

The Quran and its Message

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Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

UNDERSTANDING 'KUFR' (DISBELIEF) FROM A QURANIC PERSPECTIVE

Joseph A Islam

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Sadly, the term 'Kafr' (disbelief) or pronouncing 'Takfir' (Declaring disbelief) on another person has become an all too common affair with regards certain Muslims. This pronouncement unfortunately rolls off the tongue of many and with considerable ease without thought or warrant. In the most extreme cases for some it is a case of pronouncing 'Kufr' on **anyone** that does not necessarily support or follow the same set of ideologies as themselves.

SO WHAT IS THE QURAN'S POINT OF VIEW?

The remit of 'religious truths' can be quite wide-ranging and governs anything from the fundamentals such as core belief in **One God** with no partners and the Day of Judgement, to matters concerning doctrinal issues including matters of wider beliefs and practices in the name of religion. Scriptures were delivered and upheld by the great messengers of God to their people with a view to provide such 'religious truths' in the form of guidance.

Once these truths have been firmly manifested to a soul or a people which leaves them with **no reason to deny them** and yet they **still** reject them with a view to conceal the truth, it is then in accordance to the consistent theme of the Quran that one enters the state of 'disbelief' (Kufr - *kafara: to disbelieve*).

This understanding of '*kufr*' as to veil, to hide or to **conceal the truth** is consistent with the renditions found in Arabic lexicons.

(A, Mgh, K,) inf. n. **تَكْفِيرٌ**; (TA;) He veiled, concealed, hid, or covered, the thing: (S, A,* Mgh,* Mṣb, K:*) or he covered the thing so as to destroy it: (Az, TA:) and **كَفَّرَ عَلَيْهِ**, aor. [and inf. n.] as above, he covered it; covered it over. (K.) You say **كَفَّرَ الْبَذْرَ الْمَبْدُورَ** He covered the sown seed with earth. (TA.) And **كَفَّرَ السَّمَاءَ** The clouds covered the sky. (A.)

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [1]

كَفَرَ بِاللَّهِ (S, Mṣb) He disbelieved in God: (S:) because he who does so conceals, or covers, the truth, and the favours of the liberal Dispenser of favours [who is God]. (MF.) [Also, as shown

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

There can be a number of ways this truth can be manifested within God's knowledge alone; however the truth **delivered by a messenger of God** by His decree is considered one of the clearer proofs for the purpose of man's guidance.

006.048-49

“We send the messengers only to **give good news and to warn**: so those who believe and mend (their lives),- upon them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who reject our signs,- them shall punishment touch, for that they ceased not from transgressing”

Even the Prophet's themselves relied on clear proof.

006:057

“**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**”

EXEMPLARY PUNISHMENTS

Historically, exemplary punishments have only come to pass on a people or township, when clear warnings had been imparted by a messenger of God and yet they **still** rejected them by continuing in their vile transgressions, practicing inequity and injustices.

028:059

“Nor was thy Lord the one to destroy a population until He had sent to its centre a messenger, rehearsing to them Our Signs; nor are We going to destroy a population except when its members practise iniquity”

At times there have been numerous messengers sent at once to strengthen the argument such as with the township mentioned in Surah Ya-Sin (36:14)

036:014

“When We (first) sent to them two messengers, they rejected them: But We strengthened them with a third: they said, "Truly, we have been sent on a mission to you."”

GOD IS NOT UNJUST

It has never been the will of God to punish anyone or a people unjustly, especially when people do not know what they are doing is wrong and there is still hope that they may take heed once the truth has been made absolutely clear to them.

006.131

“This is because thy Lord destroys not the townships arbitrarily while their people are unconscious (of the wrong they do)”

011.117

“In truth thy Lord destroyed not the townships tyrannously while their folk were doing right”

Please note that it is not the messenger himself but the overarching '**purpose**' of the messenger (i.e. to deliver the message in truth) which remains key. The denial of clarity that a messenger brings has often led to communities being destroyed by the wrath of God because of their '*kufr*' (disbelief).

One can never know when someone has entered a state of *kufr*. Their faculties, the clarity of truth that has reached them, their circumstances will all be taken into account and given the immense complexities and variables, it can only be for God to pronounce judgement on the state of a soul and **not** for man. For some, belief and disbelief is a continuous cycle and it is only God that can make an appropriate judgement.

004.137

“Those who believe, then reject faith, then believe (again) and (again) reject faith, and go on increasing in unbelief - God will not forgive them nor guide them nor guide them on the way”

There are also those that say they believe and to the world even their outward manifestation (in terms of practice) may support what they claim, **but they actually believe not.**

002.008-10

“And there are some people who say: We believe in God and the last day; and they are not at all believers. **They desire to deceive God and those who believe**, and they deceive only themselves and they do not perceive”

Even the Prophet did not know who these people were:

009:101

“And from among those who are round about you of the dwellers of the desert there are hypocrites, and from among the people of Medina (also); they are stubborn in hypocrisy; **you do not know them**; We know them; We will chastise them twice then shall they be turned back to a grievous chastisement”

Those souls who are questioning the truth but are **not 'closed'** to receiving a better argument are not necessarily disbelievers. It is only those that are 'violent' in their disbelief, finding 'ease' in their transgressions whilst closing all doors of openness and receiving correct guidance, that will arguably be taken to task.

016.106

“Whoso disbelieves in God after his belief - save him who is forced there to and whose heart is still content with the Faith - **but whosoever finds ease in disbelief**: On them is wrath from God. Theirs will be an awful doom”

003.090

“Lo! those who disbelieve after their belief, **and afterward grow violent in disbelief**: their repentance will not be accepted. And such are those who are astray”

EVEN IDOLATERS (MUSHRIKEEN) ARE NOT NECESSARILY KAFFIR

Even Idolaters are not necessarily '**kafir**' **until** the 'truth' has been completely manifested to them. The Quran also separates the term 'Kafir' and 'Mushrikeen' (Idolaters). Yes indeed, a mushrikeen can become 'Kaffir' upon denial once the truth has reached them, but they are not automatically a 'kaffir' by virtue of them being idolaters.

009:006

“And if anyone of the idolaters seeks thy protection (O Muhammad), **then protect him so that he may hear the Word of God**, and afterward convey him to his place of safety. **That is because they are a folk who know not**”

This is a very powerful verse and can singularly underscore the central theme of this article. Potentially a Hindu person who believes in multiple Gods who has **not** received the clarity of arguments (given their faculties and circumstances) for them to change their ways 'may / could be' potentially in a better position in the sight of their Lord than one who **has** received the **message with full clarity**, has understood it and professes belief **but yet** sets up partners along with God or abandons belief.

This Quranic perspective is seldom appreciated.

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF NOT EVERYONE WAS DESTROYED DURING THE PUNISHMENTS OF OLD

- 011:066 Not everyone from Saleh's people (Thamud) were destroyed
- 011:058 Not everyone from Hud's (Aad) people were destroyed
- 010:073 Not everyone from Noah's people were destroyed
- 011:094 Not everyone from Shuaib's people were destroyed
- 026:170 Not everyone from Lot's people were destroyed

It was only the evil folk that were destroyed, the righteous were delivered.

007:165

“So when they neglected what they had been reminded of, **We delivered those who forbade evil and We overtook those who were unjust with an evil chastisement because they transgressed**”

010.103

“**In the end We deliver Our messengers and those who believe: Thus is it fitting on Our part that We should deliver those who believe!**”

WHERE IS FREE WILL IF GOD SEALS THE HEARTS OF CERTAIN PEOPLE?

This is a sound question for which the Quran itself provides the answer. It is not for God to punish any soul unjustly.

SO WHY DOES GOD SEAL THE HEARTS?

After an analysis of all the relevant verses, it becomes clear that despite clear proofs, there are those that continue to reject the truth and continue in the error of their ways. It is only **then** that God seals their hearts (i.e. when truth is completely manifested to them).

007:101

“These towns - We relate to you some of their stories, and certainly their messengers came to them with clear arguments, but they would not believe **in what they rejected at first**; thus does God set a seal over the hearts of the unbelievers”

010.074

“Then after him We sent (many) messengers to their peoples: they brought them Clear Signs, but they would not believe what they **had already rejected beforehand**. Thus do We seal the hearts of the transgressors”

063.003

“That is because they believed, **then they rejected faith: So a seal was set on their hearts: therefore they understand not**”

006.110-11

“And We will turn their hearts and their sights, **even as they did not believe in it the first time, and We will leave them in their inordinacy, blindly wandering on. And even if We had sent down to them the angels and the dead had spoken to them and We had brought together all things before them, they would not believe unless God pleases, but most of them are ignorant**”

So therefore, a '*seal*' or '*covering*' is imposed as a consequence of a transgressor's **unwillingness to acknowledge** the truth and to remain blind to it because of their own volition. This is in perfect resonance with cause and effect which God has imposed on his creation.

Once again:

002:007

"God has sealed their heart, ears and their hearing and over their eyes is a veil and an awesome suffering awaits"

Why? The previous verse which contextualises this verse explains it perfectly.

"Behold as for those that **are bent on denying the truth** - It is all one to them whether you warn them or warn them not, they will not believe" (2:6)

The Quran talks about this in many verses - As people that due to their own volition, having hearts with which they fail to grasp the truth, eyes with which they fail to see and ears with which they fail to listen.

A CASE IN POINT - IBLIS (SATAN)

A powerful example is seen in the case of Iblis (Satan). The 'Malaika' (angels) enquired as to why God was to create a vicegerent (Khalifa) on the Earth that would create mischief and cause much bloodshed (2:30). God explained this through a process of making the truth absolutely clear to them. He presented evidence of His wisdom by using Adam (pbuh) as an example and the knowledge that He taught him (2:31 and 2:33). The 'Malaika' (angels) accepted the argument and proclaimed God's perfection in knowledge and wisdom (2:32)

After this, the order to prostrate was given which the 'Malaika' (angels) accepted (2:34)

It was only **after** the truth was first manifested by God and after which the 'Malaika' had no reason to deny it, they accepted that only God knew best and prostrated upon order. It is interesting to note that God did not instruct the 'Malaika' to prostrate without **first** making the truth absolutely clear to them as to what He was about to do and to demonstrate the reason why. This is a very crucial point often overlooked.

However, Iblis (Satan) refused (2:34) to submit. It is here God then informs that Iblis (Satan) entered a state of 'Kufr' (disbelief). Satan's disbelief was not simply because he did not take up the order to prostrate (which in itself is unforgiveable given the circumstances), it was accentuated by the fact that he refused out of pride to acknowledge the truth even though the truth had been clearly manifested to him.

Forced acceptance is against the purpose of free will and with the teachings of the Quran. This is especially true with regards creation that has been granted 'volition' or 'choice'. Here, Iblis was no different.

002.034

"And when We said unto the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. He demurred through pride, and so became a disbeliever (**Arabic: Kafir**)"

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

Kafireen

Illustration - Joseph Islam

Therefore, *kufr* is simply not a case in disbelief in God. After all, Satan believed in God. He even sought leave from God to lead man astray (7.14) and still on the Day of Judgement maintains that he fears God 8.48, 59.16

008:048 (Part)

"Surely I am clear of you, surely I see what you do not see, **surely I fear God**; and God is severe in requiting (evil)"

059:016

"Like the example of Satan when he says to man: "Disbelieve", but when he disbelieves, he says: "I am surely clear of you; **surely I fear God, the Lord of the worlds**""

Rather, *kufr* is a state reached when one rejects truth that has been manifested clearly to them.

It is incorrect from a Quran's perspective to align any disbelief in God as automatic 'Kufr' until clear proofs have been manifested to one. Iblis clearly acknowledged his Lord, he feared his Lord, yet once he denied the truth after its clear manifestation and rejected God's order out of pride, he became a *kaffir*.

Indeed it makes no sense to understand Kaffir as simply anyone that does not believe in God until clear proofs have reached them, as this would contradict the above verses 8.48 and 59.16 where Iblis clearly maintains belief in God yet is described as 'Kaffir'.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we have noted from a Quran's perspective a '*Kaffir*' is simply not anyone who is an idolater, a Non-Muslim or even one that does not believe. There is no such thing as an automatic 'Kaffir' based on their current beliefs. '*Kufr*' as evidenced from the Quran is a 'state' that one 'enters' into once the truth has been clearly manifested to them, made absolutely clear and there is no reason left to deny it (given the recipient's circumstances, faculties etc.). However, despite the clear evidence and proof, the recipient still rejects the truth and or conceals it from within themselves. It is then that the state of '*Kufr*' is entered into.

Sadly the Quran's message is left abandoned and many rely on 'common conjecture' and 'established doctrines' to pass judgement, even when it comes to the serious matter of pronouncing 'Kufr' on other people.

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REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 7, Page 2620*

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] *Ibid.*

[Joseph Islam](#)

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