
BOOK REVIEW

Never Wholly Other: A Muslim Theology of Religious Pluralism, by Jerusha Tanner Lamptey. Oxford University Press, 2014. 352 pp., Hb., \$95.08. ISBN 0190458011

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Jerusha Tanner Lamptey's book *Never Wholly Other* is a fascinating study at the crossroads of three relatively new disciplines: Islamic theologies of religious pluralism, feminist approaches to the Qur'an, and a *Muslima* critique of a dualist semantic analysis of the Qur'an. I find these three new disciplines equally fascinating and soon after finishing the book I started to use it in a graduate class on interreligious hermeneutics. My review of this book therefore takes into consideration remarks by my students in Religion and Culture at the Catholic University of America.

The first part of Lamptey's book deals with the theology of religious pluralism from an Islamic perspective; it consists of two chapters about historical and contemporary Islamic approaches to religious otherness. Yet Lamptey begins with an introduction in which she explains why she wants to develop a *Muslima* theology of religious pluralism. This Arabic term is not only meant to convey her identification as a practicing Muslim, but also to express a certain discomfort with the term "Islamic feminism" in its association with colonialism and secularism. In the first chapter of her book she discusses how Islamic discourse about religious others developed in a process of apologetics of the Islamic self. The second chapter, discussing contemporary Islamic approaches to religious diversity, distinguishes between approaches that prioritize religious sameness, approaches that affirm sameness and difference simultaneously, and approaches that prioritize religious difference. She singles out Farid Esack and Ismā'īl al-Fārūqī as two authors who differentiate between different kinds of difference, focusing on the proximate other as someone who is never wholly other and therefore leaving open the possibility that the boundaries between self and others are not static and impermeable.

The second part of Lamptey's book focuses first on a different kind of otherness in its discussion of interpretations of the Qur'an by Muslim women (Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan). The focus on the Qur'an is consistent with Lamptey's primary focus on this unique source as main standard for theological reinterpretation. In chapter four she surveys feminist contributions to the theology of religions.

She weaves together the threads spun thus far in a highly important methodological paragraph about insights and extensions (114–121) after which she engages in the third and final discipline: a semantic analysis of Qur'anic key concepts as proposed by Toshihiko Izutsu. The advantage of Izutsu's method of delineating semantic fields in the Qur'an is that he emphasizes the primacy of relational over basic meanings, yet at the same time he has the tendency to dichotomize the Qur'anic worldview. In this respect, a *Muslima* approach helps to see how the concepts of “self” and “other” are not static but interrelated, not solid but fluid, and thus the category of the “never wholly other” blurs the neat distinction between self and other.

This insight is elaborated in the third and final part, “A *Muslima* Theology of Religious Pluralism,” where Lamptey applies Asma Barlas's differentiation between lateral and hierarchical difference to the Qur'anic discourse about religious selves and others. The semantic field of *taqwā* (“piety, God-awareness”) indicates the decisive hierarchical difference between those who align their lives in submission to God and those who don't. The semantic field of *umma* (“community”), indicates a horizontal difference that is not an evaluative category in the Qur'an. The most important consequence is that there are people among the *umma* of the Muslims that have *taqwā* and others that don't; similarly, some of the “people of Scripture” center their lives on God, and some don't. For me personally, this insight was an eye-opener that explains why the Qur'an so often differentiates when it talks about Jews and Christians—but also, to a lesser degree, when it addresses Muslims or unbelievers. This insight also influences other concepts that are positively or negatively related to the central concept of *taqwā*, such as *īmān* (“faith”), *shirk* (“ascribing partners to God”), *hanīf* (“pure in faith”), *kufṛ* (“ungratefulness”), *islām* (“devoting oneself to God”) and *nifāq* (“hypocrisy”).

In the eighth and final chapter, Lamptey unpacks the consequences of this analysis for a Qur'anically-based analysis of religious otherness. She critiques both the idea that religious difference divides humanity by erecting clear and impermeable boundaries, and the idea that difference and sameness are mutually exclusive or in a hierarchical relationship. This leads her to revisiting a number of classical theological themes, such as creation, anthropology, and revelation. While God has created every human being with *taqwā*, God also created different religious communities to provoke reflection: the other (who cannot be wholly other) becomes a sign of God and thus stimulates reflection on creation, worship of God and

manifestation of *taqwā* (252–253).

Jerusha Lamptey has given us an excellent instrument that stimulates the reflection on otherness as a sign of God, and I have used her book fruitfully in a number of classes and in my own research about the “People of Scripture” in the Qur’an. One question remains for me: one of the byproducts of the very helpful distinction between lateral and hierarchical difference is that we get a very nuanced view on religious communities: some of them develop *taqwā* in their lives and will be judged accordingly; some of them develop differently, and will be judged accordingly as well. I agree that this is a basic Qur’anic view on humanity in its relationship with God, but it is also a very individualistic view. Is it possible to develop a view on religious communities that makes them more than just the context for individual pursuits of *taqwā*? In other words: can we develop a view of the *umma* (in Christian theological terminology: an ecclesiology) that sees it as a space in which a continuous struggle to discover the guiding truth of the Qur’an and other Scriptures for the formation of our lives can be endeavored? Prayer, for instance, and rituals, might have the function to stimulate the enactment of *taqwā*. I realize that these questions require at least another book, but the fact that Lamptey’s book raises such questions shows how valuable a guide she has given us.