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Islam on the World Scale
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The big headline on the CNN website one day last week read: One quarter of the World is Muslim! Although the headline was designed to shock readers and get them to read the story, the story itself sounded more like the first day of a freshman-level "Introduction to Islam" course than a shocking revelation of unknown data.

The occasion was the recent release of the Pew Foundation's study of the world's Muslim population (pewforum.org) which has provided the most accurate (but by no means perfect) population estimates of the Islamic world. While the Pew study has refined the numbers and made them more reliable, the picture of world Islam remains that familiar to scholars and college students—although, given the press's reaction, perhaps not to most journalists or readers. Let me discuss a few highlights.

The earth contains 1.57 billion Muslims, about 23% of its 6.8 billion people. It remains the second largest religion behind Christianity, whose population is presently estimated to be 2.22 billion, about 32%.

The most interesting part of the study is that it so clearly explodes the false link between Islam and Arabs. Islam originated among the Arabs and in its early centuries the two became inseparably linked in the minds of westerners. Even as Islam expanded beyond the Arab world, the misconception held.

The Pew study shows that 62% of the world's Muslims live in Asia. They are not ethnically Arab. The Arab countries, which the Pew identifies as "Middle East-North Africa," make up only 20% of the world Muslims, even though the populations of nearly all these countries are 75% or more Muslim, and more than half of them are 95% Muslim. The desert climate of the Middle Eastern countries cannot sustain large populations like the Asian countries.

The two countries with the largest Muslim populations are Indonesia and Pakistan, respectively. Muslims are the majority in these countries. But the country with the third largest number is India, where Muslims make up only 13% of the population. India simply has a large population. The fourth country is Bangladesh. By itself, Indonesia contains 13% of the world's adherents to Islam, but the three countries of South Asia (Indian subcontinent) constitute almost a third of the earth's Muslims.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the next largest percentage of world Muslims, about 15%. Nearly a third of these live in Nigeria, which is home to 78 million.

Europe comes in fourth with just 5%, about 38 million members of Islam. What is interesting is that while press reports about Muslims in Europe feature problems with recent immigrants, such as those in England and France, most European Muslims belong to families that have been in Europe for centuries. They account for 60% of Europe's Islamic population and live primarily in Eastern Europe.

North and South America have few Muslims, just 4.6 million. This is only slightly more than Germany, which has 4 million. The United States is the only country that contains more than a million Muslims. At 2.5 million, they constitute only 0.8% of the nation's population. They are the third largest religious group in the USA, behind Christians and Jews. While the USA's Muslim population has been growing over the years, it remains about half the size of Judaism. The 2008 American Religious Landscape study put Judaism's membership at about 1.7% of the US population, something over 4 million.

Neither religious group can hold a candle to the USA's Christian population, of course, which totals well over 160 million Americans. This is more than 80 times the size of the Islamic population.

Americans may worry about the size of Islam, certainly some small political organizations have tried to use it in their scare tactics, but there is really nothing new in the Pew report that has not been widely known in the higher education community for decades. Islam has been the world's second largest religion for a long time. Muslim immigration into Europe may generate friction and therefore news, but it is not large enough to constitute a significant threat to Europe's Christian roots. And certainly, neither the USA nor any other country in the Americas is under any pressure from Islam.