Thinking Differently about Difference:
Muslima Theology and Religious Pluralism
By Jerusha Tanner Lamptey

How does the Qurʾānic discourse depict the phenomenon of religious diversity, specific other religions and, more generally, the religious 'other'? While seemingly simple, this question, in fact, is rife with significant theological and practical implications. Theologically, it is intimately connected to the understanding of God and God's action in the world. It is also intertwined with the understanding of humankind and the purpose of human creation. In fact, this rich question in many ways defines the theological relationship between God and humankind; the Qur'an's depiction of religious otherness and the religious 'other' is also—and always—a depiction of God and the religious 'self.'

Practically, the depiction of the religious 'other' assumes great importance in light of the uniqueness and ubiquity of the modern reality of religious diversity. Today, we encounter diversity in a more intimate and intricate manner. Such encounters frequently prompt inquiry into convergences and divergences in belief and practice and discussions of appropriate forms of interreligious interaction. Moreover, ongoing waves of religious violence and oppression force us to ask difficult questions about the relationship between depictions of religious diversity, other specific religions, and religious 'others,' intolerance, and oppression. Although there is not an automatic and direct connection between negative depictions of the religious 'other' and intolerant actions, negative depictions can easily be co-opted to further incite intolerance and even violence among individuals and groups.

In addition to its enduring theological and practical import, the question of how the Qur'an depicts the religious 'other' is also inherently complex. The Qur'an explicitly and extensively discusses the topic of religious difference, sometimes referencing specific groups, such as the *al-naṢārā, yahūd*, and *ahl ul-kitāb* (commonly translated as the Nazarenes/Christians, the Jews and the People of Scripture) but also using more general terminology, such as believers, hypocrites, disbelievers, and submitters. However, throughout this discourse, the Qur'an does not consistently depict religious otherness as acceptable or unacceptable. At times, otherness is positively evaluated, and at others, it is blatantly scorned:

> *Those who believe, the Jews, the Nazarenes, and the Sabians—all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good—will have their reward with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve.*[1]

> *… We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, God would have made you one community, but God wanted to test you through that which God has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and God will make clear to you the matters you differed about.*[2]

> *The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell, and you will find no one to help them.*[3]

Moreover, the extensive—and seemingly ambivalent—discussion of religious otherness is tangled together with repeated Qur'anic affirmations of continuity and commonality (or sameness) between religious communities, revelations, and prophets:

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[1] Qur'an 2:62.
[2] Qur'an 5:48 (excerpt).
[3] Qur'an 4:145.

We have sent other messengers before you—some We have mentioned to you and some We have not—and no messenger could bring about a sign except with God's permission…[4]

We sent to you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it, and with final authority over them …[5]

These various elements of the Qur'anic discourse on religious otherness have prompted the articulation of a variety of hermeneutical approaches, all of which aim to address—or make sense of—this complexity and apparent ambiguity. While one possible approach would be to deem the text inconsistent and thereby account for the apparent mixed messages, this strategy has not been employed by most historical or contemporary Islamic scholars, scholars who largely approach the Qur'an as the inerrant Word of God. Rather, Islamic scholars have largely preferred hermeneutical strategies that rely upon notions such as chronology, progressive revelation, abrogation, distinctions between particular and universal verses, and prioritization of Qur'anic principle or values. These strategies, with varying degrees of authority, have resulted in and continue to result in diverse depictions of the overarching Qur'anic view of the religious 'other.'

The contemporary Islamic discourse in the United States bears witness to this hermeneutical diversity, with scholars voicing interpretations of the Qur'anic discourse that can be grouped into two dominant trends: first, there are those that prioritize the message of religious sameness, downplaying—even ignoring—Qur'anic discussions of religious difference. This trend is evident, for example, in the writings of Asghar Ali Engineer and Abdulaziz Sachedina. Concerned with providing a theological justification for human rights and civil pluralism, Engineer downplays the particularities of the Islamic tradition and advances a view that the Qur'an is primarily concerned with general ethical action not specific tenets of belief or practice.[6] Sachedina argues that the shared human nature bestowed on all at the time of creation takes precedence over and reduces the importance of the particular—and conflict-producing—religious differences introduced through revelation.[7]

Comprising the second major trend are those scholars that aim to simultaneously account for both religious sameness and difference but are able to do so only through models that depict religious communities as isolated or hierarchically ranked. Two prominent examples of this trend are found in the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muhammad Legenhausen. Nasr draws an analogy to solar systems, arguing for the integrity of different religious universes and their particularities. This approach manages to uphold both sameness and difference but does so only by treating religious universes as if they are homogenous wholes that exist in isolation from one another.[8] Critiquing most pluralistic views of religious diversity for devaluing religious practice and religious imperative, Legenhausen distinguishes between questions of truth, salvation, and correct religion and argues that, while other religions may be true and salvific, only Islam is the correct religion—the divinely commanded religion—in contemporary times.[9]

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4 Qur'an 40:78 (excerpt).
5 Qur'an 5:48 (excerpt).
6 Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam and Pluralism," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, Edited by Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 211-219.
7 Abdulaziz Sachedina, "The Qur'an and Other Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 291-309.
8 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Religion and Religions," in *The Religious Other: Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, edited by Muhammad Suheyl Umar (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2008), 59-81.
9 Muhammad Legenhausen, "A Muslim's Non-reductive Religious Pluralism," in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, Edited by Roger Boase (Surrey: Ashgate, 2005), 51-73. (Legenhausen previously wrote on this topic in *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London: Al Hoda Publishing, 1999).

Without delving further into the specifics and valuable insights of these interpretations, what is central to note is that—irrespective of their ultimate evaluation of the religious 'other' or of religious diversity—both trends are premised upon a common conception of difference. In the majority of these interpretations, difference is conceived of as that which unambiguously divides humanity through the erection of clear and static boundaries. In the first trend—the prioritization of sameness—such boundaries are seen as impediments to the ultimate goal of tolerant interaction; boundaries and difference create conflict. Thus difference is downplayed, while sameness is emphasized. In the second trend—the attempt to simultaneously affirm religious sameness and difference—divisions and boundaries are upheld in an effort to address Qur'anic messages on the value and divine intentionality of religious diversity. Religions are therefore depicted as bounded wholes that either do not—or ideally would not—interact at all, *or* are related only through some sort of evaluative hierarchy, such as supersession or completeness. Separation and hierarchical evaluation uphold boundaries and difference, and, although sameness is acknowledged, it is not permitted to eradicate or blur such boundaries.

This conception of religious difference as being intimately tied to boundaries, however, is problematic for two primary reasons. First, it leads to an excessive focus on the boundaries themselves and on the process of identifying that which demarcates a boundary. The boundary assumes great prominence as the symbol and marker of the division between insiders and outsiders, a symbol or marker that is depicted as clear, static, and unambiguously defined. This sort of definition is only achieved through the identification of a *simple* and *singular* threshold criterion. In the contemporary discourse, some such criteria are recognition of Muhammad as a prophet or adherence to the specific rituals of Islam. While these are certainly important components in the Qur'anic discourse on religious otherness, they are not the *only* components. Therefore, an excessive focus on boundaries necessary leads to a reduction or simplification of the complexity of the Qur'anic discourse, as well as of the nature of religious identity and interaction.

The second reason that the shared conception is problematic is that it presupposes a certain genre of religious 'other.' If religious difference creates clear and static boundaries, then the religious 'other' in this scenario is one who is wholly discrete, clearly identified, clearly bounded. It is an 'other' who is unmistakably distinct from the religious 'self.' However, this genre of religious 'other'—not to mention religious 'self'—again reduces the complexity of the Qur'anic discourse. The religious 'other' of the Qur'an is unique and perplexing in that it is an 'other' that is simultaneously the same as and different from the 'self.'

Some insights drawn from the writings of Jonathan Z. Smith help to clarify this distinction. Smith acknowledges this boundary-focused view of the 'other' when he discusses the binary opposition of WE/THEY, or IN/OUT.[10] This stark dualism is characterized by a preoccupation with clearly defined, impenetrable boundaries, limits, thresholds, and pollution. As such, the primary mode of interaction depicted by this binary is a double process of containment, that is, keeping in and keeping out. However, Smith contends that 'othering'—the process whereby we make sense of the 'other'—is much more complex than the basic opposition of us and them. Othering actually involves multiple possible relations with the 'other.' Intriguingly, the deepest intellectual issues arise when the other is "too much like us," when the other is the *proximate* other in distinction from the *distant* other. Distant others are so clearly distinguished that they are insignificant and voiceless; since they are easily defined and contained, they require minimal exegetical effort. The proximate other, though, is much more complex and amorphous; it is the 'other' who claims to be 'you.' As such, the proximate other presents a direct and perpetual challenge to the worldview and identity of the 'self,' forcing ongoing

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10 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 27, 230.

modification, reconsideration, and re-drawing of boundaries. Therefore, proximate difference does not erect discrete and static boundaries, but on the contrary provokes questions about dynamic and multiple relations between the self and the other.

It is my contention that the Qur'anic religious 'other' is *this* genre of other; it is the proximate religious other, or, what I have termed, the Other-that-can-never-be-wholly-other. As such, neither of the two prominent trends in contemporary Islamic discourse is capable of effectively accounting for both the proximity *and* the otherness of this religious other. The trend of prioritizing sameness partially addresses proximity but neglects otherness by devaluing difference. The attempt to affirm both sameness and difference, conversely, neglects the full complexity of proximity by establishing clearly defined and bounded religious wholes.

This inability to effectively account for both proximity and otherness arises from the common conception of difference evident in both trends in contemporary Islamic interpretation. Therefore, in order to intricately engage the Qur'anic discourse on the Other-who-can-never-be-wholly-other, it is essential to articulate an alternative conception of religious difference. It is essential to *think differently about difference itself*.

In my work, I draw resources for this "rethinking" of difference from Muslim women's interpretation of the Qur'an—primarily the hermeneutical and theoretical approaches of Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, and Asma Barlas[11]—and feminist theology. While neither field is primarily concerned with religious difference, both fields offer pointed critiques of dominant paradigms of difference (specifically, sexual difference). In doing so, they provide insights into and conceptual fodder for the articulation of alternative models of difference. These insights and raw conceptual materials can be critically extended to the topic of religious difference.

In the remainder of this essay, I will outline one such extension drawn from Muslim women's reinterpretation—the distinction between lateral and hierarchical religious difference—and highlight its rich implications for reinterpreting the Qur'anic discourse on the religious 'other.'

In her work on the Qur'an, sex, and gender, Asma Barlas draws a distinction between difference that differentiates laterally and difference that differentiates hierarchically. Her main contention is that sexual difference (that is, biological difference) is divinely-intended and purposeful and as such should be acknowledged rather than ignored or downplayed. However, she argues that divinely-intended sexual difference only differentiates "laterally"—meaning it distinguishes individuals without ascribing value.[12] Individuals, therefore, cannot—or should not—be assessed on the basis of their sexual biology.[13]

In addition to this non-evaluative form of difference—lateral difference—Barlas identifies another genre, hierarchical difference, which *is* associated with evaluation and assessment. Citing Surah 49, āya 13,[14] Barlas argues that hierarchical difference is evaluated only with respect to the concept of *taqwā* (God consciousness, or piety). *Taqwā* is tied to and assessed on the individual level,

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11 Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Texts from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Riffat Hassan, "Feminism in Islam," in *Feminism and World Religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 248-78; and Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).
12 Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 145.
13 Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 11.
14 Qur'an 49:13: "People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should know one another. In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him [has the most *taqwā*]: God is all knowing, all aware."

rather than based on affiliation with a particular group, that is, men or women. But this does not mean that an individual can strive for or achieve *taqwā* in isolation. *Taqwā* is always defined in the context of multiple relationships. Every individual is capable and responsible for herself, but capacity and responsibility can only be actualized relationally and socially. In arguing for the distinction between lateral and hierarchical difference, Barlas aims to illuminate the fact that there *are* multiple genres of difference and to challenge the pervasive conflation and static linking of the two.

Building upon Barlas' distinction, it is possible to identify defining characteristics for both genres of difference, beginning with hierarchical difference. First, hierarchical difference is evaluative and thus connected with accountability, judgment, rewards, and punishments. Second, evaluation of this genre is carried out only on the basis of conformity or non-conformity with the concept of *taqwā*. Third, the evaluation of *taqwā*—or hierarchical difference—is performed on an individual basis. It is, however, always connected to social and relational manifestations. In other words, every person is assessed individually, but that assessment is integrally related to the individual's interactions with others, both divine and human.

There are also three defining characteristics of lateral difference. First, lateral difference is a group phenomenon. It does not primarily refer to individual particularities, but rather to patterns and trends of difference at the group level. The fact that lateral difference is a group phenomenon, however, does not mean that lateral groups are completely discrete; groupings that denote lateral difference can overlap, intersect, and even be inclusive of other lateral groups. Second, lateral difference is divinely-intended. Lateral difference, therefore, is not the result of degeneration, human error, or corruption. It is willed by God for a teleological purpose and, as such, should not be targeted for eradication or homogenization. Third, lateral difference never serves as the basis of evaluation. Evaluation is not tied to difference that is divinely-intended. Moreover, evaluation is not conducted at the group level. It is important to clarify that this does not mean that there will be *no evaluation* whatsoever within groups of lateral difference; rather, it implies that a singular evaluation will not be uniformly ascribed to an entire group solely on the basis of membership in that group. As a result, in seeking to identify groups of lateral difference within the Qur'anic discourse, the goal is not to find groups that are *never evaluated*, but rather groups that are *partially* and *diversely* evaluated.

The distinction between lateral and hierarchical difference and the outline of the defining characteristics of both provide a novel roadmap for navigating the Qur'anic discourse on religious difference. By re-reading the Qur'anic discourse with an eye to identifying the two genres and understanding the relationship between them, certain pivotal nuances are illuminated. Perhaps the most striking and thought-provoking is that the delineation between hierarchical and lateral religious difference corresponds with a distinction in terminology.

Hierarchical difference (that is, evaluative, *taqwā*-related, individual difference) is connected to terms and concepts, such as *īmān* (belief), *kufr* (disbelief), *nifāq* (hypocrisy) and *islām* (submission), in all of their various grammatical forms. As the result of comprehensively tracing the semantic structures of these concepts throughout the Qur'an, it becomes apparent that they denote various— and *particular*—manifestations of *taqwā* or the lack thereof. In the Qur'an, the central evaluative role of *taqwā* expressed in Qur'an 49:13 is coupled with explanations of the multifaceted nature of *taqwā*, for example:

> *True goodness does not consist in turning your face towards East or West. The truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets; who give away some of their wealth, however much they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage; those who keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms; who keep pledges whenever they make them; who are steadfast in*

misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. These are the ones who are true, and it is they who are the muttaqūn, *it is they who manifest* taqwā.[15]

Hierarchical religious concepts, including *īmān* (belief), *kufr* (disbelief), *nifāq* (hypocrisy) and *islām* (submission), are then continuously juxtaposed to these central features of *taqwā*:

> *True **believers** (mu'minūn) are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when God's revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord.*[16]

> *But **those who believed** (alladhīna āmanū), did good deeds, and humbled themselves before their Lord will be companions in Paradise and there they will stay.*[17]

> *The **disbelievers** (alladhīna kafarū) will remain in doubt about it until the Hour suddenly overpowers them or until torment descends on them on a Day devoid of all hope.*[18]

> *When humans suffer some affliction, they pray to their Lord and turn to God, but once they have been granted a favor from God, they forget the One they had been praying to and set up rivals to God, to make others stray from God's path. Say, 'Enjoy your **ingratitude** (kufr) for a little while. You will be one of the inhabitants of the Fire.'*[19]

Moreover, manifestations of the *taqwā*-related concepts of belief, submission, disbelief and hypocrisy are assessed individually:

> *You who believe, you are responsible for your own souls; if anyone else goes astray it will not harm you so long as you follow the guidance; you will all return to God, and God will make you realize what you have done.*[20]

They are also tied closely to praise and disdain, as well as promises of reward or punishment:

> *Who could be better in religion than those who submit ('aslama) themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith (ḥanīf)? ...*[21]

> *The worst creatures in the sight of God are those who reject (kafarū) Him and will not believe.*[22]

> *In fact, any who submit ('aslama) themselves wholly to God and do good will have their reward with their Lord: no fear for them, nor will they grieve.*[23]

> *We shall send those who reject Our revelations (kafarū) to the Fire. When their skins have been burned away, We shall replace them with new ones so that they may continue to feel the pain. God is mighty and wise.*[24]

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15 Qur'an 2:177.
16 Qur'an 8:2.
17 Qur'an 11:23.
18 Qur'an 22:55.
19 Qur'an 39:8.
20 Qur'an 5:105.
21 Qur'an 4:125 (excerpt).
22 Qur'an 8:55.
23 Qur'an 2:112.

In distinction from the hierarchical concepts of religious difference, lateral religious difference (that is, group difference that is divinely-intended, and not the basis of evaluation) is associated with terminology that refers to specific *groups*, such as *al-naṣārā* (Nazarenes, Christians), *yahūd* (Jews), and *ahl al-kitāb* (People of Scripture). Tracing these terms throughout the Qur'an, it is evident that they refer to diverse communities that exist as a result of God's will:

> *… We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, God would have made you one community, but God wanted to test you through that which God has given you. So race to do good. You will all return to God and God will make clear to you the matters you differed about.*[25]

> *We have appointed acts of devotion* (mansak) *for every community* (umma) *to observe, so do not let them argue with you about this matter. Call them to your Lord—you are on the right path—and if they argue with you, say, 'God is well aware of what you are doing.*[26]

More notably—and the cause of many interpretive debates—these groups are *partially* and *variously* evaluated. This is highlighted through common refrains that, for example, describe "*some* among the people of the Book" as praiseworthy and others as blameworthy:

> *Some of the People of the Scripture believe in God, in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them: humbling themselves before God, they would never sell God's revelation for a small price. These people will have their reward with their Lord. God is swift in reckoning.*[27]

> *Some of the People of the Scripture would dearly love to lead you astray, but they only lead themselves astray, though they do not realize it.*[28]

Since such evaluations are partial and diverse, they cannot be prompted by lateral religious difference, by the communitarian religious identity. If they were, then they would be holistically and homogeneously applied to the entire group. These evaluations, rather, are prompted by the manifestations of particular forms of hierarchical religious difference among *individual members* of the lateral religious group. This is made explicit in Qur'an 3:199 when reference is made to original Arabic; the "some among the People of the Scripture" that are praise are those that believe (*yuʾminu*), those that manifest *īmān*. It is equally explicit in other Qur'anic verses that reprimand those who *disbelieve* (manifest *kufr*) among the People of the Scripture, such as Qur'an 98:1:

> *Those who disbelieve (*kafarū*) among the People of the Scripture and the associators were not about to change their ways until they were sent clear evidence.*[29]

Although this is a very brief and limited introduction to the delineation between hierarchical and lateral religious difference within the Qur'anic discourse, it points to certain weighty implications. To begin, the coexistence of divergent Qur'anic assessments of religious 'others' has been typically explained through abrogation, chronology, or specification of Qur'anic praise to a very small contingent of the People of the Book or other communities. However, the reconceptualization of religious difference as consisting of two genres presents an alternative and unique hermeneutical

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24 Qur'an 4:56.
25 Qur'an 5:48 (excerpt).
26 Qur'an 22:67.
27 Qur'an 3:199.
28 Qur'an 3:69.
29 Qur'an 98:1.

option. The divergent assessments are no longer contradictions, but rather *multiple possible intersections* or *pairings* of lateral and hierarchical religious difference.

Additionally, if hierarchical and lateral religious difference are separate genres, they should not be conflated or treated as if they are synonymous. No one hierarchical category (including believers or disbelievers) can be treated as an automatic synonym for a lateral community. People of the Scripture, for example, are not automatically disbelievers based upon their communal affiliation as People of the Scripture. If they are described in this fashion, as disbelievers, it is due to the fact that they manifest disbelief. Conversely, if they are described as believers, it is not necessarily because they are rare exemplars or covert converts to the path of Prophet Muhammad; rather, they may be described as believers because they simply manifest belief. Similarly, and provocatively, members of Prophet Muhammad's community are not believers because they are members of his community, but rather because—and only if—they manifest belief.

Hierarchical evaluation is never fixed or holistically applied to an entire lateral religious group, because it is not ascribed on the basis of communal affiliation; hierarchical religious evaluation is individually assessed. Therefore, while there is hierarchical assessment of *taqwā*, this assessment is not confined to *or* defined by the boundaries between divinely intended lateral religious communities. In fact, hierarchical religious difference is uniquely characterized by its lack of denotative stability. It does not denote or correspond exactly and statically with specific groups. It can cut across and through *all* categories of lateral religious difference, creating various intersections and challenging the notion of discrete and fixed boundaries.

Nevertheless, this lack of denotative stability in reference to lateral communities should not be misconstrued as indicating that *taqwā* and its related concepts lack definite content. In the Qur'an, hierarchical concepts are specific, evaluative, and social; certain actions, behaviors, and beliefs in relation to God and other humans are positively evaluated and others are negatively evaluated. In fact, it is by delineating between the two distinct, yet dynamically interrelated genres of religious difference that it is possible to navigate between two objectionable extremes, between exclusivism and relativism. By distinguishing between hierarchical and lateral religious difference, it is possible to avoid the presentation of *taqwā* as confined to one reified, lateral community, and also to avoid the depiction of *taqwā* as a relativistic and nebulous form of belief.

It is also by distinguishing between hierarchical and lateral religious difference that it becomes possible to more holistically comprehend the complexity of the proximate religious other, the Other-who-can-never-be-wholly-other. Difference is no longer conceived of as that which divides humanity through impermeable boundaries. Difference is rather the dynamic intersections that produce various (perhaps even infinite) combinations of proximity and otherness. As such, the options are no longer to prioritize sameness and proximity to the detriment of otherness, or to neglect the intricacies of proximity through isolation and linear hierarchies. With this rethinking of difference, the new and primary option is to focus on the dynamic intersections themselves without collapsing the two genres, without depicting them in a static or exclusive relationship, and without returning to a reliance upon oversimplified or singular threshold criteria.

Such an acknowledgement of and focus on the dynamic intersections, though, will also necessitate that we deeply probe the intricacies of hierarchical religious difference itself. In order to avoid reverting to reliance on the notion of static, distinct boundaries between groups, we will need to obtain a more robust view of what the evaluative concepts and overarching Qur'anic discourse actually entail. If belief and disbelief are no longer ascribed on the basis of communal affiliation, then what exactly are belief and disbelief? How exactly do they conform to or diverge from the central

evaluative standard of *taqwā* in all of its dynamic, social, and relational complexity? Answering these questions becomes the heart of the interpretative task.

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