

Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism

2018 Edition

| Editors: Zayn R. Kassam, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Jehan Bagli

Kāfir

- Ismath Ramzy (2)
- Golam Dastagir (1) (2) Email author (m.g.dastagir@gmail.com)

1. Department of Philosophy, Jahangirnagar University, , Savar, Bangladesh
2. Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, , Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Reference work entry

First Online: 06 July 2018

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2055

- [2 Downloads](#)

Synonyms

Disbeliever in God (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100304); Infidel (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100305); Nonbeliever (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100306)

Definition

The Arabic term *kāfir* (pl. *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 *Allāh*. Islam teaches that one who is judged as *kāfir* in the sight of God is the one who shows ingratitude to God and commits pernicious sin known as *kufṛ*.

In a sense, the term *kāfir* can be compared to the terms *Goy* or *Gentile* in Jewish tradition, “infidel” in Christianity, and *manmukh* in Sikhism in an effort to make distinction between “a believer” and “a nonbeliever.” However, the term *kāfir* in Islam by no means can be likened to what is meant by *kaffir* (or *kaffer*, or *kāfir*, or *kaffre*), designating “native,” as pejoratively attributed to “dark-skinned South African tribes” in South Africa [5].

Meaning of *Kufṛ*

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 *kufir*.

Historical Development

Linguistically, the Arabic word *kāfir* is derived from the root word *kufir*, which has several meanings such as conceal, ungrateful, irreligious, denial, or rejection. However, epistemologically, the meaning of the word *kufir* 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 *kufir* 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,” (XXIV: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 *kufir* 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 *kufir* in Islamic history set them apart from the mainstream Muslim community (*ummah*) as they charged fellow Muslims with *kufir* [2, 6].

Causes of *Kufir*

Broadly speaking, the basic factors causing *kufir* 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 *kufir*. 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, XVIII:15, XXIX:68, XXXIII:40, XXXIX:32, LXI:8), undoubtedly commits unforgivable sins labeled as *kufir*. 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 *kufir*.

Consequences of *Kufir*

Islam teaches that committing *kufir* 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 (*murtaḍ*). 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 *Kufir*

The concept of *kufir* 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 Taymīyya](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_822) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_822)
- [Qur'ān Translation in South Asia](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_863) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_863)
- [Sin](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100310) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100310)
- [Ummah](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2016) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2016)

References

1. Ahmad Z (1992) *Sharah Muallaqat al-Sabu* (Exegesis to seven great poems). Lajnat Tahqiq fi al-Dar al-Alamiyyah, Beirut
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Sharah%20Muallaqat%20al-Sabu%20%28Exegesis%20to%20seven%20great%20poems%29&author=Z.%20Ahmad&publication_year=1992) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Sharah%20Muallaqat%20al-Sabu%20%28Exegesis%20to%20seven%20great%20poems%29&author=Z.%20Ahmad&publication_year=1992)
2. Bukhari M (1997) *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (trans: Khan MM, The translation of the meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari: Arabic-English). Dar-us-Salam Publications, Riyadh
[Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Bukhari%20M%20%281997%29%20Sahih%20Al-Bukhari%20%28trans%3A%20Khan%20MM%2C%20The%20translation%20of%20the%20meanings%20of%20Sahih%20Al-Bukhari%3A%20Arabic-English%29.%20Dar-us-Salam%20Publications%2C%20Riyadh) (https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Bukhari%20M%20%281997%29%20Sahih%20Al-Bukhari%20%28trans%3A%20Khan%20MM%2C%20The%20translation%20of%20the%20meanings%20of%20Sahih%20Al-Bukhari%3A%20Arabic-English%29.%20Dar-us-Salam%20Publications%2C%20Riyadh)
3. Esposito JL (2010) *Islam: the straight path*. Oxford University Press, New York
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Islam%3A%20the%20straight%20path&author=JL.%20Esposito&publication_year=2010) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Islam%3A%20the%20straight%20path&author=JL.%20Esposito&publication_year=2010)
4. Ibn Taymiyyah (1981) *Majmu 'al-fatawa* (edited: 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Qasim). Fiqh Hanafi Dar-al- Ibn al-Kathir Publication, Damascus

[Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Ibn%20Taymiyyah%20%281981%29%20Majmu%20%E2%80%98al-fatawa%20%28edited%3A%20%E2%80%98Abd%20al-Rahman%20ibn%20Muhammad%20ibn%20Qasim%29.%20Fiqh%20Hanafi%20Dar-al-%20Ibn%20al-Kathir%20Publication%2C%20Damascus) (https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Ibn%20Taymiyyah%20%281981%29%20Majmu%20%E2%80%98al-fatawa%20%28edited%3A%20%E2%80%98Abd%20al-Rahman%20ibn%20Muhammad%20ibn%20Qasim%29.%20Fiqh%20Hanafi%20Dar-al-%20Ibn%20al-Kathir%20Publication%2C%20Damascus)

5. Kidd D (1925) *The essential Kāfir*. MacMillan, New York
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20essential%20K%281925%29&author=D.%20Kidd&publication_year=1925) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20essential%20K%281925%29&author=D.%20Kidd&publication_year=1925)
6. Muslim I (1976) *Sahih Muslim* (trans: Siddiqui AH). KAZI Publications, Chicago
[Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Muslim%20I%20%281976%29%20Sahih%20Muslim%20%28trans%3A%20Siddiqui%20AH%29.%20KAZI%20Publications%2C%20Chicago) (https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Muslim%20I%20%281976%29%20Sahih%20Muslim%20%28trans%3A%20Siddiqui%20AH%29.%20KAZI%20Publications%2C%20Chicago)
7. Nasr SH (2004) *The heart of Islam: enduring values for humanity*. HarperOne, Philadelphia
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20heart%20of%20Islam%3A%20enduring%20values%20for%20humanity&author=SH.%20Nasr&publication_year=2004) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20heart%20of%20Islam%3A%20enduring%20values%20for%20humanity&author=SH.%20Nasr&publication_year=2004)

Copyright information

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

How to cite

Cite this entry as:

Ramzy I., Dastagir G. (2018) *Kāfir*. In: Kassam Z.R., Greenberg Y.K., Bagli J. (eds) *Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism*. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions. Springer, Dordrecht

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
- Online ISBN 978-94-024-1267-3
- 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](#).

Logged in as Ismath Ramzy University of Malaya UM (2000000861) - 6816 SpringerLink Malaysia eJournal Consortium - Higher Education (3000155375) - 8354 Springerlink Malaysia consortium (3000519906) - 10122 SpringerLink Malaysia eJournna Consortium - Higher Education (3000716851) - 13008 SpringerLink Malaysia eJournal Consortium – Higher Education (3001044276) - Ismath Ramzy (3003505080) 103.18.0.20