When the Pew Research Center released its study last October of the world's Muslim population, most American newspapers treated the news calmly, essentially reiterating points from the report.

CNN.com's Oct. 12 story was typical. Leading with the headline, "Nearly 1 in 4 People worldwide is Muslim, report says," the report emphasized that most Muslims live in Asia (60 percent), that the Hindu country of India has more Muslims than all but two countries in the world, and that China has more Muslims than Middle Eastern countries such as Syria.

One point that appeared in many newspaper and online reports but did not appear in the Pew study was the number of Christians in the world. They indicated the world's 1.57 billion Muslims may constitute 23 percent of its population, but that the 2.33 billion Christians make up 33 percent of the population.

This information seems to have been included to reassure Christians that they need not be alarmed because "our religion" is biggest.

Why would Christianity's first place in the "size sweepstakes" be comforting? Is it just a matter of: Our side is biggest, so our side is best? Should we cheer for Christianity "winning" in the same way we cheer for our favorite sports team?

Or perhaps this information should be viewed in deeper, more theological terms. For some, Christianity's top rank indicates God's plan of providing all humanity with Christ's salvation is doing well. Its large size indicates the plan is making real progress; Christianity is the biggest and therefore the best game in town, so to speak.

But before anybody cheers for Christianity as the top-ranked theological squad, they should hesitate. Many Christians do not consider all branches of Christianity valid. Many Christians only view only their own brand of Christianity as acceptable. Some accept one or two of the other branches, but not all of them. They see the others as incapable of offering salvation.

These Christians cannot take all 2.33 billion Christians as a good thing, for they do not count them as Christians. So here are the numbers of the different branches of Christianity. These are the best numbers currently available and I offer only the five largest.

Roman Catholicism is the largest at 1 billion members; in fact it is the world's largest religious organization of any kind. Taken together, Conservative Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostalists come in second at 305 million. The Eastern Orthodox churches (including Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Egyptian Copts and even the various Monophysite churches) are third at 240 million. The so-called Mainstream Protestant churches (including Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians) follow closely with 233 million. Finally, the fifth largest branch of Christianity is one most Americans have not even heard of, the 110 million members of the African Indigenous churches.

None of these branches of Christianity by itself is larger than Islam, or even larger than Sunni Islam. This observation has theological implications, as well as demographic ones.

On the one hand, if a Christian believes that only their branch of Christianity provides salvation, then God's plan is doing poorly, not even bringing in as many members as its closest rival religion, and less than half of all people who call themselves Christians.

On the other hand, if a Christian is ecumenical, as many are, and believes that other branches of Christianity lead to salvation, then that is a recognition that much of that branch's specific theological beliefs are unnecessary for salvation. The beliefs focus on matters of this world, but not the heavenly one. They form a way of organizing believers into a social body and guiding their way of life (e.g., morality, worship, aspects of daily life), but are not needed to determine one's state in the afterlife.

So the way Christians react to simple demographic information reveals something about their view of the success of God's plan of salvation.