

Part I

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Who is a Muslim?

OUT of a world population of 6.9 billion, 1.3 billion are Muslims. Both these figures are approximate since no exact statistics are available. They are, however, reasonable since the former is based on United Nations assessments, and the latter on the calculations by each country of its Muslim population. Every sixth man, woman, and child on earth, therefore, is a Muslim.

Muslims constitute the majorities of the fifty seven members of the Organization of Islamic Conference. They constitute significant minorities in a number of other countries: India (161 million), China (22 million), Russia (16 million), as well as lesser minorities in practically every country in the world.

In North America, Muslims count about eight million persons, most of whom live in the big cities. New York, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, Montreal, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Washington and Boston are home to thousands of Muslims. Many an American town has a number of mosques (Arabic: *masjid*, pl. *masājid*) or houses of prayer, where Muslims worship. The largest and most beautiful of these is the Mosque of Washington, D.C. located on Massachusetts Avenue. It was completed in 1957 under the patronage of a number of Muslim Governments. 6,000 worshipers attend Friday prayer there every week.

Who is a Muslim?

The Muslims belong to practically all world ethnic groups. The Arabs, as ethnic group, lead the list with some 316 million, followed by the Javanese (239 million), Bengalis (147 million), and the Turanians, i.e., Turkmen in Central Asia and Asia Minor (61 million). Although black people constitute an ethnic group in America, they do not do so in the world where they are divided into a number of properly “ethnic” groupings. Nonetheless, there are 241 million Muslims of African descent.

The map of the Muslim World looks like a solid rectangle running over the great land mass of Africa-Asia. It stretches from Dakar, the westernmost corner of Africa all the way to Sinkiang in northwest China. The “rectangle” seems also to have three long and heavy fingers stretched over the east coast of Africa, a second along the great river plains of northern India and reaching to the Bay of Bengal, and a third, stretching over the whole archipelago of the East Indies and including part of the Philippines and New Guinea. By area, the Muslim World includes two of the largest countries in the world, Kazakhstan and Sudan. By population, it includes four of the most populous, namely, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria with a combined population of over 600 million.

Muslims speak many languages. Those of them for whom Arabic is the mother-tongue make up over 316 million. The Javanese group is next in size and counts some 239 million; the Bengali, 147 million; the Turkish 70 million; the Persian, 69 million and the Hausa groups, 35 million respectively. Arabic is also a *lingua franca* to many more millions of non-Arabic speaking peoples. All Muslims know some measure of Arabic, since Arabic is the language of worship. Many have achieved varying degrees of mastery of the language since it is the first language of Islamic religious thought and culture. A person speaking and writing nothing but Arabic could easily find himself at home anywhere around the wider world belt, Dakar to Mindanao, among Muslim communities.

A very prominent and visible aspect of universal occurrence among Muslims consists in Arabic calligraphy and arabesque decoration, found in all places where Muslims congregate, especially in the houses of worship. Equally ubiquitous are various architectural features of

those buildings, whether inside, as in the case of the Qur'an's verses rendered in beautiful calligraphy, or outside, such as the minarets, from which five times a day, the *muadhdhin* chants the call to worship in Arabic. This call to prayer, as well as the chanting of the Qur'an, constitutes aural features of universal occurrence in the Muslim World. Certainly, there are other features binding the Muslim World together, but they are not as conspicuous. They reveal themselves to the investigator, if not to the casual tourist.

Besides these foregoing aspects of quick identification, Muslims constitute a great diversity of appearances. They are divided into a multiplicity of cultural groups, each carrying its own dress, customs, and ways of life.

In the past, the Muslim World has witnessed a great deal of mobility among its peoples. The brotherhood, racial tolerance and lack of color discrimination, the common institutions of the Muslims, once made it possible for anyone to move from one end of the empire to another without estrangement. As a direct effect of this mobility, the Muslim urban populations are very polyglot. No feast is greater to the eyes of the anthropologist than that of sitting at any sidewalk café in Rabat, Tripoli, Cairo, Damascus, Jeddah, Baghdad, Tehran, Lahore, Delhi, or Jakarta. Passing him are automobiles as well as camels, veiled women as well as women in saris and mini-skirts, jeans and sarongs, fair and blue-eyed northerners as well as people of dark skin, West African Hamitic, Chinese or Mongols, small-built Malays or large bodied Afghans, men with parted hair and men with fezzes, and turbans, men in Savile Row clothing and men in flowing robes. All of them are Muslims.

The same diversity is beginning to characterize Muslim presence in North America. Whereas half of the Muslims of this continent are black people, the other half are caucasian, and consist of immigrants (and their descendants) from all over the Muslim World. The same variety of ethnic and cultural types can be witnessed in any convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the dominant and guiding Muslim organization in the North American continent.