



Variety Within Contemporary Islam*

Cultural

Western Christians are prone to view Islam as a monolith, the same everywhere in the world. We often generalize from our limited contacts with Muslims how “they” must be. Islam is, however, like Christianity, in that it takes on different faces and forms in various cultural settings. While Muslims in Indonesia, Muslims in Nigeria and Muslims in Morocco have a common faith, the expressions of that faith may be very different. Muslims live under all kinds of governmental structure, and they are divided by language, history, economics and customs that may have little to do with Islam itself. The cultural variety is rich and exciting, though sometimes also confusing and divisive.



Theological

In addition to cultural variations within the vast Muslim populations of the world, there are a variety of theological currents within the common Islamic faith in the One God and the message of the Prophet Muhammad. There are two subgroups of Muslims: Sunni and Shiite (also known as Shia). Sunni Muslims form a majority globally, while Shiite Muslims are a vocal minority within the Muslim world. The word Sunni comes from the Arabic word Sunnah, which means customary practice. Sunnis believe in electing their leaders

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rather than having Muhammad's blood descendants inherit power. The word Shiite comes from the Arabic word Shi'a, which means supporters. Shiites believe that Muhammad's descendants are imams and that the last of the descendants will return to redeem the world. Additionally, there are jurists and theologians who take an academic, intellectual approach to the faith; and there are pietists and mystics (known as Sufis) whose religious devotion issues forth in ecstatic poetry and acts of mercy and compassion. Most Muslims combine these and other approaches to faith in varying degrees, much as we Christians do. Just as there are different types of Christians with varying religious beliefs and practices, so too are there variations among Muslims. It is important to keep this diversity in mind when we meet our Muslim neighbors. There is no one Muslim answer or solution to any problem, and no one Muslim approach to the practice of faith in the world.



According to the Pew Research Center, there are approximately 3.4 million Muslims living in North America (as of 2010). That number represents only 0.2 percent of the total Muslim population globally. The majority of Muslims (61.7 percent) live in Asia and the Pacific. Only 19.8 percent live in the Middle East and North Africa. The Muslim population is projected to grow 1.7 percent globally by the year 2020. Source: pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/31/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think.

