# Basic Religious Beliefs of Worldwide Muslims – Part 2

More Cultural Research from Steve Cable

As we will see below, most Muslims do not believe and understand the religion of Islam but they self-identify as Muslims. Earlier I reported on the stated religious beliefs of worldwide Muslims using a set of survey questions which could be considered to reflect a Qur'anic worldview. We saw that across the Eastern hemisphere less than 25% of professed Muslims held to a Qur'anic worldview. The percentage was much less in Eastern European countries (12%) and in the 'Stans (5%).

In this post, we will look at a less stringent criterion than a full Qur'anic worldview to see the differences in viewpoint across different geographic regions and different levels of educational achievement.

Once again, we are using a 2012 Pew Research Center survey of Muslims involving more than 30,000 face-to-face interviews in 26 countries across North Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In looking at the data, we will consider educational achievement and geographic 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 the following three questions.

1. *I believe in one God, **Allah**, and his prophet Muhammad.*

2. *I believe Islam is the **one, true faith** leading to eternal life in heaven.*

*3. I **know a great deal about the Muslim religion** and its practices.*

The data looks like this:

| | North Africa | Middle East | Europe | The ‘Stans | South Asia | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Allah plus True Faith | 85.8% | 89.5% | 57.0% | 63.3% | 88.0% | 78.3% |
| Add Knowledge | 45.7% | 47.7% | 24.3% | 20.4% | 43.2% | 38.0% |

As you can see, Muslims in Eastern Europe and the ‘Stans are much less likely to believe that Islam is the one true faith, with only about six out of ten versus almost nine out of ten for the other geographic regions. When we add in those who believe they know a great deal about their religion, the number drops to around two out of ten as compared to about five out of ten for the other
geographic regions.

Let this sink in a minute. Two out of three Muslims worldwide{1} do not believe that Islam in the one, true faith and that they know a great deal about it. Even in the Middle East and North Africa, less that 50% fall into this category of I
believe and I know what I believe. If you don’t know a great deal about your religion, for most it must mean that your religious beliefs are not very important to you. After all, you are not even sure what they are. Note that this does not mean that your religious culture is not important to you.

Now let’s consider the impact of education on the beliefs held in Eastern Europe and the ‘Stans. In these two geographic regions, we see a significant difference based on the level of education completed.

| | Eastern Europe | | | The 'Stans | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Limited Education {2} | High School and Beyond | All | Limited Education | High School and Beyond | All |
| Allah plus True Faith | 65.4% | 44.9% | 57.0% | 75.9% | 48.8% | 63.3% |
| Add Knowledge | 30.1% | 19.8% | 24.3% | 30.3% | 16.2% | 20.4% |

Those with only a limited education are 50% more likely than those with at least a high school diploma to indicate a belief in Islam as the one true faith and know a great deal about their religion. Thus in these two regions, people with at least a high school education are very unlikely to have a basic belief in Islam and know what Islam teaches. One would suspect that the high school education is at least somewhat secular in nature (following the example set when under the Soviet Union) and thus does not promote the teachings of Islam.

In conclusion, the survey data is very clear. Most people who self-identify as Muslims do not fully understand the teachings of Islam and believe that it is the one true faith leading to eternal life.

## Notes

1. Even though the survey only covers the Eastern Hemisphere, we can relate the data to Muslims worldwide
since over 98% of the Muslims in the world live in the Eastern Hemisphere.

2. Middle school education or less.

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.

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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 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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.

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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.

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