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THE CONCEPT OF KUFR IN EARLY ISLAM

by

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DEDICATION

THIS THESIS IS DEDICATED
TO MY BELOVED PARENTS AND
ALL THE SERVANTS OF GOD.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, MOST GRACIOUS,

MOST MERCIFUL.

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SYNOPSIS

The widespread practice of takfir, accusing an opponent of being kāfir (disbeliever), among some Muslim movements today makes it necessary to consider the meaning of kufir in early Islam. In the Qur'an the concepts of kufir, nifāq (hypocrisy), and irtidād (apostacy) are related. They are therefore discussed in some detail. It is concluded that the judgement of whether an individual is kāfir is God's, not man's. A study of the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad shows that he was always very reluctant to apply the term kufir to individuals. When he did, he was very lenient in their treatment. Kufir continues to be a sensitive subject among late theologians in their consideration of aqīda (creed), and the relationship between faith and action.

From the time of the first civil war (the Battles of the Camel and Siffin), however, the concept of kufir is used for political purposes. Especially branches of the Kharijites are inclined to condemn all opponents as kāfir, making it legitimate to seek them out and kill them. For most Shi'ites, disbelief in the Imamate amounts to kufir. The more radical trends, like the Kaysaniyyah, accepted the consequence that they could be killed. But most, particularly the Imamiyyah (Twelvers), took the view that while believers should mix with disbelievers, their punishment was to be left to God.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of writing this thesis is to study and analyse the concept of kufr, which has been at the centre of controversy since 37 A.H./657 C.E. This especially has been the case when religio-political movements through history and today have practical takfir, i.e., the denunciation of an opponent as being kāfir.

In my view the concept of kufr relates to theological doctrine. So only theologians can speak about it with authority. But over the centuries the concept has been adopted and discussed by some Muslims with insufficient knowledge of Qur'ān and Hadith. As a consequence, they have misused the concept and related it to political issues. Finding support in particular verses and Hadith they accuse other Muslims who do not belong to their groups of being disbelievers, kāfir pl. kuffār. In this way they separate themselves from the community and thus create the danger of splitting the Muslims, as happened in 37 A.H./657 C.E. and on later occasions.

This thesis will therefore attempt to analyse the concept of disbelief in the Qur'ān, concentrating particularly on the terms related to hypocrisy (nifāq), apostasy (irtidād) and, above all, kufr itself. We shall then record how the Prophet Muhammad dealt with it, as it is recounted in the Hadith. In the main theological and political trend, after the death of Muhammad, the concept of kufr in relation to belief (īmān) is a major part of the process of defining the creed (ʿaqīda). However, an important part of the creed in some movements after the events of

Siffin in 37 A.H./657 C.E. is the question of political organization. The last section of the thesis therefore looks particularly at the use of kufr by Kharijite and Shi'ite tendencies to define their opponents.

Translations from the Qur'^{ān} are based on those of Marmeduke Pickthall and A. Yusuf Ali. Transliteration from Arabic is essentially that of the Encyclopaedia of Islam with the variations common in British practice.

CHAPTER ITHE CONCEPT OF KUFR IN THE

QUR'ĀN AND HADITH

In the Qur'an there is no specific word for the concept of kufr. However, this concept could be understood through analyzing the words which are often used in the Qur'ān to judge someone a disbeliever. In the Qur'ān the words which are derived from the root KFR, nifaq (hypocrite) and riddah (apostasy) are understood to have related to the concept of takfir. Therefore, they will be studied in detail in this chapter in order to understand the concept of takfir clearly.

a. KAFARA

Kafara, kaffara, kaffār and kafūr are the words which are derived from the root KFR. Kafara is a verbal form 1. In the Qur'ān, in the form of the perfect active it appears 228 times. In the form of the imperfect active yakfuru, it is used 56 times. In the form of the imperative ukfur, it is mentioned twice. In the form of the perfect passive kufira, it is used once. In the form of the infinitive noun kufr, it appears 37 times.

The basic meaning of the word kafara is 'to cover, to deny the grace or the existence of God, to disbelieve (with bi)'. (1) According to Arthur Jeffery, in The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran, (2) "kafara is used very frequently to deny the grace or existence of God, then to be

an unbeliever". Richard Bell in Introduction to the Quran says, "the word kafara means to be ungrateful, to disbelieve, and its converse shakara (thankfulness), to be grateful. (3) There are two opinions concerned with the words kafara given by Edward William Lane in his Arabic-English Lexicon. (4) The first opinion says, "kafara in the infinitive noun kufran, kufur and kufr means he covered or concealed, and denied the favour or benefit (conferred upon him), he was ungrateful, opposite of shakara (thankfulness)". The second opinion says, "the infinitive noun of kufr means disbelieved, he became an unbeliever, or infidel the opposite of amana (infinitive noun, iman), for example, kafara billah, 'he disbelieved in God', because he who does so conceals, or covers the truth and the favours of the Liberal Dispenser of favours".

Kafir is the active participle of the word kafara. It is used 158 times in the Qur'an. Kafir is one who denies the favours or benefits of God or who denies and refuses to acknowledge the unity of God, the prophetic office of His prophets and His law. According to the common conventional acceptance, kafir is an unbeliever, an infidel, the opposite of mu'min (believer). (5)

Kafur is an intensive epithet, it appears in the Qur'an 13 times. Kafur means very ungrateful, or unthankful, especially to God. (6) Toshihiko Izutsu in Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Quran says "according to al-Baydawī, kafur is an exceeding degree of kufr and denoted the type of man who is forgetful of all benefits he has enjoyed, although he retains in memory the slightest hurt he has received". (7)

Kaffar is an adjective and it is used in the Qur'an 5 times.

It has a more intensive significance than kafūr. Kaffār means habitually ungrateful. (8)

Kaffara is a verbal form 2. In the Qur'ān, in the form of the perfect active, it appears twice. In the form of the imperfect active yukaffiru, it is used 11 times. In the form of the imperative it is mentioned once (kaffir). According to Hanna E. Kassis in A Concordance of the Quran, (9) "kaffara means to acquit, remit, atone, blot out, remove, to absolve".

As a result of analyzing these words, it is clear that, the words which are derived from the root KFR may be understood in two aspects. First, the word kafara, kaffār and kafūr are related to the attitude of man towards God, as stated in the Qur'ān. In chapter 17 (al-Isrā'): 66-67 Allah says:

رَبِّكُمْ الَّذِي يُرِيكُمْ لَكُمْ الْفَلَكَ فِي الْبَحْرِ لِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ،
 أَنَّهُ كَانَ بِكُمْ مُرْهِمًا ، وَإِذَا مَسَّكُمُ الضَّرُّ فِي الْبَحْرِ ضَلَّ مِنْ تَدْعُوكُمْ
 إِلَّا آيَاهُ فَلَمَّا نَجَّكُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ أَعْرَضْتُمْ وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَانُ كَفُورًا .

'Your Lord is He that maketh the ship go smoothly for you through the sea, in order that ye may seek of His bounty, for He is unto you most merciful. When distress seizes you at sea, those that ye call upon besides Himself, leave you in the lurch, but when He brings you back safe to land, ye turn away (from Him) most ungrateful (kafura).'

In chapter 3 (al-^cImrān):4 it is stated:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ

'Then those who reject faith (kafarū) in the sign of Allah will suffer the severest penalty'.

Second, the word kaffara, on the other hand, is related to an attitude which is absolutely possible for God to adopt towards man, as stated in chapter 3 (al-^cImrān):193

ربنا اننا سمعنا مناديا ينادى للايمان ان آمنوا
بربكم فآمننا . ربنا فاغفر لنا ذنوبنا وكفر عنا
سيئاتنا وتوفنا مع الابرار .

'Our Lord, we have heard the call of one calling (us) to faith, "believe ye in the Lord", and we have believed, Our Lord, forgive us Our sins, blot out (kaffir) from us our iniquities, and take to thyself our souls in the company of the righteous'.

In chapter 47 (Muhammad):2 Allah says:

والذين آمنوا وعملوا الصالحات وآمنوا بما نزل على
محمد وهو الحق من ربهم كفر عنهم سيئاتهم
وأصلح بهم .

'But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and believe in the (revelation) sent down to Muhammad for it is the truth from their Lord, He will remove (kaffar) from them their ills and improve their condition'.

According to the passage above, it shows that the religious duty of man is to be grateful to God for His acts of grace, so God, on His part, is bound by virtue of His own goodness to be thankful to man for all of the good works that he does as a pious believer in response to

the divine call through His Apostle, and God will never ignore the good services rendered by a sincere believer, but He acknowledges them gratefully and records them for him. (10)

Regarding the explanation of the words which are derived from the root KFR, the word kafara is always linked with the concept of takfir. In the form of the infinitive noun kufr and kufra it has two different meanings. Kufr is understood as the opposite of imān (belief) and kufra, on the other hand, being in the majority of cases the opposite of shukr (gratitude) means usually ingratitude for a favour (ni^cmah). (11) Concerning this matter, kufr is the term which has been recognized by the Qur'an. In this case, Toshihiko Izutsu in Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Quran, says "the role played by the concept of kufr is so peculiarly influential that it makes its presence well nigh everywhere in sentences about human conduct or character". (12)

Concerning the explanation above, the word kafara could be divided into two aspects. They are, the major disbelief (al-kufr al-akbar) and the minor disbelief (al-kufr al-asghar). It is also termed al-kufr an-ni^cmah. According to Ibn Ahmad al-Hukmī, in A^clām al-Sunnah al-Mansūrah, (13) "major disbelief is completely excluded from the faith, it is kufr which rejects the Article of Faith absolutely both inwardly and outwardly. The minor, on the other hand, denies the perfection of imān (faith) but does not reject it absolutely, it is kufr^c amali (acting disbelief) which is not in contrast with the utterance of the heart, its performance and adherence".

In the Qur'an there are many passages which show clearly that the

major disbelief is related to the rejection of the Articles of Faith,
for example, chapter 2 (al-Baqarah):89

و لما جاءهم كتاب من عند الله مصدق لما هم فيهم
و كانوا من قبل يستفتحون على الذين كفروا
ف لما جاءهم ما عزموا كفروا به ، نلعنة الله
على الكافرين .

'And when there comes to them a Book from Allah, confirming what is with them, although from of old they had prayed for victory against those without faith, when there comes to them that which they (should) have recognized, they refuse to believe (kafaru) in it, but the curse of Allah is on those without faith'.

Many passages of the Qur'an show that the minor disbelief is related to ingratitude towards God, for example, in chapter 16 (al-Nahl):

112

و ضرب الله مثلا قرية كانت آمنة مطمئنة يأتيها رزقها رغدا من كل مكان فكفرت بانعم الله فاذاقها الله لباس الجوع والخوف بما كانوا يصنعون .

'God sets forth a parable, a city enjoying security and sustenance from every place yet was it ungrateful (kafara) for the favours of God, so God made taste of hunger and terror (in extremes closing in on it) like a garment (from every side), because of the (evil) which (its people) wrought'.

There are many Hadith showing clearly this category of kufr.

For example, in Hadith narrated by Ibn ^cAbbas: (14)

قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم اريت النار فاذا اكثر اصلها النساء يكفرن قيل ايلفرن بالله ، قال يكفرن الحسير ويكفرن الالهيات .

'The Prophet (may God bless and give him peace) said, "I was shown the Fire (Hell), and verily, most of its inhabitants were women who had been characterized by kufr (yakfurna)". It was asked, "Does that mean that they used to disbelieve in God". He said, "They used to be ungrateful towards their husbands (yakfurna al-^cashīr) and used to be ungrateful for acts of kindness (yakfurna al-Ihsan)'.

This Hadith shows that kufr al-^cashīr and kufr al-Ihsān are not related to the kufr bi-Allah (major disbelief).

(15)

Another Hadith narrated by Abu Dhar:

قال أتيت النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم ثوباً أبيض وهو نائم ثم أتيتته وقد استيقظ فقال ما أنت عبد قال لا اله إلا الله ثم مات على ذلك إلا دخل الجنة ، قلت وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قال وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قلت وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قال وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قلت وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قال وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قلت وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قال وإن زنى وإن سرق ، قلت على رءوسهم أظني ذر

'Abu Dhar said, "I came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) while he was wearing white clothes and sleeping. Then I went to him when he had awoken". He said, "Nobody says, None has the right to be worshipped but Allah, and then died believing that, but he will enter Paradise". I said, "Even if he had committed illegal sexual intercourse and theft", He said, "Even if he had committed illegal sexual intercourse and theft", I said, "Even if he had committed illegal sexual intercourse and theft", He said, "Even he had committed illegal sexual intercourse and theft", I said, "Even he had committed illegal sexual intercourse and theft", He said, "Even he had committed sexual intercourse and theft inspite of Abu Dhar's dislike".

This Hadith shows that the great sin is not included in the category of the major disbelief.

As a result of analyzing some of the passages in the Qur'an and Hadith, it is clear that the basic meaning of kufr is disbelief in any of the Articles of Faith in Islam. They are to believe in Allah, His Angels, His Apostle, His Revealed Books, The Day of Resurrection, and Fate. The major disbelief is related to this meaning. In the Qur'an and Hadith, there are some characteristics mentioned which are related to the major disbelief.

Shouting lies (takdhib) about God and truth is included in the category of kufr. In chapter 39 (Az-Zumar):32 Allah says:

فمن اظلم ممن كذب على الله وكذب بالصدق
 اياه اليس في جهنم مثوى للكافرين

'And who doth greater wrong than he who telleth a lie against Allah, and denieth the truth when it reacheth him? Will not the home of disbelievers be in hell?'

Another passage shows that takdhib of the Day of Judgement is stressed as the characteristic mark of all the wicked (fajir). It is stated in chapter 83 (al-Mutaffifin):7-12:

كلا إن كتاب الفجار لفي سجين
 ما سجين . كتاب مرقوم . ويل يومئذ
 للمكذبين الذين يكذبون بيوم الدين .
 وما يكذب به إلا كل محدث أثم .

'Nay, verily, the record of the wicked (fujjār) is indeed (set down) in an inescapable mode. And what could make thee conceive what that inescapable mode will be? A record (indelibly) inscribed. Woe on that Day unto those who give the lie to the truth. Those who give the lie (yukadhdhibun) to the Judgment Day, for, none gives the lie to it such as are wont to transgress against all that is right (and are) immersed in sin'.

The word fujūr (nominal form of fajara) is formally contrasted with taqwa, 'the fear of God', but its meaning has much to do with the aspect of kufr which is directly opposed to the fear of God. (16) In fact, the word fājir appears sometimes alongside of kāfir, for example, in chapter 71 (Nūh): 26-27.

وقال نوح رب لا تذر على الأرض من
الكافرين ذرياً إنك إن تذرهم
يضلون عبادك ولا يلدوا إلا
فاجراً كفاراً

'And Noah prayed: O my Sustainer, leave not on earth any of those who deny the truth (al-kāfirīn), for behold, If Thou dost leave them, they will (always try to) lead astray those who worship Thee, and will give birth to nothing but wickedness (fājir) and stubborn ingratitude (kaffar)'.

There is another passage in the Qur'an showing the relationship between fājir and kufr. It is stated in chapter 80 (^cAbasa):40-42

وراه يومئذ عليماً غيبراً
وترصفاً فستراً
اولئك هم الكفرة الفجرة

'And some faces will on that Day be covered with dust, darkness will be overspread there, there will be the ones who denied the truth (kafarah) and were immersed in iniquity (fajarah)'.

Crying lies to God's signs is called zulm. In this case, zulm is one of the most characteristic aspects of kufr. In the Qur'an, chapter 62 (al-Jumu^cah):5 Allah says:

مثل الذين حملوا التوراة ثم لم يحملوها كمثل
الحمال يحمل أسفار بئس مثل القوم الذين
كذبوا بآيات الله، والله لا يهدي القوم الظالمين

'The parable of those who were graced with the burden of the Torah, and thereafter failed to bear this burden, is that of an ass that carries a load of books (but cannot benefit from them). Calamitous is the parable of people who are bent on giving the lie (kadhhabu) to God's messages, for God does not bestow His guidance upon such evil doing folk (zalimīn)'.

Sometimes the term takdhīb and iftirā', forging a lie against God appear side by side in the same verse and are labelled altogether as zulm. For example, in chapter 6 (al-An^cam):21:

ومن أظلم ممن افترى على الله كذبا
أو كذب بآياته، إنه لا يفلح الظالمون

'And who could be more wicked than he who attributes his own lying inventions (iftarā) to God or gives the lie (kadhīb) to His message? Verily, such evildoers will never attain to a happy state'.

According to this passage, those who invented untruth about God

were called the liars and wrong-doers. This passage is related to the polytheist who said the idols were God, and to the Christian who said God has a son. (17)

The words kadhhaba and zulum not only relate to inventing lies to God's signs but are also linked with the prophethood. For example, in chapter 6 (al-An^cām):93 Allah says:

رَضِيَ أَطْلَمَ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ قَالَ
 أَوْحَى إِلَيَّ وَلَمْ يُوْحَ إِلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ وَرَضِيَ قَالَ
 سَأَنْزِلَ مِثْلَ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَوْ تَرَى إِذِ
 الظَّالِمُونَ فِي غَمْرَاتِ الْمَوْتِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ
 بَاسِطُوا أَيْدِيهِمْ أَلْفُتُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ الْيَوْمَ
 تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ الْهُونِ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى
 اللَّهِ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ وَكُنْتُمْ عَنْ آيَاتِهِ تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ

'And who could be more wicked (azlam) than he who invents a lie (kadhhaba) about God, or says, "This has been revealed unto me", the while nothing has been revealed to him? or he who says, "I too, can bestow from on high the like of what God has bestowed". If you could but see (how it will be) when these evildoers find themselves in the agonies of death, and the angels stretch forth their hands (and call): Give up your soul. Today you shall be requited with suffering of humiliation for having attributed to God something that is not true, and for having persistently scorned His messages in your arrogance'.

There are some passages in the Qur'^{ān}, which relate to the people of the Book who lie to the truth of God especially regarding the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad. In order to influence the people refusing the prophethood of Muhammad and his message, Jews and Christians claimed that the prophets were only from themselves. (18) Consequently, they

were called unbelievers and wrong-doers because they turned the people away from the path of God and Islam. It is stated in chapter 4 (An-Nisā'):167-168

إن الذين كفروا وصدوا عن سبيل
الله قد ضلوا ضللاً بعيداً. إن الذين
كفروا وظالموا لم يكن الله ليخفر لهم
وليهديهم طريقاً.

'Behold, those who are bent on denying the truth and on turning others away from the path of God have indeed gone far astray'.

According to Qatadah, the people of the Book knew the prophethood of Muhammad and of Islam as the religion of God, because these have been mentioned in their books (Injil and Taurat). (19) Therefore, they were called the liars and the people who prevented the people from the path of God, as stated in chapter 3 (al-Imrān):99

قل يا أهل الكتاب لم تصدوني عن
سبيل الله من آية تبخونها عوجاً
وانتم شهداء وما الله بغافل عما
تعملون.

'Say O followers of earlier revelation, why do you (endeavour to) bar those who have come to believe (in this divine writ) from the path of God by trying to make it appear crooked, when you yourselves bear witness (to its being straight) for, God is not unaware of what you do'.

The characteristics of arrogance, jealousy and haughtiness are also related to the major disbelief. It is mentioned in chapter 2

(al-Baqarah):34

وَاذْمَلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا
إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ
الْكَافِرِينَ .

'And when We told the angels, "Prostrate yourselves before Adam", they all prostrate themselves, save Iblis, who refused and glorified in his arrogance, and thus he became one of those who deny the truth'.

In this passage Allah described Iblis in such a way as to make him a metaphor for arrogance, jealousy and haughtiness. Iblis refused to submit to what God commanded. As a result of his refusal, he became one of the disbelievers. According to some interpretations, this passage is also a rebuke to the people who have a similar attitude and character to Iblis such as being too arrogant to follow the command of Allah, to acquiesce in obedience of His law and regulation. Among them were the Jews who inhabited Medina to which the Prophet Muhammad migrated. There people of the Book arrogantly refused to affirm the prophethood of Muhammad and to submit in obedience to him, revolting against him and envying him although they knew about him in their book. (20)

The other similarity between Satan and Jews is that they possess the same characteristic, namely denying God's blessings and favours towards them. For example, the Jews denied the blessings which God had bestowed upon them and their forefathers during the time God was feeding their ancestors with manna (food like honey) and salwa (quails) and shading them with clouds, and innumerable other blessings. (21)

Meanwhile, Satan denied God's blessings and favours towards him by

opposing Him and His command to him to prostrate before Adam. (22)

Another characteristic which is included in the major disbelief is doubting or lacking conviction in the six Articles of Faith. It is shown clearly in chapter 50 (Qāf):2

بل عجبوا ان جاءهم مندر منهم فقال
الكانرون هذا شئ عجب

'But nay, they deem it strange that a warner should have come unto them from their own midst, and so these deniers of the truth are saying, "A strange thing is this"',

This passage is related to the unbelieving Meccans who endeavour to refute and revile the Prophet. (23)

There is another passage in the Qur'ān which calls the person who doubts God's revelation and His Apostle a prodigal doubter (musrif murtāb). It is stated in chapter 40 (al-Mu'min):34

ولقد جاءكم يوسف من قبل بالبينات
فمازلتم في شك مما جاءكم به، حتى
اذا املك قلتم لن يعف الله
من بعده رسولا، كذلك يضل الله
من هو مسرف مرتاب

'And verily Joseph brought you of old clear proofs, yet ye ceased not to be in doubt concerning what he brought you until, when he died, he said, "Allah will not send any messenger after him. Thus Allah deceiveth him who is prodigal doubter (musrif murtāb)'.