

Basic Religious Beliefs of Worldwide Muslims

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More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

Between October 2011 and November 2012, Pew Research Center conducted a major survey of Muslims involving more than 30,000 face-to-face interviews in 26 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The survey asked people to describe their religious beliefs and practices, and sought to gauge respondents' knowledge of and attitudes toward other faiths, as well as some of their attitudes concerning cultural issues.

Since Probe has been commissioning and evaluating similar surveys about the beliefs and practices of Christians and other faiths in America, we wanted to analyze the data in this large survey to see how the beliefs of Muslims in the eastern hemisphere relate to Christians in America. We also wanted to see how Muslim beliefs varied across different regions. To do this, we divided the data into five geographic regions: North Africa, Middle East, Europe, the 'Stans (e.g. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), and South Asia.

If you have read [Cultural Captives](#) or been following [my blog posts](#), you know that one of the metrics we have been following is the percentage of Americans with a Christian worldview. One survey we analyzed recently is the Portraits of American

Life Study (PALS) 2012. That survey shows that American Christians holding a biblical worldview were 33% of 18- to 29-year-old self-professed evangelicals, [{1}](#) and 46% of those over 30. When we consider all professing Christians (i.e. evangelical, mainline and Catholic), we find 20% of 18- to 29-year-olds and 32% of those over 30 hold a biblical worldview. For the PALS, the definition used for a biblical worldview is:

- 1. I definitely believe in God*
- 2. Jesus is the Son of God and physically rose from the dead*
- 3. The Bible is fully inspired by God*
- 4. Heaven exists where people live with God forever*
- 5. There is a Hell where people experience pain as punishment for their sin*
- 6. The Devil, demons, or evil spirits exist*
- 7. What is morally right or wrong should be determined by God's law*

For Muslims, using questions asked in the Pew survey, we defined a Qur'anic worldview to include the following responses:

- 1. I believe in one God, Allah, and his prophet Muhammad*
- 2. I know a great deal about the Muslim religion and its practices*
- 3. In Heaven, people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded*
- 4. In Hell, people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished*
- 5. I believe in angels and in jinns (spirit beings similar to demons)*
- 6. I believe Islam is the one, true faith leading to eternal life in heaven*

The results of the survey showing those Muslims who agreed to all the above points are as shown in the table below.

	North Africa	Middle East	Europe	The 'Stans	South Asia
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18 - 29	33.2%	24.1%	12.3%	4.0%	28.2%
30 plus	35.3%	30.4%	11.8%	4.8%	27.5%

What do we see in this data? First, the vast majority of Muslims living in the Eastern Hemisphere do not hold to a strong Qur'anic worldview. North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia all show about one third with a Qur'anic worldview. These numbers are much like those for a Christian worldview in the U.S. In Europe and the 'Stans, we see only about one in ten and one in twenty, respectively, hold a strong Qur'anic worldview. One might speculate that the European downturn is due to the general decline in religious interest in Europe, and the low percentage in the 'Stans is due to a lack of teaching in their heart language.[{2}](#)

In understanding these low responses, one should consider that on the whole, only about 40% of Muslims claim to know a great deal about their religion and its practices. This lack of knowledge is probably a major factor in why only about 20% of them hold a strong Qur'anic worldview. This view is consistent with my personal experience in South Asia where I found that most of the people in a Muslim country were born into their faith culture and had never considered in any depth what it really meant.

One other interesting note is that in all areas other than the Middle East, the percentage of those aged 18 to 29 with a strong Qur'anic worldview is almost identical to those over 30 years of age. In contrast, among Christians in America, only one in five of those aged 18 to 29 have a biblical worldview while one in three of those age 30 and over have a biblical worldview.

It should also be noted that among Muslims, over three out of four of them believe that Islam is the one true faith leading to eternal life. But among American Christians, only one out of five believe Jesus is the only way to receive eternal life. Even though a minority of Muslims claim to know what their religion teaches, the

vast majority believe that what it teaches is the only way to eternal life. Even though they believe it is the only way, only about one in five believe that members of their religion “have a duty to try and convert others to their religious faith.”

I imagine that many Americans think that Muslims hold to a common set of beliefs throughout the world. As we have seen from this survey, that is not the case. The majority of Muslims do not understand the basic tenets of Islam as taught in the Qur’an. Surprisingly, most of them admit it, saying that they do not know a great deal about the Muslim religion. Next week, we will look at their religious practices which tend to be more consistent than their religious beliefs.

Notes

1. Evangelicals include those associated with an evangelical denomination including historically Black Protestant churches.
2. Please note that this is only speculation on my part; there is no information in the Pew survey to enlighten us on this question.

Acknowledgement: 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, Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Acknowledgement: Emerson, Michael O., and David Sikkink. Portraits of American Life Study, 2nd Wave, 2012.

The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com.