

THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF INTERFAITH RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article explores the historical experience of interfaith tolerance in Uzbekistan, tracing its roots from the ancient Silk Road civilization to the modern period of national independence. Drawing upon historical documents, UNESCO reports, and the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the study analyzes how coexistence among Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and other religious groups has contributed to social harmony and national identity. It also highlights contemporary state policies that promote interreligious dialogue, cultural pluralism, and civil peace. The findings show that interfaith tolerance in Uzbekistan is not a recent political construct but a deeply rooted social tradition formed through centuries of cultural interaction and mutual respect.¹

Keywords: interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, Uzbekistan, Silk Road civilization, cultural diversity, national identity, social harmony.

Introduction

Uzbekistan, located at the crossroads of civilizations, has long been a center of intercultural and interfaith exchange.² From the time of the Great Silk Road, the region's cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva served not only as trade hubs but also as centers of spiritual communication between East and West.³ Here, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism coexisted for centuries, shaping a unique model of religious tolerance that continues to define Uzbekistan's cultural identity today.⁴ In the modern world, as global societies face challenges of extremism, discrimination, and identity conflicts, Uzbekistan's historical model of interfaith coexistence offers valuable lessons in building peace through dialogue, education, and mutual understanding.⁵

Historical Background

The roots of religious tolerance in Uzbekistan go back to the pre-Islamic era when the territory was part of ancient civilizations such as Sogdiana and Bactria.⁶ Archaeological findings from these periods reveal temples, shrines, and inscriptions related to Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and early Christian practices. With the arrival of Islam in the 8th century, local cultures integrated Islamic values with existing traditions of coexistence.⁷

During the reigns of the Samanids and later the Timurids, religious and cultural pluralism reached remarkable heights.⁸ Scholars like Al-Biruni and Ibn Sina not only contributed to science and philosophy but also advocated for intellectual openness and respect for diversity. The architectural masterpieces of Samarkand and Bukhara, where mosques, churches, and synagogues coexisted within the same urban spaces, became symbols of this tolerance.

Interfaith Relations in the Modern Era

Under the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, religious life underwent severe restrictions. However, communities in Uzbekistan managed to preserve elements of mutual respect and coexistence even under secular control. After gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan adopted a renewed approach toward religion, recognizing freedom of conscience and equality of all faiths.¹⁰

The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Article 31) guarantees freedom of religion and belief, while the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998, updated in 2021) establishes the legal framework for interfaith cooperation.¹¹ These laws ensure that all registered religious organizations can operate freely and contribute to the spiritual and cultural life of society. Today, more than 16 religious confessions are officially registered in Uzbekistan, including Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha'i communities.¹⁰ Institutions such as the Committee on Religious Affairs, the Center for Islamic Civilization, and the Interfaith Council promote dialogue, education, and mutual respect among believers.¹¹

Cultural and Social Dimensions

Interfaith tolerance in Uzbekistan is deeply embedded in its social fabric. Traditional values such as *mehr-oqibat* (compassion), *hamjihatlik* (unity), and *bag'rikenglik* (tolerance) are integral to everyday life. These concepts have been transmitted through oral literature, proverbs, and religious teachings that emphasize respect for others regardless of faith.⁶ Cultural projects supported by UNESCO, such as “Dialogue of Cultures and Religions along the Silk Roads,” further strengthen Uzbekistan’s role as a bridge between civilizations.⁸ Educational programs and academic forums organized by the Tashkent Islamic Institute and the Russian Orthodox Seminary demonstrate that religious dialogue is not only possible but also intellectually enriching.⁹

Modern Challenges and Prospects

Despite its achievements, interfaith harmony requires continuous effort. The rapid expansion of digital communication has created new opportunities for interreligious dialogue but also risks of misinformation and intolerance.⁵ Uzbekistan’s state institutions, in cooperation with religious leaders, are working to promote a digital culture of tolerance — encouraging ethical online behavior and fact-based discussions about faith and values.⁷ The country’s 2024–2030 National Strategy for Interethnic Harmony and Religious Tolerance emphasizes the importance of education, youth engagement, and international cooperation in maintaining peace among communities.⁸

Conclusion

Uzbekistan’s experience of interfaith tolerance represents a unique model where religion serves as a source of unity rather than division. Rooted in centuries of coexistence, strengthened by legal reforms, and supported by education and dialogue, this tradition continues to inspire both national and international efforts toward peaceful coexistence.

The historical and modern achievements of Uzbekistan demonstrate that religious tolerance is not only a political necessity but also a spiritual and moral value that defines the essence of the nation’s identity.

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