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AIC PERSPECTIVE OF LIBERAL ISLAM

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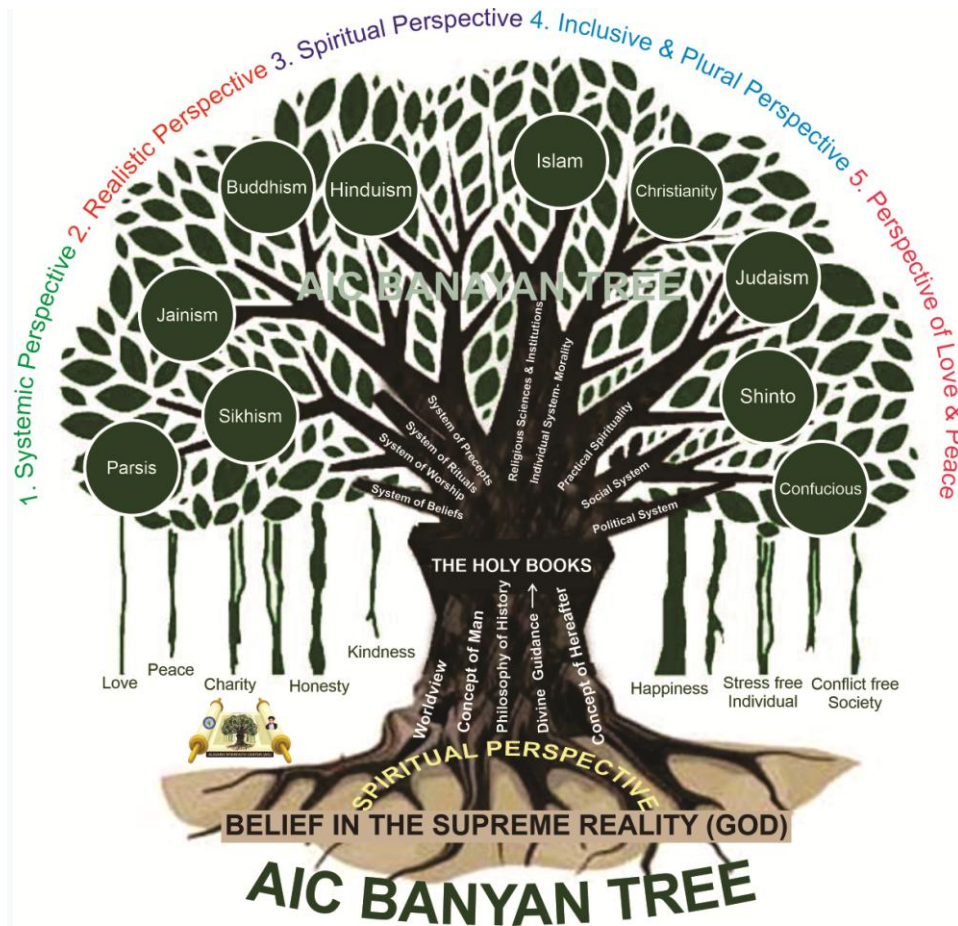
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| ARTICLE DETAILS | ABSTRACT |
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| Article History Published Online: _Published_ | Aligarh Interfaith Center (AIC) AIC is registered as TRUST for the benefit of humanity and needy persons to promote interfaith harmony and inter-religious understanding and also alleviate suffering of the poor through charity and Educational works. |
| Keywords: Liberal Islam Interfaith Dialogue ➤Islamic Spirituality ➤Islamic terrorism ➤Political Islam. ➤Systemic Perspective ➤AIC Tree ➤AIC Movement | It is an interfaith initiative taken by a group of Muslim 'ulama and intellectuals to spread the liberal and spiritual teachings of Islam. In today's world, where there is an attempt o reduce Islam to a political religion, and unfortunately, forces like ASIS have reinforced this trend, and this Political Islam is considered a threat to world peace, there is all the more necessity to codify and spread the Liberal-Spiritual teachings of Islam. Here is an attempt to define the Islamic Liberal Perspective and what the AIC movement aims to achieve. |



1. The Systemic Perspective of the Interfaith Tree

Religion is not a collection of dead rituals or a group of religious sciences and a matter of pedantry. It is a way of life and a complete life system. This system of life can be visualized as a Tree.





1. Systemic Perspective:

The roots are the belief in God. The foundation is belief in a Super-Natural Reality (God), known by different names in different religions. It results in a spiritual interpretation of life. Its foundation is the belief in God and the spiritual interpretation of life. The oneness of God and the dignity of man are two cornerstones of religion

From this fundamental belief in God flows a spiritual worldview, the concept of man, and a spiritual Philosophy of history which involves faith in the Divine Guidance and the Divine Grace. These are like the trunk of the Tree of Religion. Thus, all religions believe in the Divine Books or Scriptures, which embody the Divine Guidance for Man.

Thus, the 'trunk' of this 'Tree' is constituted by a spiritual concept of the world, man, history, and belief in the Divine Guidance and the Holy Books.

Multiple branches emerge from this trunk. Among these are: are the system of belief, the system of worship, ritual, and precepts; the system of morality; the individual and social system of life; the system of religious beliefs, worship, rites, and rituals; personal value system, and social teachings all are branches.

2. Inclusive and Pluralistic Perspective:

Different religions are like fruits and flowers of this Tree. There are multiple fruits, but all belong to one tree. There is unity in diversity and diversity in unity. This diversity in unity is the scheme of Nature, and one must accept it.

All religions have commonalities and elements of truth. All regions share the foundation and have commonalities in the concept of man, the universe, the Philosophy of history, and the systems of worship and rituals. Their morality is common, and their Spirituality is one.



Different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden or branches of the same majestic Tree. We believe in the fundamental unity of all great religions of the world. Islam also believes that all prophets were from God and that One God revealed all scriptures and books. Various religions were like the leaves on a tree. No two leaves were alike, yet there was no antagonism between them or between the branches on which they grew.

One should have strong faith in one's religion and a sympathetic understanding of the religions of others. One should have a wholehearted commitment to his own religious beliefs and practice his religion. He should abstain from fanaticism, absolutism, intolerance, or judgmental moralism.

Our perspective is inclusive and Pluralistic; we believe in the unity of religions and celebrating diversity. And at the same time believing and practicing one's own religion.

We believe, this is in accordance with the spirit and teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. The Qur'an guides us towards this plural approach with the verses like:

Lā Ikrāha fid-Dīn

There is no compulsion and force in Religion

Lakum Dīnukum waliya Dīnⁱ

For you, is your Religion, and for me is my Religion

Followers of all religions have good and bad persons, saints and sinners, and God the Compassionate will reward all according to their deeds. The Qur'an declares

Indeed those who have believed and Jews or Sabians or Christians, whosoever believe in God and the last day (Afterlife), and did righteous deeds, no fear is for them, nor they will grieve,ⁱⁱ

This is such a clear statement that followers of all religions will be rewarded for their good deeds. Many commentators have expressed the view based on *hadith* that the name sabiens include Hindus, Buddhists, and all. Moreover, it is the style of the Qur'an



and all Scriptures that they mention only those names which are known to their audience, but they are symbolic and inclusive of all.

After this, it is surprising how anyone can believe that all other than our own community will be thrown into hell. This is a statement of the inclusive perspective of Islam. There cannot be any contradiction in the Qur'an. Thus, the verses quoted by exclusivists and taken out of context should be interpreted keeping in view those mentioned above and other such verses of the Qur'an. For example, the following verse, which is the main plank of exclusivists, is a statement of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness when understood in the right and overall context of the Qur'an.

*Inn-ad-dīna 'ind-allāhi Islām,ⁱⁱⁱ
The only religion with Allah is Islam*

In this categorical statement that certainly Allah's only way is Islam, Islam does not mean the particular religion of Muslims, but Islam means submission to God, which is the essence of all religions. In the Qur'an, the word Islam is used in two senses – in the general and particular sense. In the particular sense it means the religion and shariah of Hazrat Muhammad but in the general sense, it means the way of surrendering to God and following God's laws. In this general sense, the Quran declares that the universe is *muslim* and that all prophets and scriptures preach Islam. Obviously, here Islam does not mean the religion and *shariah* of Hazrat Muhammad or this particular religion, but in its general meaning Islam means the Divine truth and the Divine laws, including the message of One God. This is the essential teachings of all religions. In fact, the whole universe is Muslim, meaning that it is following the divine laws. This is the teachings of all religions. This perspective of Islam, based on the oneness of God, and the Oneness of Religion and the teaching of all the prophets, is inclusive, and not exclusive.



3. Liberal Religious Perspective

This liberal religious perspective, where freedom to choose and follow one's chosen way, is in accordance with the guidance of the Qur'an. There are many verses of the Qur'an that point in this direction. In the famous verse, it is declared:

Lā ikrāha fid-Dīn^{iv}

There is no compulsion and force in Religion

Spiritual-Realistic Perspective:

The Religious system consists of many components, but its essence is Spirituality; religion without Spirituality is a dead body. Religious perspective considers the reality of existence as Spiritual. However, it does not negate the reality of matter or worldly life. It is Realistic, not Idealistic.

4. Perspective of Love and Peace:

Love is another essence of religion. Religion directs its followers to love of the Creator and the creature, devotion to God, and respect for all. The teachings of all religions are to practice tolerance, not hurt others' feelings, thankfulness, and forgiveness. The main idea in Islam is to praise God the Almighty^v (Qur'an, 1:1; 6:45) to show compassion to creation. Humankind is the best of all creation^{vi} (Qur'an, 17:70) and is created of the best stature^{vii} (Qur'an, 95:4). So, every human deserves respect due to his nature. Bloodshed, violence, and terrorism are alien to Islam and all religions. In Islam, the right to life is an absolute value. In the famous verse of the Qur'an, God says:

*Min ajalizālikakatabna 'alā Banī Isrā'ila annahūman qatalanafsan
bighairi nafsinaw fasādin fil-ardifa-ka-annamāqatala-an-nāsa jamī'a^{viii}*

*We decreed upon Israelites that
whoever kills a person without a (Judicial justification) murder or
spreading rebellion in land,
is as if he has killed the whole of humankind
and whoever saves one*



is as if he has saved the entire humanity

This verse shows the importance of the life of every individual. Every individual, whether Muslim or non-Muslim represents the whole of humanity. Hence, staying away from hatred and having a tolerant attitude is essential for Muslims. The Qur'an emphasizes peace and reconciliation as fundamental to all social and international relations.

Every chapter of the Qur'an, except one, starts with the verse *Bismillāhir Rahmān al-Rahīm*, [ix] meaning In the name of God, gracious (for all humankind) and Most Merciful. Here two attributes have been mentioned *Rahmān* and *al-Rahīm*. All the Tafsīr sources and commentators have held that *Rahmān* indicates God's grace for not only the whole of humankind, including Muslims and non-Muslims but to the whole universe, all creatures, as well as the environment. Every Muslim repeats this verse at least ten times daily in the Five-times prayers. This is the declaration that God is the Good of Love for all.

Likewise, the Qur'an has declared that Islam and Prophet Muhammad are a Mercy to humanity.

The Quranic verse is

Wa Mā arsalnāka Illa Rahmatan Lil-‘Ālamīn^{ix}
O, Muhammad, I have not sent you but as a mercy for whole humankind.”

Here the phrase '*lil-‘Ālamīn*' is used which means a mercy and grace for all the worlds. The plural 'worlds' is used, which means for all who live in this world. Obviously, they include Muslims and non-Muslims. Some commentators have explicitly explained that the plural phrase 'the world' indicates different groups and communities.

5. The Fruits of this Perspective: Love and Peace:

The fruits of this Tree are dialogue, service to all, tolerance, charity, celebrating diversity, and love for all, love for humanity country, and protecting the environment,



The result of this perspective is a stress-free individual and conflict-free society, inner peace, the global peace, national integration and all-around progress.

2. OUR CHALLENGES

Misinterpretations of Religion

The root cause of religious conflicts is lopsided and wrong interpretations and understanding of the religion. A theology of dogmatism, ritualism, exclusivism, and hatred is preached in the name of religion. It is spreading militancy and conflicts in the world. Religion is the cure, but distorted religion has become an infection.

The following are the main challenges that we have to counter:

Reducing Religion to Dogmatism and Ritualism

The first distortion is to make religion a collection of dead dogmas and rituals negating its inner spiritual essence. Religion is a Divine system of guidance, a Divine Tree giving shade to humanity with multiple branches. Spirituality and love are the juice of this Tree; the system of beliefs, precepts, and worship are branches. But religion is usually reduced to these two branches—the systems of beliefs and rituals; religion becomes just believing in dogmas and following some rules. This dogmatism and ritualism is the tragedy of all Faiths.

Negating Spirituality and Love and Preaching Political Religion

The main juice of this Tree of Religion is Spirituality and Morality—how to be godly and love God and be a good person and love and serve all. This main essence of Spirituality and morality is ignored, and a Political Religion is preached. This distorted political religion is becoming a danger to world peace.



Exclusivistic Perspective of Religion:

Another big challenge is the Exclusivist attitude. The exclusive perspective considers only one religion as having a monopoly of 'truth' and all other religions as false. It holds that only followers of their faith are entitled to heaven; all others are damned and going to hell. This is a distortion of religion because variety is the scheme of God in the universe, He is *rahmān*, and His Grace is for all.

Spread of culture of Hatred and violence:

Exclusivism is characterized by a strong religious (political) identity and hostility toward others. Religion becomes a tool of hatred instead of an agency of love, a tool of war instead of peace, and terrorism instead of compassion.

The main challenge is to counter these misinterpreted versions of religion and spread the right message, which is the message of Godliness, Spirituality, love, compassion and tolerance.

OUR MISSION

Spreading the Systemic Perspective and Spirituality:

Religion should not be reduced to dogmatism and ritualism but believed and practiced as a way of life. Our mission is to spread this Realistic Spirituality and systemic-rational Perspective about Religion and counter dogmatism, dry ritualism, pedantic scholasticism, and political religion.

Spirituality is the essence of all religions, but Spirituality itself has no religion; it transcends religions. Religion often descends to the level of ritualism, and politics and its spiritual essence is forgotten. It should be and is our mission to focus on Spirituality as the essence and goal of religion.



Spreading Inclusive- Perspective:

It is possible to see a rationale for both inclusivism and exclusivism in religious texts; one can draw a theology of peace or a theology of war from them. But the framework, direction, and spirit of the Scriptures make it clear that religion rests on the love and Grace of God and an inclusive approach to faith.

Our mission is to spread this inclusive and Pluralistic perspective of religion and draw a theology of peace and not war from religious texts.

Spreading Liberal Perspective:

Liberal perspective rests on a progressive outlook, democracy, civil rights, rationality, and equality. It involves respect for freedom of belief, expression, equality of gender, religious liberty, and tolerance of different religious beliefs.

Our mission is to strengthen liberal perspective and counter religious conservatism, fundamentalism, superstitions, and medieval outlook.

Spreading a culture of Love and Compassion:

If we look at the basic message of the founders of religions, we find them spreading love and peace. Observe the life of Rishis, Mahatma Buddha, Lord Mahavira, Jesus Christ and Hazrat Muhammad; they all spread the message of unity and non-violence. **Our mission is to popularize this religion.**

To arrest the trend of Religious Extremism and Religious Militancy:

Religious extremism is a longstanding phenomenon that manifests in different forms. It has brought havoc to society. The link between religious extremism and terrorism seems obvious. Religious terrorism is motivated by an absolute belief that God has



sanctioned to spread the religion with force and kill enemies. This is against the teaching of all religions.

Our mission is to defend Religious Extremism and build the capacity of conservative religious communities as key partners in counter-terrorism efforts.

To focus on Rationality and the Progressive Outlook of Religion:

Rationality and Reasoning should also be the core of religion. Reason without faith is blind, and Faith without reason is lame. Religious beliefs should not lead to irrational thinking and behaviour or hamper science and the scientific spirit. Religion is an agent of progress and cannot be against Science and progress.

We fight with irrational beliefs or behaviors and promote rational thinking and rational behavior.

7. To focus on Morality and Character-building:

True religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed sown in the soil. We stand for the religious perspective, which bolsters morality.

Character-building of the individual and moral development of the society has to be our top agenda.

8. To focus on the Peaceful and Peace-Building teachings of Hinduism and Islam and preach non-violence:

Our mission is to focus on the peaceful teachings of religions, especially Islam and Hinduism, and preach shunning of all violence in the name of religion. The propagation of truth and non-violence can be done less by books than by living those principles. Life truly lived is more than books.



9. Field work for Crisis-Management and Peace-building:

We will develop a mechanism to actively intervene in the crises situations, like tensions, riots and wars. Peace-building involves a broad range of measures before, during and, after conflict. Religious ideas, actors, and institutions also serve as incredible resources and motivation for peace-building, inspiring people to be courageous and to transformative acts of peace.

10. To work for the Modernization of Madrasas:

By spreading the Systemic-Spiritual Liberal outlook among the students and young teachers of madrasas. By developing an Interfaith Course for Madrasas and working for its adoption by madrasas.

11. To undertake charity work:

A conflict-free society and a stress-free individual are impossible without alleviating suffering and rooting out injustice and poverty, and the betterment of conditions of downtrodden sections of society.

We consider it our mission to work for it.

OUR PROJECTS

DARA SHIKOH PROJECT OF INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING (DSIU)

For Promoting Interfaith Understanding and Discovering Commonalities among Religions

In the trouble-torn World Today, Interfaith Understanding is the only way. The Essence of all religions is one which is Godliness, Spirituality, and morality.. There are striking similarities in the system of belief, forms of worship, and precepts. Dara Shikoh was the first to codify commonalities among religions. With so many similarities, there is no



reason why followers of religions may not have Interfaith Understanding instead of communal hatred and conflicts. We will work tirelessly to promote interfaith understanding.

2. ALIGARH PROJECT OF RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT (ARRT)

For spreading Systemic, Inclusive- Pluralistic, Liberal Outlook of Religion and Spirituality

Allama Iqbal named his book the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, and the movement of Liberal religious thought started in Aligarh. Today it is more needed as misinterpretation of Islam is resulting in the appearance of ISIS and the Talibanization of Muslim thought. The object and task of this project is to spread a systemic, inclusive, pluralistic and liberal perspective of religion among Muslims and promote spiritual- moral centered outlook and rational thought and behavior.

3. MAULANA AZAD PROJECT OF MADRASA EDUCATION (AME)

For spreading Liberal-Pluralistic and modern outlook and Promoting modernization and Career Promotion of Madrasa Students

Historically, madrasas as religious teaching institutions have held a position of esteem and significance in the Indian subcontinent. If we can change the outlook of Madrasa students and bring them into the mainstream, it will impact the perspective of Muslims of India.

The Curriculum of madrasas plays a significant role in radicalization or developing religious tolerance. A problem with the curriculum taught at religious seminaries is that it develops exclusivism, a narrow outlook, and animosity toward modernity. We will compile and introduce the Interfaith Studies course books and endeavour to incorporate them in the Madrasa syllabus. Likewise, we will prepare a course of *'Ilm Kalām-e Jadīd* (Modern Muslim Theology) and endeavour to make it a part of the



Madrassa syllabus for developing an inclusive and liberal religious outlook.

Moreover, we will develop Instituting mechanisms to involve madrasa youth in the promotion of a culture of peace, tolerance and intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and to launch youth empowerment and engagement programme to arrest any tendency for radicalization.

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