Religious Identities in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Walking Together & Parting Ways

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Signs of Identity in the Quran: Rituals, Practices, and Core Values

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1 Introduction*

The study of early Islamic identity is a burgeoning field. A number of articles and monographs that deal with or touch upon the issue explicitly have come out in recent years.[1] The most important contributions have, in my opinion, been those by Fred Donner (2002–2003, 2010, 2018). Fred Donner begins his, by now classic, article entitled "From Believers to Muslims" (2002–2003, 9) with the following sentence: "Studies of early Islam, by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike, have almost without exception taken as axiomatic that Islam from its earliest days constituted a separate religious confession distinct from others—in particular, distinct from Judaism, Christianity, Magianism [Zoroastrianism], and of course from the *mushrikūn*, those who 'associate other beings with God.'" This axiom he then goes on to refute, arguing for a piecemeal and somewhat slow identity-articulating process that took decades to accomplish. He dates the delineation of Islam from other faiths—the "parting of the ways," to use a phrase from early Christian studies—to the late seventh century CE.[2]

Although Donner's views on the tardiness of reified Islamic identity have received praise and affected the arguments of my studies immensely, they have not been accepted by all, as can be seen from the critical stances taken by other heavyweights of the field, such as Amikam Elad (2002), Patricia Crone (2010),

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1 To mention some of the studies that explicitly deal with or touch upon the issue of identity: Hoyland 1997, Nevo and Koren 2003, Lecker 2004, Griffith 2008, Imbert 2011, Shoemaker 2012, Zellentin 2013, G. Fowden 2014, Lamptey 2014, Neuwirth 2014, Sirry 2014, Penn 2015, Stroumsa 2015, Crone 2015–2016, Crone 2016, Shaddel 2016, Webb 2016, Sinai 2017, Munt 2017, Shoemaker 2018, Weitz 2018, Sinai 2019.

2 In this article, I mostly use Common Era dates. In some instances, I give both the Islamic and Common Era dates, in this order, e.g.: 123/741.

Nicolai Sinai (2017, e.g., 187, n. 90), and Robert Hoyland (2017). I have discussed and taken issue with Elad and Crone's criticism of Donner's argument of a slow identity-making process elsewhere (Lindstedt 2019), so I will only deal with Hoyland and Sinai's contributions to the debate here.

In his 2017 primer on the Quran, Nicolai Sinai follows Donner in using the word "Believers" as a translation of the endonym of the Quranic ingroup, which is most commonly called *muʾminūn* in the Quran (and other seventh-century CE evidence). However, in contrast to Donner, Sinai suggests that the Believers formed a group set apart from other communities. According to Sinai, a reified, bounded Muslim community existed from very early on, though they did not yet call themselves Muslims at this stage. Sinai proposes that the formation of the "Believers' communal distinctness from Jews and Christians" occurred in the Medinan period (Sinai 2017, 200), that is, during the years 622–632 CE. Although he allows for a certain symbiosis between the ritual practices of the early Medinan Believers and Judaism, this overlap diminishes as the Medinan phase advances. According to him,

> what is at stake in Medinan polemics against the Jews and Christians as well as in the Medinan surahs' establishment of distinctly Qurʾanic rituals, such as the fast of Ramaḍān and the Meccan *qiblah* [prayer direction], is ultimately the very existence of the Believers as *an independent religious community* that was more than a group of gentile monotheists orbiting around Medinan Judaism with its *fully formed communal identity*.
>
> SINAI 2017, 200, emphasis added

Thus, the full and total demarcation of Islam from other faiths was, according to Sinai, accomplished during the Medinan phase of the Prophet's life through Quranic polemics against other religions as well as the establishment of distinct rituals that only the Prophet's community of Believers performed and that marked them out as different and distinct from Jews and Christians.

I agree with Sinai in that the censure of Jews and Christians has to do with religious identity formation but an identity that is still developing and that accepts some of the earlier monotheists as part of the ingroup.[3] What is more, I do not see the polemics as quite as encompassing as Sinai does, as I will argue in this study. I will deal with the Quranic rituals in this article one by one and

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3 Quranic social categorizations are a complex and multifaceted issue which I tackle in Lindstedt, forthcoming b.

suggest that there is, on the basis of the Quran, much evidence that Jews and Christians also partook in those rituals and shared the same group beliefs. It should be noted in passing that Sinai seems to mostly follow the conventional narrative that, interestingly enough, does not remember many Christians living in and around Mecca and Medina, allocating the role of earlier monotheists to the Jews alone, who were ubiquitous in Medina. This narrative seems to go against what the Quran supposes, with its rather many references to the Christians.[4]

Robert Hoyland's 2017 article is a rich reflection on the nomenclature and discourse on early Islam and Muslims, considering endonyms and exonyms as well as emic and etic points of view. He comments on both the ethnic and religious identities as well as considers what the conquests initiated and carried out by the early Arabian Believers should be called. Hoyland, like Sinai, dates the beginning of distinct Islamic identity to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. He states that in his opinion "Muhammad had already initiated this process [of Islamic identity development] when he changed the *qibla* [prayer direction], opted for Ramadan as the month of fasting and instituted the hajj [pilgrimage], as these sort of practices tend to mark out people as different" (Hoyland 2017, 131, n. 78). Like Sinai, he cites the examples of prayer direction and fasting during Ramadan, but also adduces the pilgrimage; I suppose that Hoyland understands this as meaning the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Kaʿba in Mecca. In this article, I will discuss these three rituals in addition to other markers of identity. I will reconsider how distinctive an identity they actually create.

My earlier articles on issues of early Muslim identities have used a social psychological theory called the social identity approach.[5] It was promulgated by Henri Tajfel (e.g. Tajfel 1981) and has turned out to be a fruitful avenue of research with a large amount of literature.[6] According to my research, Fred Donner's proposal of the late formation of distinct identity stands the test.

One of my articles (Lindstedt, forthcoming b) deals with group categorizations in the Quran. There, I put forward that the Quran often classifies Jews and Christians—the "People of the Book"—as part of the ingroup, called Believers. I

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4 For a new dated pre-Islamic (sixth century CE) inscription from northwest Arabia showing the presence of Christianity in the region, though still rather far away from Mecca and Medina, see Nehmé 2017, 124–131.

5 See Brubaker and Cooper 2000 for a criticism of vague use of the word "identity" in humanities and social sciences. However, in my opinion a defined and theoreticized employment of the word is justifiable and indeed beneficial.

6 For a lucid introduction to the social identity approach, see Haslam 2004.

also draw attention to the fact that the Quranic censure of Christianity is rather muted. Though some Christian dogma (trinitarianism, Jesus as God) are denigrated, these beliefs are, in the Quran, not in fact ascribed to the Christians except in a few instances. The door is left open for Christians as well as Jews to become part of the Believer affiliation.

In another article, I discuss the so-called Constitution of Medina, which has to do with contacts and relations with the Medinan Jews (Lindstedt, forthcoming a). This text has been accepted by the majority of the scholars of early Islam as authentic and early, that is, stemming from the Medinan phase of the Prophet. I agree with this dating, though the surviving recensions of the text have been, in all likelihood, reworded to a degree. The text is a treaty document between the Gentile and the Jewish Believers of Medina.

I suggest that the "Constitution of Medina" creates a recategorized and superordinate Believer identity ("one people to the exclusion of others") which was open to sub-identities. The participants in the treaty document were Gentile and Jewish Believers. In that article, I also look at the Quranic evidence of re- and decategorization and suggest that whereas the earliest layers of the Quran welcome sub-identities totally and, hence, employ recategorization as an identity-building device, the later strata are not so accepting of them. The Medinan Quran, on the other hand, uses decategorization rather than recategorization of Jews and Christians as an identity discourse. By decategorization I mean that Jews and Christians could still affiliate with the community of Believers without undergoing a formal conversion ritual but their group identities as Jews and Christians were somewhat suspect, though not completely rejected.

In the third article (Lindstedt 2019), I concentrate on the early Islamic-era Arabic inscriptions, which form an extremely significant but still underused set of evidence. My focus is on the circa 100 Arabic inscriptions dated by their writers to the 640s–740s. In the study, I conclude (Lindstedt 2019, 201):

> To summarize the timeline for the development of the Muslim identity as reflected in epigraphy in a simplified manner: we have indeterminate pious formulae up to the 70s/690s, when the first instances of the emphasis on the Prophet surface. Simultaneously, designations referring to different outgroups appear in the 70s–90s/690s–710s. Following this, in the 80s–100s/700s–720s, we have mentions of specifically Muslim rites such as pilgrimage, prayer, and fasting. The processes of boundary-drawing and group designation are brought to a close around 100s–110s/720s–730s, when the words Muslims and Islam appear as clear references to a specific group. The idea that the Muslims formed a distinct community is

attested by, for example, one writer of a graffito of the year 123/741 who asks God to bless the totality of Muslims (*ʿāmmat al-muslimīn*) and to let them into Paradise.

Thus, I suggest, the epigraphic evidence tallies well with Fred Donner's arguments. While Donner dates the articulation of particularly Islamic identity to the late seventh century CE, I propose that it might be dated somewhat later, to the early decades of the eighth century. By this I mean that, according to the dated historical evidence, beginning from that time most of the Muslims self-categorized themselves as part of the Muslim group which was apart from other religious communities.

If Donner's and my arguments are accepted, it follows that some reconceptualization of how we understand Islamic origins is required. Just to mention one example: According to the chronicles and other literary evidence, the Caliph ʿUmar II (r. 717–720 CE) stipulated that Jews, Christians, and other communities dress differently from Muslims.[7] Usually in scholarship, this is understood as *maintaining* communal boundaries that were already in place: Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and others all agreed on communal boundaries and categorizations, and these sartorial orders only made those social categorizations more visible. However, I would argue that these identity-politics acts of ʿUmar II (if it was indeed he who tried to enforce the dress stipulations) should be seen as part of the process of *creating* the Muslim affiliation and *delineating* communal boundaries rather than merely sustaining or bolstering them. Since, according to the dated documentary evidence, it is during the decades of the 700s–730s that Muslims start to emphasize their distinctive rituals and call themselves "Muslims" and their religion "Islam," we cannot suppose (if new evidence does not surface) that the social categorizations of Muslims versus non-Muslims were already in place and widely accepted before and when ʿUmar II tried to enforce his sartorial stipulations. Naturally, the seeds of a distinctive identity were already there, but it should not be supposed, I argue, that the religious and other affiliations were understood in the same way as later.

In this article, I will do something different from my earlier studies, offering a new approach to the question of social identities in the early Islamic era. It is not my aim to repeat the social categorizations in the Quran and early Arabic evidence or to concentrate on group nomenclature. Instead, I will look at specific Quranic identity signs (such as prayer, almsgiving, and fasting) and core

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7   See Levy-Rubin 2011 for a thorough study on ʿUmar II's stipulations. However, Yarbrough 2014 remarks that these rulings are also attributed to earlier and later rulers in the literature, so the historical date and actual authenticity of these rules remains questionable.
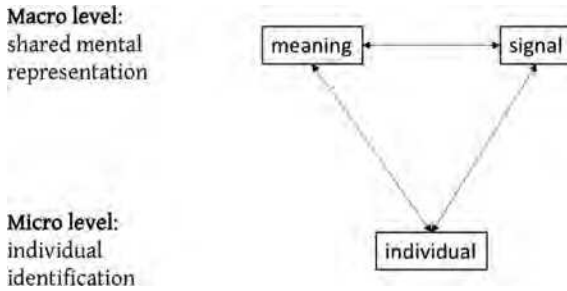
FIGURE 4.1 The tripartite structure of the identity sign
ADAPTED FROM EHALA 2018, 62

values (such as the belief in God, the last day, and the Prophet[s]). My aim is to probe which groups share these core values and signs of identity according to the Quranic evidence.

2   Theoretical Framework: Identity Signs

The recent theory of identity signs has been put forward by Martin Ehala (2018). This framework proffers tools to analyze and specify the identity markers of different groups: what makes a group differ from other groups (real or imagined) and through what processes and acts?

Ehala has formulated a theory on identity performance, utilizing the concept of *sign*, a term borrowed from linguistics. The identity sign is divided into two parts: *signal* and *meaning*. Furthermore, the identity sign is context dependent (Ehala 2018: 54). To give an example, in Finnish society in the year 2019 (context), wearing a cross necklace (signal) is widely understood as signifying that the person with the cross is indicating that she is a believing Christian (meaning). The meaning assigned to the signal can of course differ in the minds of the signaler and the receiver of the signal. While for the person with the cross the identity sign in all likelihood carries positive meanings, an ardent atheist, for example, might scoff at it. Thus, we have to take into account not only the signal and signaler but also the receivers of that signal (see figure 4.1).

Meanings and signals work on both macro (societal) and micro (individual) levels. In the above example, the necklace-wearing Christian and the atheist are both individuals on the micro level that project different meanings to the cross necklace, though they also in all likelihood share some cultural, macro-level, conceptions and understandings of the item in question. Both understand it as marking Christian faith, though the significations that they allocate to this signal differ. The above figure and its two-way arrows are meant

to indicate that identity signaling and the assignment of meaning to a signal are always a socially contextualized and negotiated process. The figure also suggests that identity signaling is a feature of both social identity and self identity.[8]

Different meanings (positive, negative, neutral, and so on) can be given to religious and other symbols signaling identity, such as wearing a cross necklace, by different individuals either sending or receiving that signal, though there are some shared conceptualizations of them as well. This is especially true for signs that are stigmatized or stereotyped. One needs only to think of the multifaceted meanings attached to wearing a Muslim headscarf in 21st-century Europe, for instance.

In addition to manifesting identity signaling, groups also hold a number of *core values*[9] that (possibly) set them apart from other groups. Core values, Ehala (2018, 4) explains, refer to

> what people with these identities are supposed to think and believe, in broad terms … Core values provide a moral scale to assess and evaluate other identities: whether individuals having these identities behave in a respectable manner, whether they are warm or cold in social relations, and whether they are competent or not.

This does not mean that groups are in agreement about the core values; however, they often aim for consensus. Social identity theorists speak of self-stereotyping, meaning that the members of the group often start to act like the perceived prototype of the group.[10] In any case, the core values and identity signs are in a constant state of negotiation.

In what follows, I suggest some *core values* and *identity signs* that I see as pivotal in the Quranic communication. To anticipate the results of my inquiry, the *meaning* that the Quran assigns to these values and signs is, by and large, *piety and ingroup belonging* both in this life and the next. Now, it must be understood that this is how the Quran articulates these signs. We have no way of telling exactly how the audience of the Quran and the individuals

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8   By social identity, I refer to an individual's understanding of herself as a member of a group or groups. Self identity, on the other hand, indicates an individual's understanding of herself as different from the other ingroup members.

9   These could also be called "group beliefs." For the definition of core values and their types, see Ehala 2018, 10–11, 91–96.

10   There is a discussion of self-stereotyping in Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2011, 52–55, 60.

among the community of the Believers received, interpreted, and performed these signals since contemporary evidence for these issues does not exist. Hence, I am only dealing with the *Quranic articulation* of the Believer affiliation and the signs of identity related to belonging to that group. I would suggest, however, that the Quranic message was of utmost importance for the early Believers and they took its communication and social categorizations in earnest.[11]

3 Core Values in the Quran

For the purposes of this study, I treat the following core values, which I deem are central in the Quran: belief in God and the last day; belief in earlier Messengers, Prophets, and revelations as well as belief in the Prophet Muhammad and his message; and submitting to God. These are organized into three subsections below. Other core values could of course be suggested as being more key in the Quranic communication than those I have laid out here,[12] but I think is safe to say that these themes would be considered significant by all interpreters of the Quran and warrant analysis here.

3.1 *Belief in God and the Last Day*
Belief in God and the last day (*al-īmān bi-llāh wa-l-yawm al-ākhar*) is a widely recurring premise for ingroup affiliation. The centrality of this belief is so essential that it gives the group the most commonly used endonym of the Quranic text, "Believers," *al-muʾminūn* or *alladhīna yuʾminūna*.

That the same belief is ascribed to Jews and Christians is rather widely attested in the Quran. For instance, verses 3:113–114 read:

> There are some among the People of the Book who are upright, who recite God's revelations during the night, who bow down in worship, who

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11   I strongly agree with Fred Donner (1998, 85): "The strong concern for piety and morals visible in the Qurʾān, which I take to be evidence of the values prevailing in the earliest community of Believers, did not die out in the period following the death of Muḥammad and the codification of the Qurʾān. Rather, the preoccupation with piety survived among the Believers."

12   Other commentators have proposed somewhat different sets of Quranic core values (though not using this specific concept). For Lamptey (2014), for instance, *taqwā* or God-consciousness is central. See also Izutsu (1959) and Fazlur Rahman (1980), who offer rich, by now classic, discussions of ethical and religious concepts, themes, and values in the Quranic communication.

believe in God and the last day, who order what is right and forbid what is wrong, who are quick to do good deeds. These people are among the pious.[13]

While belief in God and the last day might not be an attribute of all Jews and Christians, according to the Quran some do indeed believe (the same is implied, for example, in verses 2:62, 5:69, and 74:31). The common faith in one God is emphasized in verse 29:46, which enjoins the audience of the Quranic message to say to the People of the Book: "our God and your God are one."

There are some Quranic verses, however, that imply that the People of the Book, or at least some of them, do not believe. Verse 3:70 asks why the People of the Book do not believe in God's signs, even though they clearly see them. Not only that, but they scheme to deceive the Believers (Q. 3:72). Verse 2:105 notes: "Neither those People of the Book who disbelieve nor the associators would like anything good to be sent down to you from your Lord, but God chooses for His grace whoever He will: His bounty has no limits" (see also 98:6). Other passages, such as 5:82–86, appear to make a distinction between the Jews and the Christians: the latter are said to believe, while the former are said to detest the Believers.

Nonetheless, the Quranic verses imputing disbelief to the People of the Book never state that the disbeliever category applies to all of them but only those among them who do not believe. Hence, all in all, in the Quran Jews and Christians (the People of the Book) are not marked out categorically as different or distinct from the Believers because of their faith (or lack of it). The majority of the People of the Book might be transgressors, but among them are also Believers (*minhum al-muʾminūn*, Quran 3:110). It should be noted that the arguably contemporary "Constitution of Medina" also indicates that the participants in that treaty—Jewish and Gentile Believers in Medina—shared the faith in God and the last day (Lindstedt, forthcoming a). Shared belief in God (*Allāh*) is naturally what one would assume.[14]

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13 Quotations of the Quran are from the translation of Abdel Haleem, with some modifications.

14 In this connection, it should be noted that there is some (epigraphic) evidence that the pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking Christians usually called God *al-Ilāh* though *Allāh* is attested in poetry as well; see most recently Sinai 2019, 7–9. The words *al-Ilāh* and *Allāh* were used by pagans as well to refer to a deity. As for Yemen, Jews and Christians often designated God with the Ancient South Arabian word *raḥmānān*, which corresponds with Arabic *al-Raḥmān*, "Merciful" (Sinai 2019, 59).

3.2   *Belief in Earlier Prophets, Revelations, and the Prophet Muhammad*
It might not be surprising that the Quran credits the Jews and Christians with faith in God and the last day, as noted in the previous subsection. It might also not be striking that the Quran narrates that the Jews and Christians believed in earlier Prophets. What is more remarkable, perhaps, is that the Quran also ascribes to them belief in the Prophet Muhammad and the current revelation. Surprising or not, such is the case.

Indeed, belief in the past revelations and in the most recent one is often conjoined. Above, I referred to verse 29:46, but the whole passage 29:46–47 should be adduced in this connection:

> Say [plural]: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us and you. Our God and your God is one; we submit to Him.' Thus We have sent you the Book. Those that have received the Book [before] believe in it, and among them are those that believe in it. Only the disbelievers reject Our signs.

In these verses, the People of the Book are described as believing in the current revelation and are set apart from the disbelievers, who reject the "signs" (or, perhaps, "revelations," *āyāt*) of God.

Strikingly, the People of the Book's belief in Muhammad and the truth of his message is reiterated in quite a few verses: for instance, in 6:114: "Those to whom We have given the Book know that this [Muhammad's revelation] is revealed by your Lord with the truth, so do not be one of those who doubt." The same is emphasized in 3:199: "Some of the People of the Book 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 rewards with their Lord: God is swift in reckoning." Verse 13:36 says that the People of the Book "rejoice" (*yafraḥūna*) because of Muhammad's revelation, but "some factions deny parts of it"—hardly a categorical statement.

To conclude, Jews and Christians are not, in the Quran, singled out as groups distinct from other Believers in matters of faith (*al-īmān*). Quite interestingly, even belief in the Prophet Muhammad and the veracity of the revelation given to him is not seen as a divisive feature that would set the People of the Book apart—outside the boundaries of the ingroup affiliation—since key verses indicate that some of them accepted Muhammad and his revelation.

3.3   *Submitting to God* (al-islām)

Submitting to God (*al-islām*) is a rather significant group belief in the Quranic communication. As Quran 3:19 states, "the religion,[15] in God's eyes, is *al-islām*." It is an especially interesting matter to take into consideration here since, as is well known, it later gives the appellation "Islam" to the religion of the group. Scholars arguing for early Islamic identity development (that is, the supposition that the group demarcation was already in place during the life of the Prophet) might take the Quranic concept of *al-islām* to claim that it is one of the aspects that delineates the ingroup from Jews and Christians. As I have argued in the introduction of this article, I do not believe that contemporary evidence supports such an early partitioning of Islam from other faiths.

Here, as in the other core values considered above, we encounter the fact that, according the Quranic communication, the People of the Book take part in *al-islām*, submission to God. Verses 28:52–53 refer to the People of the Book, saying that they believe in the Prophet's revelation and, "when it is recited to them, say, 'We believe in it, it is the truth from our Lord. Before it came we had already submitted (*muslimīn*) [to God].'" Furthermore, Quran 29:46 says that the People of the Book and the (other) ingroup members believe in the same God, confirming that "we [all] submit to Him."

Since *al-islām* later became the widely used name of the religion, it might be reasonable to suppose that the Quran excludes this concept from the People of the Book. As I have stated, this is not the case. Rather, *al-islām* marks the People of the Book as well. Quran 28:53, moreover, states that they have been submitters even before the most recent revelation. Hence, verses such as 3:19—"the religion, in God's eyes, is *al-islām*"—that are quite often adduced as evidence for a specifically and distinctly Islamic identity in the Quranic communication turn out to be not exclusive at all since the People of the Book also receive the approbation of submission to God. Even the continuation of 3:19— "those who were given the Book disagreed out of rivalry, only after they had

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15   Or, perhaps "law," *al-dīn*. The terms *al-dīn* and *al-islām* have been treated quite extensively in modern scholarship; see, e.g., Baneth 1971; Esack 1997, 126–134; El-Badawi 2013, 49–50. Cole (2019, 419) argues that the word *al-islām* should be understood to mean the "prophetic tradition of monotheism" rather than submission. Though I might take issue with that exact rendering, Cole and I agree on the point that, in the Quran, *al-islām* does not refer to a specific religion followed by the Prophet and his community. Cole (2019, 423) states: "Far from being an attribute only of Muhammad's believers, *islām* characterizes all monotheists throughout history" in the Quranic communication.

been given knowledge"—does not affect my reading, since the disagreement could be understood to be an aspect among them, not disagreement with the Believers. Naturally, after "Islam" became the dominant name for the religion (in the early eighth century, as I argue in Lindstedt 2019), verse 3:19 was one among many that was used to demarcate religious boundaries. But this must be understood as an interpretive process that postdates Muhammad by a century or so.

4   Identity Signs in the Quran

Above, I argued that the Quran ascribes all of its ingroup core values to the People of the Book as well (in addition to other Believers). But what about the identity signs properly speaking, such as rituals and dietary regulations? The evidence is more mixed but there is still substantial overlap.

4.1   *Doing Good Deeds and Being Pious*

Doing good and pious acts, indicated with Arabic verbs and nouns from the roots *ḥ-s-n*, *ṣ-l-ḥ*, and *kh-y-r*, is an important Quranic identity marker that the Believers should possess and indicate. Doing good is often equated with, accompanied by, or connected with other Believer affiliation identity signs, such as pilgrimage (verses 2:158 and 197), fasting (2:184), fighting against the enemy (2:194–195), and spending for charity (2:215).

Doing good is mentioned as a prerequisite for the paradisal reward in many verses of the Quran, for instance in verse 10:26: "Those who do well (*alladhīn aḥsanū*) will have the best reward and more besides. Neither darkness nor shame will cover their faces: these are the companions in Paradise, and there they will remain." Or consider 3:133–134: "Hurry towards your Lord's forgiveness and a Garden as wide as the heavens and earth prepared for the righteous, who give, both in prosperity and adversity, who restrain their anger and pardon people—God loves those who do good (*al-muḥsinīn*)."

Thus, belief, doing good, and other pious deeds are connected in the Quranic communication and are described as leading to Paradise. There are not many verses that explicitly indicate that Jews and Christians (rather than the Believers in general) are also among the good-doers. But there are a few Quranic sections that will be dealt with in the following.

Quran 3:114 was cited above, but let us repeat the passage: it states that some of the People of the Book are "quick to do good deeds (*yusāriʿūna fī al-khayrāt*). These people are among the pious (*al-ṣāliḥīn*)." The same is implied in verses 2:62 and 5:69 that state that those of the Believers, Jews, Christians,

and Sabians,[16] who believe in God and the last day and do pious deeds (*ʿamila ṣāliḥan*) will get their reward in the hereafter.

Quranic verses 5:82–85 make a distinction between the pious, good-doing, and amicable Christians on one hand and hateful Jews and associators on the other. As was stated above, the Quranic theology links doing good and being accepted in Paradise. Likewise here:

> You are sure to find that the most hostile to the Believers are the Jews and those who associate other deities with God; you are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the Believers are those who say, "We are Christians," for there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics. These people are not given to arrogance, and when they listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears because they recognize the Truth. They say, "Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses. Why should we not believe in God and in the Truth that has come down to us, when we long for our Lord to include us in the company of the righteous?" For saying this, God has rewarded them with Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay: that is the reward of those who do good (*al-muḥsinīn*).

This is a rather categorical ascription of the identity marker "doing good" (*iḥsān*) to the Christians (though it is denied to the Jews in this Quranic passage). Another verse (2:83) addresses the Israelites in connection with *iḥsān*: "Remember when We took a pledge (*mīthāq*) from the Children of Israel: 'Worship none but God; be good to your parents (*bi-l-wālidayn iḥsānan*) and kinsfolk, to orphans and the poor; speak good words to all people; keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms.' Then all but a few of you turned away and paid no heed." Granted, here the context is historical (as is often the case when the Quran talks of the Children of Israel), but the verse also seems to speak to the time of the revelation. It should be noticed that while the majority of the Israelites are indeed said to have "turned away" from the virtues described in Quran 2:83, a few (*qalīl*) of them did not. Hence, while 5:82–85 counts the category "Christians" as good-doers, 2:83 implies that there are good-doers among the Israelites/Jews as well. Likewise, verses 2:62, 3:114, and 5:69 extend the attribution of good and pious acts to the Jews and Christians.

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16   The identity of this group has been debated in both classical Islamic tradition and modern scholarship. See, e.g., de Blois 2002. Janne Mattila's article in this volume deals with how later Muslim scholars understood this group.

4.2 *Giving Alms and Praying*

The identity signs of almsgiving (*zakāh*) and prayer (*ṣalāh*) are very important in the Quran, though they are not subject to detailed rules and regulations concerning how they should be performed. These practices are not often credited to Jews and Christians, but there are a few occurrences.

Verses 2:40 ff. address the Israelites, enjoining them to remember the blessing and covenant of God toward them. The whole passage is rather positive in tone. Verse 2:43 mentions the practices of almsgiving (*zakāh*) and prayer (*ṣalāh*), stating that the Israelites should uphold them and bow down with others who bow down in worship (*wa-rkaʿū maʿa al-rākiʿīn*). There is no suggestion that the Israelites are not currently giving alms and prayer; I would argue that the implication is that they indeed are and that they should continue to do so. The phrase used (*aqīmū al-ṣalāh wa-ātū al-zakāh*) resembles other Quranic verses that enjoin the Believers to maintain their rites.[17]

Verse 3:113, discussing the People of the Book in general, says that some of them recite God's "revelations" (or "signs," *āyāt*) during the night and bow down (*yasjidūna*) in worship. Although the Quranic evidence is slight (consisting of only 2:43 and 3:113), it is suggestive of the possibility that, during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, the almsgiving and prayer practices of Jews and Christians were deemed acceptable. If this is an appropriate interpretation, it signifies that the potential differences among Jews, Christians, and other Believers in the details of how the prayer was performed and alms given were not a hindrance for a shared sense of community as Believers. Jews and Christians were not automatically relegated to the outgroup.

Above, it was mentioned that both Sinai and Hoyland view the diverging directions of prayer of the People of the Book and other Believers mentioned in Quran 2:145[18] as clear signals of distinct communal practices and identities. Nevertheless, the Quran does not offer completely clear evidence concerning the prayer direction and its difference. Nor is it clear how much weight as an identity marker and what meaning the Quran gives to the prayer direction. The Islamic tradition holds (and, if I understand him well, Hoyland concurs)

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17   For instance, Q. 2:277: "Those who believe, do good deeds, keep up the prayer, and pay the alms (*aqāmū al-ṣalāh wa-ātaw al-zakāh*) will have their reward with their Lord: no fear for them, nor will they grieve." See also verses 6:72, 7:170, 8:3, 9:18, 9:71, 11:114, 13:22, 14:31, 31:4, 35:29, 42:38, and 98:5.

18   "Yet even if you brought every proof to those who were given the Book, they would not follow your prayer direction, nor will you follow theirs, nor indeed will any of them follow one another's direction. If you [Prophet] were to follow their desires, after the knowledge brought to you, you would be doing wrong."

that Muhammad's followers prayed towards Jerusalem but, later, the prayer direction was changed toward the temple of the Kaʿba in Mecca. Now, it is true that Quran 2:142–144[19] indicates that the prayer direction of Muhammad's community changed at some point, and 2:145 says that the People of the Book differ from it in their prayer direction. However, other verses from the same surah (and hence, probably more or less contemporary with verses 2:142–145)[20] explicitly deny the role of prayer direction as a distinction-making identity sign. The verses in question are 2:115 and 2:177, the latter of which I will quote in full:

> 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, travellers 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 aware of God.

Crucially then, the Quran itself seems to reject the role of prayer direction ("turning your face towards East or West") in assessing the righteousness of the people and hence limits its exclusiveness as an identity signal. The content of belief and practice trumps the form, these Quranic verses state, according to my interpretation. The meaning of the exact prayer direction is not of utmost importance for group affiliation and piety.

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19   "The foolish people will say, 'What has turned them away from the prayer direction they used to face?' Say, 'East and West belong to God. He guides whoever He will to the right way.' We have made you into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you. We only made the direction the one you used to face [Prophet] in order to distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels: that test was hard, except for those God has guided. God would never let your faith go to waste, for God is most compassionate and most merciful towards people. Many a time We have seen you [Prophet] turn your face towards Heaven, so We are turning you towards a prayer direction that pleases you. Turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque: wherever you may be, turn your faces to it. Those who were given the Scripture know with certainty that this is the Truth from their Lord: God is not unaware of what they do."

20   In fact, there is no way of knowing which came first: verses 2:142–145, which ascribe to the prayer direction the role of an identity marker, or verse 2:177, which denies this role.

4.3   *Fasting and Making the Pilgrimage*

The Quran does not say that Jews and Christians fast or perform the pilgrimage. Nonetheless, it does not say that they do not, either. It is worthwhile to probe fasting and pilgrimage as Quranic signs of identity at some length.

The first question I will ask is: What are the *meanings* and *exclusivity* of Ramadan as the month of fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca as identity signs? Here, too, we find a certain amount of ambiguity in the Quran. Fasting, in the Quran, is a very common ritual practice, definitely not exclusive to the month of Ramadan (which is mentioned as a fasting month in 2:185). Fasting is prescribed as a means of replacing other religious duties such as shaving the head during the pilgrimage (2:196), doing penance after killing another Believer (4:92), hunting during the pilgrimage (5:95), or breaking an oath (5:89). Nowhere is it said to be *forbidden* to fast at other times too. We can hypothesize (although we of course have no evidence of this) that Jews and Christians joining the Believer's group could have continued their existing traditions of fasting.

The same applies to the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*): although the importance of the local cult is emphasized, the Quran never excludes pilgrimages to other places. Once again, these other places visited by the Arabian Believers are in the realm of hypothesis only since they are not mentioned in the Quran, but they could have included other Arabian sanctuaries or Jerusalem, for example. In fact, there is actually rather little in the Quran that would tie the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Kaʿba in Mecca. Quran 2:158 does mention al-Ṣafā and al-Marwa, two hills next to the Kaʿba, and Quran 5:97, preceded by verses dealing with the *ḥajj*, reads: "God has made the Kaʿba—the sacred shrine—a means of support for people," possibly thereby linking the pilgrimage and the Kaʿba, although the expression is somewhat open to interpretation. Other verses mentioning the *ḥajj* do not mention any toponyms or simply mention "the sacrosanct place of prostration" (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*, Q. 2:196) or "the shrine" (*al-bayt*, 3:97). If Medina (along with other Arabian localities) was also counted as a *ḥaram*, sacred enclave, it is not impossible to interpret these verses (according to the traditional dating, revealed in Medina!) as referring to a local temple instead of that in Mecca. Notably also, verse 2:197 says that the "pilgrimage takes place during the prescribed months," not simply one month (the *dhū al-ḥijja*), as in later tradition. It is plausible that, during the life of the Prophet and for some time afterwards, the Believers held somewhat alternating views as to where a pilgrimage could and should be made and when.

As Arabic poetry evinces, pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to Mecca was a pre-Islamic tradition (see, e.g., Miller 2016, 104). When the Quran stipulated the *ḥajj* as a ritual, it was confirming and continuing what was already in place in Western Arabia.

Robert Hoyland (2017, 131, n. 78), as mentioned above, says that the Prophet Muhammad "instituted" the ḥajj. This is not exactly the case, since his community was, it appears, maintaining prevalent West Arabian traditions. What is more, the connection of the Kaʿba with the figure of Abraham, suggested by the Quran (2:127), might have been a shared narrative and memory already in pre-Islamic times.[21] If this is the case, we can suppose that Arabian Jews and Christians too might have made the pilgrimage to the Kaʿba and linked it with Abraham before Muhammad started to recite his prophetical revelations. Moreover, as I have argued, the Quran does not exclude other pilgrimages either and is somewhat vague as to the exact time and place of the ḥajj, which might have been a more encompassing concept than it later became. In the case of the ḥajj too, I think it is justifiable to doubt just how much this Quranic ritual actually "mark[s] out people as different" (to borrow Hoyland's phrase, 2017, 131, n. 78).

Recently, Nicolai Sinai (2019, 53–56) has catalogued instances of pre-Islamic (*jāhiliyya*) poetry where God (*Allāh*) is mentioned as the patron deity of Mecca and the Meccan shrine. Now, the authenticity of the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry has been debated in scholarship for around a century. However, it appears that a consensus is emerging that the poetical corpus includes authentic material, though we must accept that the poems were reworked during the two centuries of oral or oral–written transmission (Sinai 2019, 19–26). The poems surveyed by Sinai suggest that Arabian pagans deemed the Kaʿba and its environs holy places vouchsafed and protected by God (*Allāh*) (Sinai 2019, 54–55). Strikingly, also the Christian poet ʿAdī ibn Zayd swears by "the lord of Mecca and of the cross" (*rabbi makkata wa-l-ṣalībī*; Sinai 2019, 52)

Sinai (2019, 54) concludes: "In sum, there is poetic evidence associating Allāh with a pilgrimage sanctuary in general and with the Meccan Kaʿba specifically, and with rites like sacrifice and circumambulation that also figure in the Quran." If these poetic snippets are authentically pre-Islamic, as is probable in at least some of the cases, it follows that Mecca and the Kaʿba constituted a local pilgrimage center that was venerated by Arabians belonging to different religious orientations, including Christians.[22] This practice was accepted

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21   I thank Nathaniel Miller for suggesting this to me; see Miller (forthcoming).

22   The idea that both Christians and "pagans" (and perhaps others as well) might have venerated the Kaʿba and made the pilgrimage there in the pre-Islamic era might strike the reader odd at first glance. However, this would be customary in the history of religions: Christians have always borrowed and continued practices from non-Christians and vice versa. Shared holy places are not uncommon. Just to give one example, Heyden 2020 discusses the case of Mamre in late antique Palestine. The sanctuary of Mamre was connected with

and continued by the Quran. When the Quran speaks of pilgrimage rites taking place at the Kaʿba, I do not necessarily see this as drawing a distinction from other communities. I see cultural continuity and sharedness.

4.4 *Following the Law and Dietary Regulations*

Though the Quran is not a law book per se, the notion of law (referred to with Arabic words such as *dīn* and *shirʿa*) is rather central in Quranic conceptualizations of communal life. The Quran appears to allow some plurality in how different communities organize their laws as well as categorize their permissible and forbidden things. However, the idea that these legislations are God-given is at least implied.

This is elaborated at length in Quran 5:44–49. This is a long passage, but I will quote it in its entirety because of its significance:

> We revealed the Torah with guidance and light, and the prophets, who had submitted to God, judged according to it for the Jews. So did the rabbis and the scholars in accordance with that part of God's Book which they were entrusted to preserve, and to which they were witnesses. So do not fear people, fear Me; do not barter away My messages for a small price; those who do not judge according to what God has sent down are rejecting [God's teachings]. In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound: if anyone forgoes this out of charity, it will serve as atonement for his bad deeds. Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are doing grave wrong.

Abraham and Sarah and was esteemed and visited during pilgrimage by Jews, Christians, and others. The similarities to the Kaʿba are not difficult to see. See also E. Fowden 2002 on the issue of sharing holy places.

For the (often messy and unsuccessful) articulations of borders between Christians and "pagans" in the late antique world, see, e.g., Kahlos 2007 and 2020. Kahlos argues that Christians interacted with "pagans" at festivals and in places deemed holy: "In the reality of late antique communal life, Christians tended to make their decisions on a situational basis: in situations where they felt belonging to their Christian community was important enough, they 'activated' their Christian 'identity'. The same persons can be seen as taking part in both 'pagan' (or what was seen as pagan) and Christian festivities, probably without any particular scruples—or at least they would have had no scruples if bishops had left them to continue their celebrations in peace. Put bluntly, the often discussed identity crisis of late antique Christians was more of a headache for ecclesiastical leaders than a problem for ordinary people. Practices that in the eyes of bishops appeared incompatible with Christian conduct were not irreconcilable for the participants themselves" (Kahlos 2020, 177).

We sent Jesus, son of Mary, in their footsteps, to confirm the Torah that had been sent before him: We gave him the Gospel with guidance, light, and confirmation of the Torah already revealed—a guide and lesson for those who take heed of God. So let the followers of the Gospel judge according to what God has sent down in it. Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are lawbreakers.

We sent to you [Muhammad] the Book with the truth, confirming the Books that came before it, and with final authority over them: so judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, which deviate from the truth that has come to you. We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. So [Prophet] judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, and take good care that they do not tempt you away from any of what God has sent down to you. If they turn away, remember that God intends to punish them for some of the sins they have committed: a great many people are lawbreakers.

This extensive passage expounds the idea of legislation given to different communities: Jews, Christians, and Muhammad's community. God has "assigned a law and a path to each of you." The Torah of the Jews and the Gospel of the Christians (as the Quran calls these scriptures) are portrayed as valid laws and scriptures with which to organize communal life. Remarkably, Jews and Christians are enjoined to judge according to their scriptures rather than adopting that of the Prophet Muhammad. What is more, Muhammad's Book does not supplant but merely confirms the earlier divine Books. Verse 5:66 states that the failure of some of the People of the Book is to reject the Torah and the Gospel. Their mistake is *not*, it should be underscored, that they have repudiated the Book revealed to Muhammad.[23]

Hence, the People of the Book (or some of them) abide by a God-given law. Interestingly too, the Quran portrays them as sharing the same notions of dietary regulations with other Believers. Intermarriage, too, is permissible. Verse 5:5 proclaims: "Today all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them.

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23   It should be remembered that the Quran specifically states that some People of the Book actually accepted Muhammad's revelation, as I have argued above.

So are chaste, believing, women as well as chaste women of the people who were given the Book before you, as long as you have given them their bride-gifts and married them, not taking them as lovers or secret mistresses."[24]

The importance of food regulations and, in particular, partaking in eating together is of much importance in the ancient and late ancient discourse of Near Eastern religions but it has not been conceptualized enough in the study of the Quranic communication and early Islam. Fortunately, Zellentin has recently (2018) authored an extensive and insightful article on the topic of dietary discourse in the Quran and earlier traditions. His treatment develops from the so-called Apostolic Decree (cited in the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles 15:23–29) and the Hebrew Bible tradition. In the New Revised Standard Version translation, verses 28 and 29 in Acts of the Apostles 15 read as follows: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: *that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.* If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well" (emphasis added). Zellentin notes that many Christian texts written in late antiquity uphold these dietary regulations, proscribing blood and strangled animals (often understood to mean carrion), among other things.

The Quranic dietary regulations are hence intimately connected with the late ancient Judeo-Christian legal discourse. Quran 5:3 prohibits "carrion; blood; pig's meat; any animal over which any name other than God's has been invoked; any animal strangled, or victim of a violent blow or a fall, or gored or savaged by a beast of prey, unless you slaughter it; or anything sacrificed on idolatrous altars" (see also verse 6:145). These accord by and large with the dietary regulations of the Apostolic Decree, adding a few details as well as prohibiting pork.[25] Hence, the Quranic food stipulations in all likelihood were quite familiar to and acceptable to (or already accepted by) many Jews and Christians that were living during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The Quranic dietary discourse does not, I contend, proffer a distinctive but a shared sign of identity.

In this subsection, I have argued that the Quran seems to allow for parallel legal systems. Moreover, Quran 5:5 allows intermarriage and table fellowship

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24 The discourse of verse 5:5 is highly gendered: male believers are the implied addressee. In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the verse (and related Quranic passages) are taken to mean that Muslim men can marry women from among the People of the Book but not vice versa.

25 Pork is not censured in the New Testament as such but prohibited in Leviticus 11:7 and rejected in some late antique Christian texts, see Zellentin 2018, 147. It appears that some (many?) late antique Christians eschewed pork. Such Christians might have been present in Western Arabia as well.

TABLE 4.1   The shared core values and identity signs in the Quran

Core values and identity signs	Believers	(at least some among) Jews and Christians / People of the Book
Believe in God	X	X (e.g. Q. 3:114)
Believe in the last day	X	X (e.g. Q. 3:114)
Believe in the previous prophets and revelations	X	X (Q. 5:44, 6:114)
Believe in God's messenger (i.e., Muhammad) and his revelation	X	X (Q. 3:199, 13:36, 28:52–53, 29:47)
Submit to God	X	X (Q. 28:53, 29:46)
Do good deeds and are pious	X	X (e.g. Q. 3:114)
Pray	X	X (kneel, Q. 3:113, see also 2:43, 98:4–8)
Give alms	X	maybe (Q. 2:43, 98:5)
Fast during Ramadan and other times	X	?
Make the pilgrimage	X	?
Follow the law	X	maybe (5:44–47, 66); dietary regulations shared (5:5)
(Are rewarded in the afterlife)	X	X (e.g. Q. 2:62)

between the People of the Book and other Believers (see also Zellentin 2018, 157–158). When it comes to food and marriage, there are no rigid boundaries but mostly shared practices and traditions.

5   Social Categorizations in the Hereafter

Social categorizations transcend the division of this world from the next, continuing to function in the hereafter as well, according to the Quran. Verse 22:17 reads: "As for the Believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolaters, God will differentiate them (*yafṣilu baynahym*) on the Day of Resurrection; God witnesses all things." After reading this verse, the expectation might be that the Believers are set aside from the other communities and only the former be the object of the paradisal reward. This is not necessarily the case. In fact, the differentiation mentioned in 22:17 seems to be better inter-

preted as something that happens between individuals rather than between groups, that is, separating the wheat from the chaff.

There are multiple passages that promise salvation to the pious and faithful among the People of the Book. The soteriology of the Quran, like its legal discourse, is rather pluralistic (to use an anachronistic term).[26] This assurance of the hereafter is communicated in verses 2:62, 3:115, 3:199, 5:69, and 28:54, many of which have been referred to in the preceding. These verses promise the People of the Book their reward (*ajruhum*, Quran 2:62, 3:199) for their good deeds (3:115), adding (2:62, 5:69) that they shall not fear nor grieve (supposedly, in the afterlife). Verse 28:54 promises the People of the Book a double reward (*ajrahum marratayn*), "because they are steadfast, repel evil with good, give to others out of what We have provided for them, and turn away whenever they hear frivolous talk, saying, 'We have our deeds and you have yours. Peace be with you! We do not seek the company of ignorant people'" (28:54–55).

Thus, the Quran not only ascribes positive qualities and attributes of believer-ness and piety to some People of the Book in this world but also suggests that they will receive a reward (or even a double reward) for their good deeds in the world to come. The Quran does not present or articulate the religious communities as being totally separate but rather as overlapping in diverse ways; as Quran 3:110 asserts: the categories "the People of the Book" and "the Believers" are not really mutually exclusive. This applies to both this world and the next.

6   Conclusions

In this study, I have applied the concept of identity signs (Ehala 2018) to the Quran. I have argued that, in fact, identity signs marking a difference[27] between Jews, Christians, and other Believers are, by and large, absent in the Quran.

Perhaps strikingly, (at least some among) the People of the Book share *each and every* one of the aspects that I have termed the core values of the Quranic normative definition of the Believer affiliation. What is more, I have put for-

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26   Classical Islamic theological discourse, on the other hand, usually emphasized that only Muslims will receive the heavenly reward. The promise to the People of the Book was interpreted as applying to people before the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. However, there were some voices among early Muslim scholars that deemed the People of the Book fit for salvation; see Esack 1997, 163. For a well-argued Islamic theology of pluralism, see Lamptey 2014.

27   Such identity signs can be called "boundary features" or "distinctions"; see Ehala 2018, 80.

ward that the Quran also ascribes to the People of the Book many of the identity signs, such as rituals, that belong to the description of the Believers. I would argue that the conclusion to be drawn based on this is quite simple: the Quran categorizes some People of the Book as part of the ingroup, the community of Believers.

Naturally, this was not how classical Islamic thought understood the Quranic social categorizations. Rather, Jews and Christians were considered by the majority of Muslim scholars as being beyond the pale. Though this question is beyond the scope of my inquiry, I will end with a quotation from Farid Esack (1997, 114–115), who describes this process of social categorization in classical Islamic interpretive tradition as follows: "One of the manifestations (and consequences) of the process of Islamic theology becoming more and more rigid was the reification of terms such as *islam*, *iman* and *kufr* [disbelief]. In other words, these words are no longer seen as qualities that individuals may have; qualities that are dynamic and vary in intensity in different stages of an individual's life. Instead, these terms are now regarded as entrenched qualities of groups."

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