphere of respect and freedom. Muslims, Jews and Banians all had their own mosques and temples. Indeed, Wellsted states that these mixed races were "attracted by the mildness of the government" and had settled in Muscat "either for the purposes of commerce, or to avoid the despotism of the surrounding governments". In 1828, he maintains, Sayyid Said Bin Sultan received a number of Jews, who could not tolerate the tyranny of Daud Pacha in Iraq, with much consideration. Wellsted describes each ethnic group in Muscat separately. About the Afghans he notes that few of them made Muscat their permanent home, that they rarely entered into business, and that they were notable for keeping distant from other races. In contrast, the Belushis, he argues, mixed with everyone, and large numbers of them were employed as household troops for Sayyid Said. The Persians, he adds, were generally merchants. They traded in piece-goods, coffee, hookahs and rose-water and some of them manufactured swords and matchlocks. Due to the difference in their faith, Wellsted believes, the Oman Arabs and Persians rarely intermarried, but with the Belushis the Arabs were less "fastidious", because the Belushis often had Arab wives, and inhabited Muscat permanently. Moreover, Wellsted adds, there were more Banians in Muscat than in any other town of Arabia, and they

Possess[ed] a small temple, [were] permitted to keep and protect a certain number of cows, to burn the dead, and to follow, in all other respects, the uninterrupted enjoyment of their respective religious tenets, without any of that arbitrary distinction of dress which they [were] compelled to adopt in the cities of Yemen (1978: 14-19).

Wellsted also observes that the same toleration granted to all other faiths was extended to the Jews of Muscat:

No badge or mark, as in Egypt or Syria, being insisted on: they are not, as in the town of Yemen, compelled to occupy a distant and separate part of the town, nor is the observance, so strictly adhered to in Persia, of compelling them to pass to the left of Mussulmans when meeting in the streets, here insisted on. Their avocations in Maskat are various, many being employed in the fabrication of silver ornaments, others in shroffing money, and some few retail intoxicating liquors (21-22).

William Gifford Palgrave visited Oman in 1863. He visited Hormuz and traversed the Coast of Oman reaching Suhar, and then sailed to Muscat. Palgrave devotes three chapters of his Narrative to Oman. His attitudes towards the area and its people are founded on the idea that the Omanis shared particular qualities with other Arabs in Arabia. His travels among Syrians, the Wahhabis and the natives of Oman led him to compare them in terms of doctrine, manners and customs. Palgrave concludes his image of the people of Oman with these words:

In disposition they are decidedly, so far as my experience goes, the best-tempered, the most hospitable, in a word the most amiable, of all the Arab race. Toleration to a degree not often attained even in Europe, exists here for all races, religions, and customs; Jews, Christians, Mahometans, Hindoos, all may freely worship God after their own several fashions, dress as they think best, marry and inherit without restriction, bury or burn their dead as fancy takes them; no one asks a question, no one molests, no one hinders (1865: 265-266).

In order to appreciate such a positive picture, one should consider its historical dominion and its counterparts elsewhere in the East. The Wahhabis, for instance, have been considered by many travellers as "fanatical" and "barbarous". Palgrave, himself, narrowly, escaped death at their hands, as they did not tolerate any 'infidel' in their territories. Not only non-Moslems but also, as Palgrave proves in his narrative, other sects of Islam were targeted. Their bloody expeditions to Oman were directed, he argues, against the "enemies of God" and justified by the "infidelity of Oman". Thus, they were detested by the Omanis to the extent that when Palgrave met with a native in Suhar, the latter told him "if matters came so far that either the Muslims or the English must be masters of our country, we should decidedly prefer the latter, or even the devil in person, to rule us, rather than the Muslims" (1865: 335-336).

Robert Binning, a British Arabist and traveller, stopped at Muscat in October 1850 during his travels to Persia and Ceylon. The tolerance and kindness of the natives is also remarked on by Binning. He found the British agent in Muscat, who was a Jew, treated with courtesy and called by the inhabitants "Master". He maintains: "I was much surprised to witness the great respect shown him by the Mahomedans of this place; for I had never before seen any son of Islam exhibit the least civility to one of his degraded race" (1857: 125-126).

Samuel Barrett Miles, the British Political Agent and Consul in Muscat during the period 1872-1886, made some observations regarding the manners of the natives in Oman. In common with most previous travellers, he was impressed by the hospitality and tolerance of the Omani people. In many places, he was received with a formal salute in which the ordinances were fired off several times in greeting; the sheikhs of Oman went out to the edges of their towns to receive him and the natives were dancing and shouting. This is the picture that Miles paints of his arrival in many places in Oman. At Mezara village, the sheikh "with a levity and humour uncommon among Arab shaikhs" put his hands on Miles's throat and affirmed he would suffocate him if he did not promise to spend a day with him and accept his hospitality. When he approached the village fort, "an old twelve-pounder gun" was fired off in honour of his arrival (Miles 1896: 533). At Buhla, as well, he was received and entertained with chivalric games. The performance, he explains, consisted of a show of horsemanship, "twirling and firing their matchlocks at high speed, running races by twos with each other" (1910: 170). Miles concludes:

I was received with every mark of friendship and cordiality which the hospitable instinct of the Arabs could suggest, my reception here and at other places being a proof of the friendly feeling and high estimation with which the name of England is regarded in this country (1910: 165).

He also praises his companions, who treated him during his travels throughout Oman with kindness and civility:

Indeed, throughout my excursions in Oman, I always had reason to be grateful to the Arabs of my escort, and not unfrequently to the local sheikhs, for their zeal and self-sacrifice on my behalf. They never resented the inconvenience and fatigue I often caused them, but deferred without question to my wishes as to the when and the whether; while on any occasion of unusual toil or danger, they seemed to regard my safety and comfort as a main point of consideration (1896: 531).

Edward Firth Henderson, a British diplomat who spent most of his life in the Arabian gulf, visited Oman frequently during the second half of the twentieth century. One of the virtues that Henderson praised in the Omanis' manners was their tolerance. This characteristic was admired by most British travellers to Oman; Henderson's remark gives us a clear picture of the people of Ibri. At Ibri, Henderson was received kindly by its sheikhs and people.

Although he was a Christian, they accommodated him in a mosque. "This is how they welcomed the first really foreign and non-Muslim group of any size to come to Ibri", he comments (1999: 185-186).

From January 1963 to July 1964, David Gwynne-James, a British soldier, served with the Sultan of Muscat's Armed Forces. In chapter nine of his book 'Memories without Letters', he provides a vivid picture of the "tolerance" virtue of the Omanis:

Looking back to the early 'sixties, we were indeed privileged to be Christian soldiers in a Muslim world. Not only were we able to acquire some understanding of Omani Muslim culture but in spite of our Christianity, we were made to feel welcome in their midst. Providing we respected their Islamic culture – and we had been well briefed on this beforehand – we were accepted without hesitation and with good grace. Our abiding impression of Omanis was of a people who were devoid of prejudice, intrigued by our presence and who genuinely wanted to like us (2001: 146).

This testimony is significant; it discharges the natives of Oman from "prejudice" and religious fanaticism, while the image of Arabs and Muslims in the west is stereotyped and associated with "terrorism". Gwynne-James not only contributes, with other travellers such as Thesiger and Henderson, to dispelling this "distorted vision" of Muslims, but also he criticizes the West for "cultivating" it, as he asserts:

For nearly a thousand years the Western world has cultivated a distorted vision of Islam which bears little relation to the truth. Even now western media seem intent on prolonging these flawed prejudices. Those of us who served in Oman find ourselves embarrassed by such distortions. When we speak up to counter them, we invariably invite disapproval. When Westerners can learn to welcome Muslims with the same generosity of spirit as Omanis welcome us, a proper respect for each other's culture can follow. Once trust has the opportunity to take root, peaceful enterprise can prevail (145).

Here, in this passage he clarifies his argument:

Although few if any of us thought to analyse it at the time this generosity of spirit was rather remarkable in the context of medieval history. After all as a nation we had played a leading role in instigating a series of brutal holy wars against the Muslims of the Near East. Subsequently most Christian scholars depicted Islam as a violent and intolerant faith. In contrast to this trend, longstanding historical relationships between Britain and Muscat had helped to reduce such prejudice (146).

Many travellers to Oman have criticized some vices of their own societies, but none of them has done so more overtly than Gwynn-James in this texts. Not only does he accept the idea that the West for a long time has "distorted" the image of Islam, but also he considers his years in Oman as a paradigm of mutual respect and 'peaceful enterprise' between East and West.

3.2 German travellers

Carsten Niebuhr, a notable German traveller, visited Muscat on January 3, 1765. A substantial part of his book Travels through Arabia, and other Countries in the East is dedicated to the analysis of Oman's ancient history, cultural traditions and economy. As

history indicates, people's intellectual advancement usually correlates with their ability to appreciate the virtue of tolerance. The realities of today's world exemplify the soundness of this suggestion with perfect clarity. In backward countries, it is considered entirely appropriate to settle arguments with machetes; in civilized countries, psychologically adequate citizens settle arguments in court. Therefore, the fact that Niebuhr describes Muscat's residents as religiously tolerant people does not come as a particular surprise:

Banians from India are settled in great numbers in the commercial cities. At Mokha they suffer many mortifications. But, at Maskat, among the tolerant sect of the Beiasi, they are permitted to observe the laws, and cultivate the worship of their own religion without disturbance. In Persia there are also some of these Indians; but the Turks, who are austere Sunnites, suffer none of them in their provinces. I never saw that the Arabs have any hatred for those of a different religion. They, however, regard them with much the same contempt with which Christians look upon the Jews in Europe. Among the Arabs this contempt is regulated. It falls heaviest upon the Banians; next after them, upon the Jews; and, least of all, upon the Christians, who, in return, express the least aversion for the Mussulmans. A Mahometan who marries a Christian or Jewish woman does not oblige her to apostatize from her religion; but the same man would not marry a Banian female, because this Indian sect are supposed to be strangers to the knowledge of God, having no book of divine authority (1792: 191).

As evidenced in Niebuhr's account, Omanis tolerated not only those affiliated with different versions of Islam, but also non-Muslims, such as Jews: "The Jews dispersed through different cities have synagogues, and enjoy a great deal of freedom. They are fond of living together, and commonly form a village near every principal town. In Oman they are still better treated, and permitted to wear the dress of Mahometans" (1792: 192).

According to the author, Europeans who lived in the area were in a position to benefit from the native population's sense of hospitality, as well:

In Yemen, Oman, and Persia, an European is treated with as much civility as a Mahometan would find in Europe. Some travellers complain of the rude manners of the inhabitants of the East; but it must be allowed that the Europeans often involve themselves in embarrassments in these countries, by being the first to express contempt or aversion for the Mussulmans (1792: 240-242).

Thus, thanks to Niebuhr's description of Oman's realities, eighteenth-century European readers undeniably got the long-forgotten taste of true orientalism as something simultaneously exotic and progressive.

3.3 American Missionaries

In 1889, three American missionaries: Samuel Zwemer, James Cantine and Philip Phelps established at New Brunswick, New Jersey, what they called the "Arabian Mission". The primary object of the enterprise was "the evangelization of Arabia". Its effort was applied directly among Moslems. Its aim, according to its announced plan, was to 'occupy the interior of Arabia' (Mason & Barny 1926: 196). The mission worked at first independently, but in 1894 it was adopted by the Reformed Church in America. The first station of the mission was established at Basrah in early August 1891, by James Cantine, then the Bahrain Station was launched by Samuel Zwemer in August 1893 and the Muscat station was set up by Peter

Zwemer, the younger brother of Samuel Zwemer, in November 1893. The Arabian mission sought initially in Oman to convert the Omani Arabs to Christianity, and its missionaries did their utmost to achieve this aim through evangelism, preaching, Christian literature, education and medical work.

We find in their writings assertions of some aspects of the Omani culture, such as hospitality, friendliness and tolerance. We can find such declaration about hospitality as far back as Harry Wiersum's article on Muscat in 1900, in which he said: "The Arabs are a proverbially hospitable. Having letters of introduction from the Imam of Muscat and Oman, we were treated right royally wherever we went" (1900: 9). Many travellers and missionaries have asserted this social aspect in Arabia, but Dr. Paul Harrison, one of the mission's persona, probably, was more impressed by the Omani hospitality; it is a dominant theme in his writings. He states, exaggeratingly, that "There are no Arabs like the Omanees. I doubt if such hospitality could be duplicated anywhere else in the world" (1922: 13). Interestingly enough, this concept of hospitality has been utilized by the missionaries themselves, in the way that they established a separate room, or Majles, in their station at Muscat, where they received some Omani tribal leaders with welcome coffee and Halwa, but for evangelization this time. Along with this hospitality, the friendliness of the Omani people is also articulated by American missionaries. The early assertion about it goes back to Samuel Zwemer's visit to the interior of Oman in 1910, in which he concluded: "the people were very friendly, as they seem to be in every part of Oman, and gave us unstinted hospitality" (1911: 16). In 1934, Harold Storm asserted this character of the natives of Oman:

The Omani is most friendly in a general way to everyone. The men's majlises (meeting places) are freer than elsewhere, and no great division of social standing exists. Often in a sheikhs' majlis slaves and masters, Bedouin camel-men and rich merchants meet on a common plane to have a friendly chat. This same picture can be found in other parts of Arabia, but in Oman, there is more of a democratic spirit. This creates a fine type and spirit of community brotherhood (1934: 265).

The theme of religious tolerance is also quite frequent in American missionaries' writings on Oman. Paul Harrison, on his medical tours to the interior of Oman, was highly impressed by the tolerance shown by the Omani Arabs toward Christianity. He gives this testimony about their religious tolerance:

Oman is a district which forbids the use of tobacco just as Nejd does, but Oman is a land of tolerance and courtesy, which can hardly be said of Nejd. The visiting doctor is not an infidel and the son of a dog simply because he is a Christian. The religious faculty seems fresher and less hardened here than anywhere else in the whole of Arabia (1934: 268).

The missionaries grounded this positive attitude towards the Arabs of Oman on the fact that the Omanis did not only accept and purchase many scripture tracts, but also they welcomed the missionaries very courteously. Indeed, the sultan himself has allocated lands for their churches in Muscat. Even the Ibadi Imam of Oman, Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Khalili, who was well-known for his resistance to any Western influence in Oman, greeted American missionaries hospitably in his residence at Nizwa, dialogued with them and appreciated their presence. Dr Wells Thoms visited the Imam in 1941, accompanied by his fellow missionary Dirk Dykstra. He recalls:

he asked us numerous questions about our purpose in leaving our country to live and work in Muscat. When we answered him that Jesus, the Anointed one, whose followers we were, ordered his followers to go to all

nations to teach men His doctrines, heal the sick and share with all men the good news of the Injil (the Arabic word for the Gospel), he said, 'Do you believe that God is one?' When we said 'yes' he said, 'You are not an idolater or kafir, you are "the people of the book". We believe you are mistaken in some of your doctrines but we respect you because you fear God, the Praised and the Exalted one; therefore you may proceed in safety in our land' (Phillips 1971: 187).

4. Conclusion

The main feature of the Western accounts on Oman is the fact that their authors appear to pay particular attention to the qualitative essence of socio-political and religious dynamics within Omani society – hence, their admiration of Omanis' religious tolerance. This can be explained by the fact that the Western visitors to Oman themselves had chosen to become open-minded people, as far back as the early sixteenth century during the time of the Protestant Reformation, which is best referred to as the intellectual by-product of the Western psyche. As rightly noted by Chaves and Gorski: "The Protestant Reformation brought substantial increases in religious pluralism and religious competition" (2001: 272). Therefore, exposed to the ethnic and religious tolerance of Omanis, Western travellers could not help but see it as an indication of their cultured civilization.

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