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Quick-Reference Guide: 10 Classical Muslim Thinkers

A Companion to Roots of Reason

Falah Shifa

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Al-Kindi — Father of Islamic Philosophy

Lived: c. 801–873 CE

Key Ideas:

- First to introduce Greek philosophy into Arabic/Islamic scholarship
- Argued philosophy and revelation are compatible paths to truth
- Cosmological argument for God's existence from contingency
- Pioneered Islamic cryptanalysis and mathematics
- Distinguished divine knowledge (prophetic) from human knowledge (philosophical)

Major Works: *On First Philosophy* | *On the Intellect*

> *"We should not be ashamed of appreciating truth from whatever source."*

Why They Matter: Opened the door for all subsequent Islamic philosophy.

Al-Farabi — The Second Teacher (after Aristotle)

Lived: c. 872–950 CE

Key Ideas:

- Created Al-Madinah al-Fadilah (The Virtuous City) — Islamic political philosophy
- Emanation theory: reality flows from the One through intellects
- Harmonized Plato and Aristotle with Islamic theology
- Classified all sciences into a unified hierarchy
- Argued the philosopher-prophet-king as ideal ruler

Major Works: *The Virtuous City* | *Classification of the Sciences*

> *"The philosopher and the prophet both seek the same truth."*

Why They Matter: Created the foundation of Islamic political philosophy.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) — The Prince of Physicians

Lived: c. 980–1037 CE

Key Ideas:

- 'Flying Man' thought experiment: consciousness exists independent of body
- Distinction between essence (mahiyyah) and existence (wujud)
- Proof of God as the 'Necessary Being' (Wajib al-Wujud)
- Unified medicine with philosophy — mind-body connection
- Most comprehensive Islamic philosophical system

Major Works: *The Book of Healing* | *The Canon of Medicine*

> *"Knowledge of anything is not complete unless known through its causes."*

Why They Matter: His metaphysics of essence vs. existence became the cornerstone of Islamic philosophy.

Al-Ghazali — Proof of Islam (Hujjat al-Islam)

Lived: 1058–1111 CE

Key Ideas:

- 'The Incoherence of the Philosophers' — 20 charges against philosophy
- Argued causality is not necessary — God directly creates every event
- Left prestigious position to seek truth through Sufism
- Reconciled Islamic orthodoxy with mystical experience
- Revived Islamic spirituality through experiential knowledge

Major Works: *Incoherence of Philosophers* | *Revival of Religious Sciences*

> *"The happiness of the drop is to die in the river."*

Why They Matter: Shifted Islamic culture from pure rationalism toward faith-reason-experience synthesis.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) — The Commentator

Lived: 1126–1198 CE

Key Ideas:

- Defended philosophy against Al-Ghazali in 'Incoherence of the Incoherence'
- Double Truth: philosophy and religion reach truth through different methods
- Greatest commentator on Aristotle — shaped European scholasticism
- Argued for natural causality against Ghazali's occasionalism
- Maintained reason and revelation never truly contradict

Major Works: *Incoherence of the Incoherence* | *The Decisive Treatise*

> *"Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hate, hate leads to violence."*

Why They Matter: Preserved Aristotelian philosophy for both Islamic and European worlds.

Ibn Khaldun — Father of Sociology

Lived: 1332–1406 CE

Key Ideas:

- Invented 'Ilm al-Umran (Science of Civilization) — sociology
- Asabiyyah: social cohesion rises and falls in cyclical patterns
- 4-generation lifecycle: builders → consolidators → consumers → destroyers
- Demanded evidence-based history over blind narrative
- Connected economics, politics, culture into unified theory

Major Works: *The Muqaddimah (Introduction to History)*

> *"When a nation becomes victim of psychological defeat, that marks the end of a nation."*

Why They Matter: Created the first scientific approach to history, centuries before Comte.

Ibn Taymiyyah — Sheikh al-Islam

Lived: 1263–1328 CE

Key Ideas:

- Challenged supremacy of Greek philosophy in Islamic thought
- Argued for return to Quran and Sunnah as primary knowledge sources
- Critiqued both philosophers AND Sufis from textualist position
- Islamic epistemology based on fitrah (natural disposition)
- Influenced modern Islamic reform movements

Major Works: *Dar' Ta'arud al-Aql wan-Naql* | *Al-Aqidah al-Wasitiyyah*

> *"The foundation of the religion is a guiding book and a supporting sword."*

Why They Matter: Created a 'third way' grounded in scriptural reasoning.

Aristotle — The First Teacher (in Islamic tradition)

Lived: 384–322 BCE

Key Ideas:

- Logic (syllogism) became foundation of Islamic rational sciences
- Four Causes theory adopted by Islamic philosophers
- Nicomachean Ethics influenced Islamic virtue ethics (akhlaq)
- Metaphysics of potentiality/actuality shaped Islamic cosmology
- Translated into Arabic during 8th-9th century Translation Movement

Major Works: *Organon* | *Metaphysics* | *Nicomachean Ethics*

> *"The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet."*

Why They Matter: His logical method became the operating system of Islamic scholarship.

Plato — The Divine Philosopher (in Islamic tradition)

Lived: 428–348 BCE

Key Ideas:

- Theory of Forms influenced Islamic concepts of the unseen (al-ghayb)
- Republic's philosopher-king adapted by Al-Farabi for Islamic governance
- Allegory of the Cave resonated with Sufi spiritual awakening
- Soul's tripartite division influenced Islamic psychology
- Dialogic method influenced Islamic debate (munazarah)

Major Works: *The Republic* | *Timaeus* | *Phaedo*

> *"The measure of a man is what he does with power."*

Why They Matter: His political and metaphysical ideas were Islamized by Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi — The Great Quranic Commentator

Lived: 1149–1210 CE

Key Ideas:

- Wrote Tafsir al-Kabir — philosophical commentary on the entire Quran
- Developed Islamic philosophical theology (kalam) to its highest form
- Critiqued both Ghazali's anti-philosophy AND Ibn Sina's pure rationalism
- Middle path: reason serves revelation, revelation completes reason
- Advanced new arguments for God's existence

Major Works: *Mafatih al-Ghayb (Keys to the Unseen)* | *Al-Muhassal*

> *"I explored theology and philosophy but found no cure for the sick heart like the Quran."*

Why They Matter: Created the most sophisticated synthesis of theology, philosophy, and Quranic exegesis.

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