Prefacing Theory: secular/Islamic humanism, liberalism and the Hadith of Jibra’il

- Before one can critique secular humanism, one must understand Islamic/Qur’anic humanism (i.e. what does the Qur’an say about humanity?)
  - Allah bestowed knowledge upon humanity that they could have otherwise never known
  - Individuals can explore their spirituality by tapping into this Divine knowledge which is accessible through the ruh (which resides in the qalb) rather than the ‘aql

- Secularism is often misdiagnosed as an alternative to Islamic theology, but it is in fact an alternative to Islamic spirituality
  - Secular humanism celebrates humans minus their spiritual self; it denies the existence of the ruh and only acknowledges the nafs and ‘aql
  - Islamic humanism acknowledges nafs, ‘aql, AND ruh in its understanding of humanity

- Liberalism in terms of a set of societal and individual values (not philosophy) takes tolerance and therefore, peaceful coexistence, as a core aspect in its definition
  - As such, there can be liberal and illiberal secularists, and liberal and illiberal Islamists
  - Liberalism encourages tolerance, free inquiry, and being open to a wide range of ideas so that one can learn about, understand, and appreciate individuals who adopt different ideologies than oneself (without necessarily appropriating those ideologies) – just because something doesn’t work for oneself, does not mean it cannot work at all

- Hadith of Jibra’il outlines the concepts of Iman, Islam and Ihsan – each of these concepts led to the development of certain disciplines in Islamic scholarship
  - Iman led to the discipline of theology
  - Islam led to the discipline of figh and shari’ah; law, legal theory, jurisprudence
  - Ihsan led to tazqiya and tasawwuf; spirituality, Sufism
    - To worship Allah as if one SEES Him is not about tangible sensory perception but spirituality

Imam al-Ghazali: crisis of faith, search for Truth, path of tasawwuf

- Imam al-Ghazali spent most of his life in Baghdad (the hub of intellectual and artistic learning at the time) where he was a renowned professor of the Islamic disciplines (i.e. Qur’an, tafsir, sunna, kalaam, figh)
- Despite his reputable position, Imam al-Ghazali had a complete crisis of faith which he outlines in his spiritual autobiography, al-Munqidh min al-Dalal (Deliverance from Error)
- This crisis resulting in his doubting the ability of humankind of discover certain truths and knowledge (particularly about God)
- After months of this internal struggle, Allah sent the “nur (light) of His hidaya (guidance)” into al-Ghazali’s heart
- Upon receiving this hidaya, al-Ghazali wanted to know, love and experience Allah so he looked in society for seekers to the path of Truth
  - Theologians – studied God’s essence and attributes to achieve nearness to Him
    - Al-Ghazali tried to use the same theology he taught to seek Allah but it did not work for him
  - Philosophers – particularly those influenced by the work of Ibn Sina (Avicenna)
For 2 years, al-Ghazali read Ibn Sina’s philosophy which culminated in his writing a book on the topic to ensure he understood it (the book was approved by the philosophers and remains an excellent resource when studying Ibn Sina’s work).

Al-Ghazali did not find that this philosophy was a path to Truth he could follow.

People of tasawwuf – people who sought to align the ruh with values mentioned in the Qur’an (i.e. a ruh of taqwa, sabr, dhikr, ihsan, ikhlas, tawakkul)

Finally, al-Ghazali found a path to Truth he wanted to devote himself to.

Al-Ghazali said that tasawwuf is the greatest path to seek and experience Allah because the people of tasawwuf are the closest to Allah after Prophets.

Every nabi is a nabi but is also a wali (beloved friend of Allah) because while they did certain things that were part of their nubuwat (i.e. preaching), they also personally partook in activities as part of their wilayat and love for Allah (i.e. praying tahajjud in dhikr of Allah).

Although there can be no more anbiya, there are still many awliyya.

How are awliyya so close to Allah? Because of their emphasis on dhikr.

Allah says in the Qur’an, “when you make dhikr of me, I make dhikr of you” (1:152)

When Allah makes dhikr of a person, s/he FEELS it and EXPERIENCES Allah.

At the beginning of his path of tasawwuf, al-Ghazali went to visit four sacred places in the Islamic world: Damascus, Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina.

Every day for 2 years, he climbed the minaret of the Umayyad Masjid (or the Great Mosque of Damascus) to make dhikr of Allah.

After these 2 years, he returned to Baghdad to attend to the needs of his family but he spent most of his time making dhikr of Allah for another 8 years.

After 10 years of dhikr, he started teaching again and wrote Ihya ‘Ulum ad-Din (Revival of the Religious Sciences).

This was his masterpiece in Islamic learning.

It was written for the ‘ulema (scholars of Islam) because he thought that the best way to begin to revive the spirit of the umma was to ensure the ‘ulema emphasized the importance of the heart and a pure ruh in their teaching.

Something to think about

How is it that the Muslim world and its academic body has become so disinterested and in fact, disinherited from its entire Muslim tradition?

We have sidelined an entire world of knowledge, ideas and spirituality that goes beyond the study of sacred art and architecture.

There is a marked shift away from the Islamic Liberal Arts and Humanities.

More important that a mere study of the aesthetics of Islamic art and architecture, think about what state of heart it takes to prompt the mind to create such sacred art and architecture.

Without such an understanding, the study is superficial.

Imam al-Ghazali is virtually absent from the curriculum in the Muslim world (the inheritors of his legacy) versus in many institutions in the West where his life and work is studied extensively.