

Religious Tolerance: Islam in the Sultanate of Oman

The Message of Oman



THE exhibition "Religious Tolerance: Islam in the Sultanate of Oman" opened on December 3, 2013 at the Ljubljana Town Hall sponsored by Islamic Culture Center. Ljubljana is the capital and largest city of Slovenia, a member of the European Union, located between Austria, Italy and Croatia. The Republic of Slovenia is an alpine country which has been a hub between the Slavic, German and Latin cultures, and is home to more than 50,000 Muslims, approximately 2 per cent of the country's two million people.

Attending the opening ceremony were Ljubljana's mayor Zoran Jankovic, Mufti Nedzad Grabus, and representing Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Shaikh Ahmed Saud al Siyabi, Secretary-General of the Iftaa office. The Sultanate of Oman was also represented by Dr Badr Mohamed al Hinai, Oman's Ambassador accredited to Slovenia and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vienna. Distinguished guests included Slovenia's former president, the current ministers of defence and foreign affairs, and Egypt's Ambassador to Slovenia. More than 200 visitors attended the opening ceremony.

Mayor Jankovic welcomed the distinguished guests by name, and welcomed the close ties to the Sultanate of Oman, which has demonstrated over time its commitment to openness and tolerance. He also expressed his appreciation to the Islamic community, and said he did not know who was more looking forward to the opening of Ljubljana's only mosque, the Mufti or himself!

Following the Slovenian Mufti's opening remarks, Shaikh Al Siyabi reiterated Oman's historic legacy of co-existence both at home and abroad, stating that "Just as inside Oman, it has been the same abroad, wherever the Omanis lived and traded, such as in East Africa and Southeast Asia. Omanis have coexisted with everyone, even with the pagans and atheists. It is the human side which has power over relationships and life. The Omanis understand this through the words of the prophet Mohammed, (PBUH), when he stood up at the funeral of a Jew out of respect for his humanity, and asked 'Does not every man have a soul?'"

Ambassador Al Hinai stated that he hopes this exhibition will spread further in Europe and cross many more borders, within the framework of Oman's National Plan for the Alliance of Civilisations, devised in 2009 to promote tolerance and coexistence between civilisations and religions. Oman has been adamant about fostering religious tolerance."

With a population of 300,000, Ljubljana is one of the smallest capital cities in Europe, with its centre stretched decoratively along the Ljubljanica River, spanned by romantic bridges. Each year over 10,000 cultural events take

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place in the city. It has managed to retain traces from all periods of its rich history; from the legacy of Roman Emna; to the Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau periods. Here eastern and western cultures meet.

Earlier this year, on September 14, 2013, Slovenia's Prime Minister Alenka Bratusek laid the foundation stone for the first mosque in Slovenia during a ceremony attended by some 10,000 people, noting that it is a "symbolic victory against all forms of religious intolerance" and that Europe would not be as culturally rich without Islam. Construction should be finished by the end of 2016. The Islamic Religio-Cultural Center, also known as the Ljubljana Mosque, is located in the Bežigrad district, comprising the mosque, a library, a classroom, an ablution fountain and the Imam's offices and quarters. Financial assistance is being provided through a donation made by Qatar.

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Accompanying the exhibition is a short documentary film, *Religious Tolerance in Oman*, by the award-winning

German film-maker Wolfgang Ettlich, commissioned by the Ministry to document religious life in the country.

The exhibition is on display from December 3 through December 23 at the Ljubljana Town Hall, Mestna trg 1, Ljubljana in the Zgodovinski Atrium.

The contents of the exhibition on religious tolerance in Oman are available online at www.islam-in-oman.com

ABOUT OMAN

July 2013 was the 43rd anniversary of Sultan Qaboos's reign in the Sultanate of Oman. In 1970, when he assumed power, the country was a hermit nation, and it was only in the early 1990's with the beginnings of tourism that this situation began to change. Under the leadership of the Sultan the country and its people have made the leap into modernity without severing their roots or losing their traditions.

The Sultanate of Oman is surprising in its varied landscapes: rugged mountains, deep canyons, idyllic oases and vast plantations. The lush greenery contrasts to the vast deserts of sand and gravel. The 1,700 km long coastline varies between white sand beaches and steep cliffs. It is easy to see how the legends of 1001 Arabian nights, of Sindbad, the Three Kings, and the riches of the Frankincense Road all arose in this region. A broad spectrum of faces and languages reflect Oman's long history as a seafaring nation.

Today the country is exemplary in terms of education

and healthcare. Modern infrastructure for communications and transportation is well developed throughout the land, making life easier even in the remotest regions. Women serve in high government positions, as ministers and ambassadors, and are integrated in all levels of the work force, including ownership and management positions.

Of crucial importance for success in modern development — besides intelligent planning — is the autonomous religious identity of Omanis, the majority of whom subscribe to Ibadhiyah, Ibadism. The Ibadhi philosophy is based on principles of religious tolerance and avoidance of conflict. According to Ibadism, Islamic principles must always be considered in relation to cultural norms and historical context. Only then can Islam retain its original spirit and remain timely. This Islamic school of thought is largely unknown, not only in the west but also in the Islamic world.

In their intentionally modest way, the Ibadhis are the purists of orthodox Islam, but they are also very progressive in their willingness to adapt interpretations of the Quran to the requirements of here and now.

In Oman there were always members of other religions, such as Jews, Christians, Hindus and Zoroastrians. Due to the principles of religious tolerance their presence was accepted and they were not subjected to any discrimination because of their religious affiliation, even in the past centuries when Oman was an Imamate, a religious state.

Today a large number of followers of various religions live in Oman, where free choice and the practice of religion is guaranteed by the state. There are Christian churches of different denominations, as well as temples for Hindus and Buddhists. Missionary activities and proselytising are proscribed for all religious communities, including the Islamic.

Responsible for the various religious communities in the country is the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs. The head of this ministry, Minister Shaikh Abdullah al Salmi, has a clear vision of the world and his personal mission: "We have three population groups on earth: the first, consisting of Christians, Jews and Muslims, who believe in one God and a holy book; the second, atheists, who have lost all confidence in religion; and the third group, representing a variety of religious and spiritual ideas. We endeavour to maintain a constructive and genuine dialogue with scholars and representatives of all these groups. The aim of exchange is to reflect on the foundations of our thinking, a common morality and a common sense of justice. For only when we are aware of these similarities and these form a basis for our actions, while accepting cultural differences, will we and our children enjoy a peaceful future."

