The Arabic term \( \text{kāfir} \) (pl. \( \text{kuffār} \)), literally meaning “disbeliever,” or “infidel” in Islam, refers to the person who denies or rejects the essence of Islam – the reality of the Islamic God, the One, the Absolute, and the Infinite, who in Arabic is known as \( \text{Allāh} \).

Islam teaches that one who is judged as \( \text{kāfir} \) in the sight of God is the one who shows ingratitude to God and commits pernicious sin known as \( \text{kufr} \).

In a sense, the term \( \text{kāfir} \) can be compared to the terms \( \text{Goy} \) or \( \text{Gentile} \) in Jewish tradition, “infidel” in Christianity, and \( \text{manmukh} \) in Sikhism in an effort to make distinction between “a believer” and “a nonbeliever.” However, the term \( \text{kāfir} \) in Islam by no means can be likened to what is meant by \( \text{kaffir} \) (or \( \text{kaffer} \), or \( \text{kāfir} \), or \( \text{kaffre} \)), designating “native,” as pejoratively attributed to “dark-skinned South African tribes” in South Africa [5].
At the heart of the credo of Islam lies “the Oneness of God” – “there is no god, but Allāh,” – the core of Islamic belief, which is firmly established by evidences and reasons, and therefore, there seems no justification to deny or reject it. There is no shortcut way or halfway of following Islam. For Muslims, embracing Islam entails unconditional acceptance of its principles, teachings, as well as Qur’ānic injunctions, prophetic practices, and traditional rituals. For Islam claims that even the Prophets themselves relied on clear proofs, as the Qur’ān holds: “Say: I am (relying) on clear proof from my Lord, while you deny Him. I do not have that which you seek to hasten. The decision is for God only. He tells the truth and He is the Best of Deciders” (Q. VI:57). For example, the effort of Prophet Abraham in search of truth is clearly described in the Qur’ān (VI:76–80). Furthermore, God makes the universe an open book to realize the truth, as He says: “We shall show them Our portents on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth. Doth not thy Lord suffice, since He is Witness over all things?” (XLI:53). From an Islamic perspective, the Messengers and the Prophets of Allāh were sent to remind what was already established truth, not to invent it, and hence, denial of such truth, if offered in a convincing manner, results in kufr.

**Historical Development**

Linguistically, the Arabic word kāfir is derived from the root word kufr, which has several meanings such as conceal, ungrateful, irreligious, denial, or rejection. However, epistemologically, the meaning of the word kufr can be traced back to the Hebrew word kipper which means “cover,” “purge,” or “transfer.” Traditionally, this term has been used in Arabic literature in different senses, for example, to refer to farmers who conceal the seeds in their field for plantation. Labīd (560–661), one of the famous seven poets among the Arabs, used the word kafir in the similar sense as he described the stars in the sky: “[…] at night when the clouds conceal the stars” [1]. However, the word kufr has been used to mean “disbelief” in the following verse of the Qur’ān: “Have they not seen that Allāh Who created the heavens and the earth is Able to create the like of them, and hath appointed for them an end whereof there is no doubt? But the wrong-doers refuse aught save disbelief” (XVII:99). Similarly, it has been used in the meaning of repudiation – “[…] then on the Day of Resurrection ye will deny each other and curse each other,” (XXVIV:25) – as well as it has been used to refer to disbelievers, such as “The curse of Allāh is on disbelievers” (Q. II:89). However, a technical meaning is attributed to this term mentioned in a number of verses of the Qur’ān, alluding to those who rejected Islam (XL:35, LXXXII:34, XXV:77, VIII:12, VI:45, IV:91, V:33, and XXXVII:18).

In the spiritual context of Islamic tradition, the term kāfir means those who deliberately conceal the truth inside their hearts out of ulterior motive. In another terminology, the Qur’ān and Sunnah put emphasis on the characteristics of kufr and its descriptions rather than the persons and their religious affiliation. Therefore, the term kāfir is not considered a derogatory term; rather, this term is cited to refer to a person’s spiritual status in the expression of truth and reality. Since this spiritual status is subject to change anytime under any condition, the term does not apply to everybody, save those identified in the Qur’ān and Sunnah. Arguably, Muslims are not allowed to accuse fellow Muslims of being kāfir at any circumstances, for such a
charge is deemed sedition (*fitnah*). The Kharijites who adopted radical approach on 
*kufr* in Islamic history set them apart from the mainstream Muslim community 
(*ummah*) as they charged fellow Muslims with *kufr* [2, 6].

**Causes of Kufr**

Broadly speaking, the basic factors causing *kufr* include denial or rejection of any 
established beliefs (*'itiqād*), or creeds, or worships (*'ibādah*), or rituals, and so on. 
Desecrating the Qur’ān or its part or defaming the Prophets also leads to *kufr*. For 
instance, one who disavows any of God’s Divine attributes while ascribing partnership 
unto Him and showing ingratitude toward (Q. IV:48, IV:116, V:72, XXXIX:2–3, LI:56) 
and denies the revelations of the Messengers of *Allāh* for every nation (Q. XVI:36), 
while inventing a lie against *Allāh* and rejecting His signs (Q. VI:21, VII:37, XI:18–19, 
XVII:15, XXIX:68, XXXIII:40, XXXIX:32, LXI:8), undoubtedly commits 
unforgiveable sins labeled as *kufr*. Furthermore, indulging in prohibited matters like 
adultery, fornication, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, theft, murder, sorcery, magic, 
disbelief in the resurrection, reward, punishment in the hereafter, and the like also 
leads to *kufr*.

**Consequences of Kufr**

Islam teaches that committing *kufr* by way of involvement in those actions mentioned 
above or fostering intentions whatsoever means going astray from the mainstream 
Islam, and such person in question is condemned as an apostate (*murtad*). All of his or 
her good deeds and merits turn into fruitless efforts. Not only that, an apostate 
including his or her entire family does not deserve to continue to maintain a formal 
bond and group relationship with the majority of people in the society [4]. 
Furthermore, some Islamic scholars hold that the accused should be sentenced to 
death for the sake of justice, unless he or she repents and returns to Islam. However, 
meting out punishment to the *kāfir* has drawn flak from human rights organizations 
and pluralistic ideologies. The Qur’ān clearly states that if anybody is forced to speak 
or act against Islam while he or she is confident in his or her beliefs, he or she is still 
considered as Muslim, as God says: “Whoso disbelieveth in *Allāh* after his belief – save 
him who is forced thereto and whose heart is still content with the Faith – but whoso 
findeth ease in disbelief: On them is wrath from *Allāh*. Theirs will be an awful doom” 
(XVI:106).

**Social Impact of Kufr**

The concept of *kufr* in Islam does not provoke animosity between Muslims and non-
Muslims. Contrarily, it encourages peaceful coexistence and harmonious relationship 
with complete acknowledgment of ideological differences. Some claim that certain 
verses of the Qur’ān legitimize animosity between believers and nonbelievers, between 
Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly aimed at Jewish and Christian communities 
(Q. IV:139, V:57, and LX:13). However, this view can be challenged by contextual 
understanding of those verses in relation to others. For the Qur’ān has many levels of 
meaning [7], and therefore, each verse has to be understood in terms of its context. In
fact, the Qur'ān encourages intimacy with non-Muslims and Jews and Christians, who are not only “People of the Book” but also “Children of Abraham,” belonging to “different branches of the same family” [3], as God says: “Allāh forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allāh loveth those who are just” (LX:8). Moreover, with the aim of uniting the Muslim ummah, the contextual analysis of the Qur'ānic verse (Q. V:51) warns that Muslims should not trust those who showed open animosity toward Islam and Muslims. However, it also strongly advocates for ties and friendliness with Jews and Christians, making all of their good things lawful (Q. V:5). Islam attaches importance to the shared values and sacred history of the Jewish and Christian tribes with whom the Prophet had treaties for the sake of a peaceful world.

Cross-References

- Ibn Taymiyya (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_822)
- Qurʾān Translation in South Asia (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_863)
- Sin (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100310)
- Ummah (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2016)

References


Copyright information

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V., part of Springer Nature 2018

How to cite

Cite this entry as:

About this entry

- First Online 06 July 2018
- DOI https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3
- Publisher Name Springer, Dordrecht
- Print ISBN 978-94-024-1266-6
- eBook Packages Religion and Philosophy
- Buy this book on publisher's site
- Reprints and Permissions

SPRINGER NATURE

© 2018 Springer Nature Switzerland AG. Part of Springer Nature.