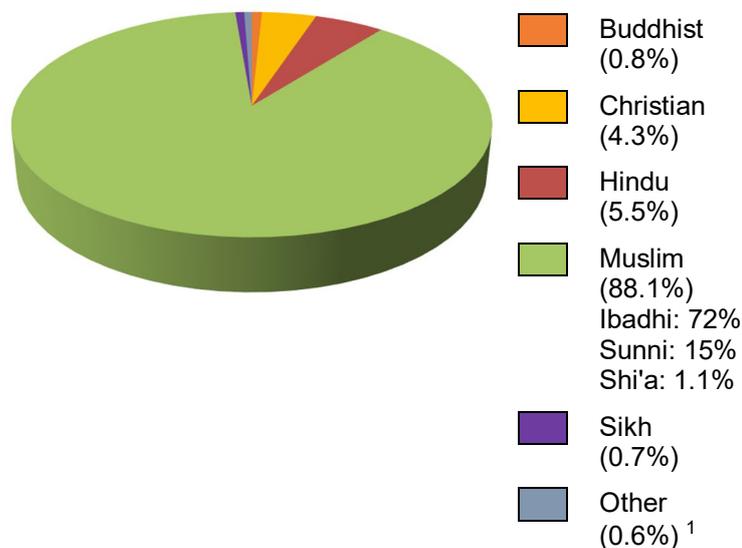


OMAN



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
309,000 km ²	2.9 million	Monarchy	Arabic

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Oman is a sultanate located on the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. The majority of its population, including the ruling dynasty, (around 75 percent) are Ibadhi Muslims. They are neither Sunni nor Shi'a but are descendants of an early stream in Islam. Oman is the only country in the world that has an Ibadhi majority. Sunni and, to a much smaller extent, Shi'a Muslims constitute the rest of the citizenry. There are a small number of naturalised Christian and Hindu families. For centuries, there has been a Hindu community in Oman, which originally settled in Muscat.

Around 45 percent of the country's population are non-citizen residents, mostly foreign workers. Among them are Hindus, Buddhist, and Sikhs. There are three Hindu temples and two Sikh gurdwaras.

There are about 180,000 Christians of different denominations living in Oman. Over 60 Christian groups are registered with the government. The Protestant and Catholic communities are recognised by the ministry of religious affairs. In January 2014 a new Protestant church was opened in the capital, Muscat. Officials from the Ministry attended and gave congratulatory remarks.²

There are four Catholic parishes in Oman (two in Muscat, one in Sohar and one in Salalah), and these fall under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia (AVOSA). An official at AVOSA told ACN there are an estimated 80,000 Catholics in Oman.

The constitution of 1996, as amended in 2011³, states in article one: "The Sultanate of Oman is an Arab, Islamic, Independent State with full sovereignty." The following article (three) declares Islam the religion of State: "The religion of the State is Islam and Islamic *Shari'a* is the basis for legislation." Article 28 says: "The freedom to practice religious rites according to recognised customs is protected, provided it does not violate the public order or contradict morals."

Oman has no law that criminalizes apostasy from Islam. However, a father who converts from Islam loses his paternal rights over his children.

Article 209 of Oman's Penal Code punishes with a term of imprisonment of between ten days and three years, or a fine between five to five hundred Omani Riyals (approximately US\$13 to \$1,300), an individual who commits the following acts: (1) publicly blaspheming God or the prophet Mohammed, (2) committing an affront to religions and faiths by spoken or written word, or (3) breaching the peace of a lawful religious gathering. Under Law 32, of 1997, on Personal Status, the rules of Islamic *Shari'a* law apply to all matters concerning inheritance and the validity of the marriage of a non-Muslim spouse.⁴

Using the Internet in a way that "might prejudice public order or religious values" carries a penalty of up to one year in prison, and fines of at least 1,000 Riyals.⁵

Imams need to have a license. They must follow the sermons issued by the government.

The law prohibits public proselytising by all religious groups, although the government allows religious groups to proselytise privately within legally registered houses of worship. Foreigners found guilty of proselytism can be deported.

Non-Muslim groups may practise their religion according to their values, customs, and traditions without interference but only on land specifically donated by the Sultan for the purpose of collective worship. The government does not permit gatherings for religious purposes in private homes or in any location other than government-approved places of worship.

Incidents

In November 2014 the Malayalee Christian Congregation (MCC) celebrated its 45th anniversary at the Protestant Church in Oman (PCO) Complex in Ruwi. The congregation is one of the oldest Christian congregations functioning in Oman, having served as an inter-denominational Evangelical organisation since its inception on 3rd July 1970. From a small beginning with few members, the congregation has grown over the last four-and-a-half decades with hundreds of members.⁶

In December 2015 Moran Mor Baselios Cleemis, the Major Archbishop (or Catholics) who heads the Syro Malankara Catholic Church, visited the country for the 15th anniversary celebrations of Oman's Syro Malankara Catholic Community.⁷

There were no reports of governmental or societal abuses of religious freedom within the time period of this report. A problem though remains with the lack of space for non-Muslim communities to worship.

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Doug Leonard, who runs Al Amana Centre, a Protestant organisation that fosters dialogue and mutual learning between Muslims and Christians, says: "Many people doubt that Muslims and Christians can peacefully co-exist. Oman provides proof that we can. In the past 120 years, Omani Muslims and American Christians have worked together as healthcare professionals and educators, with Muslims remaining Muslims and Christians remaining Christians, to improve society for the common good of all."⁸

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_171_1.asp

² 2014 U.S. Report on International Religious Freedom - Oman

³ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Oman_2011.pdf

⁴ <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/index.php#oman>

⁵ U.S. International Religious Freedom report 2015

⁶ <http://timesofoman.com/article/43642/Oman/Oman's-Malayalee-Christians-to-hold-function->

⁷ <http://timesofoman.com/article/72478/Oman/Government/Top-church-official-to-attend-Oman's-Catholic-Church's-anniversary-celebrations>

⁸ <http://timesofoman.com/article/37761/Oman/Tradition-of-tolerance-in-Oman-endures>; <http://www.alamanacentre.org>; <http://www.alamanacentre.org/newsletter/Al%20Amana%20Newsletter%20Spring%202014.pdf>; see also http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/sultanat-religioese-toleranz-in-oman.1278.de.html?dram:article_id=325183