

Muslim Beliefs on Sexuality

Islamic teaching on sexual issues varies significantly from a Christian biblical position in several areas. But, as we have seen in other areas, the beliefs of average Muslims do not necessarily follow the teachings of Islam.

[Over the last several months](#), we have been looking at the religious beliefs and practices as expressed by a worldwide, Muslim population in an extensive Pew Research Center survey^{1} taken in 2012. We have compared those beliefs and practices with those of Americans toward the Christian faith as documented in several recent surveys.

Now, I would like to turn our attention to some cultural beliefs and behaviors. In particular, we will begin by looking at beliefs concerning sexual behavior. Once again the survey data on Muslims will be divided into five regions: North Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Russia, and Turkey), the 'Stans (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), and South Asia.

For this evaluation, we will use questions asked in the Pew survey. The questions are worded, "I personally believe that _____ is morally acceptable, morally wrong, or it is not a moral issue." The five topics considered (as they are worded in the survey) are:

1. Sex between people who are not married
2. Homosexual behavior
3. Having an abortion
4. Polygamy (having more than one wife)
5. Divorce

A person following the Qur'an and the Hadith would say that the first two items above are morally wrong while the last two items would be considered morally acceptable with some

constraints. The question about abortion is not directly addressed in the Qur'an or Hadith. The way in which Muslims actually responded is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Muslims Believing a Behavior is Morally Wrong

	North Africa	Middle East	Eastern Europe	'Stans	South Asia
Sex outside marriage & Homosexuality	84.7%	88.7%	68.9%	77.2%	84.1%
Abortion	73.2%	64.4%	72.0%	52.6%	83.6%
All of the above	67.5%	66.9%	56.5%	44.3%	77.3%
Polygamy	25.2%	30.1%	73.0%	57.7%	39.8%
Divorce	17.0%	34.2%	20.2%	30.4%	27.8%
All behaviors	7.2%	13.6%	11.6%	13.5%	13.9%

As shown, they are fairly consistent on fornication and homosexuality, with strong majorities stating that they are both morally wrong. However, Eastern European Muslims appear to have been influenced by the culture around them, falling about 16 percentage points lower than the average for other areas in the world.

On the question of abortion, we find a greater variation across geographic areas. Those Muslims in South Asia are most united in their views, with well over 80% of them saying that abortion is morally wrong. In contrast, the Muslims of the 'Stans are about evenly split with just over half saying it is morally wrong. The Middle East is not as strong as one might expect, with about two out of three people agreeing that abortion is morally wrong.

Polygamy, seen as acceptable in the Qur'an with a man allowed to have up to four wives, is seen quite differently in different geographic areas. In North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the majority of Muslims **do not** consider it to be morally wrong. In contrast, in Eastern Europe and the 'Stans, a strong majority of Muslims consider it **to be** morally

wrong. Of course most of the Muslims in Eastern Europe and the 'Stans grew up in the Soviet Union or Soviet bloc countries where polygamy was presumably illegal.

Finally, we see that most Muslims across all geographic locations do not believe that divorce is morally wrong.

If we consider that the Christian Bible teaches us that all of these actions are morally wrong (with some exceptions for divorce), we realize (looking at the bottom row of the table) that nine out of ten Muslims do not agree with that perspective.

Looking at data on similar topics from residents of the United States, we find the following:

Table 2: American Christians Believing a Behavior is Not Right

	All	Born Again Christian	All Others	Source
Sex before marriage & Homosexual relations	16.9%	32.8%	7.0%	GSS 2014 ^{2}
Abortion	44.9%	62.0%	34.5%	GSS 2014
All of the above	13.2%	25.6%	5.4%	
Homosexual relations	23.3%	41.7%	13.4%	Baylor 2010 ^{3}
Divorce with children	29.2%	47.1%	19.4%	Baylor 2010

Comparing the two tables and focusing on the Born Again Christian column, we observe that worldwide Muslims are much more likely to see sex outside of marriage and homosexual relations as morally wrong. On abortion, born again Christians have a similar response as Muslims. But born again Christians are more likely to oppose divorce when children are involved than Muslims.

On the whole, it appears that Muslims are more likely to agree with the teachings of the Qur'an than born again, American Christians are to agree with the teachings of the Bible. However, Muslims do not agree with the full set of biblical stances on sexual issues.

Notes

1. The World's Muslims Data Set, 2012, Pew Research Center – Religion & Public Life. The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by James Bell, Director of International Survey Research.
2. General Social Survey 2014 conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by Tom W. Smith of the NORC.
3. Baylor University. 2010. The Baylor Religion Survey, Wave III. Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by Kevin D. Dougherty, Paul Froese, Andrew L. Whitehead, Jerry Z. Park, Mitchell J. Neubert.