

The Symbolic Weight of the Number 40 in Syrian Orthodox and Sunni Muslim Mourning

As religion has long functioned as a way to understand and give meaning to death, many find solace in devotional customs to nurture the connection between the living and the dead. This exploration of religious mourning practices transcends theological debates, and offers insight into how sacred traditions use numerology, time, and ritual to navigate the unknowns of the afterlife. In both Syrian Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam, the number 40 in particular links such mourning practices to the significance of numerology in texts like the Bible and the Qur'an. While there are many fundamental differences between the ways in which Christians and Muslims (of these specific sects) interpret the afterlife, both systems share a common observance of a 40-day period following death—known in Syria as *Arba'een*, directly translating to the number 40. The 40 days in the Syrian Orthodox Church represents a transformational period of the soul, whereas for Sunni Muslims, the 40th day of grieving marks the end of an intense mourning period. In this essay, I will explore the key differences in the Syrian Orthodox and Sunni Muslim interpretations of the number 40 and its relationship to mourning rituals. Here, I will focus on Syria as a distinct site where both Christians and Muslims coexist, observing similar grieving practices in a land considered holy to both religions.

The shared significance of the 40-day period in Syrian Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam can be traced to their Abrahamic origins, where the number 40 holds a great

weight beyond a mourning ritual. To begin with this numerological analysis, it is critical to recognize how both the Bible and Qur'an interpret the number 40 as a symbol for transformation, purity, and completion (Ayonrinde et al., 2020). For instance, in the Bible, 40 days is a recurring theme: Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness (*Matthew 4, English Standard Version*, 1999), Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai (*Exodus 34, English Standard Version*, 2000), and the Great Flood lasted 40 days in Noah's time (*Genesis 7:4, English Standard Version*, 2013). On a similar note, according to the Qur'an, Prophet Musa (Moses) spent 40 nights in communion with God (Qur'an 7:142), and Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) first received the revelation of the Qur'an at the age of 40 (Qur'an 96:1-5). In order to understand the value of the number 40 in relation to the spiritual practices of Christians and Muslims in Syria, it is essential to explore how numerological structure fits within the broader context of the deep cultural and theological roots shared by both traditions. Within a region that holds importance for both faiths, the influence of these Biblical and Qur'anic origins is seen in the way both communities integrate the number 40 when grieving.

Following this scriptural framework, we can examine the deeper significance of the 40-day memorial period after death within the Syrian Orthodox Church. In Syria, Orthodox Christians mourning a death commemorate three important milestones: the third, the ninth, and the 40th days all serve as a marker in the soul's journey to the afterlife, each one reflecting a specific stage of spiritual transformation. These dates are also accompanied by services both in the home and the Church. During these practices, food offerings are made, such as *burgul*, a Syrian classic grain, and Aramaic chants fill

the sanctuary of the Church. Mourning becomes a shared and communal moment—the congregation consolidates around the grieving family, offering support and solidarity in the public sphere and the private home. This is especially evident on the 40th day following death—regarded as the most important for Syrian Orthodox Christians. Rooted in the Biblical narrative of Christ’s ascension 40 days after His resurrection, the 40th day symbolizes the soul’s transition to its ultimate resting place (*Acts 1:3, English Standard Version*, 2016).

Through the observance of the 40th day, Christians aim to support the deceased in their spiritual journey, while also strengthening their own relationship to the Church. In connecting the practices of prayer for the deceased to Graham Harvey’s discussion of religious belief in “Christianity is not a religion,” we can see how the Syrian Orthodox ritual functions as a form of transcendent connection between the living and the divine—mirroring the belief in a higher power that is central to Donald Lopez’s definition of religion. As Harvey pinpoints a marker of Christianity as holding faith in God, the act of praying for the deceased on the 40th day exemplifies how the Syrian Orthodox belief transcends rational understanding of death and instead ties believers to the divine through ritual and communal action (Harvey, 2014). Lopez describes religious belief as superior to reason; the practices of the 40th day of mourning represent the broader Christian beliefs—where believers place their value in an unseen spiritual realm and the spirit’s connection to the divine (Lopez, 1998, as cited in Harvey, 2014).

The Sunni Muslim interpretation of the number 40 surrounding death is grounded in the understanding of 40 as a numerical symbol for maturity, unlike the Christian value

of transformation. The number 40 represents renewal and purification in some aspects of the Muslim faith. For example, Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) said that a fetus undergoes different development stages every 40 days (Al-Bukhari, n.d., Vol. 4, Book 54, Hadith 430). However, rather than marking the 40 days following death as a point of final rest, as in the Syrian Orthodox Christian faith, in Sunni Islam, the 40th day represents the end of the mourning period. This perspective can be cited to the Prophet (PBUH)'s discovery of the Qur'an at age 40 (Qur'an 96:1-5)—one of the most, if not the most, important milestones in both his life and Islamic history in general. It signified a moment of spiritual maturity and the beginning of his mission that indicated the start of Islam. This association reinforces the idea of the 40th day in Islam as a resolution point. Applying this framework to mourning for Sunni Muslims manifests itself as a cultural completion of grieving at 40 days. Unlike in the Bible, where Christ is said to have walked 40 days after His death and resurrection (*Acts 1:3, English Standard Version*, 2016), the Qur'an makes no mention of the number 40 in the context of death. The most important service following a death in Sunni Islam is the burial, as opposed to the Syrian Orthodox's value in the 40th day. However, many Sunni Muslims in Syria still observe 40 days after death as a religious and cultural tradition. As families close their mourning period on the 40th day, an intimate vigil is held in the home, meant for close friends and relatives. This usually culminates in recitation of the Qur'an, prayers, and *du'a* (supplication).

Like the Syrian Orthodox Christians, food is also emphasized on the 40th day service in Islam. It is less formal than the public space of the Church. Nevertheless, the 40th day is still as much of a practice for Sunni Muslims in Syria as it is for Syrian

Orthodox Christians, which can be attributed to the cultural similarities between the two faiths in the country. This parallel in grieving traditions highlights the interconnectedness between the two religions. Beyond their common origins in the Abrahamic heritage, these mourning practices reflect a deeply rooted cultural exchange between religious communities in Syria—where rituals of remembrance and communal gatherings transcend doctrinal differences. This aligns with Lopez’s sentiment that religious practices are not isolated within their own traditions but are shaped by the societies in which they exist, continuously influencing and being influenced by one another (Lopez, 1998, as cited in Harvey, 2014). The differences in emphasis on the most important mourning day for Muslims and Christians lie in the Christian focus on Christ’s resurrection and the Muslim emphasis on the significance of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH)’s life and spiritual milestones. While this paper focuses on the Sunni sect of Islam—which comprises the majority of Syria’s Muslim population—it is also worth noting the Shia interpretation of the number 40. Known as Arba‘een, the observance recognizes 40 days after the death of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) and a leader in Shia Islam. Shia Muslims across the world commemorate the day with a pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq, where Ali is buried (McCallum, 2024).

The shared significance of the 40-day period between Syrian Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam helps us understand the ways in which traditions provide structure to the experience of death. However, it also cements the definition of religion itself: the number 40 supports the purpose for religion by signifying the need for a

universal human need for structured mourning through numerology and a belief in the afterlife. By analyzing these cultural practices in the context of Syria, a land with a rich religious history, we can see how the number 40 guides the soul's transition from a physical realm to a spiritual one. The significance of mystical numbers in Abrahamic religions—whether in the 40 days of mourning, the 40 years in the desert, or the 40 days of fasting—supports the idea that religion provides a framework for navigating life transitions.

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