

## **Religious Tolerance as A Historical and Modern Foundation of Interethnic Relations**

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the functional role of religious tolerance in balancing and developing interethnic relations within the context of historical continuity and contemporary socio-political processes. The ideological stereotypes of historiography during the former Soviet period are critically examined, while the historical roots of the culture of interreligious dialogue and tolerance formed over centuries in the land of Movarounnahr are objectively assessed. The study employs methods of historicism, comparative analysis, and a systematic approach. Under the conditions of New Uzbekistan, institutional reforms aimed at ensuring harmony among various nationalities and confessions in the republic, as well as the concept of the "Uzbek model of tolerance," are conceptualized. In conclusion, practical recommendations are proposed for enhancing the historical consciousness and culture of tolerance among youth in the process of building the foundation of the Third Renaissance.

**Keywords:** religious tolerance, ethnic relations, "Avesta," Kushan period, Buddhist monuments, Nestorianism, Manichaeism, Movarounnahr, chronicles, archival data, statistics of confessions.

### **Introduction**

Religious tolerance and interethnic harmony are among the highest spiritual values of human social development, playing a foundational role in the stable development of multinational societies and in the formation of an atmosphere of mutual respect and cultural cooperation. The balance of interethnic relations is a complex integrative system directly connected with the socio-political experience of past centuries, interconfessional dialectical relations, and the level of social consciousness. In the stable and dynamic development of this system, numerous institutional and spiritual factors - including state policy, legal norms, the educational system, and the historical memory of the people - play a decisive role.

At the same time, throughout the history of nations, there have always existed unique periods of radical renewal, during which the conceptual potential of a particular state and society, as well as its aspiration to demonstrate traditions of peace and tolerance, rises to the highest levels. At the current stage of building New Uzbekistan, fundamental reforms are being implemented in all spheres of social life, particularly in the socio-spiritual sphere [1,2,3]. As the conceptual foundation of these reforms, the idea of creating the basis of the Third Renaissance has been advanced, which is directly connected with the formation of spiritual immunity in the hearts of the younger generation against destructive ideas, as well as educating them to be cultured and, most importantly, highly tolerant in interethnic relations [4]. In a society lacking traditions of religious tolerance and interconfessional harmony, it is impossible to achieve national self-awareness, strengthen state independence and its geopolitical security, or look confidently toward the future. Therefore, an impartial and systematic study of the experience of tolerance in our historical past and the introduction of its conceptual models into modern social practice constitute one of the most urgent tasks facing the disciplines of history, political science, and source studies today.

During the former Soviet regime, interethnic relations and the history of religions in the territory of Uzbekistan were, in many cases, interpreted one-sidedly on the basis of the dominant Marxist-Leninist ideological framework and from the perspective of the principles of “religion as the opium of the people” and class struggle [5]. The centuries-old friendly relations between Islam and other confessions in the region, as well as the processes of mutual cultural enrichment, were falsified, while historical sources and the ideas of thinkers concerning tolerance were concealed from the scholarly community or criticized solely from an atheistic standpoint. During the years of independence, and especially under the conditions of New Uzbekistan, this approach changed fundamentally. Social and humanitarian sciences have now abandoned sociological and ideological stereotypes and instead rely on concrete and objective facts - namely, the traditions of historical continuity.

Religious tolerance is not merely patience toward representatives of other beliefs, but rather the recognition of the equal rights of different religions and cultures, respect for their uniqueness, and the establishment of cooperation for the development of society [6]. For centuries, the territory of Uzbekistan (Movarounnahr) has served as a unique cultural crossroads where Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islamic civilizations coexisted peacefully and enriched one another. In the history of this land, the philosophical and legal heritage left by our great thinkers such as Imam al-Bukhari, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, Abu Rayhan Beruni, and Alisher Navoi played an incomparable role in shaping religious tolerance [7]. Indeed, their works and social views continue to hold significant importance today in forming the humanistic consciousness of the peoples of Central Asia.

Particularly during the period of independence - from 1991 to the present day - enormous practical efforts have been undertaken in the process of renewing national spirituality and improving the institutional foundations of state policy to create an Uzbek model of religious tolerance and interethnic harmony, guarantee religious freedoms, and ensure equal rights for representatives of more than 130 nationalities and ethnic groups and 16 religious confessions in the republic. Today, studying these centuries-old historical traditions in harmony with modern norms of international law and strategic programs possesses important scientific and theoretical significance in demonstrating the place of New Uzbekistan within the world community.

### **Literature Review and Methods**

The conceptual foundations of religious tolerance and interethnic relations have long been among the fundamental directions extensively studied within the framework of global and national social and humanitarian sciences. For the purpose of scientifically analyzing this issue, it is appropriate to classify the existing body of literature into three main groups.

The first group includes the works of foreign researchers who studied the general conceptual, philosophical, and legal aspects of tolerance and interethnic dialogue. In particular, beginning with classical thinkers such as John Locke and Voltaire, modern Western researchers have analyzed tolerance in their works as a political and legal instrument ensuring civil peace in pluralistic societies [8]. However, Western sociological schools often interpret tolerance within the frameworks of “subjective patience” or “multiculturalism,” which cannot fully reveal the centuries-old transformation and value-based model of tolerance characteristic of the peoples of Central Asia.

The second group consists of studies devoted to the historical roots of interconfessional dialectics, interethnic relations, and cultural integration in the territory of Central Asia and Uzbekistan. In this direction, monographic studies conducted by scholars of our country occupy a special place [9]. These studies demonstrate, through historical sources such as waqf documents, coins, and official decrees, that representatives of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other religions coexisted for centuries on the land of Movarounnahr without conflicts and within a culture of mutual cooperation. In addition, the philosophy of tolerance and the role of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi in the science of kalam have been widely covered by modern Orientalist scholars [10].

The third group of literature is directly devoted to the institutional mechanisms and state strategies

for ensuring social stability and interethnic harmony under the conditions of New Uzbekistan. In their recent scientific articles, researchers have socio-philosophically analyzed the issues of enhancing the historical consciousness of youth and the culture of religious tolerance in the process of creating the foundation of the Third Renaissance [11].

The study made it possible to examine the stages of formation and development of interethnic and interconfessional relations in the territory of Movarounnahr in historical sequence and in accordance with the socio-political context of each period. It was applied for the purpose of comparing the traditions of tolerance of the past and their legal-spiritual foundations with the models of interethnic harmony in the state policy of present-day New Uzbekistan, as well as identifying the characteristics of the transformation of values. The concept of religious tolerance was studied as an integral part of social life and as a macrostructure (system) ensuring the stability of interethnic relations, while its structural components - legal norms, the activities of cultural centers, and the role of religious organizations - were analyzed. It also served to reject the one-sided ideological views of Soviet-era historiography and to impartially reassess primary sources from the perspective of the present day [12]. The empirical basis of the research consists of decrees and resolutions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, statistical data of the Republican Committee on National Cultural Centers and Friendship Relations with Foreign Countries, as well as scientific-analytical materials published in recent years in this field.

### **Results and Discussion**

The system of religious tolerance is not merely a set of spiritual views, but also an institution ensuring the structural stability of society. Religious tolerance possesses several main aspects, which include the following:

1. Understanding and respecting the uniqueness of every religion and belief system;
2. Recognizing religious diversity and striving to preserve social peace in the practice of religious customs and traditions;
3. Paying attention to the rights and freedoms of every religious view and preventing discrimination against any religion.

Religious tolerance is essential for achieving mutual understanding and compromise, as well as for ensuring prosperity and peace within society. In today's developed society, creating such an environment remains an important task for many states. Indeed, religious tolerance helps to ensure peace and solidarity among representatives of different religions. This, in turn, prevents conflicts and clashes that may arise within society. In a society lacking religious tolerance, feelings of distrust, fear, and hatred emerge among people, leading to national or interreligious conflicts. Therefore, religious tolerance unites people of different faiths and forms feelings of solidarity and cohesion among them.

Religious tolerance is regarded as an important factor accelerating and stimulating social and economic development in society. This process promotes cooperation among people of different religions, creating opportunities to unite new ideas and forces, expand trade, attract investments, and create new jobs. An important means of forming religious tolerance is connected with communication and courtesy, which help to study religious and cultural diversity among people. Through open dialogue, understanding various accepted views and customs increases mutual trust and prevents social contradictions.

The rich cultural values of the peoples of the region occupy a significant place in world civilization. Even their unique methods of military art, clothing, and weapons were studied by other nations. For example, sources mention that the Huns brought Khorezmian armor to Europe, the Avars purchased Fergana horses, and the Scythians used the composite bone bows of the Saka and Massagetae in battles.

Researchers acknowledge that the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the "Avesta," emerged in

Khorezm in the first millennium BCE. It is said that the Avesta was initially subjected to the “suppression” of Alexander the Macedonian; in particular, some studies note that after becoming acquainted with the ideas contained in this book, he ordered it to be burned out of fear that the influence of Hellenistic culture would diminish. After this, several attempts were made to restore the Avesta. The Avesta contains historical information related to ancient Khorezm, legends, religious, philosophical, and ethical ideas, as well as extensive information concerning ancient Uzbek and Persian culture. Ancient Khorezm constituted a part of the golden ages of ancient Turan history, and the Avesta mentions many tribes and socio-historical events related to them [13]. Among the ethical values of the Avesta, justice was regarded as the most important principle. In Zoroastrianism, justice was expressed through the concept of “Asha.” The belief system reflected in the Avesta exerted a strong influence on the social development and cultural life of ancient Khorezm through the following aspects:

1. The principle of the struggle between good and evil formed moral values and social discipline among the population;
2. High respect for nature (water, earth, fire, and air) gave rise to principles of environmental justice and discipline in the management of natural resources;
3. Religious ceremonies and traditions strengthened feelings of solidarity and tolerance among people;
4. Values such as justice, truthfulness, and compassion called upon peoples to unite under the banner of a common homeland.

A fair attitude toward nature ensures social stability among people and creates the foundation for maintaining balance between humanity and nature. Thanks to independence and the initiative of the government, the 2700th anniversary of the “Avesta” was solemnly celebrated at the international level in November 2001 [14].

As a result of the development of Buddhist teachings, which rose to the level of a state religion during the Kushan Kingdom, by the 5th–6th centuries CE there was an observable migration of Buddhist monks from the northern Kashmir regions of India to the territories of Central Asia. The Kushan Kingdom encompassed vast territories, which played an important role in the spread of Buddhism across wide regions [10, p. 236]. In turn, the Kushan emperors, particularly Emperor Kanishka, supported Buddhism as an official religion and contributed to its development and increasing influence. Buddhism mainly spread to ancient China, Central Asia, and other territories through the Great Silk Road and trade caravans. The spread of Buddhism positively influenced the development of art and architecture and enriched philosophical thought. In particular, sculpture and mural paintings became widespread in art, depicting the life of Buddha. Temples discovered in the Surkhandarya region were recognized as important institutions for religious education. In architecture, sacred mausoleums called “stupas” became widespread, and archaeological studies have revealed that they also existed extensively in Bukhara and Samarkand [15].

Most importantly, during the Kushan Kingdom, the coexistence of representatives of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and even Christianity and Judaism within one territory formed among people a sense of mutual respect toward religious beliefs and helped preserve peace for many years. While fire worship became widespread in the region during the era of the Iranian Achaemenids, sources record that the earliest Christian communities fleeing persecution in ancient Iran settled in the territories of Sogd, Chach, and Khorezm in Central Asia. For example, when a prince of the ancient Iranian state was persecuted for accepting Christianity and fled to ancient Sogd, the ruler of Bukhara, Bukharkhudat, showed him generosity and granted him extensive land and property. Archaeological excavations in Ancient Merv, Koktepa, and along the shores of Issyk-Kul (Qurmanti) uncovered Christian temples and religious artifacts. In particular, Orthodox Christians (Melkites) lived in Khorezm, while Nestorian Christians resided in Merv, Sogd, and Chach.

Although the teachings of Zoroastrianism were highly developed in Central Asia, they did not

hinder the spread of Christianity. Moreover, it is known that episcopal positions were established within Christian communities in ancient Fergana and Kashgar, and that they participated in the assemblies of the “Ecumenical Council of Christians” in 424. In the Hephthalite state that emerged in the mid-5th century and in the Turkic Khaganate of the 6th century, communities professing Zoroastrianism, Tengrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Christianity freely practiced their religions, while social peace was preserved. The emergence of Manichaeism in Central Asia during the early Middle Ages and its wide dissemination in the territories of Samarkand and Chaghaniyan became a symbol of interethnic harmony. The residence of the leader of Manichaeism was established in Samarkand, and by the end of the 7th century the ancient Sogdian language had been recognized as the official language of Manichaean doctrine, thereby creating the foundation for the emergence of rich Manichaean literature in Sogdian and Turkic languages [16].

During the 9th–12th centuries, when Islam spread widely throughout Movarounnahr and Sharia traditions were introduced into social life, tolerance continued to be preserved. The encyclopedic scholar Abu Rayhan Beruni wrote in the 11th century that Zoroastrian (Majusi) communities still existed in Bukhara and Samarkand. Fire-worship temples discovered in the Romitan district of Bukhara region are identified in the works of Abu Bakr Narshakhi as belonging to these communities. Beruni also noted in his writings that an Orthodox metropolitan and several Nestorian Christian bishops were active in Merv. According to the historian Narshakhi, a Christian church was located near the Attaron Gate in Bukhara. Furthermore, as a result of the missionary activities of Patriarch Timothy (780–819), Christianity also spread among the Turkic khagans.

In the work entitled “Travels,” written in 1165 by the famous Jewish traveler Benjamin (Veniamin) of Tudela, it is noted that the number of Jews increased toward the East. Israeli scholar Reuven Bensman wrote that the first Jewish synagogue in Bukhara had already been built in the 8th century and scientifically proved that Jews persecuted in Europe and the Byzantine Empire possessed equal rights with representatives of other religions in Central Asia.

The verses of the Holy Qur’an and the hadiths, which constitute the foundation of Islam, promote maintaining good relations among people and calling for goodness. These ideas reached their highest peak in the works of Eastern scholars. In his work “The Virtuous City,” Abu Nasr al-Farabi emphasized that groups of people should prefer cooperation with one another. Abu Rayhan Beruni, in his work “India,” advocated that nations should live in friendship and unity and condemned wars. In his “Hikmats,” Ahmad Yassawi wrote: “It is a Sunnah - even if one is an infidel, do not cause harm; God detests the hard-hearted who hurt others,” thereby emphasizing that even non-believers should not be harmed. The principal motto of the Naqshbandi order, “Dil ba yoru, dast ba kor” (“Heart with God, hands at work”), demonstrated the necessity of living through faith and honest labor. Jalaluddin Rumi, revered by followers of all religions, advanced the principle: “The paths are different, but the goal is one - the presence of God,” and acknowledged that religions were created for humanity, not humanity for religions.

The works of Ibn Arabshah also state that, alongside Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists faithfully served in the army of Amir Temur. Ibn Arabshah wrote: “Among Temur’s soldiers were idol-worshipping Turks and Magian Persians who worshipped fire.” This demonstrates that Amir Temur accepted those who served him loyally regardless of their nationality, race, or faith, thereby displaying qualities of tolerance and showing equal concern for all of them.

During the Jadid movement period, Mahmudkhoja Behbudi wrote that the Holy Qur’an granted freedom of religion and conscience to others, while Abdurauf Fitrat, in his treatise “Rahbari Najot,” emphasized that religion consists of moral principles leading humanity toward happiness in both worlds. This indicates that the most important virtue of citizens lies not in their race or religion, but in dedicating their existence to humanity.

After Uzbekistan achieved independence, freedom of belief and attitudes toward religion changed positively in a favorable direction, and religion began to be regarded as a part of spiritual values. Legal documents established that insulting the religious feelings of citizens was impermissible. As

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized: “For many centuries, representatives of different nations, ethnic groups, cultures, and religions have lived peacefully on our ancient and generous land. Hospitality, kindness, generosity of heart, and true tolerance have always been characteristic of our people and constitute the foundation of their mentality.”

During this period, important anniversaries were celebrated at the state level with the aim of studying the scientific and spiritual heritage of great scholars and restoring their historical memory:

- 1993 was declared the “Year of Ahmad Yassawi,” and the 675th anniversary of Bahauddin Naqshband was celebrated;
- In 1995, the 850th anniversary of Najmiddin Kubra was commemorated;
- In 1998, the 1225th anniversary of the birth of Imam al-Bukhari was solemnly celebrated;
- In 2007, the Hazrati Imam religious and architectural complex in the city of Tashkent was reconstructed and restored.

In addition, the first regional Christian-Muslim conference in Central Asia, held on October 10–12, 1995, possessed particular significance. Representatives of religions from five states participated in the conference under the slogan “Living Together Under One Sky.”

Today, in our republic, 16 religious confessions and more than 2,300 religious organizations operate in mutual harmony. Their composition is reflected in the following official statistical table:

№	Type of religious organization	Number
1	Islamic organizations (mosques, etc.)	2 148
2	Non-Islamic religious organizations	199
3	Total religious organizations	2 347
4	Number of religious denominations	16
5	Religious educational institutions	16

More than two thousand nations and ethnic groups live in over two hundred countries around the world, communicating in more than seven thousand languages. Under such complex conditions, humanity condemns religious fundamentalism, terrorism, and radicalism, recognizing that they pose a threat to development and religious tolerance.

Our research demonstrates that the development of interethnic relations fosters mutual understanding and respect among different cultures. The development and strengthening of tolerance within the system of nations and interethnic relations occupy an important place in the progress of a country. Therefore, it is necessary to instill in the consciousness of young people such humanistic traditions that glorify humanity as tolerance, harmony, and patience.

### Conclusion

As a result of the comprehensive and systematic study of the historical and modern foundations of religious tolerance and interethnic relations, the following scientific, theoretical, and practical conclusions were reached:

First, historical-retrospective analyses have shown that in the territory of Uzbekistan (Movarounnahr), interconfessional tolerance and interethnic harmony are not accidental socio-political phenomena, but rather fundamental values formed over centuries. The long-term coexistence without conflicts of the civilizations of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in this region created a unique “cultural synthesis.” In this process, the humanistic views and legal-theological concepts of great thinkers such as Imam al-Bukhari, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, and Alisher Navoi served as a spiritual filter that shaped a stable social

environment based on mutual respect in the region.

Second, it has been proven that during the period of the former Soviet system, the history of religions and the evolution of interethnic relations were interpreted in a one-sided and distorted manner under the framework of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the principle of class struggle. Today, by abandoning sociological stereotypes and introducing written sources and archival documents into scientific circulation, it has been possible to objectively restore the genuine functional role of religious tolerance in maintaining the balance of interethnic relations. It has been established that only a society with restored historical memory and consciousness is capable of understanding itself and strengthening its national identity.

Third, during the years of independence, particularly in the context of building New Uzbekistan, centuries-old traditions of tolerance have been successfully integrated with the institutional and legal foundations of state policy. A “Uzbek model of tolerance” has been developed, ensuring equal rights for more than 130 nationalities and ethnic groups and 16 religious confessions residing in the republic. This model serves as the main criterion in educating the younger generation in the spirit of patriotism, tolerance, and spiritual immunity against various destructive ideologies, forming the foundation of the Third Renaissance.

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