The Qur'ān's Engagement with Disbelief: A Textual and Philosophical Study

Dr. Hafiz Saeed Ahmad
Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies,
Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore
Dr. Nisar Ahmad
Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies,
Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore

ABSTRACT
This article examines the Qur'ān's multifaceted response to atheism and skepticism through a textual and philosophical lens. It explores how the Qur'ān articulates rational indications of God's existence—cosmological, teleological, and moral—by invoking natural and historical *āyāt* (signs). It also appeals to human nature and conscience (*fiṭrah*) as an innate epistemic faculty and asserts its inimitability (*iʿjāz*) and prophetic verification as internal evidence of divine origin. Furthermore, the Qur'ān addresses objections that parallel modern atheist critiques, including the problem of evil, divine hiddenness, alleged contradictions, and perceived tensions with science. Rather than constructing a polemical rejoinder, the study maps how these textual strategies function and how classical exegetes and modern Muslim thinkers have systematized them into formal arguments. Methodologically, the article employs close reading of the Qur'ān in Arabic (with M.A.S. Abdel Haleem's English translation for selected passages), engagement with classical exegesis—particularly *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*—and analysis of philosophical and apologetic writings, including those of al-Ghazālī and Hamza Andreas Tzortzis. The study contributes to Qur'ānic scholarship by offering a comprehensive account of the text's engagement with atheistic worldviews and its ongoing relevance to contemporary debates on faith, reason, and skepticism.
Keywords: Qur'ān; atheism; skepticism; *āyāt* (signs); *fiṭrah*; divine existence; *iʿjāz*; *tafsīr*; al-Ghazālī; Islamic apologetics

Significance and Need of the Study

The question of belief and unbelief remains one of the defining intellectual and moral debates of the twenty-first century. According to a report by the **Pew Research Center (2022)**, global levels of religious disaffiliation—particularly among youth in Europe and North America—have risen sharply in recent decades, with the "nones" emerging as one of

the fastest-growing categories of self-identification.[1] Similar patterns are evident in parts of the Muslim world, where younger generations, influenced by digital media and globalized culture, encounter atheistic and skeptical arguments on an unprecedented scale.[2] Against this backdrop, the Qur'ān's discourses on doubt, denial, and evidence are not only of historical or theological concern but of pressing contemporary relevance.

For many Muslim youth, exposure to atheistic critiques often occurs in online environments devoid of nuanced or scholarly responses. Without accessible, research-based engagement with the Qur'ān's intellectual framework, such encounters may lead to confusion, weaken confidence, or create a perceived divide between faith and reason. A systematic study that maps the Qur'ān's arguments, classical interpretations, and modern elaborations equips educators, community leaders, and young readers with tools to understand how Islam's foundational text addresses skepticism. This need is underscored by surveys among Muslim youth in Western societies indicating a growing preference for intellectual rather than purely devotional approaches to questions of faith [3](**Pew Research Center, 2017**).

From an academic perspective, the study makes three principal contributions. First, it bridges the gap between Qur'ānic studies and the philosophy of religion, disciplines often treated separately: the former emphasizes historical and literary dimensions, while the latter largely engages with Christian or secular sources. By bringing Qur'ānic arguments concerning divine existence, moral consciousness, and prophetic verification into dialogue with contemporary atheist critiques, this research enriches both domains. Second, it highlights how classical Muslim thinkers such as **al-Ghazālī** transformed Qur'ānic motifs into systematic philosophical arguments—an area still underexplored within comparative philosophy of religion.[4] Third, it contributes to religious studies pedagogy by presenting a model that treats sacred texts not only descriptively but also analytically and comparatively—an approach increasingly valued in pluralistic academic settings.

Finally, this study underscores the Qur'ān's self-presentation as a text inviting reflection, reasoning, and critical engagement rather than unreflective adherence. It demonstrates that the Qur'ān's engagement with disbelief is not merely defensive or apologetic but dialogical and rational, offering valuable resources for constructive conversation between faith communities and secular thinkers. At a time when public discourse is polarized between militant secularism and reactive religiosity, such scholarship can help reclaim a space for informed, balanced, and intellectually rigorous engagement.

Introduction:

In the twenty-first century, secular atheism has emerged as a major intellectual challenge to religious belief, including Islam. In Europe and North America, "nones" and atheists now constitute a growing share of the population[5] (**Pew Research Center, 2022**), and similar patterns are increasingly visible among educated Muslim youth (**Pew Research Center, 2017**). Against this backdrop, the Qur'ān's discourse remains strikingly relevant: far from demanding blind submission, it appeals to reason, conscience, and observation, offering what may be described as a "textual philosophy" of belief and disbelief. This article maps the Qur'ān's multi-layered response to atheism, showing how its cosmological, teleological, moral, and revelatory arguments are developed in classical *tafsīr* and contemporary apologetics.

In Islamic thought, atheism is commonly rendered as *al-ilḥād*—a "deviation" or denial of God's existence—and historically also as *al-dahriyyah*, materialism that denies creation.[6] By contrast, the Qur'ānic term *kufr* literally means "covering" or "concealing" and signifies rejection or ingratitude toward God, His revelations, or His messengers.[7] While modern secular atheism is generally a philosophical or scientific stance that denies any deity or transcendent reality, theological denial (*kufr* or *ilḥād* in the classical sense) is defined within Islamic theology as the conscious, wilful rejection of what has been divinely revealed once it has been clearly communicated. [8]This distinction clarifies how the Qur'ān and Muslim scholars address non-belief both as a modern worldview and as a religiously defined category.

From the earliest centuries of Islam, scholars distinguished between outright materialists—called *dahriyyah*—who denied creation altogether, and those guilty of *kufr* for rejecting revealed truths after they had been made clear. Classical theologians such as **al-Ashʿarī** (d. 935) and **al-Māturīdī** (d. 944) argued that reason itself points to the existence of a Creator and that denying this constitutes *ilḥād*.[9] **Al-Ghazālī** (d. 1111), in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, explicitly refuted philosophers who denied bodily resurrection or posited an eternal world, categorizing them among unbelievers. [10]**Ibn Taymiyyah** (d. 1328) later clarified that *kufr* can take several forms—belief, speech, or action—and that culpability depends on knowledge and intent.[11] These early debates reveal that Islamic theology treated disbelief not only as a doctrinal position but also as a moral and epistemic stance, while still recognizing degrees of ignorance and misunderstanding distinct from conscious denial.

The Arabic term *al-ilḥād* (الإلحاد), derived from the root *l-ḥ-d* meaning "to deviate" or "to incline away," appears in the Qur'ān to describe deviation from divine truth[12]. Classical exegetes interpreted *ilḥād* as distorting or denying God's attributes and, more broadly, as the outright rejection of divine existence.

Closely related is *al-dahriyyah* (الدهرية), a term historically used for

Definition of Atheism and Disbelief (Kufr) in Islamic Theology

1. Atheism (al-Ilḥād / al-Dahriyyah)

materialists who believed in an eternal, self-subsisting universe without creation—a view condemned by scholars such as al-Ghazālī [13]and Ibn Taymiyyah[14] In modern discourse, atheism typically denotes either (a) the positive belief that no deity exists or (b) the absence of belief in any deity. Within Islamic theology, this corresponds to *ilḥād* insofar as it entails rejection of the Creator (*al-Khāliq*), though not necessarily the denial of prophetic revelation if unfamiliar with it.[15]

2. Disbelief (Kufr)

The Qur'ānic term *kufr* (كفر), literally "to cover" or "to conceal," refers to hiding or denying truth. A *kāfir* (كافر) is therefore one who covers or rejects divine reality. The Qur'ān employs *kufr* in two principal senses:

- **Doctrinal denial** of God, His oneness, revelation, or messengers (Q. 2:6; Q. 3:21).
- **Ingratitude** toward divine Favors (Q. 14:7).

Muslim theologians distinguished between **major disbelief** (*kufr akbar*), which expels a person from Islam, and **minor disbelief** (*kufr asghar*), referring to sinful acts metaphorically described as *kufr*.[16] The distinction depends on *ʿilm* (knowledge) and *qaṣd* (intent): willful rejection after knowledge differs from ignorance or misunderstanding (al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*).

3. Secular Atheism vs. Theological Denial

Modern secular atheism generally functions as a **philosophical or scientific worldview** rejecting any transcendent reality, grounded in naturalism and empiricism. Theological denial (*kufr* or *ilḥād* in the classical sense), by contrast, is an **internal Islamic category**, defined as conscious rejection of what has been divinely revealed after clear communication of the message.[17]

Thus, a secular atheist may lack awareness of revelation, whereas *kufr* presupposes deliberate denial after knowledge. Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī condemned the *dahriyyah* for denying creation, while modern Muslim apologists like Hamza Andreas Tzortzis (*The Divine Reality*, 2016)[18]differentiate between atheism as a sociocultural phenomenon and *kufr* as a theological condition.

Comparative View: Atheism vs. Kufr — Key Distinctions

Feature	Atheism (Modern/Secular)	Kufr / Theological Disbelief
Focus	Denial of God's existence, often from philosophical or scientific reasoning	Rejection of God, His oneness, revelation, or messengers
Basis	Grounded in naturalism, empiricism, rationalism; often detached from scripture	Defined within Islamic epistemology (Qurʾān, Sunnah, consensus)
Intent & Knowledge	May involve ignorance, indifference, or rejection after exposure	Requires knowledge of revelation and willful rejection
Outcome in Islamic Theology	Viewed sociologically or philosophically	Major *kufr* leads to apostasy; minor *kufr* denotes moral error but not exclusion

The Qurʾānic Orientation toward Reason and Signs

A defining feature of the Qurʾān's discourse is its persistent appeal to **reason (ʿaql — عقل)** and **signs (āyāt — آيات)** in the natural and moral order as indicators of the Creator. Verses such as, *"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, the alternation of night and day, the ships that sail through the sea with what benefits people… are signs for those who reason"* (Q. 2:164), and *"And among His signs is that He created you from dust; then, suddenly, you are human beings dispersing"* [19] show how the Qurʾān treats the contingency and order of the cosmos as evidence requiring explanation rather than brute fact.

Classical exegetes such as **Ibn Kathīr (ابن كثير)** and **Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (فخر الدين الرازي)** read these passages as invitations to rational reflection—al-Rāzī even describes them as indications of origination—thus forming a Qurʾānic strand that functions analogously to the cosmological argument for a Creator.[20]

The Qurʾān also issues an internal epistemic test commonly called the **challenge of inimitability (taḥaddī al-Qurʾān — تحدّي القرآن)**, whereby opponents are invited to produce a passage comparable to the revelation if they doubt its origin: *"And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our Servant, then produce a surah like it…"*.[21] These verses operate both as a falsification challenge and as an invitation to examine the Qurʾān's linguistic, literary, and moral uniqueness—what classical theorists name **iʿjāz (إعجاز).**[22]

Modern translators and scholars such as **M. A. S. Abdel Haleem** [23]emphasize that these passages function as appeals to reflection rather than calls for blind obedience. Classical theorists of *iʿjāz*, for example **al-Bāqillānī (الباقلاني)** and **al-Rummānī**, treated the Qurʾān's unmatched eloquence, depth, and moral efficacy as internal signs of divine authorship. Contemporary apologists (e.g., **Hamza Andreas Tzortzis**) often present *iʿjāz* alongside cosmological and teleological reasoning as part of an integrated case for the divine origin of the text. [24]Thus, the Qurʾān's orientation toward reason and signs is central—not peripheral—to its engagement with disbelief and competing worldviews.

Fiṭrah (فطرة): The Innate Disposition as a Qurʾanic Response to Disbelief

Complementing cosmological and textual arguments, the Qurʾan appeals to human nature—**fiṭrah (فطرة)**—as an intrinsic epistemic resource.

The text declares: *"So set your face toward the religion, inclining to truth; [adhere to] the fiṭrah of Allāh upon which He has created humankind. No change should there be in the creation of Allāh. That is the upright religion, but most people do not know."* (Q. 30:30). **Fiṭrah** denotes the original, natural disposition with which humans are created. **Ibn Kathīr (ابن كثير)** reads *fiṭrat Allāh* as the natural orientation toward Islam;[25] **al-Rāzī (فخر الدين الرازي)** treats it as an innate epistemic faculty capable of recognizing God though it may be obscured by environmental influences. [26]This exegetical position coheres with the prophetic ḥadīth: Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ said, *"Every child is born upon the natural disposition (fiṭrah); it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian."*[27]

which indicates that socialization can veil but does not annihilate this primordial awareness. From a Qurʾānic perspective, **disbelief (kufr — كفر)** is not merely absence of belief but a covering or suppression (*k-f-r*) of an originally inscribed awareness. [28]Accordingly, the Qurʾān's rhetorical strategy emphasizes **remembrance (dhikr — ذكر)** and **reflective contemplation (tadabbur — تدبر)**—calls to recollect and reason about what is, in some sense, already present within the human soul.[29] Modern Muslim thinkers (e.g., Hamza Andreas Tzortzis) often relate *fiṭrah* to the idea of properly basic beliefs in contemporary epistemology, arguing that it provides a foundational, non-inferential starting point for religious cognition.[30] Thus, in Qurʾānic theology *fiṭrah* functions alongside the cosmological *āyāt* and the textual *iʿjāz*: together they form a complementary tripartite orientation—nature, cosmos, and revelation—through which the Qurʾān dialogues with disbelief and invites recovery of the human capacity for belief.

Qur'ānic Engagement with Common Objections to Belief

In addition to presenting *āyāt* (signs) in nature, appeals to *fitrah*, and the challenge of *iʿjāz* (inimitability), the Qur'ān explicitly acknowledges and responds to objections that parallel those raised in modern atheistic discourse—namely, the problem of evil, divine hiddenness, and alleged contradictions.

1. The Problem of Evil (*sharr*)

The Qur'ān situates suffering and adversity within a moral and eschatological framework. It differentiates between trials (*ibtilāʾ*) that refine faith and consequences that arise from human wrongdoing: "Whatever strikes you of disaster—it is for what your hands have earned; but He pardons much"[31] "Say, 'All [things] are from Allah.' So what is [the matter] with those people that they can hardly understand any statement?" [32]

Classical exegetes such as *al-Rāzī* (d. 606/1210) and *Ibn Kathīr* (d. 774/1373) interpret these verses as affirming that worldly hardships serve either as divine tests or as opportunities for spiritual purification, with ultimate justice deferred to the *ākhirah* (hereafter). [33]Modern scholars like Mohammad Hassan Khalil have emphasized that Qur'ānic theodicy functions less as an abstract philosophical defense than as a narrative of divine wisdom (*ḥikmah*), justice (*ʿadl*), and moral accountability.[34]

2. Divine Hiddenness (*khafāʾ al-ilāhī*)

The Qur'ān also anticipates the claim that God's existence is not sufficiently evident:

"Those who do not expect to meet Us say, 'Why are angels not sent down to us, or [why] do we not see our Lord?'" [35]

Rather than offering coercive proofs, the Qur'ān maintains that divine guidance is sufficiently manifest for those inclined to perceive it, yet veiled enough to preserve human freedom and moral responsibility.[36] *Al-Ghazālī* (d. 505/1111), in *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, explains that divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*) corresponds to the receptivity (*istiʿdād*) of the human heart—an insight echoed by contemporary Muslim philosophers such as *Safaruk Chowdhury*[37] in discussions of divine hiddenness.

3. Alleged Contradictions and Conflicts with Science

The Qur'ān acknowledges the skeptics who accused the Prophet ﷺ of inconsistencies or fabrication: "And when Our verses are recited to them as clear evidences, those who do not expect the meeting with Us say, 'Bring a Qur'ān other than this or change it'[38]"

The Qur'ān's reply is both self-referential and epistemic: "Do they not contemplate the Qur'ān? If it had been from other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction" (Q. 4:82). *Al-Bāqillānī* (d.

403/1013), in *Iʿjāz al-Qur'ān*, identifies this verse as foundational to the doctrine of textual coherence and linguistic inimitability.[39] Modern Muslim apologists reinterpret such claims in light of scientific modernity,[40] distinguishing between the Qur'ān's theological assertions and the premodern cosmological frameworks in which they were historically expressed.

Findings

This study demonstrates that the Qur'ān deploys a multi-layered strategy to engage disbelief. It grounds belief in rational reflection upon creation[41] appeals to the innate human disposition (*fitrah*) that inclines toward divine recognition[42] and establishes an internal epistemic test through the challenge of *iʿjāz*.[43] Furthermore, it anticipates objections analogous to modern atheism—such as the problem of evil, divine hiddenness, and alleged contradictions—addressing them within a moral, rational, and eschatological horizon. Classical scholars (*al-Rāzī*, *Ibn Kathīr*, *al-Ghazālī*, *Ibn Taymiyyah*) systematized these elements, while modern thinkers such as *Hamza Andreas Tzortzis* have rearticulated them for contemporary secular audiences.

Suggestions

Future scholarship may benefit from:

- Comparative analysis between Qur'ānic argumentation and contemporary analytic philosophy of religion (e.g., cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments).
- Textual exploration of lesser-known classical works on *ilḥād* (atheism) and *dahriyyah* (materialism) to trace early Muslim classifications of non-belief.
- Interdisciplinary inquiry integrating Qur'ānic studies, the psychology of religion (especially on *fitrah*), and communication theory to evaluate the persuasive appeal of Qur'ānic reasoning among youth.

Recommendations

For educators, imams, and youth mentors:

- Integrate Qur'ānic rational arguments into curricula, emphasizing that Islam promotes *ʿaql* (reasoned reflection) rather than blind imitation.
- Train students in both classical and contemporary apologetics using authoritative *tafsīr* (Ibn Kathīr, al-Rāzī) and reliable English translations (e.g., M.A.S. Abdel Haleem).
- Encourage open dialogue with questioning students, distinguishing between ignorance (*jahl*) and willful rejection (*istikbār*), as classical scholars did.

- Produce critical editions and translations of primary Arabic texts on *iʿjāz*, *fitrah*, and Islamic responses to materialism.
- Establish academic centers dedicated to Qur'ānic engagement with modern worldviews, particularly secularism and atheism.

Conclusion

The Qur'ān's engagement with disbelief is neither polemical nor merely devotional. It presents a unified intellectual and moral framework that integrates rational reflection (*ʿaql*), innate disposition (*fitrah*), and textual inimitability (*iʿjāz*) as complementary avenues of guidance. Classical theologians expanded these insights, while modern scholars continue to reinterpret them for contemporary contexts. Recognizing this layered approach enables educators and researchers to transcend simplistic portrayals of Islam as anti-rational and equips Muslim youth with a tradition-grounded yet intellectually credible response to secular atheism. In doing so, the Qur'ān remains both a sacred text and a living interlocutor in global discourses on God, meaning, and truth.

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