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The Triumph of Abrahamic Monotheism
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Of course, this land area view is somewhat misleading, because Asia is home to two of the world's most densely populated large countries, India and China. At more than 1.2 billion people each, these two countries contain more than a third of the world's population between them.

India is in fact home to the world's third largest religion, Hinduism, which counts about a billion adherents and roughly 14 percent of the world's population. Asia is home to most of the world's Buddhists, but guesses about their population are highly uncertain and range from 300-350 million.

This is where we reach the limits of our ability to count more precisely, however. Hinduism may be the third largest religion, but it is smaller than the number of people around the world who follow no religion at all. About 16 percent of the world's population does not attach to any religion. These range from committed atheists to agnostics and secularists to people who check "none of the above" on surveys of religious belonging.

We should not forget communism's work to stamp out religious belief in China, Russia and other countries, nor the rise of secular and scientific worldviews in Europe, the Americas and elsewhere. The ability to perform a more accurate count might lower each religion's population a few percentage points. But it would not in the end change the general picture.

Is this a triumph of monotheism? I would not characterize it as such because there is no unity. Islam and Christianity are highly suspicious of each other. Within each religion, large groups do not even recognize other groups as belonging under the same religious umbrella. Evangelical Christians do not recognize the Mormons as Christians even though they are called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Don't forget that Protestant Christianity was formed through the rejection of the validity of the Catholic Church. In Islam, there is ongoing Sunni questioning of Shiite and Sufi forms of the religion.

So rather than a single, large monotheistic religious umbrella, monotheism is simply a category that contains numerous, squabbling members. Indeed, the world's largest Christian nation, the United States, is also the home to the world's largest variety of Christianities, all of whom would rather remain separate than join together.

Note: Numbers in this essay are based on information found at Adherents.com and pewforum.org/Global-Muslim-Population.aspx. For a dynamic graphic illustrating the growth and movement of world religions, go to www.mapsofwar.com/ind/history-of-religion.html.

Photo:
Members of the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam together dominate more than 80 percent of the Earth's land area. (Dbachmann, Wikimedia Commons)

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