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*From Sexual Difference to  
Religious Difference:  
Toward a Muslima Theology  
of Religious Pluralism*

In the contemporary Islamic discourse on religious pluralism, a number of provocative and pointed questions about the existence, value, and functionality of religious diversity are raised. What does the Qur'an say about Judaism, Christianity, and other religions? Is Islam the only "valid" religion in the present time? Are all religions particular expressions of an ineffable divine unity? Is Islam the only acceptable and salvifically effective path? Or are there multiple paths? While seemingly varied, these questions all revolve around one central concern: the identification and evaluation of difference. Perhaps more significantly, these scholarly approaches demonstrate a shared conception of difference as that which divides humanity through the erection of clear, static, and impermeable boundaries. This particular conception of difference, I contend, has led to a practical and theological gridlock. In order to address this gridlock, it is necessary to search for an alternative conception of difference, a conception that is not premised upon discrete and fixed boundaries.

One potential resource for such an alternative conception of difference is the work of Muslim women interpreters of the Qur'an. Muslim women interpreters of the Qur'an—in particular Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Riffat Hassan—are an essential resource for two cen-

tral reasons. First, women—whether silent, silenced or unheard—have generally suffered from interpretative “voicelessness” within Islamic history; the Islamic interpretative tradition has historically been dominated and controlled by men. Thus, the mere inclusion of a largely excluded voice has the potential to proffer new insights. Second, the central interpretative task of these scholars is the elucidation of a Qur’anic conception of human difference, specifically sexual/biological difference. Certain elements of this conception of difference can be generalized and utilized as a guide in articulating other conceptions of human difference, in the case of this essay, religious difference.

I will begin this essay with a brief sketch of two dominant trends and the shared conception of religious difference in contemporary Islamic discourse on religious pluralism. After highlighting the shortcomings of this conception, I will then explore the manner in which Muslim women interpreters of the Qur’an depict human difference. I will conclude by indicating ways in which their specific conception of difference can guide the articulation of an alternative formulation of religious difference, thus forming the basis of the novel approach I have termed a *Muslima* theology of religious pluralism.<sup>1</sup>

### *Contemporary Islamic Discourse on Religious Pluralism*

Contemporary Islamic discourse on religious pluralism is dominated by two trends.<sup>2</sup> The first trend is the prioritization of sameness over difference. In this trend, boundaries between different religions are seen as impediments to the ultimate goal of tolerant interaction; boundaries and difference create conflict. Thus difference is devalued and downplayed, while sameness is emphasized. Asghar Ali Engineer, for example, argues that the Qur’an is primarily concerned with “good deeds,” not “dogmas,” with general ethical action, not specific tenets of

1 I will not discuss the specific conclusions of a *Muslima* theology within this short essay. For more information, see my dissertation: “Toward a *Muslima* Theology of Religious Pluralism: the Qur’an, Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity” (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2011).

2 The treatment I present here is greatly simplified. I have written more extensively and critically on the various trends in contemporary Islamic discourse on religious diversity in “Embracing Relationality and Theological Tensions: *Muslima* Theology, Religious Diversity, and Fate,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation and the Fate of Others*, ed. Mohammad H. Khalil, 234–254 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and in my dissertation.

belief.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Abdulaziz Sachedina stresses a universal, ethical *fiṭra* (natural orientation) over the specific, historical revelations to various communities.<sup>4</sup> Interpreting the writings of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Mahmut Aydin also prioritizes sameness over difference when he contends that it is the general message of revelation that is vital, not the specific religious systems.<sup>5</sup>

The second prevailing trend in contemporary Islamic discourse is the attempt to simultaneously affirm both sameness and difference. In this trend, divisions and boundaries between religions are upheld in an effort to maintain the value and divine intentionality of difference. 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. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for example, envisions all religions as being connected to the Absolute in Itself (God), but religions, ideally and under normal conditions, remain discrete universes or frontiers.<sup>6</sup> In Muhammad Legenhausen's work, divine revelation is acknowledged in other religions, but divine revelation also creates discrete communities that are deontologically commanded in successive and linear order without any overlap.<sup>7</sup> In this trend, separation and/or hierarchical evaluation maintain boundaries and difference, and, although sameness is acknowledged, it is not permitted to eradicate or blur such boundaries.

While they offer an array of different perspectives, it is vital to note that both of these trends are based on the same conception of difference. They both conceive of difference as that which divides humanity through the erection of clear and static boundaries. It is this particular conception of difference that has led to a practical and theological gridlock, and that, as such, impels the search for alternative conceptions.

3 For example, Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam and Pluralism," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul Knitter, 211–219 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 215.

4 For example, in Abdulaziz Sachedina, "The Qur'an and Other Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 291–309 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006).

5 For example in Mahmut Aydin, "A Muslim Pluralist: Jalaluddin Rumi," in Knitter, *Myth*, 220–236.

6 For example, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Religion and Religions," in *The Religious Other: Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, ed. Muhammad Suheyl Umar, 59–81 (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2008).

7 Muhammad Legenhausen, "A Muslim's Non-reductive Religious Pluralism," in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase, 51–73 (Surrey: Ashgate, 2005). See also Muhammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London: Al Hoda Publishing, 1999).

*What's the Issue?  
Proximity and Othering*

The work of Jonathan Z. Smith can help to clarify the implications—and shortcomings—of the shared conception of difference manifest in contemporary Islamic discourse. Smith intricately probes the construction of the “other,” describing the most basic view of the “other” as the binary opposition *We/They* or *In/Out*.<sup>8</sup> He argues that 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 opposition is a dual process of containment, i.e., keeping in and keeping out. The threshold or boundary therefore assumes great prominence as the symbol and marker of the division between insiders and outsiders.<sup>9</sup>

Smith, however, contends that othering is much more complex than this basic and clearly defined binary opposition. Othering actually involves four possible alternative stances to the “other”: like us, not like us, too much like us, and we are not like them. The most profound intellectual issues surround the third stance (too much like us), which he terms the proximate other in distinction from the distant other.<sup>10</sup> Distant others (not like us) are so clearly distinguished that they are “insignificant” and “voiceless.” Since they are easily defined and contained, they require no exegetical effort. The proximate other, however, is much more complex and amorphous; it is the “other” who claims to be “you,” the “other” that is the same as “you” in at least some respects. As such, the proximate other presents a direct and perpetual challenge to the worldview and self-identity of the initial group, forcing ongoing modification, reconsideration, and redrawing of boundaries.<sup>11</sup> For Smith, therefore, the “other,” the different, is not that which is wholly distinct or discretely bounded. Difference—at least meaningful difference—is always relational, dynamic, and provocative.<sup>12</sup>

Neither trend in contemporary Islamic discourse effectively accounts for the complexity of this proximate other. The first trend par-

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

9 *Ibid.*, 231.

10 *Ibid.*, 245. These terms could connote spatial relationships, but Smith utilizes them primarily in a cognitive or conceptual manner.

11 *Ibid.*, 246.

tially addresses proximity by highlighting sameness, 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 distinct religious wholes that are either isolated from each other or ranked hierarchically. This is conceptually insufficient in light of an understanding of—and lived reality of—the religious other as the proximate other that blurs boundaries and compels ongoing, complex theological and practical consideration.

*Muslim Women  
Interpreters of the Qur'an:  
Conception of Difference*

Muslim women interpreters of the Qur'an—in particular Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Riffat Hassan—present an integrated model for understanding human sameness and human difference, without resorting to a conception of difference as that which divides humanity through the erection of clear and static boundaries.

These Muslim women interpreters endeavor to return to the Qur'an in order to garner a more comprehensive understanding of the Qur'anic discourse on men and women. This reinterpretation is largely impelled by the social and historical realities of women and the related patriarchal interpretations of Islamic sources. Such patriarchal interpretations, according to Barlas, are grounded in a binary conception of sexual differentiation, which presents man as the primary "subject" and woman as the wholly and completely "other."<sup>13</sup> This conception is based upon the extension of sexual difference—meaning sexual biology—to an all encompassing category that determines all aspects of human ontology and establishes a "gender dualism" in which "biology (sex)" is confused with "its social meanings (gender)."<sup>14</sup> This conception is problematic for two main reasons. First, it depicts one trait as determinative of all aspects—moral, social, ontological—

12 Ibid., 242.

13 Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 129. See also Wadud, "Towards a Qur'anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice," 42.

14 Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam*, 130.

of a specific group. Second, it not only conceives of the groups—men and women—as wholly distinct, but more specifically it depicts the groups as being in opposition.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in this patriarchal conception that emphasizes difference only, men are the central human “subjects,” and women are everything that men are not. Difference is pervasive and situated in a fixed, static hierarchy.

Responding to this difference only conception, Wadud, Barlas, and Hassan begin their explorations by focusing on sameness rather than difference. All three of these scholars commence with a discussion of the Qur’anic discourse on “the origin and nature of human creation,” in hopes of undermining the “notions of radical difference and hierarchy” that characterize the exclusive focus on sexual difference.<sup>16</sup> According to Hassan, the fact that it is generally considered “self-evident that women are not equal to men who are ‘above’ women or have a ‘degree of advantage’ over them” is intimately related to certain pervasive theological assumptions about creation.<sup>17</sup> Hassan identifies three such assumptions: that man is God’s primary creation; that woman was the cause of the Fall of mankind; and that woman was “created not only *from* man but also *for* man.”<sup>18</sup> In an effort to understand the foundations of—and deconstruct—these assumptions, Hassan formulates three guiding questions: How was woman created? Was woman responsible for the Fall?, and Why was woman created?<sup>19</sup> These questions guide her analysis, leading her to emphasize “undifferentiated humanity,”<sup>20</sup> the absence of a concept of the “Fall” in the Qur’an, and equal status and responsibility for both men and women. Hassan summarizes her analysis, stating,

Not only does the Qur’ān make it clear that man and woman stand absolutely equal in the sight of God, but also that they are “members” and “protectors” of each other. In other words, the Qur’ān does not create a hierarchy in which men are placed above women, nor does it pit men against women in an adversary relationship.<sup>21</sup>

15 Ibid., 131.

16 Ibid., 133.

17 Riffat Hassan, “Feminism in Islam,” in *Feminism and World Religions*, eds. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young, 248–278 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 253.

18 Riffat Hassan, “Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam,” in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, eds. Paula M. Coe, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel, 39–64 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 44.

19 Hassan, “Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam,” 46.

Wadud is concerned with similar assumptions and, consequently, explores four creation related Qur'anic concepts (*āya*, *min*, *nafs*, and *zawj*),<sup>22</sup> as well as the Qur'anic discourse on the Garden of Eden<sup>23</sup> and the Hereafter.<sup>24</sup> Based upon this, Wadud confirms Hassan's analysis, arguing that there is no distinction between men and women in regards to their creation, their status as subjects of divine guidance, or their status as recipients of rewards or punishments.<sup>25</sup> In other words, every individual is created in the same manner. At the time of creation, every individual is placed into the same direct and intimate relationship with God. And, every individual has the same potential for reaping rewards or punishments in the Hereafter. In surveying the "ontology of a Single Self," the ontology of the *nafs*, Barlas arrives at the same conclusion: "men and women originate in the same Self, at the same time, and in the same way; that is, they are ontologically coeval and co-equal."<sup>26</sup>

By focusing initially on sameness, Wadud, Barlas, and Hassan advance three main conclusions. First, there is no inherent hierarchy in the human creation; the *nafs*, or humanity, was created as one without differentiation. Second, the conception of the *zawj*, or pair, does not imply derivative status or an oppositional relationship. Rather, a pair is conceived of as two "equally essential" forms of "a single reality ... two congruent parts formed to fit together."<sup>27</sup> Third, women are not responsible for a rift between humanity and God, as no such collective rift exists within the Qur'an and culpability is assessed on an individual basis. Furthermore, women do not exist in a collectively mediated or indirect relationship with God.

While Wadud, Barlas, and Hassan all initiate their reinterpretations by focusing on sameness, they do not aim to replace the difference only approach with one based upon sameness only. In fact, an exclusive emphasis on sameness is deemed to be as "equally phallogocentric"<sup>28</sup>

20 Hassan, "Feminism in Islam," 255.

21 *Ibid.*, 262.

22 Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Texts from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17–20.

23 *Ibid.*, 23–25.

24 *Ibid.*, 44–53.

25 *Ibid.*, 15.

26 Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam, 136.

27 Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 21.

28 Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam, 132.

as the emphasis on difference alone. As with difference, if sameness is considered in isolation, sameness is extended to all aspects of human ontology, thus obliterating or ignoring vital and valuable difference. Furthermore, a sameness only focus extends one norm to all individuals and groups.<sup>29</sup> According to Barlas, even in a sameness only approach, man remains the normative “subject” and woman remains the “other.” Thus the male norm is generalized and presented as a universal human norm, a “paradigm to define women.”<sup>30</sup> The affirmation of a shared egalitarian humanity, therefore, does not result in an understanding of humanity as homogeneous. These scholars acknowledge differences between men and women; they are not interested in denying—or reducing—difference. However, they are interested in contesting the “pervasive (and oftentimes perverse) tendency to view differences as evidence of inequality”<sup>31</sup> and the resultant hierarchy, which has customarily depicted women as inferior, derivative, and in an indirect relationship with God.<sup>32</sup>

The alternative approach articulated by Muslim women interpreters aims to affirm sameness and to “think of difference itself differently so as to de-link it from biology and also from social hierarchies and inequalities.”<sup>33</sup> This conception of difference, in contrast to the difference alone approach, does not ascribe sexual difference to essential human nature.<sup>34</sup> As should be readily apparent from the preceding discussion of human creation, the essential human nature is universal in men and women. This being said, difference is not depicted as degeneration from an original and perfect state of unity and sameness. As expounded upon by Wadud in her analysis of *Sūrat al-nisā*, God created the undifferentiated *nafs* and then the *zawj*.<sup>35</sup> This indicates that difference was also divinely intended. If difference is not a result of degeneration and is divinely intended, then it is something that should not be eradicated; “by representing differences as an expression of God’s Will ... the Qur’an ... establishes the inappropriateness of trying to erase or obliterate them.”<sup>36</sup>

29 Amina Wadud, “Towards a Qur’anic Hermeneutics of Social Justice: Race, Class and Gender,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 12, no. 1 (1995–1996): 37–50, here 42.

30 Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 132, 11.

31 Ibid., 5.

32 Hassan, “Feminism in Islam,” 264.

33 Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 132.

34 Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 7, 15.

35 Ibid., 19–20.

Divine intentionality also implies value and purposefulness, and for these scholars that value or purpose is defined in terms of functionality, mutuality, and complementarity.<sup>37</sup> Difference is not conceived of as something that divides or establishes bounded groups. On the contrary—through the examination of the Qur’anic themes of divinely intended “dualism” and diversity in creation<sup>38</sup>—they envision difference as the impetus to and basis of a unique form of relationality in which neither particularity (maleness or femaleness) is automatically privileged, but where the two are ideally engaged in a relationship of mutual benefit and functionality.<sup>39</sup>

While sexual difference serves a functional and relational purpose, it never serves as the basis for hierarchical differentiation between people. Sexual difference differentiates “laterally”—meaning it distinguishes individuals without ascribing value—but it does not differentiate “hierarchically.”<sup>40</sup> Individuals are not assessed on the basis of their biology; “sex is irrelevant.”<sup>41</sup> Wadud and Barlas aver that the only basis for differentiating hierarchically between individuals is *taqwā*, or piety.<sup>42</sup> *Taqwā* is tied to and assessed on the individual level, rather than based on affiliation with a particular group, i.e., men or women. This, however, 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 him or herself,<sup>43</sup> but capacity and responsibility can only be actualized in relation to God, oneself, and other humans. The importance of this relationality is reflected in the structure of Wadud’s reinterpretation. She begins with human origins and creation (the relation of human to God), moves to discuss women as individuals (human to self), then women in the Hereafter (human to God), and finally the “rights and roles” of women in the social context (human to human).

Wadud’s discussion of *taqwā* also provides a concise summary of the overall conception of difference espoused by these Muslim women interpreters of Qur’an. Interpreting *āya* 13 of *Sūrat al-Hujurat*,<sup>44</sup>

36 Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 146.

37 Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 65.

38 *Ibid.*, 20–23.

39 Hassan, “Feminism in Islam,” 265; Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 179; Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 8, 102.

40 Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 145.

41 *Ibid.*, 11.

42 *Ibid.*, 143; Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman*, 37.

43 Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 144.

Wadud states that

[i]t begins with creation. Then, it acknowledges the pair: male and female. These are then incorporated into larger and smaller groups ... 'that you may know one another.' ... The culmination of this verse and its central aspect for this discussion is ... *taqwā*.<sup>45</sup>

In summary, the model presented by Muslim women interpreters dismisses a focus on difference in isolation; begins with sameness; acknowledges intentional difference; conceives of the relationship between sameness and difference as purposeful and functional; and concludes with the assertion that evaluative differentiation is possible only on the basis of individual *taqwā* as manifest in a multifaceted series of relationships.

*Sameness, Difference(s),  
Relationality: Toward a Muslima  
Theology of Religious  
Pluralism*

The various elements of the model presented by Muslim women interpreters of the Qur'an can be generalized and applied to the topic of religious difference, thus revealing unique insights and proffering strategies for overcoming the shortcomings evident in contemporary Islamic discourse on religious pluralism. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully examine definitive conclusions, in this section, I will highlight five insights and trajectories of analysis suggested by the generalization and extension of their model.

*1. Radical Difference  
Is Not an Option*

As in the discussion of sexual difference, an approach that emphasizes radical and oppositional difference between religions will be critically dismissed. Such an approach depicts one religion as the positive "subject" and all other religions as wholly and oppositionally "other." There is only one "true" or salvifically effective religion—the apex in

<sup>44</sup> Qur'an 49:13.

<sup>45</sup> Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 37.

a static religious hierarchy—and all others are false and without value. Religions are envisioned as clearly defined and separate wholes; the boundaries between religions are unambiguous. As such, there is no sameness—or proximity—for which to account; there is only pervasive otherness. Moreover, individuals are assessed based only upon their affiliation with a specific religion, and since religions are situated in a rigid hierarchy, that assessment is automatically ascribed.

Although the focus on radical difference is not a common perspective voiced in the contemporary Islamic discourse on religious pluralism, it is a prominent historical perspective that retains influence in Muslim communities in general through the widely disseminated writings of scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr.<sup>46</sup> It is also an approach that clearly perpetuates—and even amplifies—the problematic conception of difference as that which divides humanity through the erection of clear and static boundaries.

## 2. *Human Sameness (Creation and Human Nature) as the Starting Point*

The attempt to understand religious difference, therefore, will begin by focusing on and understanding the complexity of human sameness, or theological anthropology, as described in the Qur'anic treatment of creation and human nature. This initial focus will highlight similar conclusions as those voiced by Wadud, Barlas and Hassan, although the primary intention will not be to affirm the equal status of men and women but rather the equal status of all individuals irrespective of their ultimate religious affiliation. All people are created by God, in the same manner, with the same capacities and the same purpose.

Such assertions, however, will raise a variety of intricate questions. What does it mean for all of humanity to be the subject of God's guidance, as argued by Wadud, Barlas, and Hassan? Does that guidance come only in the Qur'an or are there multiple forms of guidance, many of which are instilled in humanity at the time of creation? If there are other faculties capable of guiding, how do they relate to rev-

46 For example, see Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyya, *Jawāb al-ṣāḥiḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ* (Egypt: Maṭba'at al-Nīl, 1905); Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyya, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle Against Popular Religion with an Annotated Translation of His Kitāb iqtidā' aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-Jahīm*, ed. and trans. Muhammad Umar Memon (The Hague: Mouton, 1976); Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'aẓīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1987).

elation? In other words what is the understanding of the relationship between creation and revelation? Does revelation complete creation? Do created faculties only get you so far, and then revelation completes the guidance? Does revelation “save” humanity from a particular incapable status? Or does revelation *remind* and *complement* what is given with creation?

### *3. Sameness Alone Is Not an Option*

While the exploration will begin with sameness, it will not deal with sameness only. Such a focus will fall under as equal scrutiny as an exclusive focus on difference. Whereas the focus on radical difference ignores or denies any sameness—proximity—a focus on sameness alone ignores or devalues difference—otherness. This is the precise critique that has been made of the first trend in contemporary Islamic discourse; the prioritization of sameness results in the downplaying of vital differences, especially in terms of the social and practical manifestations of religion. These particularities of religious practice are of utmost importance to the adherents of religious traditions, and thus cannot and should not be overlooked.

As Muslim women interpreters stress, the insular focus on sameness is also frequently an approach in which a particular norm is presented as a universal norm. For example, a norm drawn from one religion is presented as a general standard for all religions. What is intriguing is that with the focus on radical difference, a similar projection of a particular norm takes place. Notably, however, with radical difference, the particular norm is explicitly acknowledged to be particular. The norms, beliefs, practices, and goals of one religion are presented as the evaluative standard for all other religions. With the focus on sameness alone, a similar process takes place; the norms of one religion are presented as a universal standard. However, this is done implicitly and perhaps therefore even more detrimentally. When Aydin, for example, stresses the general “message” over a specific system, what is that general message and from where does it derive? Likewise, when Engineer emphasizes the centrality of “good deeds,” from where does he derive his definition of good deeds?

#### 4. *Thinking of Difference Differently*

Therefore, while maintaining the foundation of sameness that comes from a universal human creation and nature, it is essential to simultaneously acknowledge and examine religious difference. This is the intention of scholars who align with the second dominant trend in contemporary Islamic discourse, the attempt to simultaneously affirm both sameness and difference. However, in contrast with that trend, this new model will not employ hierarchy or isolation as a means for comprehending the simultaneous existence of human sameness and religious difference. Moreover, religious difference will not automatically be construed as evidence of inequality or an indirect relationship with God. It will be necessary to think of difference differently.

The attempt to simultaneously affirm both sameness and difference will therefore be grounded in an intricate examination of Qur'anic descriptions of religious diversity (the diversity of revelations) as divinely intended.<sup>47</sup> If religious diversity is intentional, then it necessarily follows that it is non-degenerative and purposeful. If religious diversity was willed by God, it cannot be understood as the product of human straying, corruption, or deviation. It also cannot be understood as something that should be eradicated.

What then is the purpose of divinely intended religious difference? Various Qur'anic passages describe this purpose as "knowing each other" and/or "competing in good works."<sup>48</sup> Similar to Muslim women interpreters' depiction of sexual difference, these statements appear to depict religious difference as having an indispensable relational purpose. While some contemporary scholars have highlighted these verses, few have offered substantive analysis of their meanings and implications. What is the goal of "knowing each other"? What is gained through such a process? What does competing mean? Who is competing? Religious communities, other communities, or individuals? These questions must be further examined in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relational purpose of divinely intended religious difference. What is important to note however is that in approaching religious difference as relational, difference can no longer be conceived as erecting fixed boundaries between groups.

47 For example, Qur'an 2:213 and 30:22.

48 Qur'an 49:13 and 5:48.

Relational difference is that which compels—or propels—interaction across boundaries; relational difference is proximate otherness.

### 5. *Distinguishing between Lateral and Hierarchical Difference*

Divinely intended religious difference (the difference introduced through various revelations), however, is not the only type of religious difference discussed in the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not only discuss religious difference that is intentional and purposeful, it also offers an evaluation—both positive and negative—of other types of religious difference. The latter is manifest, for example, in the Qur'anic discourse surrounding the concepts of *īmān* (belief), *islām* (submission), *kufr* (disbelief), *shirk* (associationism), and *nifāq* (hypocrisy).

The model drawn from Muslim women interpreters provides an invaluable insight in this regard. Muslim women interpreters distinguish between two types of Qur'anic difference, lateral and hierarchal. Lateral difference is divinely intended and, as such, never serves as a basis of evaluation. Hierarchical difference, on the other hand, is affiliated with *taqwā* (piety) and is the basis of hierarchal assessment. Divinely intended religious difference, religious difference that results from different revelations, therefore can be seen as lateral difference. The evaluative discourse on *īmān*, *islām*, *kufr*, *shirk*, and *nifāq* can be seen as a detailed discussion of various manifestations—or non-manifestations—of *taqwā*, as various manifestations of hierarchical difference. What is key, though, is that *taqwā* is only assessed on the individual level; evaluation is not automatically ascribed on the basis of communal affiliation. Therefore, while there is hierarchical assessment of *taqwā*, this assessment is not confined to or defined by the boundaries between divinely intended religious communities. In other words, lateral and hierarchical difference do not necessarily correspond. Hierarchical religious difference can cut across and through categories of lateral religious difference. It will be indispensable to examine the manner in which the Qur'an describes the various dynamic intersections between lateral and hierarchical religious difference.

## *Conclusion*

The preceding insights form the foundation of a *Muslima* theology of religious pluralism. While I have not discussed the specific contentions or hermeneutical approach of a *Muslima* theology in detail, I have aimed to demonstrate the need for an alternative conception of religious difference that transcends the fixation on static boundaries and is capable of accounting for the proximate religious other. I have also argued that the approach and model proffered by Muslim women interpreters of the Qur'an in their investigation of sexual difference can be generalized and extended to the topic of religious difference. This model—which incorporates sameness, difference, and relationality—has the potential to overcome the present gridlock and reveal novel and creative possibilities in contemporary Islamic discourses on religious pluralism.

