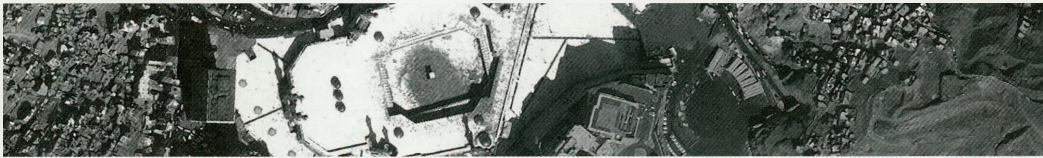


Discussed: diaspora, Shari'ah law, peace and freedom, execution threats, Christian dream,  
faithful fundamentalist Muslims

# Looking for Middle Ground with Islam

By *Berge Schantz*

Is middle ground at all possible in the discussion of Muslim cultures? This was the challenging question the editor of *Spectrum* put to me as we were negotiating some aspects of Islam and Muslims in the world today.

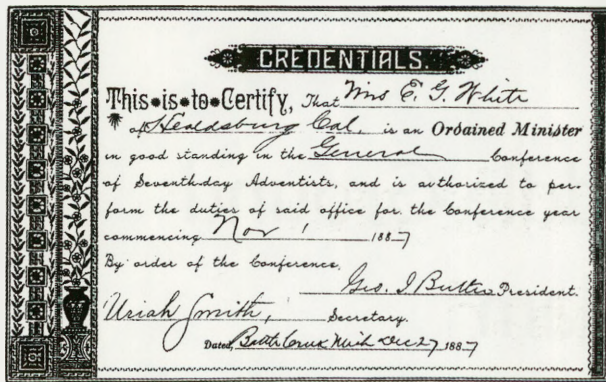


It is possible to find middle ground between many cultures in the world because they have much in common. The middle ground problem arises in situations where culture and religion are integrated. In the editor's challenge, the word *culture* was tied to Muslim. Interestingly, in anthropological studies, Islam is the prime example of an almost complete integration of culture and religion. This means that the challenge really is to find middle ground between two religions because Muslim culture is synonymous with a religion, Islam. In Islam, religion is integrated into culture in such a way that separation of the two is impossible.

One result of this inseparability is that Muslims in diaspora have a hard time living in non-Islamic cultures. A change in an Islamic cultural pattern—for instance, in the way a woman dresses or how she takes part in normal societal life—could mean that she rejects a religious practice. The result of such an act could be punishment according to Shari'ah law, or even no hope of access to the Islamic paradise.

So a reasonable answer to the question will require that we distinguish between a Muslim and an Islamist.

Muslims are fellow citizens in the world. Regardless of race, color, or language, they should always be met with understanding



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and respected as equals. As individuals, they are potential recipients in God's saving grace and must be worthy objects of Christian witnessing activities.

In contrast, Islamism—a growing radical political/religious movement—must be studied and understood. Christians should be aware of the perils and threats it presents to Western culture, humans, and property. In their understanding of the Koran and the Hadiths, Islamists aim to get world dominion by the means of the Shari'ah law. They feel that they are justified to use oppression or even terror as means to reach their goal. This can be clearly observed in recent events.

To reach middle ground between two religions requires that both sides be prepared to contextualize, negotiate, and tolerate, to be flexible and even to some extent yield within the framework of their own religions. A healthy sense of humor also helps.

However, these characteristics are not what we experience from fundamentalist, rabid, and extreme Muslims. In their camp, the virtues needed for a meaningful dialogue are really regarded as weaknesses on the part of Christians. In dialogues between Christians and strict Muslims, the latter have no room for middle ground positions. If they agree to talk they will instead use the opportunity to take advantage or even exploit the "weak" Christians.

Fortunately, not all Muslims are like this. As a matter of fact, the majority of the more than twenty-five million who reside in the Western world want to live in peace and enjoy freedom and the benefits they receive. They are prepared to adapt their lifestyle (culture and customs) in order to live among Christians in a harmonious and peaceful manner. They are, however, kept in line by extreme fundamentalist Islamists, who account for less than 10 percent of the total. They can and will use execution threats from the Shari'ah law to keep their Muslim sisters and brothers inside the fold of Islamic doctrines.

A middle ground in culture—although difficult to establish—can be reached on the personal level with individual Muslims. In religious matters, a middle ground position is only a Christian dream. It is unacceptable for faithful fundamentalist Muslims.

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Børge Schantz was the founding director of the Adventist Centre for Islamic Studies, at Newbold College, and recently published *Islam in the Post 9/11 World*.