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**Interfaith Not Infidels:**

As an active interfaith person representing Islam locally, nationally and internationally, I have been asked one question over and over again: Who are the “kafirs” - “infidels” - condemned in the Quran? Are they Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, atheists today?”

The first few times I heard this question, I hesitated and said, “Oh, they are not Christians or Jews. The Quran refers to them as People of the Book and we Muslims  believe in their Holy Scriptures too.”

A Sikh Holy man over heard me in Salt Lake City, Utah at the interfaith gathering called by United Religions Initiative ([www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org/)) on June 2, 2001. He asked me, “What about Buddhists, Hindus, Bahais and people of other faiths.

I could not answer him because from childhood days, Islamic scholars in Indian-Pakistan sub-continent taught that they are all idol-worshipers and Hell bound. Alama Mohammed Chisty, interfaith guest from Pakistan whispered in my ear saying, “Anyone who does not take Prophet Mohammed as Messenger of God are Kafirs (infidels). It was not important whether they believe in God or not or did deeds of righteousness.”

I disagreed with Alama Chisty and he started quoting me in Arabic right and left. But I could not accept that answer - I knew something was wrong.

**Spiritual Search:**

 I embarked on a decade-long spiritual journey to find out the definition of the word Kafir or infidel that the Quran uses. The terrorist attacks on WTC only intensified my determination to find the truth.

Why would God create billions of people in different faiths and not provide salvation through their religion of birth? Most of us are born by chance of birth in whatever faith and we die living that faith. Freedom of Religion is internationally accepted right that gives anyone to change their religion. Hence I am taking the liberty of defining the word Kafir or Infidel that my interfaith community has been asking from me.

Here is what I have partially researched in the last ten years.

**Definition of Kafir or Infidel:** The word Kafir is derived from the Arabic root word KFR, (Kaf, Fay and Ray) which means to cover, conceal or hide, to hide with the intention of misleading or misinforming. It also includes changing the Holy Scriptures with the intention of suppressing or distorting the truth.

Let me put this in another way, take the case of people meddling with the Holy Scriptures where intentionally truth is either, concealed, changed, omitted, misinterpreted so that people either begin to doubt or lose complete faith in God, His Signs and His Revelations - this can come in the area of committing perjury, disloyalty,  infidelity or Kufr in Arabic. Character assassinations and deliberate deceptions of Prophets, done intentionally to undermine the faith or trust/believe in God, His Signs and Revelations can also be classified, as Kufr and people committing such acts are Kafirs or infidels. Just like in modern language a person unfaithful to his country could be a traitor.

One cannot call a believer in God from Christian or Jewish faith as Kafir if they do not believe in Mohammed (pbuh) as Messenger.  This is for Muslims, just as Jesus is for Christians and Moses for Jews.

Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs who comprise 2.5 billion of the world’s population cannot all be classified as non-believers or  KAFIRS. The Quran does not give a standard criteria for collectively defining people as Kafirs.

Each case is an individual case and because we humans do not have perfect knowledge - our Prophet has strongly warned Muslims from calling anyone a Kafir. There are billions of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc. who belief in God, the Judgment Day and Life after death and in doing righteous deeds. They have also been shown the art of surrender, submission or devotion (which in Arabic is called Islam). The Quran says, “To every people God send an Apostle in their own language and in their own country to clarify misunderstandings 14:4, 10:47 &16:36.

Hence believers in God from any faith or spiritual tradition cannot be collectively stereotyped as non-believers. No one has the authority to judge believers from other faiths as infidels.  The Quran refers to pagan Arabs who lived during the times of Prophet Mohammed as kafirs.  Prophet brought the pagan Arabs into the fold of monotheistic Abrahamic family.

The universal message of Jesus makes a lot of sense to me, “DO NOT JUDGE OTHERS LEST YOU BE JUDGED.”

**Conclusion:** Such open discussion and freedom of thought is happening all over America. America is an incubator or interfaith laboratory that must come up with strategic tolerance among religions and nations.

God has blessed America with not only material resources but also provided a multi-racial and multi-religious society and we must all listen to Abraham Lincoln’s words that are still ringing in my ears, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that this government of the people, by the people and for the people shall never perish from this earth.”

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I had originally sent the piece as Opinion or Forum for the SF Chronicle.

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