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Gulsunkhon TILLYABAYEVA[a]

[a]*Doctoral Researcher, International Islamic Studies Academy of Uzbekistan*
E-mail: gulsunxon@gmail.com

THE PHENOMENON OF SACRED SITES IN WORLD RELIGIONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PAST AND PRESENT ON THE EXAMPLE OF UZBEKISTAN

Abstract. *This article examines sacred sites as a cross-religious phenomenon through the case of Uzbekistan, a territory where Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Christian, Judaic and Islamic sacred geographies have overlapped one after another. Few comparative studies explain why particular places keep their sacred status through changes of religious tradition, political regime and social order, and this is the research problem the article addresses. The theoretical framework draws on Mircea Eliade's concepts of hierophany, axis mundi and the opposition of sacred and profane space, and on Rudolf Otto's category of the numinous (mysterium tremendum et fascinans), which together allow sacred sites to be analysed both as structures of religious space and as places of religious experience. The study combines phenomenological, comparative-historical and typological approaches, drawing on archaeological data, written sources and current pilgrimage practices. Its historical and empirical scope covers Zoroastrian fire temples and dakhmas, Buddhist monastic complexes of ancient Bactria and Tokharistan such as Fayaztepa and Karatepa, traces of East Syriac Christianity, Jewish communal shrines of Bukhara and Samarkand, and the Islamic mausoleums and mazars that form the core of the ziyarat tradition. The article argues that sacred space in the region has continued mainly through reinterpretation, layering and adaptation rather than complete breaks. Particular attention is given to the revival of pilgrimage after 1991, state heritage policy and pilgrimage tourism. The conclusions are relevant to understanding religious identity, interfaith tolerance and the preservation of sacred heritage in contemporary Uzbekistan.*

Keywords: *sacred sites, hierophany, sacred space, pilgrimage (ziyarat), world religions, religious heritage, Uzbekistan.*

INTRODUCTION

Sacred sites are among the most stable and recognisable phenomena in the religious history of humanity. In every major tradition, certain places are set apart from ordinary space: temples, shrines, tombs of saints, mountains, springs and trees. They are treated as points where the divine becomes accessible, and they draw people seeking blessing, healing, intercession or a renewed sense of belonging. Pilgrimage has been a central form of religious behaviour wherever such places exist, from the Hajj to Mecca and Christian journeys to Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela, to Buddhist circumambulation of stupas and the visitation of saints' tombs (Turner & Turner, 1978). In the contemporary world, this phenomenon has not faded under secularisation, as several classical theories predicted. Instead, it has revived and diversified (Berger, 1999). Religious pilgrimage now coexists with heritage tourism, cultural diplomacy and the politics of national identity. The sacred site has become a meeting point of faith, memory, economy and state policy, and this makes it an important subject for religious studies.

The issue is especially relevant for Central Asia, and for Uzbekistan in particular. The territory of present-day Uzbekistan lay at the crossroads of the Silk Road. For more than two millennia it hosted a succession of religious traditions:

Zoroastrianism and local cults of fire and ancestors (Boyce, 1979);

Buddhism, which spread through Bactria and Tokharistan (Staviskii, 1998);

East Syriac Christianity, Manichaeism and Judaism;

Islam, which from the eighth century became the dominant religious and cultural framework of the region.

Each tradition left its imprint on the landscape, and many places show signs of sacred use across several religious epochs. In the Islamic period, the cult of saints and the practice of ziyarat – visiting the tombs of saints, scholars and Sufi masters – became a defining feature of local religiosity (Basilov, 1970). The mausoleums of Imam al-Bukhari, Bahauddin Naqshband and the Shah-i Zinda complex are prominent examples. During the Soviet period, these practices were restricted and many shrines were closed or repurposed. Even so, pilgrimage persisted in informal and often concealed forms (Ro'i, 2000). Since independence in 1991, and especially in recent years, sacred sites have been restored on a large scale (Louw, 2006). Pilgrimage tourism has developed rapidly, and the state has recognised these sites as part of national heritage and as a resource for

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promoting interreligious harmony. This situation calls for scholarly reflection that goes beyond description of individual monuments.

Existing scholarship on sacred space can be broadly divided into two lines of inquiry.

The first is the universal-theoretical line, represented above all by Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. Otto's analysis of the numinous as mysterium tremendum et fascinans explains the experiential dimension of encounters with the holy (Otto, 1917/1923). Eliade's concepts of hierophany, axis mundi and the opposition of sacred and profane space offer a general model of how places become sacred and how religious people orient themselves in the world (Eliade, 1959). Later approaches, including the anthropology of pilgrimage developed by Victor and Edith Turner, have refined and partly challenged these models (Turner & Turner, 1978).

The second is the regional-empirical line. It comprises historical, archaeological, ethnographic and source-critical studies of particular shrines, cults and pilgrimage practices in Central Asia. These studies include the work of Uzbek scholars and of international researchers on saint veneration, Sufi traditions and "popular Islam" in the region (DeWeese, 1994; Privratsky, 2001).

These two lines have developed largely in parallel. General theories are often applied to Central Asian material in a schematic way, without attention to the specific mechanisms of local religious history. Regional studies, in turn, rarely place their findings within a comparative framework that covers several religious traditions. As a result, two questions remain insufficiently explained:

- why particular places in Uzbekistan retained or regained sacred status across changes of religion and political regime;
- how universal structures of sacred space interact with local forms of veneration.

The research problem of this article is therefore the need to bring together universal religious theories of sacred space with the regional traditions of Uzbekistan in a single comparative analysis.

The aim of the study is to reveal the general and specific features of sacred sites in the world religions represented in Uzbekistan's history, and to identify the mechanisms that maintain sacred space in the region from antiquity to the present.

To achieve this aim, the article sets the following objectives:

1. To clarify the theoretical foundations of the concept of sacred space in the works of Otto and Eliade and assess their applicability to Central Asian material.

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2. To describe and compare the main types of sacred sites associated with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam in the territory of Uzbekistan.

3. To identify patterns of continuity, reinterpretation and layering of sacred space across religious epochs.

4. To analyse the transformation of pilgrimage practices in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

5. To assess the role of sacred sites in contemporary religious life, state heritage policy and the promotion of interfaith tolerance.

The methodology of the research rests on a combination of complementary approaches:

- The phenomenological approach, grounded in the works of Otto and Eliade, is used to identify the structural features of sacred space and religious experience.
- The comparative-historical method makes it possible to compare sacred sites of different traditions and periods, and to trace their transformation over time.
- The typological method is used to classify sacred sites according to their function, form and the type of sacrality attributed to them.

The empirical base includes archaeological data on pre-Islamic religious complexes, written sources such as hagiographies, local histories and travel accounts, and materials on contemporary pilgrimage practices. Principles of historicism, objectivity and confessional neutrality guide the analysis. These principles are especially important when studying a phenomenon that remains a living part of the religious life of the population.

MAIN PART

Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study

The sacred sites of Uzbekistan are usually described as Islamic shrines *(ziyaratgohlar)* inherited from earlier centuries. Their history, however, is more complex. Over the last century and a half, many of them have passed through several stages:

- a Sufi hagiographic centre;
- a place of restricted memory in the Soviet period;
- a site of religious revival after 1991;
- a national heritage object;
- a destination of religious tourism.

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To study such sites, one needs a framework that neither treats sacredness as a fixed property of a place nor reduces religious experience to politics or economics. We combine three bodies of theory for this purpose: the phenomenology of the sacred, the social and ritual construction of sacredness, and the theory of the production of space. These are supplemented by pilgrimage studies and by regional scholarship on Central Asia.

According to Mircea Eliade, sacred space arises through a hierophany. The manifestation of the sacred establishes a centre, an axis mundi, that orients religious life and reenacts the founding of the cosmos (Eliade, 1959). This model allows us to compare traditions that succeeded one another on the territory of Uzbekistan. A Zoroastrian sacred fire, a Buddhist stupa in ancient Tokharistan, a Christian martyrium, a Jewish communal cemetery and a Muslim saint's mausoleum all mark a point of contact between the visible and the unseen. In this sense, Shah-i Zinda in Samarkand, the Bahauddin Naqshband complex near Bukhara and the shrine of al-Hakim at-Termizi in Termez can be regarded as local centres of orientation.

Rudolf Otto describes the holy as the numinous, a mysterium tremendum et fascinans that at once overwhelms and attracts (Otto, 1917/1923). His concept helps to interpret the behavior of visitors at Uzbek shrines: personal prayer, touching the tomb, tying cloth to trees and grilles, leaving offerings, and sometimes weeping. Both approaches have limits. Eliade assumes that a place, once sanctified, remains sacred whatever people do with it. Otto's concept comes from German Protestant theology and does not fit an Islamic setting without adjustment. In Uzbekistan the experience of ziyarat is expressed through local concepts:

- *baraka*, the blessing that flows from the saint;
- *karomat*, the miracles attributed to him;
- *tavassul*, the seeking of his intercession before God.

In this understanding, the source of sacredness is the saint's closeness to God. We therefore use phenomenology to describe sacred space and religious experience, and look elsewhere to explain how particular places acquire and keep their status.

Émile Durkheim regarded the sacred as an expression of collective force: it is the community that sets certain things apart and demands respect for them (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Shrine visitation in Uzbekistan supports family bonds, belonging to the mahalla and regional attachment in exactly this way. The same logic applies to heritage

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policy. When the state declares religious sites to be national "spiritual values" (ma'naviy qadriyatlar), it classifies them on a national scale.

Jonathan Z. Smith argued against Eliade that sacred places are made through ritual, narrative, memory and institutional classification, and that their sacredness depends on circumstances (Smith, 1987). His approach explains the successive roles of Uzbek sites described above, each of which corresponds to a particular ritual and political regime.

Henri Lefebvre distinguishes three dimensions of space (Lefebvre, 1974/1991):

- spatial practice, the everyday use through which space is reproduced;
- representations of space, the space conceived by planners and officials;
- representational spaces, the lived space of symbols.

A shrine is at once a place where pilgrims pray, walk around the tomb and share communal meals; an object of restoration programs and tourist infrastructure; and a symbol of national history and "spiritual renewal". The tension between devotional use and museum-style management is one of the main subjects of our analysis.

Victor and Edith Turner interpreted pilgrimage as a liminal experience that gives rise to *communitas* (Turner & Turner, 1978). Recent studies call attention to informal and embodied practices outside officially recognized sites, and to the blurred line between pilgrim and tourist (Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). In Uzbekistan these concerns, first, veneration at springs, trees and cemeteries, which seldom appears in heritage registers, and second, the mixed audience of the major shrines.

Several comparative cases are relevant here:

• Narrative. Danielle Ross shows that Volga-Ural Muslim accounts of the hajj described the sacred geography of Mecca differently as political and devotional conditions changed (Ross, 2021). Uzbek pilgrimage narratives can be read in the same way.

• Regional context. Mehdi Ebadi places ziyarat within the Turco-Iranian cultural world (Ebadi, 2016), the wider context of the Naqshbandi, Yasavi and local saint traditions.

• Access and boundaries. The Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, shows how sacred geography is shaped by control of access and boundaries (Elazar & Billig, 2024). It is a useful comparison for Uzbek complexes where mosque, mausoleum, museum and tourist zone share one territory.

Devin DeWeese has shown that Central Asian shrines, such as that of Ahmad Yasavi, were embedded in "public narratives" of sanctity, lineage and miracle, and that sacred

place and Sufi identity shaped each other (DeWeese, 2000). The tradition of ziyarat in the region is therefore centuries old. For the Soviet period, Vera Exnerova draws on archival and oral sources from the southern Ferghana Valley to show that the visitation of saints' graves continued despite anti-religious policy (Exnerova, 2015). Rozaliya Garipova's study of a Kazakh mosque that became a shrine shows the part played by material culture, oral narratives and a female shrine keeper in preserving Islamic life (Garipova, 2023). Maria Louw's ethnography of post-Soviet Bukhara presents shrines as places where people define what it means to be Muslim and moral after socialism (Louw, 2006).

For the contemporary period, Kazakhstan's state project "Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan" offers the closest parallel to the nationalization of sacred landscapes (Tsyrempilov et al., 2022). Andrea Schmitz analyses Uzbek religious policy as a combination of liberalization, state ideology and the representative use of Islamic heritage (Schmitz, 2023). Studies of destination marketing outline the economic side of religious tourism (Navruz-Zoda & Navruz-Zoda, 2016). We approach them critically, asking whether branding turns ziyarat into a commodity or strengthens local religious communities.

Taken together, these theories make it possible to compare sacred sites of different religions without forcing them into a single scheme. Phenomenology identifies shared structures. Ritual and social theory show how each tradition maintained the sacredness of its places. The theory of space traces how heritage policy and tourism take up these meanings.

- The study uses the following methods:
- phenomenological description;
- comparative-historical analysis covering the pre-Islamic, Islamic, Soviet and post-Soviet periods;
- typological classification of sites;
- hermeneutic reading of hagiographic sources;
- discourse analysis of official heritage and tourism documents.

The sources include archaeological data, hagiographies, local histories, travel accounts, normative acts and published ethnographic studies of contemporary ziyarat.

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Historical Evolution of Sacred Spaces in Uzbekistan: From Pre-Islamic Roots to Islamic Synthesis

Zoroastrian and local Iranian cults. At the time of the Arab conquest, Muslim authors regarded most of the population of Central Asia as Zoroastrian (Grenet, 2015). Regional religious life, however, was not identical to the Zoroastrianism of Sasanian Iran. Michael Shenkar's study of the iconography of deities in the pre-Islamic Iranian world examines both aniconic and anthropomorphic traditions and shows how varied the forms of cult were (Shenkar, 2014). Funerary practice provides the richest evidence. Bones cleaned of flesh were placed in ceramic ossuaries. Yu. A. Rapoport's study of Khorezmian ossuaries remains a basic work on this subject (Rapoport, 1971). Grenet makes an observation that matters for our topic. Soviet archaeologists excavated burial grounds extensively, which gave scholars direct access to the beliefs of ordinary people. In the post-Soviet period such work declined, partly out of concern not to disturb Muslim graves (Grenet, 2015). The sanctity of burial places in the present thus affects what can be known about their past. For the history of sacred space, the main legacy of this period lies less in particular buildings than in a set of persistent elements: fire, water, high places and the graves of ancestors (Boyce, 1979). As later ethnographic material shows, several of these elements continued to play a role in Islamic practice.

Buddhism in northern Bactria. Buddhism reached the south of present-day Uzbekistan in the Kushan period, and Termez on the Amu Darya became one of its important centres. The monastic complexes of Kara-tepa and Fayaz-tepa, together with Chingiz-tepe, form the core of this Buddhist landscape. Fayaz-tepa contained a monastery with a stupa. At Kara-tepa, monks lived in cells cut into the hill. The inscriptions found at these sites are especially valuable. Analysis of ceramic contexts at Chingiz-tepe by a Spanish-Uzbek team confirmed a Buddhist occupation of the site in the Kushan period (Gurt Esparraguera et al., 2015). Excavations at Dalverzintepe, a Kushan city in the Surkhan Darya valley studied by G. A. Pugachenkova and E. V. Rtveladze, show that Buddhist sacred space was not limited to Termez (Pugachenkova & Rtveladze, 1978). At the center of these complexes stood the stupa, a reliquary and a symbol of the cosmic mountain, around which believers walked in circumambulation. B. Ya. Stavisky's archaeological study traced the long decline of Buddhism in the region (Staviskii, 1998). Unlike some Zoroastrian elements, Buddhist sacred sites left almost no trace in later local religious practice. They returned to public awareness only through twentieth-century archaeology.

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Christian communities. The Silk Road brought East Syriac Christianity, Manichaeism and Judaism to Sogdiana (Foltz, 2010). Christianity reached Central Asia mainly through the Church of the East. It spread from Persia through Khorasan into Sogdiana, and from there into Turkic lands and China. Barakatullo Ashurov's study of Sogdian Christian texts, found mainly at the site of a monastery near Bulayiq in the Turfan oasis, makes three points:

- orthography served Christians as a marker of identity;
- their communities were multi-ethnic and multilingual;
- the East Syriac literary tradition continued in Sogdian translation (Ashurov, 2015).

These features suggest that Christianity in Sogdiana gradually became a local religion rather than remaining a faith of foreign merchants and missionaries. Material evidence comes mainly from burials and inscriptions. Dickens has published studies of gravestones with Syriac-script inscriptions, including those kept in Tashkent, which attest to Christian communities and their cemeteries in the region (Dickens, 2020). Uzbek archaeologists have also contributed to the study of this heritage. The collection on Christianity in the ancient cults of Central Asia, published in Tashkent in 1994, brought together materials on Christian monuments in Uzbekistan, among them G. V. Shishkina's article on a Christian burial in Samarkand (Zhukova, 1994). Christian sacred space in the region thus consisted of churches, monasteries and cemeteries, marked by crosses and Syriac inscriptions. As with Buddhism, it did not pass into living local tradition. Its memory has been recovered mainly through archaeology and epigraphy.

Jewish communities. The history of Jews in Central Asia is longer, but also less continuous, than is often assumed. Albert Kaganovitch argues on the basis of circumstantial evidence that Jews settled in the region at least two and a half thousand years ago. The earliest communities appeared in the western part of the region, in Khorasan and Merv, and only later moved to Samarkand and Bukhara. Kaganovitch also argues that their presence was not continuous. He finds no evidence of Jews anywhere in Central Asia in the early sixteenth century. By the end of that century, Bukhara had become the new religious and ethnic centre of Central Asian Jewry. The name "Bukharan Jews" was given to this group by European travelers only in the first half of the nineteenth century (Kaganovitch, 2019). His conclusion that modern Bukharan Jews are not descendants of the first Jewish settlers differs from the community's own

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tradition of unbroken presence since antiquity. It shows how historical memory and historical evidence can diverge (Kaganovitch, 2019). Under Muslim rule, Jews had the status of a protected community (ahl al-dhimma). Their sacred space was organized around the synagogue, the Jewish quarter and the cemetery. Alanna Cooper's study shows that Bukharan Jews developed their own religious culture within a Muslim environment while maintaining ties with the wider Jewish world (Cooper, 2012). Unlike Muslim shrines, Jewish sacred places were not centers of pilgrimage for the general population. They were communal spaces whose sanctity was bound to the life of a particular community. This had important consequences in the twentieth century. As Cooper shows, the community began to disperse after the fall of the Soviet Union. Synagogues and Jewish cemeteries in Bukhara and Samarkand remain, but they are now largely sites of memory for a community that lives elsewhere. They form a distinct type of sacred space, one that exists primarily through diaspora connections and heritage.

Islamic communities. The Arab conquest of the eighth century began a process of Islamization that took several centuries to complete. Soviet ethnographers documented the veneration of trees, springs, stones and graves in great detail. G. P. Snesarev and V. N. Basilov interpreted much of it as "survivals" of pre-Islamic beliefs (Basilov, 1970; Snesarev, 1969). Their field material remains indispensable. Their interpretive framework, however, has been challenged. Devin DeWeese argued that the idea of "survivals" presents Islam as a thin layer over an unchanged pagan core. It thereby ignores the ways in which communities made Islam their own through narratives of conversion and sacred history (DeWeese, 1994). From this perspective, veneration of a spring at a saint's tomb is an Islamic practice with its own logic, in which the place transmits the baraka of a friend of God, rather than a pagan remnant. Research by Uzbek scholars allows this process to be seen at a local level. Azim Malikov's study of shrines in the Samarkand region shows that popular religion recognized a hierarchy of saints. It ranged from the Caliph Ali and prominent religious figures to the "martyrs" (shahid) of the Arab conquest, whose cult grew out of the heroic epic of Islamization (Malikov, 2010). Malikov also notes that the cults of some pre-Islamic local figures and even deities were transferred to Muslim saints. He further distinguishes between shrines at a saint's grave and shrines marking a place where the saint is said to have rested (Malikov, 2010). This distinction is important for a typology of sacred places. A volume edited by Y. Shinmen, M. Sawada and E. Waite on the mausoleums of the

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Ferghana Valley and Xinjiang shows a similar variety. Those buried in Central Asian mazars include Sufi masters, prophets of the general Islamic tradition, saints whose historical existence is doubtful, and rulers of the period of Islamization (Shinmen et al., 2013).

The shrine of Qusam ibn Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet, became the nucleus of the Shah-i Zinda necropolis in Samarkand. It shows how the memory of the conquest became a source of sanctity for a whole city. Among the historical names of Samarkand, Malikov notes the epithet "Garden of Saints" (Malikov, 2018). A distinctive feature of Central Asian shrine culture was its connection with hereditary sacred lineages such as sayyids and khojas. Malikov has studied the history and identity of the sacred lineages of Samarkand (Malikov, 2020). Sufi orders provided the institutional backbone of shrine culture. In the Yasavi tradition, the shrine of Ahmad Yasavi in Turkestan, built by order of Timur at the end of the fourteenth century, became the focus of hagiographic "public narratives". In these narratives the authority of the order and the sanctity of the place supported each other (DeWeese, 2000). In Mawarannahr itself, the leading role passed to the Khwajagan-Naqshbandiyya. Bahauddin Naqshband (1318–1389) was buried near Bukhara, and his grave became one of the most important pilgrimage centers in the region. Later Naqshbandi masters combined spiritual leadership with political and economic influence. The letters of Khwaja Ubaydullah Ahrar and his associates, published by Jo-Ann Gross and the Uzbek scholar Asom Urunbaev, are a key source on the relations of fifteenth-century shaykhs with rulers and urban society (Gross & Urunbaev, 2002). The long-term survival of shrines also had an economic basis in waqf endowments. Robert McChesney's study of a shrine in neighboring Balkh traces this mechanism over four centuries (McChesney, 1991). It offers a model for understanding how major shrines in the region outlasted changes of dynasty.

The coexistence of several religions along the Silk Road did not mean that they lived in isolation. Richard Foltz describes the religious history of the region as a long process of contact and mutual influence (Foltz, 2010). Sogdian Christian texts, with their mixture of languages and ethnic backgrounds, point in the same direction (Ashurov, 2015). Among individual sites, the clearest example of shared memory is the shrine of Khoja Doniyor near the Afrasiab settlement in Samarkand. One legend associates the person buried there with the biblical prophet Daniel, who is honored in Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition. Malikov describes the mausoleum as one of the unique holy places of

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Samarkand (Malikov, 2010). The shrine shows how several layers of sacred memory can accumulate in one place. Continuity should not be idealized. The Buddhist monasteries of Termez were abandoned (Staviskii, 1998). Zoroastrian institutions ceased to exist. Christian communities disappeared, and the Jewish presence was interrupted at least once (Kaganovitch, 2019). What persisted was not the presence of particular religions in particular buildings, but certain ways of marking space as holy:

- the grave of a revered person as a source of blessing;
- water and trees as signs of sacred presence;
- the guardianship of sacred places by particular families and lineages.

In terms of the theoretical framework set out above, the "center" in Eliade's sense remained, while the rituals, narratives and institutions that made it sacred changed from one epoch to the next (Eliade, 1959; Smith, 1987). By the time of the Russian conquest in the second half of the nineteenth century, the sacred geography of Mawarannahr had become essentially Islamic. It formed a network of mausoleums, Sufi lineages and waqf-supported shrines, alongside the communal sacred spaces of Bukharan Jews. Traces of earlier traditions remained visible within it. Under Soviet rule this layered structure faced the most radical challenge in its history, which is the subject of the next section.

Comparative and Contemporary Analysis of Sacred Sites in Uzbekistan

The Soviet period was the sharpest break in the history of the region's sacred geography. Waqf property was confiscated, many mosques and shrines were closed or given other uses, and pilgrimage was officially treated as a harmful "survival". The practice nevertheless continued. Yaacov Ro'i has shown that visiting holy places remained one of the most persistent forms of Muslim religiosity in the USSR, despite repeated campaigns against it (Ro'i, 2000). In the southern Ferghana Valley, believers found ways to combine Soviet modernity with the veneration of saints (Exnerova, 2015). A similar Kazakh case shows a decaying mosque turning into a shrine through oral narratives and the care of a woman custodian (Garipova, 2023). In this period, sacred space survived mainly in informal and family settings.

Independence in 1991 changed the situation. Bakhtiyar Babadjanov documented the renewal of Sufi communities in Uzbekistan in the 1990s, including the restoration of master–disciple (pir–murid) relations (Babadjanov, 1998). Vernon Schubel showed that the revival was accompanied by new hagiographies, through which the Naqshbandi tradition was reconstructed for a post-Soviet audience (Schubel, 1999). The state also

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took part in restoring major shrines. In 1998, for the 1225th anniversary of Imam al-Bukhari, the government built a new memorial complex on the site of his mazar near Samarkand (Primova, 2025). Shrines in these years were more than places of ritual. For the inhabitants of Bukhara they were also places where people defined what it meant to be a Muslim after socialism (Louw, 2006).

The revival did not follow a single pattern. Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi's study of a pilgrimage site in Khorezm shows that the shrine became a place where different actors competed to define its meaning and control its use (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2006). In her monograph on the region, she found that religious practice there was linked mainly to life-cycle events, health and prosperity. She also traced the effects of state intervention and the growing tension between local "customary" Islam and newer, more puritan views (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008). The post-Soviet shrine thus brought several authorities together in one place: the custodian family, the official clergy, the state and religious reformers.

Pilgrimage tourism (ziyorat turizmi) has become a separate field of state policy. From January 2019, foreign citizens could obtain a pilgrimage visa for up to two months. In February of the same year, the first international forum on pilgrimage tourism was held on the President's initiative (Imam Bukhari International Research Center, 2020). Decree No. UP-6165 of 9 February 2021 set out measures for the further development of domestic and pilgrimage tourism (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). Following this decree, the Cabinet of Ministers expanded the "Umrah Plus" program, which links the umrah with travel to Uzbekistan, by adding subsidies and new air routes (Umarov, 2026). A separate presidential resolution on tourism cooperation with the Turkic states approved the "Blessed Pilgrimage" concept, which extends ziyarat tourism into a joint project of the Turkic world (Umarov, 2022).

According to official data presented in 2021, the country had 784 Islamic, 19 Christian and 8 Buddhist heritage sites relevant to pilgrimage (Government Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). These figures show that the state places the sacred sites of different religions in a single category of cultural heritage, with a clear predominance of Islamic sites. Tourism scholarship treats this process mainly as an economic opportunity. Bakhtiyor and Zebiniso Navruz-Zoda proposed a "religious destination" built around Bahauddin Naqshband under the name "The Homeland of Sufi Sultan" (Navruz-Zoda & Navruz-Zoda, 2016). In a later study with co-authors,

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Bakhtiyor Navruz-Zoda considers Uzbekistan as a destination for multi-confessional, self-organized pilgrims (Navruz-Zoda et al., 2019). Uzbek researchers also stress the cultural and educational value of pilgrimage tourism (Djuraeva, 2023).

Religious studies must also ask what happens to a shrine when it becomes a destination. The same complex receives believers seeking a saint's intercession, families on a day out, foreign Muslim pilgrims and cultural tourists, and the boundary between pilgrim and tourist becomes unclear (Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). In Lefebvre's terms, the planned space of heritage management increasingly shapes the lived space of ritual, but it has not replaced it. The trend is regional. Kazakhstan's "Sacred Geography" project codified sacred sites as symbols of national territory (Tsyrempilov et al., 2022). Malikov's work on southern Kazakhstan links pilgrimage there to religious policy and national identity (Malikov, 2019). Uzbekistan places a different emphasis. Its policy foregrounds scholars and Sufi masters of wide Islamic renown, such as al-Bukhari, at-Termizi and Bahauddin Naqshband. Sacred geography thus presents the country as a historical center of Islamic civilization, not only as a national homeland. The structures described by Eliade and Otto, the sacred center and the experience of the holy, can be found at Uzbek sites of different religions. Their present form, however, depends on two factors: whether a living community still maintains the place, and how the state classifies it. On this basis four types of sacred space can be distinguished.

Living Islamic shrines. This type includes the complexes of Bahauddin Naqshband, Imam al-Bukhari and Shah-i Zinda, along with hundreds of local mazars. All dimensions of sacred space are present here. Each site is a center of orientation where visitors seek baraka and intercession, and a community of visitors and custodians maintains its ritual and narrative life. In the large complexes these elements now coexist with state management, museum functions and tourism.

Shrines of shared memory. The mausoleum of Khoja Doniyor in Samarkand is the main example (Malikov, 2010). Such places correspond to the model of a single center around which the narratives of several traditions gather. In official discourse they also serve as symbols of interreligious tolerance.

Archaeological sacred heritage. This type covers the Buddhist monasteries of Termez and the remains of Christian and Zoroastrian sites. They lost their communities long ago, and their sacredness now exists mainly as heritage. Since independence they have been included in conservation projects with international partners. One was

the UNESCO and Japanese project at Fayaz-tepa in 2000–2004, which also aimed to integrate the site into heritage management and tourism development (Permanent Delegation of Japan to UNESCO, n.d.). Buddhist visitors from Asian countries can give such places a devotional meaning again. Sacredness can therefore be reactivated by a new community.

Diaspora sacred spaces. Synagogues and Jewish cemeteries in Bukhara and Samarkand belong to this type. Since most Bukharan Jews left Central Asia at the end of the twentieth century (Cooper, 2012), these places have been sustained largely through diaspora ties. In Durkheim's terms, the community that sets them apart now lives elsewhere, yet its bond with the place remains.

The typology shows a historical asymmetry within Uzbekistan's multi-confessional environment. Islam has a living network of shrines. Buddhism and Christianity are represented mainly by archaeological heritage, and Judaism by places of memory supported from abroad. The state includes all of them in one discourse of national heritage and tolerance, which partly obscures these differences. The gap between the official image of a "shared sacred heritage" and the different ways in which these places are actually lived is an important subject for further research.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to examine the sacred sites of Uzbekistan through a comparison of world religions, combining general theories of sacred space with the concrete history of the region. The results allow several conclusions to be drawn.

First, sacred sites in the world religions share a common logic despite differences in doctrine. In each tradition, sanctity is linked to a place that marks contact with the divine or preserves the memory of a holy person:

- in Buddhism, a stupa containing relics;
- in Christianity, a church built over the tomb of a martyr;
- in Islam, the Kaaba as the single direction of prayer and, at the local level, the graves of saints and scholars;
- in Judaism, Jerusalem and, at the local level, the synagogue and the graves of the righteous.

All of these traditions developed forms of pilgrimage, from circumambulating a stupa to the hajj and ziyarat. The differences lie in the source of sanctity. In Buddhism it is the relic and the memory of awakening. In Christianity it is the event of salvation

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and the witness of the martyrs. In Islam it is obedience to God and, at the level of popular piety, the baraka of His friends. In Judaism it is the covenant between God and His people. The material from Uzbekistan shows that Eliade's phenomenology describes this shared structure well, but its history must be explained in other terms. At the Buddhist monastery of Kara-tepa and at the Bahauddin Naqshband complex, the organizing principle is the same: a sacred center connected with the remains of a holy person, around which believers walk in circumambulation. Kara-tepa survived as an archaeological monument, while the Bahauddin complex has remained a living centre of pilgrimage for more than six centuries. The difference is explained by the presence of a community, ritual and institutions that maintained the place. The approach I adopt therefore combines the two perspectives. Phenomenology describes what the believer experiences, and ritual and spatial theory explain how this experience is sustained in a particular place over time.

Second, the sacred geography of Uzbekistan developed through layering rather than replacement. The most revealing comparison concerns attitudes to the dead. Zoroastrianism regarded the corpse as a source of impurity and sought to separate it from earth, water and fire. Islam in Central Asia made the grave of a righteous person a source of blessing. The sanctity of place moved from fire and the pure elements to the burial of a saint, while springs, trees and high places were kept as signs of the saint's presence. In our view, what persisted across religious epochs was a kind of grammar of sacralization. It has three elements: a holy person whose remains or traces sanctify a place; natural signs of sacred presence; and a family or lineage that guards the site. Each new tradition filled this grammar with its own content. Islam gave it the most lasting form by linking it with the Sufi orders, hereditary sacred lineages and the institution of waqf.

Third, the years of independence opened a new stage in the life of the country's sacred sites. After decades of restrictions in the Soviet period, Uzbekistan has carried out large-scale work to restore shrines and develop pilgrimage tourism. Several steps illustrate this:

- the new Imam al-Bukhari memorial complex built in 1998 and its comprehensive reconstruction in recent years;
- the introduction of a pilgrimage visa;
- Decree No. UP-6165 of 2021;
- the "Umrah Plus" and "Blessed Pilgrimage" programs.

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These measures have returned major shrines to believers, preserved monuments of world significance and created conditions for receiving pilgrims from abroad. Sacred space in Uzbekistan today ranges from large complexes such as that of Imam al-Bukhari, which combine a place of worship, a museum, an educational center and modern infrastructure, to local mazars closely tied to family life and community traditions. The further development of this field would benefit from attention to both levels. Local shrines could gradually be included in heritage registers and restoration programs, with the involvement of custodian families who preserve their traditions and oral history. In the major complexes, careful planning that takes into account the needs of both pilgrims and cultural tourists will help preserve the spiritual atmosphere of these places as visitor numbers grow. Comparison with Kazakhstan shows that drawing on sacred geography to strengthen national identity is common across the region. Uzbekistan's approach has its own distinctive feature. Through the legacy of al-Bukhari, at-Termizi, Bahauddin Naqshband and other scholars and Sufi masters, it presents the country as one of the historical centers of Islamic civilization.

Fourth, sacred sites embody the principle of religious tolerance, which is rooted in the teachings of the world religions themselves.

Islam: The Qur'an states that there is no compulsion in religion (2:256). Throughout history, Muslim states recognized the right of Christians and Jews to maintain their places of worship.

Buddhism: Rock Edict XII of the Indian emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE) calls for honoring the followers of other teachings.

Judaism and Christianity: The biblical command to love the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19) and the New Testament call to hospitality (Hebrews 13:2) made openness to strangers a religious duty.

World history knows many places venerated by followers of several faiths. Jerusalem is holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka is venerated by Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The Monastery of St Catherine in Sinai has had a mosque within its walls since the Fatimid period. Uzbekistan fits naturally into this tradition. The four-part typology proposed in the article reflects the richness of its multi-confessional heritage:

- living Islamic shrines;
- shrines of shared memory;

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- the archaeological heritage of Buddhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism;
- the sacred spaces of Bukharan Jews.

Islamic shrines form the core of the country's living religious tradition and welcome visitors of all faiths. The Buddhist monuments of Termez, studied in cooperation with international partners, open opportunities for cultural dialogue with the countries of Asia. The mausoleum of Khoja Doniyor, honored in the Islamic, Jewish and Christian traditions, together with the synagogues and cemeteries of Bukhara and Samarkand, embodies the centuries-old experience of different faiths living side by side. The policy of interreligious harmony and tolerance pursued in Uzbekistan thus rests on a deep historical foundation. Involving the relevant religious communities and international scholarly partners in the study and preservation of these sites could strengthen this direction further.

Several questions remain open for future research. The proposed typology needs to be tested through systematic fieldwork in different regions of the country. Further study is also needed on the role of women in shrine life, on the representation of sacred sites in digital media, and on how foreign visitors perceive the spiritual heritage of Uzbekistan.

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