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Deconstructing Secular Humanism: Toward an Ethical Islamic Political Philosophy

Muh. Alwi Parhanudin
Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article addresses the research question: Does excluding spiritual foundations from political philosophy undermine justice and legitimacy in modern societies? The primary aim is to critically compare secular and Islamic humanism to clarify their ethical frameworks. As commonly practiced in Western political thought, secular humanism centers on human autonomy and procedural rationality while often marginalizing spiritual and metaphysical perspectives. This orientation, the article argues, leads to a crisis of meaning and normative fragmentation, reducing politics to a technocratic process devoid of ethical depth. In contrast, Islamic humanism—or *al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah*—roots human dignity in concepts such as divine trust (amānah), servanthood (ʿubūdiyyah), and justice (ʿadālah), integrating ethical responsibility and spiritual purpose into the heart of political life. Methodologically, the study employs a normative-philosophical analysis, drawing from the works of Taha Abdurrahman, Al-Fārābī, and Al-Māwardī, to construct a comparative framework. The findings demonstrate that incorporating spiritual anthropology is not simply a theological issue but an epistemic necessity for achieving meaningful justice. Ultimately, the article offers a conceptual model for reconstructing political ethics, bridging rational and spiritual dimensions to advance a more just and coherent political order.

Keywords

Islamic Humanism, Secular Humanism, Epistemology from the Margins, Islamic Political Philosophy, Deconstruction, Spirituality, *al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah*

Corresponding Author
Muh. Alwi Parhanudin
Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Indonesia; alwie@uinmataram.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern political philosophy faces a profound dilemma: as it continues to build on the foundations of secular humanism—with its strong emphasis on human autonomy, rationality, and procedural justice—it is wrestling with the question of meaning and legitimacy. How can societies hope to sustain justice and dignity, if the spiritual and metaphysical sources that once animated political life are systematically excluded? (Taylor, 2007; Asad, 2003). This is not merely an abstract concern. While advances in rights, democracy, and secular governance are remarkable achievements (Nussbaum, 2011; Taylor, 1991), they come at the cost of a growing sense of disconnection—a feeling that something essential may be missing at the heart of public life (MacIntyre, 1981).

This article examines exactly this: what happens, both normatively and existentially, when

spiritual anthropology is removed from our collective ethical foundations? Why does the absence of transcendence matter—and how might its restoration reshape the conversation on justice, dignity, and responsibility in modern societies? Contemporary scholarship acknowledges the ethical aspirations of secular humanism—its commitment to justice, dignity, and rights—yet also interrogates the cost of its disenchanted worldview (Taylor, 2007). As Talal Asad (2003) and William Connolly (1999) have argued, the universalist claims of secular reason are historically contingent, masking political and cultural particularities under the guise of neutrality. Jean-François Lyotard's critique of metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984) and Michel Foucault's genealogy of modern subjectivity (Foucault, 1972) further reveal that the ostensibly emancipated individual of secular humanism is constituted by discursive and institutional formations that often suppress alternative, especially spiritual, ways of knowing.

By contrast, the Islamic tradition articulates a distinct model of humanism—al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah—which situates human dignity within a framework that integrates reason (ʿaql) and revelation (waḥy), ethical agency (taklīf), and spiritual trusteeship (amānah) (Nasr, 1990; Iqbal, 1930; Ṭāhā, 2006). Thinkers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muhammad Iqbal have underscored the necessity of re-enchanting political philosophy by grounding it in spiritual anthropology, while recent interventions by Hasan Hanafi, Taha Abdurrahman, and Abdulaziz Sachedina articulate a vision of human flourishing that transcends the reductionism of both procedural liberalism and dogmatic literalism (Abdurrahman, 2006; Sachedina, 2001). Post-secular theorists, including Charles Taylor and Lena Salaymeh (2020), further challenge the epistemic exclusions of modernity, calling for a broader conception of public reason that recognizes spiritual sources of value as integral to ethical and political discourse.

Despite lively debates in contemporary scholarship, the real consequences of separating the secular from the spiritual are rarely explored. Much is said about the strengths and limits of secular humanism (Taylor, 2007; MacIntyre, 1981), but little has been done to systematically compare it with alternative traditions—especially with the rich legacy of Islamic thought, which is too often reduced to procedural or legalistic debates. What is missing is a dialogical, philosophical account that shows how Islamic humanism can offer a new paradigm for reimagining justice and meaning. In the spirit of this inquiry, this article moves through three main stages: first, mapping the histories and concepts behind secular and Islamic humanism; second, using deconstruction to bring hidden tensions to light; and finally, developing a normative framework rooted in spiritual anthropology as a genuine foundation for political life. The hope is that, by re-centering spirituality—not as dogma, but as a vital epistemic resource—we might discover new possibilities for a politics that is not only just and rational, but also deeply meaningful.

The intellectual discourse on humanism has developed along two distinct thematic trajectories: the secular humanism of the Western tradition and the spiritual humanism rooted in Islamic thought. Both traditions are united by their concern for human dignity and freedom, but their ontological and epistemological assumptions are fundamentally divided. Secular humanism, emerging from a critique of ecclesiastical authority and scholastic metaphysics, foregrounds human autonomy, rationality, and the procedural ordering of moral life (Taylor, 1991; Asad, 2003). Landmark figures such as Pico della Mirandola and Immanuel Kant set the groundwork for viewing humanity as the locus of value, independent of revelation or transcendence (Mirandola, 1996; Kant, 1784). This trajectory continued in contemporary thought—e.g., Nussbaum's capabilities approach and Taylor's reflections on the self—while prompting anxieties about spiritual disenchantment and moral fragmentation (Nussbaum, 2011; Taylor, 2007; MacIntyre, 1981).

Islamic humanism, in contrast, insists on the integration of reason (ʿaql) and revelation (waḥy), conceiving the human as a moral-spiritual agent entrusted with divine responsibility (Nasr, 1990; Iqbal, 1930; Ṭāhā, 2006). Core concepts such as *amānah* (trusteeship), *taklīf* (ethical agency), and *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* (objectives of law) structure Islamic approaches to justice and freedom. Thinkers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muhammad Iqbal present human flourishing as a product of spiritual consciousness and creative submission. At the same time, Taha Abdurrahman critiques procedural liberalism within an ethical and faith-based paradigm. Recent critical voices have challenged both traditions to move beyond reductionist binaries. Post-secular scholars (e.g., Asad, Salaymeh) have exposed the political contingencies behind concepts like "autonomy" and have urged recognition of spirituality as an ongoing epistemic force (Asad, 2003; Salaymeh, 2020). Meanwhile, intra-Islamic debates are increasingly prominent. Hasan Hanafi and Abdulaziz Sachedina emphasize justice and pluralism as intrinsic to Islamic ethics (Hanafi, n.d.; Sachedina, 2001), while critics such as Khaled Abou El Fadl and Amina Wadud interrogate patriarchal and legalist reductions of Islamic humanism, calling for greater inclusivity and contextual moral reasoning. Recent empirical studies and case analyses—particularly from Southeast Asia (e.g., Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Nadirsyah Hosen, and Azhar Ibrahim) and Africa (e.g., Abdullahi An-Na'im)—demonstrate how Islamic humanism is interpreted, adapted, and sometimes contested in diverse socio-political environments. These works highlight the resources and limitations of spiritual frameworks for democratic pluralism and public policy.

Thus, this review frames the debate as a binary opposition and a dynamic, cross-cultural confrontation. Against this complex backdrop, the article proposes a normative deconstruction of secular humanism and advances *al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah*. This Islamic spiritual humanism aims to integrate reason, revelation, and existential experience into the ethical core of political life. Such a framework restores spirituality not as a mere appendage, but as a foundational epistemic resource for contemporary questions of justice, power, and dignity.

This study is anchored in a postmodern perspective, a critical lens to deconstruct the dominant epistemic structures underlying secular humanism in Western political philosophy. Postmodernism here is not reduced to radical relativism or nihilistic skepticism, but rather understood as a genealogical critique of epistemic power—one that questions the universalist claims often masked as neutral rationality. Jean-François Lyotard's seminal phrase—incredulity toward metanarratives—captures the core of this critique, including the secular humanist narrative that centralizes "Man" while displacing the transcendent (Lyotard, 1984).

Michel Foucault (1972) deepens this critique by showing how the modern subject is not an autonomous entity, but a product of discursive and institutional formations. In this light, secular humanism's promise of emancipation gives way to new forms of alienation: detachment from spirituality, disconnection from deeper sources of value, and subjugation to a procedural rationality devoid of existential meaning. In the epistemic regimes of modernity, spiritual experiences, moral intuitions, and metaphysical insights are often dismissed as irrational "noise." Post-secular theorists like Talal Asad (2003), Charles Taylor (2007), and William Connolly (1999) have challenged this exclusion by advocating for a broader notion of public reason—one that accommodates spiritual voices and affirms their relevance in shaping ethical and political discourse.

In this context, postmodernism becomes a vehicle for recovering "epistemologies from the margins." These are ways of knowing rooted in traditions and experiences historically silenced by the Enlightenment's dominant paradigm. Islam belongs to this category as both a faith and a knowledge system. It provides a unique epistemological framework for understanding human dignity, political

responsibility, and justice—not as abstract ideals, but as spiritual-moral imperatives grounded in divine trust (amānah) and moral agency (taklīf).

Rather than positioning Islam as lagging behind modernity, this perspective treats Islamic philosophy as a legitimate source of epistemic critique and renewal. It offers a counterpoint to secular humanism and a normative alternative rooted in al-Insāniyyah al-Rūḥiyyah. Through this lens, human beings are not defined solely by autonomy and rationality, but by their moral-spiritual consciousness, anchored in a vertical relation with the Divine and a horizontal responsibility as khalīfah on earth. In short, this postmodern and post-secular reading does not affirm relativism. However, it makes space for meaningful alternatives to emerge from traditions outside the dominant Western canon—traditions that place spirituality not at the periphery, but at the heart of ethical and political life.

This study adopts deconstruction not merely as a textual reading method, but as an epistemic strategy to interrogate and unravel the underlying structures of secular humanism in modern political philosophy. Rooted in the work of Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is a mode of critical inquiry that destabilizes binary oppositions constitutive of dominant discourses—such as rational/spiritual, secular/sacred, and autonomy/relationality (Derrida, 1976). Modern Western epistemology is deeply embedded in the metaphysics of presence—an ontological assumption that privileges the immediate presence of an autonomous rational subject as the ground of meaning. Secular humanism builds upon this by positing the human being as the sole source of value and meaning, independent of any transcendent reference. Rather than directly refuting this framework, deconstruction disrupts it from within—by exposing its internal contradictions, silences, and undecidable tensions (Caputo, 1997; Norris, 1987).

As Derrida argues, every system of meaning conceals what he calls trace and différance—the absence and deferral of meaning—that inevitably undermine its claims to epistemic coherence. In this study, a deconstructive approach is employed to expose how secular humanism's supposed neutrality and universality exclude spirituality and faith-based experiences as valid sources of knowledge. This reading resonates with critiques advanced by Talal Asad (2003) and William Connolly (1999), highlighting the secular biases embedded within modern political and ethical thought.

Deconstruction thus opens a space for "epistemologies from the margins"—modes of knowing that emerge from geocultural, historical, and spiritual peripheries (Spivak, 1988). Within this framework, Islam is not reduced to a dogmatic system that requires secularization, but is reclaimed as an alternative epistemological core that centers spiritual consciousness as the axis of political meaning-making. The concept of al-Insāniyyah al-Rūḥiyyah, or Islamic spiritual humanism, emerges from this epistemic realignment that integrates reason, revelation, and existential awareness as inseparable dimensions of human life. This framework aligns with postmodern and post-secular orientations that reject the dominance of a singular rationality and embrace the plurality of ethical imaginaries grounded in diverse spiritual traditions. By employing deconstruction as both critique and strategy, this paper not only reveals the epistemological limitations of secular humanism, but also gestures toward a new horizon—where the political is reimagined through a deeply spiritual anthropology anchored in the Islamic tradition.

2. METHOD

This research adopts a critical-philosophical methodology that is normative, exploratory, and comparative, aiming both to interrogate the epistemic foundations of secular humanism and to articulate *al-Insāniyyah al-Rūḥiyyah* as an epistemic-normative alternative in Islamic political thought.

1. Unit of Analysis and Text Selection

This study's primary unit of analysis is not empirical data or social practices, but philosophical concepts (such as autonomy, dignity, justice, and spiritual responsibility) and the canonical texts that articulate them. Texts and thinkers from both Western and Islamic traditions were chosen according to three criteria: (a) their foundational influence on respective discourses of humanism and political ethics; (b) the clarity and depth of their engagement with questions of reason, revelation, and moral authority; and (c) their representation in both academic and intellectual traditions. This includes major works by Kant, Nussbaum, Taylor, Derrida (for the Western canon), and Iqbal, Nasr, Taha Abdurrahman, Hanafi, and Alatas (for the Islamic canon).

2. Hermeneutic and Comparative Analysis

The hermeneutic method is applied through close reading and interpreting these texts, attending to their historical, philosophical, and normative contexts. Comparison is descriptive and analytic: the study systematically maps how each tradition frames core concepts, identifies convergences and divergences, and explores the implicit tensions within and between them. For instance, Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is analyzed alongside Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, focusing on how each theorizes freedom and moral obligation.

3. Deconstruction and Epistemologies of the South

Deconstructive analysis, following Derrida, is operationalized by identifying and critically unpacking key binary oppositions—such as secular/sacred and autonomy/submission—within the canonical texts. The research interrogates how these binaries structure each paradigm's narrative, with examples from canonical sources. Additionally, the perspective of "epistemologies of the South" (Alatas) is used to reposition Islamic thought as a generative and autonomous source of political philosophy, foregrounding texts and traditions often marginalized in mainstream discourse.

4. Analytical Steps

a. Genealogical Mapping: Tracing core concepts' evolution and transformation across historical contexts.
b. Critical Reading: Applying deconstructive strategies to expose epistemic boundaries and exclusions in each tradition.
c. Normative Reconstruction: Formulating *al-Insāniyyah al-Rūḥiyyah* as a viable framework, grounded in authoritative sources and interpretive commentaries.

5. Scope and Limitations

This inquiry is explicitly normative and philosophical. It does not engage in empirical research, sociological surveys, or legal analysis. Rather, it focuses on conceptual, ethical, and epistemological dimensions. The findings are thus not intended to offer policy prescriptions or case-specific solutions, but to contribute a robust conceptual framework for comparative political ethics. The interdisciplinary orientation—bridging political theory, Islamic studies, and decolonial critique—broadens its relevance, but the argument remains grounded in textual and conceptual analysis.

6. Justification and Transparency

This methodological approach ensures transparency and coherence by making explicit the

criteria for text selection, unit of analysis, and analytical procedures. The aim is to critique and constructively theorize an alternative paradigm for political philosophy, demonstrating the value of rigorous comparative inquiry between secular and Islamic epistemologies. In summary, this methodology is a reflective and dialogical process—anchored in close textual engagement, explicit comparative criteria, and a clear articulation of scope and limits. The study seeks to advance critical insight and normative reconstruction in contemporary political philosophy through this approach.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Genealogy of Secular Humanism

Secular humanism is the historical culmination of a prolonged and multifaceted transformation within Europe's cultural, intellectual, and political landscape, especially since the Renaissance. Its roots can be traced to a deliberate challenge against the ecclesiastical monopolization of knowledge and the theological claim to ultimate truth. Pioneers such as Pico della Mirandola, in his Oration on the Dignity of Man (Mirandola, 1486/1996), shifted the axis of value from the divine to the human, arguing that human dignity lies in the individual's capacity for self-fashioning and moral self-determination. This vision subtly preserved, rather than fully discarded, the spiritual aspirations of previous eras.

The Enlightenment deepened this reorientation by foregrounding reason as the principal means of emancipation. Immanuel Kant, in his famous essay What is Enlightenment? (Kant, 1784), called on humanity to emerge from "self-imposed immaturity" through the exercise of autonomous rationality. Reason became the arbiter of truth and legitimacy, and, over time, the realm of politics was increasingly separated from revelation and tradition. Charles Taylor (2007) describes this epochal shift as the move toward "the immanent frame," wherein belief in God became one of many options for constructing meaning, rather than a universal foundation. Yet, even as Enlightenment thinkers championed the sovereignty of reason, many—Kant included—grappled with securing a substantive moral order without recourse to metaphysics. Kant's moral law within retained a quasi-transcendental dimension, suggesting that secular humanism is not a simple negation of spirituality, but an attempt to reimagine it in terms of rational autonomy.

Secular humanism thus emerged as a complex epistemic and existential project, relocating value from transcendent sources to the autonomous human subject. This reconfiguration yielded profound contributions: the rise of individual rights, the development of procedural democracy, and the establishment of legal equality. However, it also produced new tensions. Instrumental rationality—where truth and goodness are judged by efficiency and effectiveness—became dominant. Max Weber (1946) warned of this process, coining the term “iron cage” to describe the bureaucratic rationalization that threatens to drain the world of its moral significance. Yet Weber did not merely critique; he recognized the achievements of modernity in promoting predictability and accountability, even as he lamented the loss of existential meaning.

This legacy is visible within political philosophy in the evolution of procedural ethics, especially within the liberal tradition. John Rawls (1971), in his influential theory of justice, grounded political morality not in any comprehensive vision of the good, but in the fairness of procedures that free and equal citizens could accept. Rawls sought to design principles that could hold in pluralistic societies, acknowledging the difficulty—if not impossibility—of attaining universal moral consensus. While his model advanced the cause of inclusion and stability, critics argue it can reduce justice to a formal process, sidelining deeper questions of moral purpose and collective good.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) critiques this procedural turn as leading to the erosion of shared moral

narratives, resulting in ethical fragmentation and the rise of emotivism. Michael Sandel (2009) similarly argues that liberalism, by bracketing questions of telos, risks impoverishing both civic virtue and the sense of common purpose. Yet both critics, while incisive, recognize that the liberal project is animated by a genuine aspiration to respect pluralism and individual autonomy—values which have delivered substantial protection against tyranny and oppression.

Nevertheless, secular humanism and liberalism are not immune to internal critique. Though intended to safeguard dignity, their elevation of autonomy and the procedural management of moral difference can generate new forms of moral relativism, spiritual alienation, and existential ambiguity. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) poignantly characterizes this state as "liquid modernity," a world of shifting values and dissolving social bonds, in which freedom can become a source of anxiety rather than fulfillment. Significantly, such self-reflexive critiques are not limited to Western thinkers. Islamic intellectuals such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1997) contend that secular modernity, in its quest for autonomy, severs humanity from its essential spiritual roots. Taha Abdurrahman (2006) pushes this critique further by describing liberalism as a form of ethical stagnation (tanammuṭ akhlāqī)—a system unable to renew itself because it neglects the spiritual telos and divine accountability that historically sustained moral life. From the standpoint of Islamic political philosophy, secular-liberalism's reduction of the human to an autonomous agent, detached from ontological dependence on God (taʿalluq bi'Llāh), represents both an ethical and epistemic narrowing.

Yet it is important to acknowledge that the Islamic tradition's critique of secular humanism is not simply a rejection but an engagement that seeks to recover the aspirations of justice, dignity, and autonomy while re-situating them within a richer spiritual anthropology. Al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah emerges here not as an antithesis, but as a constructive paradigm: it endeavors to integrate the procedural strengths and universalistic impulses of modern political thought with a renewed metaphysical foundation that emphasizes spiritual accountability, communal belonging, and cosmic purpose. The genealogy of secular humanism thus provides a record of philosophical transformation and a field of ongoing contestation and dialogue. Its achievements in advancing autonomy, equality, and procedural justice remain significant, yet its unresolved tensions and internal critiques open a space for alternative frameworks. In this context, Islamic political philosophy, through the lens of al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah, is positioned to offer a normative reconstruction—one that neither rejects the gains of modernity nor romanticizes pre-modern certainties, but seeks to reanimate the political with a sense of meaning, responsibility, and transcendence. In the following sections, this constructive alternative will be elaborated, demonstrating how a spiritually grounded humanism can engage the complexities of modern life while addressing the moral and existential deficits exposed by secular-liberal paradigms.

Historical Period / Thinker	**Key Ideas / Contributions**	**Philosophical Implications**	**Critical Tensions / Practical Effects**	**Possibility for Synthesis or Critique**
Renaissance (Pico della Mirandola)	Human dignity based on individual freedom to shape one's nature (*Oration on Dignity*)	Shift from theocentric to anthropocentric ontology; autonomy as foundation	Autonomy expands human potential, but it can risk moral relativism	Can be reframed as potential for dialogical freedom
Enlightenment (Immanuel Kant)	Reason as the path to emancipation from dependence; moral autonomy	Rationality replaces revelation/tradition as epistemic authority	Rational law is universalizing, but struggles with moral depth	Ethical autonomy can partner with spiritual ethics
Modern	Pluralism of belief;	Privatization of religion;	Public reason loses	Opens space for

Secularization (Charles Taylor)	"immanent frame"—spirituality becomes optional	loss of shared metaphysical foundation	spiritual depth; risk of societal fragmentation	spirituality as an "option" in public reason
Modernity & Rationalization (Max Weber)	Instrumental rationality, bureaucratic efficiency ("iron cage")	Disenchantment; life becomes procedural and value-neutral	Loss of existential meaning in public life	Rationalization can be re-embedded in ethical/spiritual vision
Liberal Proceduralism (John Rawls)	Justice as fairness, grounded in neutral procedures, not substantive values.	Politics as a mechanism, not a vision; ethical minimalism	Justice reduced to process, neglects moral purpose	Procedural fairness as a baseline, not a sufficient foundation
Communitarian Critique (MacIntyre, Sandel)	Loss of shared narratives, rise of relativism	Value fragmentation; neglect of *telos* (ultimate aim)	Civic virtue and sense of common good diminished	Re-centering narratives via ethical-spiritual traditions
Postmodern Anxiety (Bauman)	"Liquid modernity": shifting values, unstable identities	Disorientation, loss of anchors, spiritual vacuum	Anxiety, crisis of belonging	Calls for re-finding anchors (possible via spiritual vision)
Islamic Critique (Nasr, Taha Abdurrahman)	Secularism severs humans from their spiritual essence; ethical stagnation	Urges re-spiritualization and metaphysical reintegration of ethics	Calls for re-centering tawḥīd, meaning, and responsibility	Spiritual humanism as both critique and dialogue with modernity

Table 1. The Genealogy and Critical Dynamics of Secular Humanism

2. The Crisis of Secular Political Ethics

Within the paradigm of modern secularism, politics has increasingly been reduced to a technocratic contest of power and interests, rather than a field for cultivating the common good or nurturing the moral capacities of citizens. As transcendent foundations and objective moral values are excluded from the political sphere, a proceduralist logic of governance remains—guided not by virtue, but by strategic calculation and bureaucratic routine. This has led to a form of politics in which legitimacy is equated with legality, and law becomes the substitute for ethical consensus. In his seminal Political Theology, Carl Schmitt (1922) famously argued that secularization strips politics of its normative and theological dimension. For Schmitt, "the political" becomes a matter of friend and enemy, with sovereignty reduced to the pragmatic authority of decision-making, not the pursuit of justice or a shared vision of the good. Leo Strauss (1953) deepened this critique, lamenting that modern political thought had severed itself from its classical and religious roots, thus drifting into relativism and technocracy. Without a transcendent referent, Strauss argued, the political order becomes unable to answer the fundamental question of "the good."

This detachment is vividly captured in Hannah Arendt's (1963) diagnosis of the "banality of politics"—a world where administrative routines and bureaucratic consensus replace genuine deliberation and existential reflection. Public life's contemplative, meaning-seeking dimension gives way to managed mass conformity. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (1991) identifies a "crisis of rationality," where strategic interests and technical reasoning colonize the public sphere, eroding its normative integrity and fostering widespread distrust.

As a result, contemporary politics is marked by what Charles Taylor (1991) calls "moral fragmentation"—a plurality of values with no shared horizon or substantive purpose. Individuals become isolated moral agents, each confined to their private ethical domain, and the emergence of a coherent collective vision becomes ever more elusive. Richard Rorty (1989) affirms this pluralism, advocating for the historicity and contingency of values, but at the cost of any universal foundation for

justice. The result is an age of "moral fatigue," where society struggles to find meaning and consensus. Cornel West (1993) describes this malaise as "ethical nihilism," a public sphere drained of spiritual resonance, dominated by competitive self-interest rather than cooperative striving for higher ideals. Alain de Benoist (2004) also contends that radical secularism uproots the moral and spiritual anthropology of the human being, leaving politics adrift without vision or telos.

From the perspective of Islamic political philosophy, this crisis is theoretical and existential. Muhammad Asad (1980) insists that politics is inescapably ethical, and that excluding spiritual values reduces it to a contest of egos and interests. Abdulwahab El-Affendi (2001) similarly warns that democracy becomes susceptible to corruption, injustice, and loss of genuine representation when stripped of spiritual roots. Yet, while these critiques are compelling, it is important to recognize that secular political ethics have also fostered significant goods—protection of individual rights, safeguards against theocracy, and pluralistic frameworks for coexistence. Many theorists, such as Habermas, have attempted to articulate a form of "public reason" that aspires to neutrality and inclusion. A legitimate concern, especially in pluralistic societies, is that appeals to spirituality in politics risk exclusion, coercion, or the re-emergence of dogmatic power.

A spiritually grounded political ethic, then, must avoid these pitfalls. Rather than advocating for the imposition of a singular religious worldview, it can be envisioned as an ethos that recovers the moral and existential dimensions of public life without negating diversity. Such an ethic would foster a civic culture of humility, dialogical engagement, and mutual responsibility—a culture in which citizens are encouraged to draw on their deepest moral and spiritual convictions, yet also commit to principles of reciprocity and justice accessible to all.

This vision does not entail a return to theocratic models or the subordination of politics to any one faith. Instead, it points toward a pluralistic public reason enriched by, rather than emptied of, spiritual insight—a "spiritual secularity," as Taylor suggests, in which the search for meaning, justice, and dignity remains open to contributions from diverse traditions. Practically, this would mean institutional arrangements that honor conscience, facilitate ethical deliberation across worldviews, and foreground the human need for purpose in policy and law design.

In this sense, the crisis of secular political ethics invites not a retreat into nostalgia, but the creative reconstruction of public life. The aspiration is to move beyond procedural legality and instrumental rationality toward a richer, more integrated vision of political ethics—one that recognizes the spiritual dimension of the human being as a source of meaning, solidarity, and hope in the face of complexity and plurality. In the following section, the paradigm of al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah will be developed as a constructive alternative: an approach that seeks to heal contemporary politics' moral and existential deficits by re-centering spiritual accountability and ethical purpose at the heart of public life.

Thinker / Source	**Core Critique of Secular Political Ethics**	**Philosophical/Political Consequence**	**Constructive Response / Relevance for Plural Societies**
Carl Schmitt (1922)	Secularization eliminates theological legitimacy; politics is reduced to decisionism	Sovereignty becomes about power, not justice; the collapse of normativity	Raises question of legitimacy; invites reflection on moral sources of authority
Leo Strauss (1953)	Loss of classical moral-teleological roots	Rise of relativism and technocracy; "the good" is neglected	Urges re-engagement with foundational moral questions beyond procedure
Hannah Arendt (1963)	Politics devolves into administrative routine and loss of moral responsibility.	Banal politics; diminished ethical gravitas	Highlights the need for existential/ethical depth in public life

Jürgen Habermas (1991)	Public discourse becomes instrumental, not normative	Legitimacy crisis; law replaces shared ethical consensus	Argues for "public reason" to reintegrate ethics in plural discourse
Charles Taylor (1991)	Pluralism without a shared *telos* yields moral fragmentation	Individuals isolated as moral agents; loss of collective direction	Suggests "spiritual secularity"—ethics enriched, not emptied, of meaning
Richard Rorty (1989)	No universal foundations—values are contingent/historical	Pluralism risks sliding into relativism	Calls for pragmatic solidarity, but lacks a transcendental anchor
Cornel West (1993)	Secular liberalism breeds ethical nihilism and spiritual emptiness	Public cynicism, loss of existential meaning	Stresses the importance of re-enchanting public reason with moral/spiritual vision
Alain de Benoist (2004)	Radical secularism uproots spiritual anthropology	Politics adrift, lacking ontological grounding	Opens debate on anthropology: what is the human in public ethics?
Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1997)	Modernity disconnects humans from their spiritual origins	Crisis of moral authority; loss of responsibility	Promotes "re-sacralization" of public ethics
Taha Abdurrahman (2006)	Neglects divine accountability; stagnation (*tanammuṭ akhlāqī*)	Reduction of ethics to legality; loss of spiritual accountability	Advances al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah: responsibility and moral intentionality
Muhammad Asad (1980)	Politics without tawḥīd is ethically hollow	Action becomes power-centric, no transcendental orientation	Spirituality is inescapable for moral legitimacy
Abdulwahab El-Affendi (2001)	Secular democracy lacks a spiritual anchor	Legality without justice; risk of corruption and alienation	Spiritual anchoring as a moral safeguard in governance

Table 2. Critiques and Dynamics of Secular Political Ethics: Thinkers, Problems, and Constructive Responses

3. Deconstructing Secular Humanism: Internal Contradictions and the Crisis of Meaning

Secular humanism, founded on the autonomy of reason and the deliberate exclusion of revelation as an epistemic source, harbors deep internal contradictions. It positions the human being as the center of meaning and moral authority, yet, in severing the human subject from transcendent roots, it produces an existential vacuum beneath its emancipatory rhetoric. Jacques Maritain (1947) incisively argued that by discarding the divine, secular humanism eliminates the objective foundation upon which true human dignity rests. A vision of sovereignty without anchorage emerges—an apparent liberation that erodes the very horizons needed to sustain meaning, community, and responsibility.

In After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) takes this critique further by demonstrating how the modern ethical project, divorced from narrative and communal roots, collapses into what he terms a "post-ethical" society. Here, morality is reduced to private preference or procedural agreement, stripped of binding force and ontological substance. The outcome is the proliferation of moral claims with no shared authority, exposing the modern individual to the anxiety of meaninglessness and ethical isolation. These tensions are manifest in the world's inability to resolve dilemmas in bioethics, rights, and justice—debates often constrained by proceduralism and the lack of transcendent reference points. The absence of a stable value source fosters moral relativism, instrumental reasoning, and a crisis of legitimacy, all undermining efforts to cultivate a common good.

Contemporary Islamic philosophy, as articulated by Taha Abdurrahman, offers a sharp rejoinder. Taha labels secular humanism as al-Insāniyyah al-ʿIlmāniyyah—a humanism centralizing the human while refusing spiritual and revelatory moorings. In Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah (2006), he contends that this model imports empty values into the Islamic world, compounding the crisis of meaning rather than alleviating it. Taha's critique identifies three core epistemological flaws: (1) naqlīyah al-maʿānī (uncritical transplantation of meaning from Western to non-Western contexts), (2) faṣl al-akhlāq ʿan al-

maʿrifah (separation of ethics from knowledge), and (3) tazyīf al-rūḥ (falsification of spirituality, where moral language persists without spiritual roots).

Against this, Taha advances al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah, a vision of spiritual humanism grounded in faith, inner witnessing (shuhūd), and theocentric responsibility. In this framework, the human is not simply an autonomous agent but a moral trustee and servant (ʿabd) of God, whose freedom is exercised not in detachment from norms, but in conscious, ethical submission to higher ends. This paradigm does not reject human dignity; rather, it seeks to re-found it upon alternative epistemological and ontological grounds, calling for "epistemic decolonization" in the spirit of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2007) "epistemologies of the South." Spiritual experience, indigenous wisdom, and non-Western traditions are reclaimed as valid and vital sources of knowledge, meaning, and social order.

Yet, any constructive alternative must also address potential critiques and practical challenges—especially in pluralistic, secular societies. Critics may argue that spiritual humanism risks exclusivism or the re-inscription of dogmatic authority into public life. There is the legitimate concern that, without careful safeguards, appeals to the transcendent could marginalize minority voices, threaten religious neutrality, or hinder the flourishing of diverse perspectives.

To respond, proponents of al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah must clarify that spiritual humanism is not a call for theocratic dominance or a single confessional politics. Rather, it proposes a framework that recognizes spirituality as a universal dimension of human existence that can ground ethical responsibility, solidarity, and mutual respect across differences. In practice, this would require an ethic of dialogue, humility, and openness: public reason enriched, not replaced, by spiritual insight; institutional arrangements that protect freedom of conscience; and a civic culture that welcomes contributions from diverse traditions.

Indeed, the constructive potential of spiritual humanism lies in its refusal to accept the false binary between secular proceduralism and religious exclusivism. Instead, it envisions a public sphere where deep moral sources animate the search for meaning and justice, accessible to believers and non-believers, and translated into norms of justice, dignity, and the common good. Thus, the deconstruction of secular humanism opens a path not toward nostalgic restoration, but toward a reconfiguration of humanist ethics—one capable of engaging the realities of modern pluralism while resisting the drift toward meaninglessness and fragmentation. In this context, al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah offers a post-secular critique and a generative vision: a call to rethink the foundations of human dignity and responsibility by reconnecting reason, autonomy, and freedom to their spiritual and communal moorings.

Analytical Aspect	Secular Humanism (Dominant Paradigm)	Internal Contradiction / Critique	Constructive Alternative: al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah
Epistemology	Autonomous reason is primary; revelation and spiritual knowledge are excluded.	Produces epistemic instability—reason is unmoored from transcendent meaning.	Integrates reason (ʿaql) with revelation (waḥy) as mutually validating sources
Anthropology	Human as self-grounding, sovereign individual	Leads to existential anxiety, loss of ontological anchoring, and moral relativism	Human as ʿabd (servant) and khalīfah (trustee); accountable to God and society
Moral Framework	Morality reduced to subjective, procedural, or utilitarian calculation	No binding moral authority; ethics become negotiable, context-dependent	Moral obligation rooted in divine accountability and intentionality (niyyah)
Spiritual	Spirituality privatized,	Public life is disenchanted; spiritual	Spirituality (rūḥiyyah) as the

Dimension	sidelined, or commodified	claims lack moral weight in policy	core of human action and dignity; public virtue
Power & Authority	Power legitimized through social contract, consensus, or legal process	Lacks transcendent reference; law may justify unjust outcomes	Power as amānah (trust), under divine sovereignty (al-ḥākimiyyah)
Freedom	Defined as autonomy from all external (esp. religious) authority	Risks of becoming aimless, nihilistic, or unconstrained by collective responsibility	Freedom as responsible agency—bounded by ethical and spiritual norms
Critique (Taha Abdurrahman)	Critiques "al-Insāniyyah al-ʿIlmāniyyah"—humanism without God	(1) *Naqlīyah al-Maʿānī* (transplanted meanings); (2) *Faṣl al-Akhlāq ʿan al-Maʿrifah* (ethics divorced from knowledge); (3) *Tazyīf al-Rūḥ* (falsified spirituality)	Proposes "al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah"—humanism rooted in faith, ethics, and spiritual witnessing
Post-secular & Decolonial Critique	Eurocentric, historicist claims universality	Fails to account for global plurality; imports alien values; epistemic domination.	Calls for epistemic decolonization—reviving spiritual humanisms from Islamic and other traditions
Implication for Public Life	Pursuit of "neutral" public sphere, privatization of deepest values	Fosters fragmentation, loss of shared purpose, and challenges social trust	Encourages civic ethos grounded in dialogue, ethical pluralism, and mutual responsibility

Table 3. Internal Contradictions of Secular Humanism and the Constructive Alternative of al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah

DISCUSSION

1. An Islamic Vision: Politics Grounded in al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah

In Islamic thought, the human being is not understood as a radically autonomous agent in the liberal sense—unbound by external normative commitments—but rather as mukallaf: a morally responsible being accountable to God and society. Human subjectivity in Islam is not neutral or empty; an existential mandate shapes it—to serve as vicegerent on earth (khalīfah fī al-arḍ) and to worship the Divine (ʿubūdiyyah) (Nasr, 1993). Freedom in Islam is a form of responsible agency, guided by reason (ʿaql) and revelation (waḥy), oriented toward moral and spiritual purpose (ghāyah) (Taha, 2010).This vision contrasts sharply with secular humanism, which enthrones man as the sole arbiter of value but fails to provide a stable normative framework for political and social action (Rosenthal, 1958). Islam harmonizes freedom with moral accountability: human beings are free to choose, yet every choice entails masʾūliyyah—responsibility before God, humanity, and creation (Al-Attas, 1980).\

The Islamic spiritual humanist paradigm, or al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah, articulates a political ethic grounded in the following spiritual principles:

1. Tawḥīd – The unity of God as the ontological and ethical foundation. Politically, this principle rejects the absolutization of human power; all authority derives from God's sovereignty (al-ḥākimiyyah) (Taha, 2012).
2. ʿAdālah – Justice is not merely procedural fairness but a holistic virtue encompassing distributive, spiritual, and social dimensions. Al-Māwardī, in al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah, places justice at the core of Islamic governance (Al-Māwardī, 1996).
3. Amānah – Power is a trust, not a private right. Leadership is understood as stewardship (khidmah), not domination. Al-Fārābī envisioned the ideal ruler (al-raʾīs al-awwal) as both rational and morally upright, connected to the active intellect (Al-Fārābī, 1985).

4. Masʾūliyyah – A multi-layered sense of accountability—before God, society, and the environment. This principle curbs arbitrary power and enshrines moral consciousness in governance (Nasr, 1993; Al-Attas, 1993).
5. Akhlāq – Ethics as spiritual intentionality embedded in all political action. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas emphasized taʾdīb—the cultivation of a just and refined human being—as the core aim of political education (Al-Attas, 1980; 1993).

Al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah conceptual elaborates Taha Abdurrahman's critique of secular humanism. In al-ʿAmal al-Ṣāliḥ and Bāḥith fī al-ʿAql al-Akhlāqī al-ʿArabī, he maintains that true humanity is realized through tajribāt al-taʾalluh—a lived experience of divinity within ethical action (Taha, 2010; 2012). Genuine political practice, then, is rational and procedurally valid, and ṣāliḥ—rooted in sincere intention and spiritual orientation.

Taha outlines three core pillars of Islamic spiritual humanism:

1. Tadbīr rūḥānī (Spiritual governance)
2. Tansīq akhlāqī (Ethical coordination)
3. Tawjīh ʿubūdī (Theocentric orientation) (Taha, 2006)

This humanism is not anti-human; rather, it rejects the absolutization of the human subject. Paradoxically, by recognizing human finitude and reorienting toward the Divine, human beings actualize their highest dignity as a meaningful and responsible moral agent (Nasr, 1993; Esposito & Voll, 2001). Ultimately, this proposal is a normative alternative for the Muslim world and an epistemic correction to modern political philosophy, which has reached a value impasse (Rosenthal, 1958; Al-Attas, 1993). In a post-secular age, al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah opens the possibility of a global political ethic that is spiritually grounded, normatively robust, and deeply rooted in tradition—without lapsing into either fundamentalism or relativism (Esposito & Voll, 2001).

While al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah emerges from the wellspring of Islamic metaphysics, its accountability, justice, and ethical intentionality principles are not confined to a single tradition. Rather, they offer a framework open to dialogue and cross-fertilization with other moral philosophies—secular, Christian, or otherwise—by emphasizing the universal human quest for meaning, responsibility, and the common good. In pluralistic societies, this paradigm encourages the cultivation of a civic ethos grounded in shared values—such as trust, stewardship, and respect for human dignity—while allowing each community to draw from its deepest sources of wisdom. Such a vision can inspire new approaches to public policy, environmental stewardship, interfaith cooperation, and cultivating virtue in public life. By advancing a spiritual grammar of politics that resists procedural emptiness and authoritarian closure, al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah invites a renewed global conversation on what it means to be human, govern justly, and live ethically in a fractured world.

Dimension	**Secular Paradigm**	**Islamic Spiritual Humanism (al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah)**	**Philosophical Foundations / Key References**	**Practical Implication / Example**
Human Subjectivity	Autonomous, self-legislating agent; identity as personal project	Mukallaf: morally accountable agent, bound to God, community, and environment	Al-Attas, Nasr, Taha Abdurrahman	Policy: Emphasis on communal good & collective trust
Freedom	Self-determination; maximization of choice; freedom from external norms	Freedom as responsible agency; submission to ethical-spiritual guidance (taʾabbudiyyah, ghāyah)	Taha Abdurrahman (2010, 2012)	Law: Individual rights balanced by social responsibility

Moral Responsibility	Rooted in human consensus, individual preference, or social contract	Rooted in ʿubūdiyyah (servitude) & masʾūliyyah (accountability) before God and society	Al-Fārābī, Al-Māwardī	Ethics: Leaders are stewards, not power-owners
Political Authority	Legitimacy from procedure (elections, social contract), legal positivism	Amānah: power is a sacred trust (not just a legal mandate); subject to divine sovereignty (al-ḥākimiyyah)	Taha, Al-Attas, Al-Fārābī	Governance: Transparent, accountable, ethical leadership
Ethical Foundation	Procedural, utilitarian, or pragmatic rational ethics	Akhlāq (spiritual intentionality): Virtue and ethics are inseparable from metaphysical truth	Taha Abdurrahman, MacIntyre	Education: Ethical formation, not just skills
Justice (ʿAdālah)	Procedural fairness; distributive justice as defined by law or policy	Justice as a holistic virtue—spiritual, distributive, and social dimensions combined	Al-Māwardī, Nasr	Policy: Welfare systems consider spiritual & social justice
Educational Aim	Civic rationality: training for technical competence and critical thinking	Taʾdīb: formation of virtuous, spiritually anchored citizens and leaders	Syed M. N. Al-Attas	Curriculum: Values-based and character education
Spiritual Orientation	Spirituality privatized or marginalized in public affairs	Tawjīh ʿubūdī: public accountability before God, integration of spiritual goals in policy	Taha Abdurrahman	Governance: Policy with ethical-spiritual impact
Governance Ethic	Bureaucratic neutrality, technocratic efficiency	Tadbīr rūḥānī (spiritual governance), tansīq akhlāqī (ethical coordination)	Taha Abdurrahman	Management: Moral and spiritual audits in institutions
Epistemology of Politics	Empirical, positivist, secular rationalist	Integrative: Reason (ʿaql), revelation (waḥy), inner conscience (ḍamīr)	Al-Fārābī, Taha, Al-Attas	Decision-making: Informed by spiritual-moral deliberation

Table 4. Islamic Spiritual Humanism (al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah) vs Secular Paradigm in Political Ethics

2. Towards an Ethical Islamic Political Philosophy

An ethical Islamic political philosophy is grounded in the integrative power of two primary epistemic sources: reason (ʿaql) and revelation (waḥy). Rather than viewing these as antagonistic, the Islamic intellectual tradition treats them as dialectical partners in constructing a coherent and comprehensive normative framework for political life. This epistemic synthesis challenges the secular-modern paradigm that separates ethics from politics, reducing governance to procedural rationality devoid of spiritual substance. In contrast, Islamic political philosophy positions itself not merely as a collection of religious norms but as a living system of thought that unifies moral, spiritual, and rational dimensions in pursuing public good.

The classical tradition, exemplified by thinkers such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd, foregrounds the possibility of a deep partnership between reason and revelation. For them, political theory is inseparable from the cultivation of the soul (tazkiyah al-nafs) and the realization of saʿādah (ultimate happiness) through just governance (al-Fārābī, 2001; Gutas, 2001). In their view, the state functions as a prophetic extension—guiding individuals toward both material order and spiritual fulfillment (Ibn Rushd, 2012).

Al-Ghazālī advances this vision by emphasizing the necessity of integrating ethics and politics. He warns, in al-Iqtiṣād fī al-Iʿtiqād and Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk, that divorcing morality from political

authority invites tyranny and social decay (Al-Ghazālī, 1993). This classical insight foreshadows modern anxieties about the ethical vacuity of policy-making and the risk of technocracy unmoored from moral purpose.

Contemporary scholars such as Taha Abdurrahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd have sought to revitalize this legacy in light of pluralism and rational critique. Taha articulates al-ʿaql al-akhlāqī—the morally enlightened intellect oriented toward divine ends (Taha, 2006)—while Abu Zayd calls for a hermeneutic reading of revelation to preserve its ethical relevance in a rapidly changing world (Abu Zayd, 2003). In The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Muhammad Iqbal pushes for a dynamic philosophy of ijtihād that sees revelation not as static law, but as spiritual energy that animates creativity and justice (Iqbal, 1930). In this light, politics is transformed from a contest for power to a field of ethical striving and spiritual refinement.

At its core, Islamic political philosophy is teleological—its aim is not mere proceduralism or popular consensus, but the realization of taqwā (God-consciousness), ʿadālah (justice), and maṣlaḥah (public good). The framework of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah strengthens this orientation by viewing law as a means to secure essential human values—faith, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth (Auda, 2008). Thus, Islamic political philosophy is essentially a philosophy of ethics, rooted in a multidimensional conception of human flourishing that unites inward moral formation with outward social justice.

Nevertheless, this integrative vision faces real challenges. The synthesis of classical metaphysics with modern critical thought is not without tensions. Some critics argue that appeals to revelation risk stagnation or exclusion of dissenting voices; others caution that overemphasizing reason can lead to secularization or the dilution of spiritual depth. The enduring task for Islamic political philosophy is to continually negotiate the boundaries of tradition and innovation—adapting its ethical vision to changing contexts while guarding against dogmatism and ethical relativism. Engaging with modern pluralism requires ongoing hermeneutical effort, openness to dialogue, and the willingness to learn from internal critique and external encounter.

In a world where modern Western political philosophy has lost its spiritual and teleological bearings, the Islamic tradition offers a meaningful synthesis—not as a nostalgic return, but as a critical epistemological intervention. Islamic political thought aspires to provide a holistic, dynamic, and ethically robust framework for just governance and human flourishing by uniting reason and revelation, classical depth and modern critique. The future of this project depends on its capacity to remain faithful to its metaphysical foundations while actively participating in the plural, contested space of contemporary political thought.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the epistemological limitations of secular humanism within modern political philosophy, particularly its tendency to sever political ethics from spiritual and transcendent sources of meaning. The analysis demonstrated that secular humanism has promoted autonomy, rights, and pluralism, but it has also contributed to a crisis of moral coherence, meaning, and legitimacy in contemporary public life. By employing a comparative and deconstructive approach, the study identified the internal contradictions of secular humanism—most notably, its elevation of human dignity without an anchoring transcendent foundation. The paper then proposed the framework of al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah, or Islamic spiritual humanism, as a normative and epistemic alternative. Rooted in the integration of reason (ʿaql) and revelation (waḥy), and grounded in concepts such as *amānah* (trust), *ʿubūdiyyah* (servanthood), and *ʿadālah* (justice), this paradigm re-centers spiritual

responsibility and moral intentionality at the heart of political life.

This research's core contribution is articulating a conceptual model that bridges rational and spiritual dimensions within political ethics—challenging both procedural secularism's reductionism and dogmatism's pitfalls. By re-integrating spiritual anthropology into political philosophy, the study offers a renewed foundation for justice, meaning, and dignity, and enriches the contemporary discourse of Islamic political thought. While this article has focused on conceptual and normative analysis, future research could further explore practical applications and case studies, especially in pluralistic societies. Ultimately, al-Insāniyyah ar-Rūḥiyyah is presented not as a retreat to the past, but as a viable horizon for rethinking public reason and legitimacy in a world searching for ethical renewal and shared purpose.

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