

**ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIANITY FOUND IN MUSLIM TRADITIONS
ON THE EXAMPLE OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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ABSTRACT Purpose: To identify syncretic elements derived from Christian influence in Central Asian Muslim traditions and to analyze their manifestations in contemporary religious practice. Methods: A qualitative study was conducted between 2021 and 2023 in five regions of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, with the participation of 166 respondents; in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and analysis of historical documents were employed. Results: 71.7% of respondents reported regularly or occasionally engaging in at least one syncretic practice. Shrine visitation (68.7%), forty-day ceremonies (84.3%), and recourse to sacred springs (52.4%) were identified as the most widespread elements. Conclusion: Syncretic elements assimilated from Christian, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist traditions have historically been integrated into Central Asian Muslim religious practice and remain actively present today, reflecting the complex, multi-layered nature of religious identity.

Keywords: syncretism, Central Asian Islam, Christianity, folk religiosity, shrine visitation, forty-day ceremony, sacred spring, religious traditions, Nestorianism, religious anthropology.

INTRODUCTION Central Asia is a crossroads where various civilizations, religions, and cultures have converged over many centuries. Religious practice in this region is a complex system that encompasses not only the pure normative forms of Islam but also traces of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, shamanism, and Christianity. Before the adoption of Islam following the Arab conquest of the 7th–8th centuries, Christianity in the Nestorian tradition was widespread in Central Asia, particularly along the Silk Road. The Nestorians conducted active missionary work in Sogdiana, Bactria, and the Fergana Valley, giving rise to distinctive religio-cultural traditions among the local population. Although the phenomenon known as 'folk Islam' or 'practical Islam' has been fairly well studied in Central Asia, the Christian traces within it have not yet been sufficiently investigated. The Russian scholar Bartold V.V. recorded the earliest observations on Christian-Islamic syncretism in this region

in the 19th century. Subsequently, Western scholars such as DeWeese D. (1994), Baldauf I. (1993), and Privratsky B. (2001) analyzed the pre-Islamic and Islamic layers that shaped Central Asian Muslim practices. However, modern comparative studies devoted specifically to Christian elements are scarce.

Syncretism is the process by which elements of different religious traditions blend together to form new mixed religious systems or practices. This phenomenon unfolded historically in Central Asia as a natural and complex process: each civilization that conquered the region did not obliterate earlier religious strata but integrated them into its own system, or they were assimilated by the local population into the new religion. The result of this process is the multi-layered religious phenomenon observable in contemporary Central Asian Muslim practice.

The aim of the present study is to identify elements of Christian origin or elements paralleling Christianity through a qualitative ethnographic study conducted in five Central Asian states, to demonstrate their geographic distribution, and to analyze how these elements have become intertwined with modern Muslim identity.

METHODS

Research Design The study was conducted using a qualitative ethnographic design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the content and context of religious practices, and the way respondents interpret them, are more fully revealed through rich description than through numbers. Study duration: March 2021 – June 2023; a total of 28 months of fieldwork and analysis.

Research Field and Sample The research was carried out in five Central Asian states — Uzbekistan (Samarkand and Bukhara regions), Kyrgyzstan (Osh and Jalal-Abad), Tajikistan (Khatlon region), Turkmenistan (Lebap and Mary regions), and Kazakhstan (Turkestan and Shymkent) — purposefully selected as the main Silk Road centers where Christianity was historically active. A total of 166 respondents (aged 18–75; 54% male, 46% female) participated. The sample was formed through purposive and snowball sampling, with priority given to religiously knowledgeable individuals — imams, ishans, pilgrims, community activists, and local historians.

Data Collection Methods Four primary methods were used in the study. The first was in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=89): each conversation lasted 45–90 minutes, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The second was focus group discussions (8 groups, 5–9 participants each), conducted to identify group opinions and social norms regarding practices. The third was participant observation: the researcher directly participated in shrine visits, forty-day ceremonies, and other religious events, keeping detailed field notes. The fourth was analysis of historical and archival documents: epigraphic inscriptions from the Nestorian era, diaries of nomads and travelers, and Soviet-era ethnographic reports were examined.

Method of Analysis The data were analyzed using thematic analysis — based on the six-stage process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were developed, then themes were grouped and theoretically grounded. Research ethics: all respondents gave verbal consent; data were processed with anonymity preserved. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies (No. E-2021/18).

Table 1. Classification of syncretic elements identified in Central Asian Muslim traditions

Element / Practice	Christian Source	Islamic Manifestation	Region of Prevalence
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Visitation of sacred sites (Mazars)	Pilgrimage to saints' tombs (Catholic, Orthodox)	Visitation of saints' mausoleums, recitation	Fergana Valley, Samarkand
Holy water (spring cults)	Sacred springs, infant baptism	Veneration of healing springs, treatment	Mountain regions of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan
Candle lighting and symbolism of light	Church candles, Easter light	Lighting lamps at shrines and mosques	Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan
Forty-day ceremonies	Forty days of mourning in Christianity, the fortieth day	Forty-day ceremony (qirq oshi) in Islam	All of Central Asia
Talismans and sacred symbols	Cross, icons, sacred images	Amulets, tuvit, objects inscribed with Quranic verses	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan
Beliefs in fate and intercession	Intercession of saints (Catholic, Orthodox theology)	Appeals to ishan, pir, and sacred figures	Fergana, Khorezm, Tashkent

Note: The table lists only elements of Christian origin or with clear parallels to Christianity; Zoroastrian and shamanistic elements are the subject of a separate study.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Syncretic Practices During the study, 119 of the 166 respondents (71.7%) acknowledged regularly or occasionally engaging in at least one syncretic practice. The most widespread practice was the forty-day memorial meal ceremony, with 84.3% of respondents reporting that they observe this tradition. Visitation of shrines and saints' graves was assessed as a current practice by 68.7% of respondents. Recourse to sacred springs was recorded by 52.4% of respondents; this practice is particularly strong in the mountain regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Geographically, the highest concentration of syncretic elements was observed along the Samarkand–Bukhara–Termez corridor. These areas were historically the principal regions of spread for Nestorianism and other Christian denominations. Archaeological data and epigraphic inscriptions confirm the active presence of Christian communities in these regions during the 5th–9th centuries. In the southern regions of Kazakhstan, particularly in the city of Turkestan (ancient Yasi), practices related to talismans and beliefs in intercession have been preserved.

Shrine Visitation and the Cult of Saints Shrine visitation is the most visible syncretic phenomenon in Central Asia, potentially assimilated from the Christian tradition of visiting the graves of saints. The Nestorians had long regarded the visitation of the graves of saints and martyrs, praying at them, and seeking healing for the sick as a sacred practice. After the adoption of Islam, this tradition took the form of visitation to the mausoleums of walis — Islamic saints. In 17 of the 48 shrines analyzed (35.4%), epigraphic traces of the Christian era, architectural elements, or local legends were identified. At the 'Khoja Davud' shrine in Samarkand and 'Chor Bakr' in Bukhara, the practices of praying to saints and seeking healing displayed a remarkable similarity to Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

Forty-Day Ceremonies: A Common Stratum The forty-day memorial meal ceremony — a gathering and offering of food held forty days after a person's death — is widespread in all five states. This ceremony has no direct grounding in Islamic law; however, in Eastern Christian traditions — particularly in Orthodox Christianity and Nestorianism — a forty-day period of mourning and prayer following death holds great significance. The importance of the 'fortieth day' service is specially

emphasized in the Rule of the Apostle Barnabas and in ancient Syriac liturgical texts. In focus group discussions, while many respondents considered this ceremony 'Islamic,' the majority of muftis and imams acknowledged that it has no Quranic basis. The possibility that this ceremony traces back to ancient Near Eastern mourning traditions — which are also reflected in Christianity — was discussed.

Holy Waters and Spring Cults The practice of veneration of sacred springs has been strongly preserved in the mountain regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This practice involved approaching a location where water flows, using the water for healing purposes, and sometimes leaving cloth or coins near the water. The parallelism between this practice and the Christian traditions of infant baptism (immersion) and pilgrimage to holy springs (Lourdes, Fatima) is noteworthy. According to comparative analysis, the Nestorians also incorporated prayer at rivers and springs into their practice. 14 respondents (8.4%) stated that they keep spring water specially as a source of 'baraka' (blessing).

Candles and Symbolism of Light The practice of lighting candles or 'lamps' at various shrines and mosques was recorded by 43.4% of respondents in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In Christianity, particularly in Orthodox and Catholic traditions, lighting a candle during prayer is a central symbolic act — it represents Christ as 'the light of the world.' The lighting of candles at shrines and saints' mausoleums may be interpreted as a transposition of this symbolism into an Islamic environment; some respondents explained it as 'if I light a candle, my prayer will be accepted.' This practice is not directly indicated in the Quran or hadith, yet it is widespread.

Table 2. Data on the research field, sample, and key findings

State / Region	Sample size (n)	Methods used	Key finding
Uzbekistan (Samarkand, Bukhara)	48 persons	In-depth interview, observation	Shrine visitation and candle-lighting are widespread
Kyrgyzstan (Osh, Jalal-Abad)	36 persons	Focus group, observation	Veneration of sacred springs is active
Tajikistan (Khatlon region)	29 persons	Interview, document analysis	Forty-day ceremonies and pir cults
Turkmenistan (Lebap, Mary)	22 persons	Questionnaire, observation	Shrine and lamp-lighting traditions preserved
Kazakhstan (Turkestan, Shymkent)	31 persons	Focus group, interview	Talisman and intercession beliefs are widespread

Note: Respondents were selected using purposive sampling; all interviews and focus group discussions were conducted under conditions of anonymity.

DISCUSSION The findings of the study confirm the existence of a number of phenomena in Central Asian Muslim practice that can be interpreted as elements preserved from, or paralleling, Christian traditions. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of DeWeese D. (1994) in 'Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde' — the theory that pre-existing religious traditions were preserved during the Islamic transition in Central Asia. The study conducted by Privratsky B. (2001) in Kazakhstan also demonstrated the multi-layered structure of folk Islam in 'Muslim Turkestan.'

An important methodological note: it is difficult to prove that these elements derived directly from Christianity, since some of them — such as forty-day mourning or veneration of sacred sources — may also belong to the common pre-Islamic Near Eastern religious stock. In this sense, the present study does not adopt the firm conclusion that 'these practices were assimilated exclusively from Christianity,' but rather takes the cautious position that 'they have clear parallels with Christianity'

and, in some cases, a direct historical connection.' Separating the influence of Christianity from that of Zoroastrianism or shamanism is in many instances difficult, which remains a methodological challenge for future research.

One important conclusion from the standpoint of religious identification is that the overwhelming majority of respondents do not consider the syncretic practices they perform to be 'contrary to Islam.' On the contrary, they interpret these traditions as 'our customs,' harmonizing them with Islamic ethics. This phenomenon corresponds to the theory of Geertz C. (1968) regarding the function of religion as a 'cultural system': religion takes on a distinctive form within the local cultural context, and even if this form differs from the normative text, it is considered socially 'authentic.'

Among the study's limitations are the following: the relatively small sample size (166 persons) restricts broad generalization; the researcher's position as an external observer may have hindered access to some sensitive information; moreover, it is not always possible to distinguish a 'Christian element' from a 'Zoroastrian element.' Conducting comparative studies jointly with historical archaeology and linguistics in the future could deepen these matters.

CONCLUSION The present study has demonstrated that a number of elements that parallel or were assimilated from Christian religious practices — shrine visitation, forty-day ceremonies, veneration of sacred springs, candle lighting, and seeking intercession from saints — remain actively present in Central Asian Muslim traditions today. 71.7% of respondents reported engaging in at least one such practice.

These findings confirm that the Islam of Central Asia is historically not a pure normative religious system, but rather the religio-cultural product of centuries of inter-civilizational dialogue. The Nestorians were active in this region until the 7th century, and the religio-cultural imprint they left continued to survive in various forms even after the arrival of Islam. It is scientifically more appropriate to understand this phenomenon not as 'corruption' or 'bid'a' (innovation), but as a historical-cultural adaptation of religious traditions.

In terms of practical significance, this study may assist scholars of the sociology of religion, history, and cultural studies, as well as regional policymakers, in properly understanding the religious complexity of Central Asian societies. Rather than denying or suppressing religious syncretism, understanding its historical mechanisms can serve as a foundation for deepening regional religious dialogue.

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