

The Idea of Religious Tolerance in Central Asian Thought

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Abstract

The article analyses the transformation of religious tolerance in Central Asia during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Early twentieth-century Jadid thought is treated as an intellectual background rather than the main subject. The analysis focuses on Soviet atheist secularism, the post-Soviet reinterpretation of freedom of conscience, and contemporary interconfessional relations. Drawing mainly on Uzbek, Kazakhstani and Russian scholarship, the study distinguishes enlightenment-oriented, ideological-secular and civic-secular forms of tolerance. Religious tolerance is interpreted as recognition of legitimate worldview difference, human dignity and dialogue within a shared civic space.

Keywords: Central Asia, Turkestan, religious tolerance, freedom of conscience, secularism, interconfessional dialogue.

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1. Introduction

Religious tolerance is one of the fundamental principles of life in a multi-confessional society. It implies not merely the absence of conflict among representatives of different religions, but also an individual's recognition of the existence of other views and beliefs while preserving his or her own faith, the rejection of violence, and the establishment of social relations based on mutual respect. In this regard, religious tolerance emerges as a concept possessing ethical, social, and philosophical dimensions.

V. A. Lektorsky does not equate tolerance with indifference or with the assumption that all viewpoints are equally valid. In his view, tolerance is manifested in a person's ability to maintain his or her own position while engaging rationally with an alternative position. M. M. Mchedlova, in turn, characterizes religious tolerance as a specific form of social relations within a multi-

confessional society.

This approach is also of considerable importance for the study of the historical and philosophical thought of Central Asia. The mere coexistence of different religions and cultures in the region does not, in itself, indicate that religious tolerance had been established. The essential issue is how differences among representatives of various faiths were understood, how attitudes toward such differences were expressed, and what ethical and social norms regulated these relations.

2. Method

The Jadids did not develop religious tolerance as a separate theory based on contemporary legal and philosophical concepts. Their primary focus was on enlightenment, the modernization of education, the harmonization of religious knowledge with modern

science and intellectual thought, and the elimination of social backwardness.

B. Qosimov characterizes Jadidism as a movement closely associated with the ideas of national awakening, enlightenment, and reform. D. Kenjayev, in turn, demonstrates that, in the views of the Jadids, national and religious tolerance was linked to social cooperation, spiritual renewal, and the progress of society. From this perspective, it would be inappropriate to fully equate the Jadid intellectual legacy with contemporary religious pluralism. Nevertheless, several important ideas closely related to tolerance can be identified in their views. These include critical thinking, dialogue through enlightenment, and the prioritization of the interests of society over personal or group-based conflicts.

The Jadid movement of the early twentieth century represents an important historical stage in understanding the subsequent development of the idea of religious tolerance. During this period, there was a growing tendency to view religious issues not solely within the framework of doctrinal debate, but also in connection with education, enlightenment, and social responsibility. At the same time, Jadidism cannot be regarded as a fully developed legal model of freedom of conscience or religious tolerance in the modern sense. These concepts acquired a more clearly defined meaning in the course of subsequent political and social transformations.

After 1917, religious life in Central Asia came increasingly under the influence of state policy and the dominant ideology. Although freedom of conscience was formally recognized, in practice the predominance of atheistic views significantly restricted the activities of religious organizations and the exercise of religious freedom. Drawing on archival sources, A. Salmonov demonstrates that during the 1920s and 1930s, anti-religious propaganda intensified, religious institutions were closed, and various restrictions were imposed on religious activity. At the same time, religious beliefs and certain customs continued to exist in unofficial forms.

The experience of this period clearly demonstrates the distinction between secularism and atheism. A secular state should ensure equal legal treatment of different beliefs and worldviews. Ideological atheism, by contrast, privileges one worldview while restricting the opportunities of others within the public sphere. For this reason, religious tolerance should be assessed not only in terms of the separation of religion and the state, but also in terms of the possibility for different faiths to exist and

be expressed freely.

The establishment of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in Tashkent in 1943 marked the beginning of a certain degree of relaxation in the operation of religious institutions. A. Salmonov identifies this development as a distinct stage in Soviet religious policy. Nevertheless, religious activity continued to be conducted under state supervision, and this situation did not amount to full religious freedom.

This historical period leads to an important conclusion for understanding religious tolerance: the relative absence of open religious conflict in society does not necessarily indicate the existence of genuine tolerance. If the free expression of different beliefs is restricted, outward social stability may result not from mutual respect, but rather from limitations imposed on religious activity.

After 1991, religious life and religious identity began to manifest themselves more actively in society. This process cannot be adequately explained solely through the concept of a “religious revival.” During the same period, the relationship between religious memory, national identity, the secular state, and freedom of conscience also acquired new meanings. Z. Husniddinov analyzes religious tolerance as an important social value closely associated with societal development and relations among different confessions. B. O. Turaev and M. A. Artikov, in turn, link tolerance in Central Asia to historical experience and contemporary interfaith harmony. From this period onward, religious tolerance in Uzbekistan increasingly came to be regarded not only as part of the country’s historical heritage, but also as a principle that contributes to mutual respect, equality, and social harmony in contemporary society. In addition to the peaceful coexistence of representatives of different faiths within one society, issues concerning their rights, freedom of conscience, and civic equality also assumed considerable importance.

Research conducted in Kazakhstan reveals other dimensions of post-independence religious life. A. G. Kosichenko and E. E. Burova have analyzed the role of religion in public life, relations between the state and religious organizations, and emerging religious processes. E. E. Burova draws attention to the increasing complexity of individual and group forms of contemporary religiosity. In a 2023 sociological study, E. E. Burova and Sh. E. Zhamanbalayeva examined the religious situation in Kazakhstan on the basis of

empirical data.

These studies demonstrate that it is insufficient to explain religious tolerance solely through the notion of a historically inherited “tradition of harmony.” Religious views, levels of religious activity, and forms of belief within society change over time. Therefore, contemporary social processes must also be taken into account when examining the issue of tolerance. A comparison of the experiences of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan shows that, despite their shared historical and cultural roots, there is no single model of religious tolerance in Central Asia. The principle of secularism, the role of religious organizations in society, and the forms of interfaith dialogue differ across the countries of the region. For this reason, rather than interpreting religious tolerance in Central Asia through a single predetermined model, it is more appropriate to approach it as a question of maintaining a balance among religious freedom, secularism, civic equality, and social stability.

Although the five Central Asian states share a common Soviet past, religious processes after independence did not develop in the same way in each of them. These differences cannot be explained solely by variations in state policy. The historical formation of religious identity, the ethnic composition of the population, the level of urbanization, the role of religious organizations in society, and the degree to which secular lifestyles have become established have also influenced these processes. A. K. Sultangaliyeva analyzes Islam in Kazakhstan in relation to history, ethnicity, and society, demonstrating that religious identity cannot be reduced solely to worship or religious practice.

This point is also important in assessing religious tolerance, because the level of religiosity in a society and the level of tolerance are not identical concepts. Religiosity reflects the extent to which an individual or a group is attached to a particular faith, whereas religious tolerance concerns attitudes toward people who hold different views and beliefs. It would also be inappropriate to apply the findings of studies conducted in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan directly to the experiences of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, or Turkmenistan. The role of religion in public life, the scope of activity available to religious organizations, and the manifestation of secular values in everyday life differ across the countries of the region. Therefore, while common criteria may be used in comparative analysis, the states of Central Asia should not be assessed according to a single uniform model. Such criteria may include freedom of conscience, non-

discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, interfaith dialogue, and civic equality.

From this perspective, the concept of “Central Asian tolerance” should also be used with caution. It may reflect the historical and cultural proximity of the peoples of the region, but it does not fully capture the specific characteristics of the religious situation in each individual state. From a philosophical standpoint, the central issue concerns how people with different religious and non-religious worldviews can live together in a common secular society on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

Under contemporary conditions, religious tolerance can be understood through several interconnected dimensions. First, before forming judgments about another faith, it is necessary to seek an accurate understanding of it. In addition, human dignity should not depend on whether a person belongs to a particular religion or does not adhere to any religion at all. Another important aspect is recognition of the individual’s right to profess a religion, to change one’s religious beliefs, or to hold no religious belief. Furthermore, the ability of people with different views to cooperate on matters of common concern to society is also an important indicator of tolerance.

Tolerance does not mean considering all beliefs and viewpoints to be identical or equally acceptable. A person may disagree with another faith or regard it as incompatible with his or her own convictions. However, such disagreement cannot serve as a basis for denying another person’s rights, dignity, or equal status in society. In the context of Central Asia, it is insufficient to assess religious tolerance solely by the absence of open conflict. A society may display outward stability, but this does not necessarily mean that different religious views are able to exist freely and on an equal basis. For this reason, the actual level of tolerance should be assessed together with religious freedom, civic equality, and mutual respect.

A review of historical developments also shows that the meaning of religious tolerance has changed over time. During the Jadid period, greater emphasis was placed on enlightenment and dialogue, whereas during the Soviet period religious life was subjected to ideological restrictions. After independence, the issue of maintaining a balance among religious freedom, secularism, and civic equality once again became highly relevant.

The consolidation of religious tolerance in the region

depends on two major factors. The first is equal treatment of all citizens by the state and the legal system regardless of their religious beliefs. The second is the development of respectful and impartial attitudes toward people of other faiths within education, local communities, religious organizations, academic and educational environments, and the mass media. Only when legal guarantees and a culture of respectful everyday interaction complement one another can religious tolerance become a stable social value in practice.

3. Conclusion

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the meaning of religious tolerance in Central Asia evolved in accordance with changing historical conditions. In the early twentieth century, during the Jadid period, the ideas of enlightenment, new modes of thinking, and social reform created a basis for a broader approach to religious issues. During the Soviet period, although freedom of conscience was formally recognized, the predominance of atheistic ideology restricted the free development of religious life. Following independence, religious tolerance acquired a new meaning in connection with freedom of conscience, secularism, civic equality, and interfaith harmony.

The analysis shows that religious tolerance cannot be assessed solely in terms of peace or the absence of conflict. Its essential features include the equality of representatives of different faiths and worldviews before the law, their ability to express their beliefs freely, and their participation in social life on the basis of mutual respect. In this sense, tolerance should not be understood as passive “endurance,” but rather as a culture of recognizing the existence of different views and being able to coexist and cooperate peacefully with those who hold them.

The experience of Central Asia also demonstrates that religious tolerance is shaped not only by historical heritage, but also by contemporary social and legal relations. Under present-day conditions, the primary objective is not to eliminate religious and non-religious differences, but to ensure that people holding diverse views can coexist within a shared civic space on the basis of mutual respect, human dignity, and freedom of conscience. Such an approach helps to understand religious tolerance as one of the essential conditions for social stability and harmony.

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