

Surah Al Kafirun (The Disbelievers)

Name

The Surah takes its name from the word *al-kafirun* occurring in the first verse.

Period of Revelation

Hadrat Abdullah bin Mas'ud, Hadrat Hasan Basri and Ikrimah, say that this Surah, is Makki, while Hadrat Abdullah bin Zubair says that it is Madani. Two different views have been reported from Hadrat Abdullah bin Abbas and Qatadah, first that it is Makki, and second that it is Madani. However, according to the majority of commentators, it is a Makki Surah, and the subject matter itself points to its being a Makki revelation.

Historical Background

There was a time in Makkah when although a storm of opposition had arisen in the pagan society of Quraish against the message of Islam preached by the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace), yet the Quraish chiefs had not yet lost hope that they would reach some sort of a compromise with him. Therefore, from time to time they would visit him with different proposals of compromise so that he accepted one of them and the dispute between them was brought to an end. In this connection, different traditions have been related in the *Hadith*.

According to Hadrat Abdullah bin Abbas, the Quraish proposed to the Holy Prophet; "We shall give you so much of wealth that you will become the richest man of Makkah. We shall give you whichever woman you like in marriage. We are prepared to follow and obey you as our leader, only on the condition that you will not speak ill of our gods. If you do not agree to this, we present another proposal which is to your as well as to our advantage."

When the Holy Prophet asked what it was, they said that if he would worship their gods, Lat and Uzza, for a year, they would worship his God for the same space of time. The Holy Prophet said: "Wait awhile; let me see what my Lord commands in this regard."

Thereupon the revelation came down: *Qul ya-ayyuhal- kafirun...* and: *Qul afa-ghair Allahi...* (Az-Zumar: 64): "Say to them: ignorant people, do you bid me to worship others than Allah?" (Ibn Jarir, Ibn Abi Hatim, Tabarani). According to another tradition from Ibn Abbas, the Quraish said to the Holy Prophet: "O Muhammad, if you kiss our gods, the idols, we shall worship your God. Thereupon, this Surah was sent down. (Abd bin Humaid).

Said bin Mina (the freed slave of Abul Bakhtari) has related that Walid bin Mughirah, As bin Wail, Aswad bin al-Muttalib and Umayyah bin Khalaf met the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) and said to him: "O Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings), let us agree that we would worship your God and you would worship our gods, and we would make you a partner in all our works. If what you have brought was better than what we possess, we would be partners in it with you, and have our share in it, and if what we possess is better than what you have brought, you would be partner in it with us and have your share of it." At this Allah sent down: *Qul ya-ayyuhal-kafirun* (Ibn Jarir, Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn Hisham also has related this incident in the *Sirah*).

Wahb bin Munabbih has related that the people of Quraish said to Allah's Messenger: "If you like we would enter your faith for a year and you would enter our faith for a year." (Abd bin Humaid, Ibn Abi Hatim).

These traditions show that the Quraish had proposed such things to the Holy Prophet not once, in one sitting, but at different times and on different occasions; and there was need that they should be given a definite, decisive reply so that their hope that he would come to terms with them on the principle of "give and take" was frustrated for ever.

Theme and Subject Matter

If the Surah is read with this background in mind, one finds that it was not revealed to preach religious tolerance as some people of today seem to think, but it was revealed in order to exonerate the Muslims from the disbelievers religion, their rites of worship, and their gods, and to express their total disgust and unconcern with them and to tell them that Islam and kufr (unbelief) had nothing in common and there was no possibility of their being combined and mixed into one entity. Although it was addressed in the beginning to the disbelieving Quraish in response to their proposals of compromise, yet it is not confined to them only, but having made it a part of the Quran, Allah gave the Muslims the eternal teaching that they should exonerate themselves by word and deed from the creed of kufr wherever and in whatever form it be, and should declare without any reservation that they cannot make any compromise with the disbelievers in the matter of Faith. That is why this Surah continued to be recited when the people to whom it was addressed as a rejoinder, had died and been forgotten, and those Muslims also continued to recite it who were disbelievers at the time it was revealed, and the Muslims still recite it centuries after they have passed away, for expression of disgust with and dissociation from *kufr* and its rites is a perpetual demand of Faith.

As for the esteem in which the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) held this Surah, it can be judged from the following few *ahadith*:

Hadrat Abdullah bin Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) has related that on many an occasion he heard the Holy Prophet recite Surahs *Qul Ya- ayyuhal-kafirun* and *Qul Huwu-Allahu ahad* in the two rakahs before the Fajr obligatory Prayer and in the two rakahs after the Maghrib obligatory Prayer. Several traditions on this subject with a little variation in wording have been related by Imam Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Nasai, Ibn Majah, Ibn Hibban, Ibn Marduyah from Ibn Umar.

Hadrat Khabbab says: "The Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) said to me: when you lie down in bed to sleep, recite *Qul ya-ayyuhal kafirun*, and this was the Holy Prophet's own practice also; when he lay down to sleep, he recited this Surah." (Bazzar, Tabarani, Ibn Marduyah).

According to Ibn Abbas, the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) said to the people: "Should I tell you the word which will protect you from polytheism? It is that you should recite *Qul ya-ayyuhal kafirun* when you go to bed." (Abu Ya'la, Tabarani).

Hadrat Anas says that the Holy Prophet said to Hadrat Mu'adh bin Jabal; "Recite *Qul ya-ayyuhal-kafirun* at the time you go to bed, for this is immunity from polytheism." (Baihaqi in *Ash-Shu'ab*).

Both Fardah bin Naufal and Abdur Rahman bin Naufal have stated that their father, Naufal bin Muawiyah al-Ashjai, said to the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace): "Teach me something which I may recite at the time I go to bed." The Holy Prophet replied: "Recite *Qul ya-ayyuhal kafirun* to the end and then sleep, for this is immunity from polytheism." (Musnad Ahmad, Aba Da'ud, Tirmidhi, Nasai, Ibn Abi Shaibah, Hakim, Ibn Marduyah, Baihaqi in *Ash-Shuab*). A similar request was made by Hadrat Jabalah bin Harithah, brother of Hadrat Said bin Harithah, to the Holy Prophet and to him also he gave the same reply. (Musnad Ahmad, Tabarani).

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

قُلْ يَتَأْتِيهَا الْكُفْرُونَ ﴿١﴾

لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢﴾

وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ ﴿٣﴾

وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ ﴿٤﴾

وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ ﴿٥﴾

لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ ﴿٦﴾

[1-6] Say: "O disbelievers!¹ I do not worship those whom you worship.² Nor are you worshipers of Him Whom I worship.³ Nor am I a worshiper of those whom you have worshiped. Nor are you worshipers of Him Whom I worship.⁴ For you is your religion and for me is mine."⁵

1A few points in this verse are particularly noteworthy:

(1)Although the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) has been commanded to tell this to the disbelievers plainly, the theme that follows makes it explicit that every believer should tell the disbelievers plainly what has been said in the following verses; so much so that the person who has just believed and repented of kufr is also bound to express similarly his disgust with and disapproval of the creed and rites of worship and gods of kufr. Thus, though the first addressee of the word qul (say) is the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) himself, the command is not restricted to him alone but it reaches every believer through him.

- (2) The word "kafir" is no abuse, which might have been used for the addressees of this verse, but it implies the one who refuses to believe, or is an unbeliever. As against it the word "mu min" is used for the believer. Therefore, the Holy Prophet's saying, by Allah's command, "O disbelievers, ...", in fact, means: "O you, who have refused to believe in my apostleship and in the teachings brought by me." Likewise, when a believer uses this word, it will imply those who do not believe in the Holy Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings),
- (3) The word used is "O kafirs" and not "O mushriks"; therefore, the addressees are not only the mushriks but all those people who do not acknowledge Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings) as Allah's Messenger and the teachings and guidance brought by him as the teaching and guidance given by Allah Himself, whether they be Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians or the disbelievers, polytheists and pagans of the entire world. There is no reason why this address be restricted to the pagans of Quraish or of Arabia only.
- (4) To address the deniers with the word "O kafirs" is just like addressing certain people as "O enemies", or "O opponents". Such an address is not, in fact, directed to the person of the addressee but it is made on the basis of their characteristic of enmity and opposition, and lasts only until they are so characterized. If one of them gives up enmity and opposition, or turns a friend and supporter, he no longer remains the addressee of this word. Likewise, the address of "O kafirs" to the people also is in view of their characteristic of kufr and not their person. This address would be perpetual for him who continues to be a kafir till death, but the one who believes will no longer be its addressee.
- (5) Many scholars from among the commentators have expressed the opinion that in this Surah the address of "O disbelievers" applied only to a few persons of Quraish, who were visiting the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace) with proposals of compromise regarding religion and about whom Allah had informed His Messenger that they would not believe. They have formed this opinion for two reasons. First, that it is followed by *La a`budu ma to`budun*: "I do not worship him or those whom you worship". They say that this does not apply to the Jews and Christians, for they worship Allah. Second, that this is also followed by: *wa la antum `abiduna ma a`bud* "Nor are you worshipers of Him Whom I worship". Their reasoning is that this statement does not apply to the people who at the revelation of this Surah were disbelievers but later believed. Both these arguments are incorrect. As for these verses, their explanation that follows will show that they do not bear the meaning which has been understood from them. Here, to point out the error of the reasoning it would be enough to say that if the addressees of this Surah were only these people, why then does this Surah still continue to be recited when they are dead and gone from the world long long ago? And what was the need of making this Surah a part of the Qur'an permanently so that the Muslims should continue to read it for ever afterwards?

2This includes all those deities whom the disbelievers and the polytheists have been, and are still, worshiping everywhere in the world, whether they are the angels, the jinn, prophets, saints, spirits of the living or dead men, or the sun, the moon, stars, animals, trees, rivers, idols and imaginary gods and goddesses. One may say that the pagans of Arabia acknowledged Allah also as a Deity and the other pagans of the world also have never disacknowledged Allah as a Deity till today. As for the followers of the earlier scriptures, they also acknowledge Allah alone as the real Deity. How then can it be correct to exonerate oneself froth the worship of all the deities of all those people, without' exception, when Allah too is included among them?

The answer is that if Allah is worshiped along with others regarding Him as a Deity among other deities, the believer in Tauhid will inevitably express his immunity from this worship, for in his sight Allah is oat a Deity out of a collection of deities, but He alone is the real Deity, and the worship of the collection of deities is no worship of Allah, although worship of Allah also is included in it. The Qur'an has clearly stated that Allah's worship is only that which does not have any tinge of the worship of another and in which man makes his worship exclusively Allah's. "And the only Command they were given, was to worship Allah, making their religion sincerely His, turning all their attention towards Him." (Al-Bayyinah: 5).

This subject has been explained at many places in the Qur'an forcefully; for example, see Au-Nisa': 145-146, Al-A`raf :29, AzZumar: 2, 3, 11, 14, 15, A1-Mu'min: 14, 64-66. It has been further explained in a Hadith Qudsi (i.e. Divine Word revealed through the mouth of the Prophet) in which the messenger of Allah says: "Allah says: I am Self-Sufficient of the association of every associate most of all. Whoever performed an act in which he associated another also with Me, 1 am free of it, and the entire act is for him who was associated." (Muslim, Musnad Ahmad, Ibn Majah). Thus, acknowledging Allah as one of the two, three or many gods and serving and worshiping others along with Him is, in fact, the real kufur, declaration of immunity from which is the object of this Surah.

3The words used are: ma a'budu. The word ma in Arabic, is generally used for lifeless or unintelligent things, and the word man for intelligent and rational beings. The question arises why has ma a `budu been used here instead of man a `budu? The commentators generally give four answers to it:

- (1) that ma here is in the meaning of man;
- (2) that ma here is in the meaning of alladhi (i.e. which or who);
- (3) that in both the sentences ma is in the meaning of a noun of action (masdar) and it means: "I do not perform the kind of worship that you perform, i. e. polytheistic worship, and you do not perform the kind of worship that I perform, i.e. worship of One God;"

(4) that since in the first sentence ma ta'buduna has been used, in the second ma a `budu has been used to keep the style; in both places there is only the uniformity of the word, there is no uniformity of meaning; instances of this are found elsewhere also in the Qur'an. For example, in Al-Baqarah: 194, it has been said: "Therefore, if anyone transgresses a prohibition by attacking you, you may do likewise." Obviously, to transgress likewise in retaliation is no transgression, but the word transgression (in retaliation) has been used only for the sake of uniformity in style. In Surah At-Taubah: 67, it has been said: "They forgot Allah, so Allah forgot them", whereas Allah does not forget. what meant to be said is that Allah ignored them. The word nisyan in respect of Allah has been used corresponding to their nisyaa (forgetfulness) only to keep the uniformity of the study.

Although all these four interpretations are correct in their own way, and there is room in Arabic to take all these meanings, yet none of these explains the real object for which ma a'budu has been used instead of man a `budu. As a matter of fact, when man is used for a person in Arabic, it is meant to say or ask something about his person, and when ma is used, it is meant to ask or express something about his characteristics and traits. This can be explained in English by the questions: who is he? and what is he? about a person. When it is asked, who is he? the object is to know something about his person. But when it is asked, what is he? the object is to know whether, for example, he belongs to the army, and if so, what is his rank, or whether he belongs to some teaching organization, and if so, whether he is a lecturer in it, or a reader, or a professor, what science or art subject he teaches, what are his qualifications, etc.

Thus, if in this verse, it was said: La antum abiduna man a `bud, it would mean: "You are not worshipers of the being whom I worship, and in response, the disbelievers and the polytheists could have said that they too believed in the Being of Allah and also worshiped Him. But when it was said: La antum 'abiduna ma a `bud, it meant: "You are not worshipers of the Deity who has the attributes of the Deity whom I worship."

And this is the real point on the basis of which the religion of the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings) is absolutely distinguish-ed from the religions of all kinds of disbelievers, besides the deniers of God, for his God is utterly different from the God of all of them. The God of some of them is such that He stood in need of rest on the seventh day after having created the world in six days, Who is not God of the universe but God of Israel, Who stands in a special relationship to the people of one particular race, which is not shared by other men, Who wrestles with the Prophet Jacob and cannot throw him, Who has also a son, named Ezra. The God of some others is father of an only son, called Jesus Christ, and He causes His son to be crucified in order to make him an atonement for the sins of others. The God of some has wife and children, but begets only daughters. The God of some assumes human form and shape and living in a human body on the earth works like men. The God of some is merely an Essence, or Cause of causes, or the First Cause, Who after giving the system of the universe the initial push is sitting aside unconcerned, the universe is working by itself according to some relentless laws, and now He and man have nothing to do with each other. In short, even the unbelievers who acknowledge

God do not, in fact, acknowledge the God, Who is the Creator, . Master, Disposer, Administrator and Ruler of the entire universe, Who has not only set the system of the universe but is running and controlling it by Himself every moment, Who is above every defect, fault, weakness and error, Who is free from every similitude, every physical limitation, every likeness, Who is Self-Sufficient of every companion and associate, Who has no partner in His Being, attributes, powers and entitlement to worship, Who is far too Holy that He should have children, or should take some one for a son, or should have an exclusive relationship with a community or race, Who is directly related to each individual creature of His as His Providence, Sustainer and Guardian, Who hears the prayers and answers them, Who alone possesses all the powers to give life and death, to cause profit and loss, and to make and mar destinies, Who not only sustains His creatures but also guides each according to its nature and need, Who is not only our God Whom we worship but also enjoins commands and prohibitions through His Prophets and His Books, which we have to obey, before Whom we are accountable for our deeds, Who will resurrect us after death, call us to account and reward and punish us accordingly. No one in the world except for Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings) and his followers, is worshiping the God with these attributes. If at all some others also are worshiping God, they are not worshiping the real and true God but the God who is their self-invented, imaginary God.

4A section of the commentators is of the view that both these sentences are a repetition of the theme of the first two sentences and the repetition is meant to strengthen the statement in the first two sentences. But many commentators do not regard it as a repetition. They say that a new theme has been expressed in these which is different from the theme of the first two sentences. In our opinion they are correct in so far as there is no repetition in these sentences, for in these only "nor are you worshipers of Him Whom I worship" has been repeated, and this repetition also is not in the sense in which this sentence was used first. But after negating the repetition the meanings that this section of the commentators has given of these two sentences are very different from each other. There is no occasion here to take up and discuss each of the meanings given by the commentators. Avoiding details we shall only discuss the meaning which is correct in our opinion.

In the first sentence, it has been said: "Nor am I a worshiper of those whom you have worshiped." Its theme is absolutely different from the theme of verse 2, in which it was said: "I do not worship those whom you worship," These two things widely differ in two aspects. First, that although there is denial, and a forceful denial, in saying that "I do not, or shall not, do such and such a thing", yet there is much greater force in saying that "I am not a doer of such and such a thing", for it means: "It is such an evil thing that nothing to say of committing it; it is not possible that I would even think of it, or have intention of doing it." Second, that the sentence "whom you worship" applies to only those gods whom the disbelievers are worshiping now. On the contrary, the sentence "whom you have worshiped" applies to all those gods whom the disbelievers and their forefathers have been worshiping in the past. Now, it is a well known fact that the gods of the polytheists and disbelievers have always been changing and their

number increasing and decreasing. In different ages different groups of them have been worshipping different gods and the gods of all the disbelievers have never always been the same everywhere. Therefore, the verse means: "I exonerate myself not only from your gods of today but also from the gods of your forefathers, and I am not a person who would even think of worshipping such gods."

As for the second sentence, although its words in verse 5 are the same as in verse 3, yet its meaning at the two places is different. In verse 3, it follows this sentence: "I do not worship those whom you worship." Therefore, it means: "Nor are you worshipers of the God having the attributes of the One God Whom I worship." And in verse 5, it follows this sentence: "Nor am I a worshiper of those whom you have worshiped." Therefore, it means: "Nor does it seem you would become worshipers of the One God Whom I worship." Or, in other words, "It is not possible that I should become a worshiper of each of those gods whom you and your forefathers have worshiped, and on account of your aversion to adopting worship of One God, instead of many gods, it cannot be expected that you would desist from this wrong worship and will become worshiper of Him Whom I worship."

5 That is, "My religion is entirely distinct and separate from your religion. I am not a worshiper of your gods and you are not worshipers of my God. I cannot worship your gods and you are not prepared to worship my God, Therefore, you and I can never follow and walk one and the same path together." This is not a message of tolerance to the disbelievers, but a declaration of immunity, disgust with and dissociation from them as long as they are disbelievers. Its object is to disappoint them absolutely and finally that in the matter of religion the party of Allah's Messenger and his followers would ever come to terms with them. This same declaration of immunity and expression of disgust has been made in the Makki Surahs revealed after this Surah successively.

Thus, in Surah Yunus, it was said: "If these people deny you, say to them: I am responsible for my deeds and you are responsible for yours: you are not accountable for what I do, and I am not accountable for what you do." (v. 41). Then further on in the same Surah it was said: "O Prophet, say: O mankind, if you are still in doubt concerning my Faith, know that I do not worship those whom you worship beside Allah, but I worship that Allah alone, Who has the power to cause your death." (v. 104).

In Surah Ash-Shu'ara it was said: "If they disobey you, tell them: I am not responsible for what you do." (v. 216).

In Surah Saba it was said: "Say to them: you will not be questioned for the errors we have committed, nor shall we be answerable for what you are doing. Say, our Lord will gather us together, then He will judge between us rightly." (w. 25-26).

In Surah az-Zumar: "Tell them plainly: O my people, do whatever you will, so shall I. Soon you shall come to know as to whom comes the disgraceful torment and who gets the enduring punishment." (w. 39-40).

Then the same lesson was taught in Madinah to all the Muslims: "There is indeed an excellent example for you in Abraham and his companions when they said to their people plainly: `We have nothing to do with you and your gods, whom you worship beside God: we have renounced you and there has arisen between us and you enmity and hatred for ever, until you believe in Allah, the One." (Al-Mumtahinah: 4).

These continuous explanations of the Qur'an do not leave any room whatever for the doubt that the verse *Lakum dīnukum wa liya dīn dīn* does not mean: "You may go on following your religion and allow me to follow mine", but it is the kind of declaration made in Surah Az-Zumar: 14: "O Prophet, say to them: I shall serve Allah alone, making my religion sincerely His. As for you, you may serve whomever you please beside Him." (v. 14).

From this verse Imam Abu Hanifah and Imam Shafe`i have deduced that *kufr* (unbelief), as a whole, is one community, however discordant and different from each other be the religions of the unbelievers; therefore, a Jew can inherit a Christian, and a Christian a Jew, and likewise the unbeliever of one religion can inherit the un-believer of another religion, if there exists between them a relationship by descent or marriage, or some other connection, which necessitates the passage of inheritance of one to another. On the contrary, Imam Malik, Imam Auza`i and Imam Ahmad hold the view that the followers of one religion cannot inherit the followers of another religion. They deduce this from the Hadith which has been related on the authority of Hadrat 'Abdullah bin 'Amr bin al-As, saying that Allah's Messenger (upon whom be peace) said: "The people of two different communities cannot inherit each other." (Musnad Ahmad, Abu Da'ud, Ibn Majah, Daraqtuni).

A Hadith with almost the same content has been related by Tirmidhi from Hadrat Jabir, by Ibn Hibban from Hadrat 'Abdullah bin 'Umar, and by Bazzar from Hadrat Abu Hurairah. Dealing with this legal problem comprehensively, the well known Hanafi Imam; Shamsul-A'immah Sarakhsi, writes: "The unbelievers can inherit each other mutually for all those reasons for which the Muslims inherit each other mutually, and they can also inherit each other in certain other cases in which the Muslims do not inherit each other ... The fact is that Allah recognizes only two ways of life, the religion of Truth and the religion of falsehood; that is why He has declared: *Lakum dīnukum wa liya dīn*. And He has classified the people also into two groups, one group will go to Paradise and this consists of the believers, and the second group will go to Hell and this consists of the disbelievers collectively. And He has declared the two groups only as the potential opponents of each other: "These are the two parties who have disputed about their Lord." (Al-Hajj: 19).

That is, one group comprises all the disbelievers collectively and they are opposed to the believers ... We do not admit that they are separate and distinct communities

according to their beliefs, but as against the Muslims they all form one community. For the Muslims affirm faith in the prophethood of Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings) and in the Qur'an and they refuse to affirm faith. For this very reason they have been declared to be unbelievers and are one community as opposed to the Muslims ... The Hadith, La yata-warith ahl millatain, points to the same thing as explained above. For the Holy Prophet has explained the word millatain (two communities) by his saying: La yarithul Muslim al-kafir wa lal-kafir al-Maslim: "The Muslim cannot inherit the disbeliever, nor the disbeliever can inherit the Muslim." (AlMabsut vol. 30, pp. 30-32). The Hadith cited here by Imam Sarakhsi has been related by Bukhari, Muslim, Nasa'i, Ahmad, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah and Abu Da'ud on the authority of Hadrat Usamah bin Zaid.