

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

OMAN

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Oman	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	59	44
WWL 2018	57	46
WWL 2017	53	49
WWL 2016	53	50
WWL 2015	55	39

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Oman

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14654150>

Recent country history

Located at the confluence of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, Oman was an influential sultanate during the medieval period. Arabic is the official language, and more than half of Oman's population is Arab. Having been occupied by the Portuguese, Ottomans and others in the 18th century, the sultanate became powerful and took control of the coastal region of present-day Iran and Pakistan, colonized Zanzibar and Kenyan seaports, brought back enslaved Africans and sent boats trading as far as the Malay Peninsula. The country was finally subdued by British forces and treaties of friendship and cooperation with Great Britain were signed in 1798 allowing the country to maintain its independence.

In 1971, Oman joined the League of Arab States and the United Nations. Oman generally has good relations with neighboring countries. According to Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2018 (p. 36): "Oman maintains close relations and strategic partnerships with the United Kingdom, the United States and their Arab allies (especially Egypt and Jordan). [...] Oman works to establish security through cooperation rather than conflict and strives to maintain good relationships with all its neighbors, the [GCC](#) and Iran, Pakistan and India." (GCC stands for the Gulf Cooperation Council, a political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. The GCC was established in May 1981, but lost significant influence due to the ongoing [Qatari crisis](#).)

The religious landscape

Islam is the state religion. Oman was one of the countries reached by Islam within Muhammad's lifetime. Omanis practice a unique brand of Islam called Ibadhism, which is a majority sect only in Oman. Ibadhism has been characterized as "moderate conservatism," with tenets that are a mixture of both austerity and tolerance. According to experts on the sect, the followers of the Ibadi sect are [not violent](#) in comparison with Sunni or Shiites. They do not believe in violence, even towards those who leave Islam or who are not Muslims, but rather focus on "dissociation" which is usually an internal attitude of withholding "friendship" (*wilaya*). Thus, even though Islam dominates the lives of Omanis, there is also a tendency to tolerate Christians – a tolerance not found in some of the neighboring countries. This tolerance is strengthened by the Sultan, who is trying to present the country internationally as a symbol of tolerance and diplomacy, especially by attempting to mediate in international talks with some of the militant groups in the region.

The constitutional provision regarding religious freedom is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it provides for religious freedom, and on the other hand it states that the practice of freedom of religion should not violate established customs, public policy or public morals.

The political landscape

The country is ruled by a monarchy with two advisory bodies (State Council and Consultative Council). The current Sultan came to power in 1970 after deposing his own father. He is credited for abolishing slavery in the country and giving Oman a strong economy. He has brought his country into a strong alliance with the United States, which has been interested in its oil reserves and its strategic location relative to Iran, the Persian Gulf, and Middle Eastern oil fields (Source: [Stratfor](#)). He is also credited for

bringing security and stability to a country that has had a history of war and conflict. While many other Arab states have succumbed to sectarian violence and political tumult, the sultanate of Oman has stood out as a beacon of tranquility and tolerance.

The Sultan is also credited with introducing some democratic reforms. For example, in 1997, women were granted the right to be elected to the country's consultative body, the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura). In 2003, the Sultan extended voting rights to everyone over 21; previously, voters were selected from among the elite, and only about a quarter of the population was allowed to vote. Despite all modernization and the abolishment of slavery many years ago, the attitude of slavery is often still apparent.

The Basic Statute of the State (issued in 1996) is the country's constitution. It was amended in 2011 as a response to the protests that year. Nevertheless, the Sultan's control over the country is still firmly in place.

The socio-economic landscape

Oil and gas wealth has promoted massive social transformation since 1970. Education levels have improved considerably. The younger generations are interested in new ideas - visible also in the clothing of younger people. Moreover, a cultural shift is taking place from agrarian nomadic to urban lifestyle. To tackle future unemployment - more than half the population is under 21 - Oman is gradually replacing expatriates with nationals. Due to this, the percentage of educated and skilled Omanis is growing. Female education has dramatically reduced illiteracy. Literacy is 75%. Highly educated teachers and technicians from abroad are currently in demand but ultimately "Omanization" will lead to a decrease in the level of non-Muslim residents.

The Sultan of Oman has a monopoly on the use of force, and political opposition is weak. At the same time, Oman has a free and competitive market economy. Moreover, according to Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2018 (p. 20): "The foundations of a free and competitive market economy are assured. The currency is freely convertible, and the government has incrementally introduced laws to ensure a free market." However, "rules that regulate the employment of expatriate labor (such as the kafala sponsorship system) and policies for the Omanization of the private sector workforce are still in force."

Concluding remarks

The future of Christians in Oman is shaped by social, political and regional factors. The Sultan is believed to be the main force behind the security and stability of the country; he is ageing and reports have indicated that his health is deteriorating. Thus, if his influence ceases, the country might fall into the hands of radical Muslims. Any weakening of the regime could thus lead to further Islamization of the country's political institutions and a stricter application of Sharia legislation. Furthermore, the current civil war in Yemen might also begin to affect the country, if both refugees and Islamic militants seek refuge in Oman.

On the other hand, there is also the positive trend of the government trying to develop a culture of religious harmony as can be seen in its support of the [al-Amana Center](#) which works to promote dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Oman

- Recent country history: GCC
<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Gulf-Cooperation-Council>

- Recent country history: Qatari crisis
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40173757>
- The religious landscape: not violent
<http://islam.uga.edu/ibadis.html>
- The political landscape: Stratfor
<http://www.stratfor.com/video/conversation-omans-geopolitical-importance#axzz3Cp2Ek5dY>
- Concluding remarks: al-Amana Center
<http://www.alamanacentre.org/index.php?pageid=3a>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
4,830,000	198,000	4.1

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

Christianity is believed to have first entered Oman with the coming of the Portuguese in 1507–1508 and also to have departed with them. A new era for mission began in 1889–1890 with the arrival of James Cantine and Samuel Zwemer (1867–1952) in Muscat, Oman’s capital. Their visit was part of their work with the American Arab Mission. In 1894 the Reformed Church in America (RCA) assumed sponsorship of their work, which extended throughout the region. The RCA opened a hospital in Muscat, which became the center of the nation’s Christian presence for many years. This work, now known as the Protestant Church of Oman, includes Protestants of many denominational backgrounds and continues to be served by RCA personnel. Its work is concentrated in Muscat and in the nearby communities of Ruwi and Ghala. The Sultan of Oman also granted parcels of land to the church in Salalah and Sohar.

The Roman Catholic Church re-established itself in the area in 1841 with an assignment of personnel to Aden (Yemen). That work grew successively into a prefecture (1854) and a vicariate (1888), and in 1889 it became the Vicariate of Arabia, now administered from Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) and responsible for Catholics in Oman. The first Roman Catholic church in Oman was erected in 1977 in Muscat. (Source: Melton J. & Baumann M., eds., *Religions of the World*, 2nd edition, 2010, p.2147.)

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Oman	Christians	%
Orthodox	24,800	12.5
Catholic	138,000	69.7
Protestant	11,500	5.8
Independent	20,600	10.4
Unaffiliated	3,200	1.6
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	198,100	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	6,000	3.0
Renewalist movement	35,200	17.8

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Indigenous Christians (i.e. Christians with a Muslim background) number only a few hundred.

According to [Middle East Concern](#): "Expatriate Christians enjoy considerable freedom in Oman, provided their activities are restricted to designated compounds and that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. Church compounds are typically overcrowded on days of worship as they seek to accommodate multiple congregations of various nationalities and languages." There are church compounds in Muscat, Sohar and Salalah, with facilities for Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches. Land has also been made available for other non-Islamic forms of worship. There are discreet efforts being made to obtain permission for a church in Buraimi. The umbrella organization for Protestants, the Protestant Church in Oman (PCO), has an Arabic-speaking congregation for expatriates. The PCO has a voluntary reporting arrangement with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. One consequence is that those working with Omani Christians are very cautious in their relationship with the PCO, and vice-versa. The Anglican Church is one of the main expatriate groups and its congregations are under the jurisdiction of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East.

Religious context

Religious Context: Oman	Numbers	%
Christians	198,000	4.1
Muslim	4,314,000	89.3
Hindu	244,000	5.1
Buddhist	29,000	0.6
Ethnoreligionist	710	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	13,000	0.3
Atheist	250	0.0
Agnostic	7,200	0.1
Other	24,060	0.5

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

According to WCD 2018 statistics, 89.3% of Oman's inhabitants are Muslim, with most Omanis (75%) following the conservative Ibadi sect of Islam. The next largest religion in the country is Hinduism with 5.1% of the total population.

Notes on the current situation

The Sultan of Oman is believed to be the main force behind the security and stability of the country; he is ageing and reports have indicated that his health is deteriorating. If his influence ceases, there is danger that the influence of radical Islam in the country will increase.

External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- What church networks exist today?: Middle East Concern
<https://meconcern.org/countries/oman/>

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 59 points, Oman ranked 44th in WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

Islamic oppression: Islam is the state religion and legislation is based mainly on Islamic law. The government restricts collective worship to churches build on land specifically donated by the Sultan for this purpose. Public proselytization is forbidden.

Ethnic antagonism: Society and a convert's family shun those who leave Islam. Tribal traditions (e.g. family honor) blended with Islamic values are forced upon converts from Islam to Christianity. As family identity and religion are intertwined, leaving Islam is seen as betrayal of the family.

Dictatorial paranoia: Oman is an absolute monarchy, ruled by Sultan Qaboos. The regime imposes limits on virtually all political rights and civil liberties, and responds particularly harshly to criticism and dissent. The government expects obedience from its citizens and does not allow any opposition. Although expatriate Christians are relatively free to practice their faith, the government monitors all activities.

Who is driving persecution?

Omani society is conservative and tribal relationships are important. Leaving Islam is therefore seen as betrayal of both tribe and family and both will put pressure on a convert to return to Islam. The Omani government actively promotes religious tolerance. However, this does not alter the fact that public law is based on Sharia law, allowing the freedom of religion only as long as it does not violate established Islamic customs, policy and public morals. Furthermore, the non-democratic government keeps its citizens, especially minorities, under strict surveillance.

What it results in

Converts from Islam to Christianity are put under pressure from family and society to recant their faith. They can be expelled from the family home and from their jobs and face problems over child custody and inheritance. Expatriate Christian communities are tolerated, but their facilities are restricted and Christian meetings are monitored to record any political statements and if any Omani nationals are attending. All religious organizations must be registered with the authorities.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Oman	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	16	2	0	0
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	0	10	1	0

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- Public proselytizing is forbidden; it can only be done privately. Reportedly, some converts and expatriate Christians involved in proselytization were called in for questioning in the WWL 2019 reporting period.
- Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the government which then approves and controls the leases of building to such groups.
- According to the US State Department's [International Religious Freedom Report 2017](#): "Hassan Al-Basham, who had been sentenced to three years imprisonment in 2016 for blasphemy and disturbing religious values, arising out of his comments on social media, remained in prison at year's end." This indicates the political climate in which Christians in Oman have to operate.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: International Religious Freedom Report 2017
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281244.pdf>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 59 points, Oman ranked 44th in WWL 2019. The rise of 2 points compared to WWL 2018 was partly due to a rise in the number of reports of violence targeting Christians.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Oman	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Medium
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Very weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Islam is the state religion and legislation is based mainly on Islamic law. All state school curricula include instruction in Islam. Apostasy is not a criminal offense, but it is not respected by the legal system either, which assumes that all citizens are Muslims. National holidays are religious holidays, which means Christians are forced to adhere to the Islamic calendar, celebrations and customs. A convert from Islam to Christianity faces problems under the Personal Status and Family Code, which for example prohibits a father from having custody over his children if he leaves Islam.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

Tribal values, in which family honor plays a very important role, are blended with Islamic values. To be Omani is to be Muslim. There is great pride in being Omani, and often the celebration of tradition is held in higher regard than the meaning behind the tradition. To break with tradition or to question the reasons behind it are unimaginable for the general population. Society shuns those who leave Islam, even though violence is not encouraged.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

Oman has been ruled by a dynasty that does not respect the will of the people. There is discontent among Omanis who generally believe that the government is authoritarian, even though they accept that recent economic reforms have been beneficial. In its 2018 report, Freedom House rated the country as "[not free](#)". According to the report: "The regime restricts virtually all political rights and civil liberties, and imposes criminal penalties for criticism and dissent." The media also faces harassment and intimidation.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Oman	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK	-	-	MEDIUM	-
Government officials	Strong	-	Weak	-	-	-	Medium	-
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

Local Omani Christians have been interrogated by government officials, commanded to stop meeting, and have faced threats of losing their jobs and homes. Many have faced persecution from their families. Christian expatriate workers have been interrogated and instructed not to share their faith, or risk losing their visas. In this way, government and society complement each other. The government restrains Christianity from above, meeting the wishes of their citizens to have an Islamic country. On the other hand, society puts pressure on both indigenous and expatriate Christians to comply with the Islamic rules, giving the government no need to act forcefully against Christians and to maintain a friendly face towards the world, especially the West.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

For Omanis, being Omani is their nationality, but their tribe is their real identity. As a communal society, a convert to Christianity brings great shame on the entire tribe. The leaders of the tribe and of the family then bear the burden of restoring honor to the tribe. This can only be done if the person returns to Islam, leaves the community or dies. The persecution most often seen is the unwavering pressure on a convert to return to Islam, or the complete abandonment of the individual by their community.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

While the Sultan is very popular due to the progress and prosperity the country has seen under his rule, he is also a dictator. While many Christians fear the monitoring of their phones and social media, most often this technology is focused on Omanis and is used to suppress any hint of dissension or criticism of the government.

Context

For a more detailed overview, see the Keys to Understanding section above.

Located at the confluence of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, Oman was an influential sultanate during the medieval period. Arabic is the official language, and more than half of Oman's population is Arab. In 1971, Oman joined the League of Arab States and the United Nations. Oman generally has good relations with neighboring countries. The current Sultan is credited with introducing some democratic reforms. Despite all modernization and the abolishment of slavery many years ago, the attitude of slavery is still in existence and the Sultan still has a monopoly on the use of force. Political opposition is weak. At the same time, Oman has a free and competitive market economy. Oil and gas wealth has promoted massive social transformation since 1970. Education levels have improved considerably. Female education has dramatically reduced illiteracy. The younger generations are interested in new ideas - visible also in the clothing of younger people. Moreover, a cultural shift is taking place from an agrarian nomadic lifestyle to a more urban one.

Christian communities and how they are affected

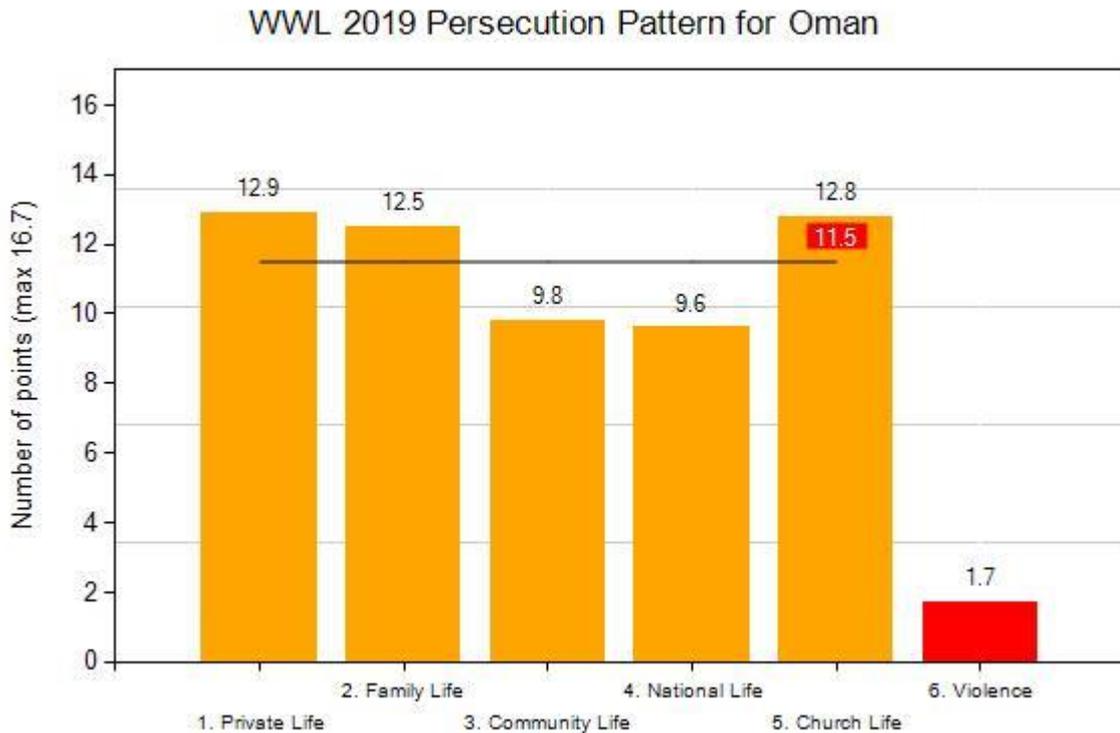
Communities of expatriate Christians: There are a number of expatriate communities in Oman, centered mainly in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar and Salalah. These include Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant congregations. There are more than sixty different Christian groups, fellowships and assemblies active in the capital city, Muscat. All religious organizations must register and Christian meetings are monitored. Foreign Christians are allowed to worship discreetly in private homes or work compounds. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals.

Historical Christian communities: There are no historical Christian communities (other than expatriate ones covered in the first category above.)

Converts to Christianity: Converts from Islam to Christianity risk persecution from family and society, mostly in the form of pressure to renounce their faith and by withholding relationships. Converts can lose their family, as the law prohibits a father who leaves Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

Non-traditional Christian communities: There are no non-traditional Christian communities in the country (other than expatriate ones covered in the first category above).

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Oman shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.5), rising from 11.2 in WWL 2018.
- Although all *spheres of life* show high or very high levels of pressure, pressure is clearly highest in the *Private, Family and Church spheres of life*. This reflects, on the one hand, the difficult situation for convert Christians who face very high pressure from their (extended) family; on the other hand, church life is difficult for both convert and expatriate Christians, as proselytizing and integrating converts from a Muslim background are socially unacceptable.
- The score for violence remained low despite increasing from 1.1 in WWL 2018 to 1.7 in WWL 2019. This increase is mainly due to the scoring of the situation of domestic maids within Omani households. Reportedly, their faith causes increased vulnerability for (sexual) abuse.

Private sphere:

Oman is one of the few countries where Islam is state religion, but where conversion is not a crime as long as it is not done publicly. Yet there are consequences, especially on issues related to family matters and converts in particular face persecution in their private life. According to the US State Department's [International Religious Freedom report for 2017](#), "conversion from Islam was reportedly viewed extremely negatively within the Muslim community", which explains why a convert will be ostracized by his family. Given the tribal culture, ostracization means that a convert will lose all social securities normally provided by the family.

Family sphere:

Converts are legally still considered to be Muslim. They can only marry under Islamic rites. Having a Christian wedding or funeral is difficult. A country researcher adds: "A convert husband will lose his right to custody upon divorce. That is what the personal status and family code clearly puts."

(This would not be different for a convert wife, but women in general do not have custody rights.) In addition, spouses will be pressurized into divorcing a convert, while the family will disinherit the convert.

Community sphere:

In their local communities - and particularly in schools - it is especially converts who have to take precautions to avoid discrimination, harassment and bullying. A country researcher notes: "Public school curricula include Islamic teachings. It is a must for Muslim students to take Islamic teachings. Christians or other non-Muslims are not obliged to take the Islamic teaching courses. However, converts who do not want to reveal their new Christian faith for safety reasons will still be required to take the Islamic teachings. In addition, there is no similar Christian teaching included in school curricula for Christian students."

Christians are in general monitored not only by the government but also by society. Displaying Christian symbols, like a cross, can lead to questions. Also in this area, most pressure is experienced by converts, who will in general be excluded by society if their faith is known. A convert can easily lose his job for example.

National sphere:

The pressure exerted in the *National sphere* often has a significant impact on shaping the persecution dynamics in a given country. In Oman, Islam is the state religion and Sharia law is the principal source of legislation. That means Christians have to live under policies and laws that are enacted in accordance with Islam. However, one country researcher writes: "In recent years the Omani authorities have advised local believers that it is permissible for them to believe whatever they like, provided they do not meet together in unauthorised places or publicize their Christian beliefs in any way." This indicates that the government will not act as long as the convert is not causing any public disturbance.

Church sphere:

It is true that there are many recognized congregations in Oman. Yet constructing and registering a church-building is difficult. The government must also approve any buildings rented by religious groups. The law prohibits public proselytizing by any non-Islamic religious group, although the government tolerates private proselytizing within legally registered houses. Tolerating private proselytizing is something that characterizes the country, as this is impossible and even dangerous in neighboring countries. In this way, the government wants to present the country as Islamic to its neighbors, while being tolerant towards minorities at the same time.

Violence:

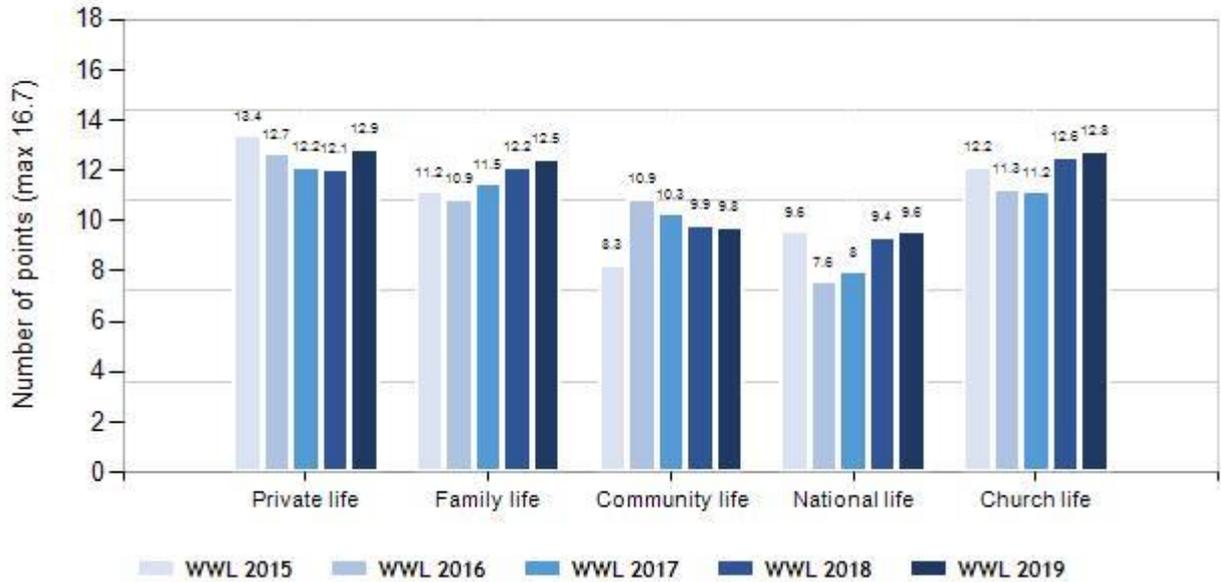
The increase in the violence score was mainly due to scoring the situation of (female) domestic workers. Under the official *kafala* sponsorship system, domestic workers are tied to their employers, who confiscate their passport and can force them to work excessive hours. This leaves them vulnerable to abuse. (Source: Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2017/18, p. 288.) For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

Over the last five reporting periods, the levels of pressure in the *Private, Family and Church spheres of life* have remained significantly higher than those in the *Community and National spheres of life* (chart 1). The second chart shows that the average level of pressure on Christians has remained more or less

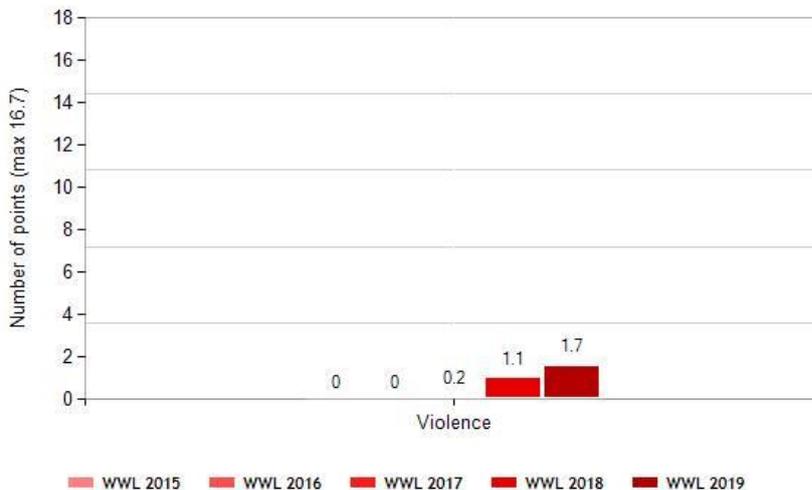
stable at a very high level (measuring between 10.6 and 11.5) over the five reporting periods. This reflects the fact that the overall situation for Christians in Omani society has not changed much over the years. The scores for violence (third chart), although negligible in WWL 2015-2017, show an increase in the last two reporting periods.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Oman (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Oman	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	11.5
2018	11.2
2017	10.6
2016	10.7
2015	10.9

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Oman (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Female:

In general, women are in a vulnerable position in Oman. Society is very conservative and the lives of women and girls are controlled by their father, husband or guardian. Within Omani Islamic culture, women are regarded as being less worth than men, even during court proceedings. Most commonly, women stay in the family home with their children. This encourages a mindset in which women are seen as being less capable in many ways, which also has an impact on their faith, since women are not expected to have their own (religious) opinions. Thus, this environment makes it especially difficult for women to convert from Islam to Christianity. Typically, pressure from the family side would be felt most keenly by women and girls (followed by younger and then older men, reflecting levels of status and freedom generally within the culture). Together with the social control within this system, it can be seen how many barriers exist preventing women from converting and meeting up with Christians.

The ill-treatment of foreign workers, including sexual abuse, remains a high-profile issue. Although not primarily faith-related, there are indications that non-Muslim domestic workers, almost all of whom are female, are more vulnerable to such abuse than Muslims.

Male:

If expatriate male Christians face pressure because of their faith, it is most likely that they will encounter it on the work-floor. For convert males, the impact of their faith will be much more far-reaching. Most likely they will be ostracized by their families, resulting in wider social exclusion: i) Their families will not support them any longer; ii) They lose access to daily necessities normally provided by the family; iii) Finding a job will be harder in Oman's network-based society; and iv) No family will allow their daughter to marry a man who does not respect his own family.

If a convert has family and employment at the time of his conversion, he risks losing it all. When a man leaves Islam, he automatically by law loses custody of any children, his wife might divorce him and he can easily lose his job, which has major implications for all his family members since men are traditionally the breadwinners for their families.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Hindus, Buddhists and non-Ibadi Muslims are relatively free to practice their own beliefs. The US State Department's [International Religious Freedom report for 2017](#) stated that "non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious groups experienced no interference from the government in their regular private worship services despite continuing legal prohibitions on worship outside of government-approved locations. Non-Muslim minority groups continued to report overcrowding at their places of worship. Space limitations also caused overcrowding at some private homes used for non-Islamic worship."

Future outlook

The political outlook: The future for Christians in Oman is shaped by social, political and regional factors. Looking at the situation of many countries in the Middle East and the Gulf, it is difficult to envision positive developments and Oman is no exception. If social unrest happens in the future, the regime might weaken, which could well lead to further Islamization of the country's political institutions and a stricter application of Sharia legislation. The Sultan is believed to be the main force behind the security and stability of the country, but he is ageing and reportedly of ill-health. If his influence ceases, the country might fall into the hands of radical Muslims. Furthermore, although a

ceasefire does appear to have been reached between the parties in Yemen, the country remains unstable and both refugees and Islamic militants could try to enter Oman if the situation does not improve. This would harm Oman's reputation of being a neutral safe haven. In addition, although Oman did not take sides in the Qatari crisis yet, it might be forced to do so by Saudi Arabia, which could also have an effect on government policies and the economy."

The outlook for Christians - as viewed through the lens of:

- *Islamic oppression:* Although there does exist the threat of future Islamization, there is also the positive trend of the government trying to develop a culture of religious harmony. The al-Amana Center, a Protestant [initiative](#) supported by the government, works to promote dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians on the premise: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions" and "No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions". Nevertheless, conversion will remain a very sensitive and controversial issue and churches will remain limited in their activities, especially when it comes to evangelization.
- *Ethnic antagonism:* Although urbanization and modernization are influencing the new generations, family and tribalism will most likely remain significant factors in society. As long as religious identity and tribal identity remain interwoven, converting to Christianity will be seen as a betrayal of the family, making it difficult to make such a choice.
- *Dictatorial paranoia:* If the Sultan remains in power, expatriate Christians will keep their relative freedom to worship. The government will keep monitoring Christians for forbidden activities (proselytizing) which can cause public unrest, but is not likely to persecute Christians aggressively. However, this can easily change if the Sultan dies or retires.

Conclusion: If the Sultan dies, the transition period might prove to be one of uncertainty and conflict. The same applies to the civil war in Yemen: If it is not halted, it could have an impact on Oman, with Islamic militants and refugees crossing the border from Yemen. In addition, although Oman is not directly involved in the Qatari crisis, it could be affected if the regional tension continues unabated or even increases, as it is already affecting the cooperation of the Gulf countries within the Gulf Cooperation Council. For the moment Oman remains a peaceful country, but its future is uncertain and some developments could have a serious effect on the Christian minority.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: not free
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/oman>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: International Religious Freedom report for 2017
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281244.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom report for 2017
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281244.pdf>
- Future outlook: initiative
<https://alamanacentre.org/>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).