The Thinkers Who Built Muslim Philosophy — Roots of Reason Part II

The Thinkers Who Built Muslim Philosophy

Roots of Reason · Part II

FALAH DIGITAL · MICRO-COURSE

Seven Minds, One Conversation

A tradition is not a doctrine. It is a conversation — and the conversation that became Muslim philosophy was carried by a handful of extraordinary minds, each answering the ones before him in his own voice.

This course introduces seven of them, in seven compact profiles: al-Kindi, who opened the door; al-Farabi, who designed the ideal society; Ibn Sina, who mapped the self; al-Ghazali, who pressed the hardest critique from within; Ibn Rushd, who answered it in defence of reason; Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi, who charted the inner world of light; and al-Razi and Ibn Taymiyya, whose opposed instincts still shape every argument about reform.

These are introductions, not deep dives. Each profile gives you the person, the single idea they are remembered for, and why it still matters — and points you, where relevant, to the Falah courses and casts that treat them in full. Think of this as the family tree, walked one branch at a time. Read them in order and you will hear the whole conversation take shape.

Lesson 1 — Al-Kindi: The First Philosopher

Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq **al-Kindi** (c. 801–873) is remembered as the "Philosopher of the Arabs" — the first major philosopher of Islam. In the cosmopolitan court of the Abbasid caliphs, he oversaw the translation of Greek manuscripts, bringing Aristotle, Plato, and Ptolemy into Arabic. But he was never a passive conduit. He was, in his own phrase, an architect of a "First Philosophy."

Al-Kindi's great conviction was the **unity of knowledge**. Because the universe was made by a single rational Creator, its structure had to be mathematical, and all the sciences — optics, astronomy, metaphysics, theology — were facets of one inquiry. "Whoever is not versed in mathematics," he warned, "cannot comprehend the beauty of philosophy." In his strange, forward-looking treatise *On the Stellar Rays*, he pictured a universe in which every object emits "rays" of causal influence that propagate through the cosmos — a vision some modern readers find eerily close to an early theory of information.

His deepest contribution, though, was the one that made everything after him possible: he argued that **reason and revelation cannot truly contradict**, because both are "twin rays" from the same divine source. Where philosophy and scripture seem to clash, either the philosophy is flawed or the text has been misread. This is the harmony on which the whole tradition would be built.

To be first is to be exposed. Al-Kindi had to defend Greek thought against theologians who saw it as a foreign threat, and he paid for it: late in life he was reportedly flogged and his library

confiscated. The founder who maps new territory is often the first sacrificed when the established order consolidates its boundaries. Yet the framework he built held. Every thinker in this course stands, in some sense, on the door that al-Kindi opened.

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Al-Kindi insisted knowledge is one, not a set of walled-off specialties. Where has over-specialisation blinded you to a connection worth seeing?
2. He paid a real price for being first. What makes founders so often the first to be punished?

Lesson 2 — Al-Farabi: The Second Teacher

Abu Nasr **al-Farabi** (c. 872–950) earned a title given to no one else: the **Second Teacher**, second only to Aristotle. A polymath who worked in the shadow of Baghdad's House of Wisdom and chose a life of deliberate simplicity, he set himself a monumental task — to reconcile Greek rationalism with Islamic revelation, and to apply the result to the deepest human problem: how should people live together?

His answer was the **Virtuous City** — *al-Madina al-Fadila*. A city, al-Farabi argued, is not bricks and markets but a living organism, like a body that needs a soul to direct it toward its purpose. That purpose is *sa'ada*, true happiness: not pleasure or wealth, but the moral and intellectual flourishing of its people. At its head stands not a tyrant but a **philosopher-ruler** whose soul is aligned with the Active Intellect — someone who grasps the highest truths and can translate them into laws ordinary people can live by.

Al-Farabi was also a realist. He catalogued the **"ignorant cities"** — those driven by wealth, power, pleasure, or honour, where citizens mistake shadows for reality. His warning is unervingly modern: a society can perfect the *physical* geometry of the virtuous city — efficient, frictionless, data-optimised — while installing the *soul* of the ignorant city, mistaking the optimisation of data for the cultivation of virtue. A city, he insisted, is only as virtuous as the soul that guides it.

Al-Farabi's political philosophy is the hinge of the whole tradition, and it is far richer than a single profile can hold: the six

marks of the wise ruler, the ladder of existence, the four diseased cities, and his startling eclipse by Machiavelli five centuries later.

> ***For the full political philosophy, see The Virtuous City: From Al-Farabi to Machiavelli*** *— the Falah Digital micro-course devoted entirely to al-Farabi's thought.*

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Al-Farabi says a city can be physically perfect and still have the "soul" of an ignorant city. Does that describe anywhere you have lived or worked?
2. He ties good government to the moral formation of citizens, not just procedure. What has that trade cost modern societies that emphasise procedure alone?

Lesson 3 — Ibn Sina: The Floating Man

Abu Ali al-Husayn **ibn Sina** (c. 980–1037) — Avicenna to the Latin West — was the system-builder of the tradition. A prodigy who had mastered the sciences of his day by his late teens, he fused Aristotelian logic, Neoplatonic metaphysics, and medicine into the grand synthesis of his masterwork, *Kitab al-Shifa* (The Book of Healing). But his most enduring legacy is a single thought experiment about the nature of the self.

Imagine, Ibn Sina wrote, a man **created in an instant, fully formed, suspended in a void** — blindfolded, floating in still air, his limbs held apart so they touch nothing. No sight, no sound, no sensation, no awareness of a body at all. Would this "floating man" be aware that he exists? A strict materialist says no: without sensory input, consciousness has nothing to arise from. Ibn Sina says the opposite. The floating man would affirm his own existence instantly — while having no awareness of any physical body. Therefore the self, the *nafs*, is distinct from the body.

This was not crude dualism — a ghost in a machine — but a careful warning against a category error: the tools of physics may not be suited to measuring subjective experience. When a neuroscientist says consciousness is "nothing but" firing neurons, Ibn Sina would answer that they are studying the radio and mistaking it for the broadcast. A thousand years before David Chalmers named the "hard problem of consciousness," Ibn Sina had already walked up to the explanatory gap and described it.

His argument has become newly urgent in the age of artificial minds: if the *nafs* is immaterial, no amount of added complexity

will make a machine truly conscious; if consciousness is merely emergent complexity, perhaps it will. Nothing in his text settles it — but the question itself, born in a Persian void, now haunts every AI lab.

> ***For a deeper treatment of Ibn Sina and the Kitab al-Shifa, see the Falah Cast Al-Shifa episodes.***

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Sit with the floating man for a moment. Do you find that you can conceive of your *self* without your body, but not your body without a self?
2. If a machine perfectly imitated a conscious person, how would you ever know whether "someone was home"? Should that uncertainty change how we build such machines?

Lesson 4 — Al-Ghazali: The Deliverer from Error

Abu Hamid **al-Ghazali** (1058–1111) stood at the summit of the Islamic world — chief professor at Baghdad's Nizamiyya Madrasa — when he fell into a crisis that reads like a modern thriller. He realised that most of what he believed he had simply **inherited**, accepted on the authority of teachers and society. "The child of every Muslim," he wrote, "grows up believing his religion is the right one." That realisation plunged him into a "sea of doubt."

He subjected everything to ruthless skepticism — centuries before Descartes. He doubted the senses: a star looks as small as a coin yet is immense. He doubted the intellect through the **dream analogy**: in a dream, false things feel entirely real; what guarantees that waking life is not simply a longer dream? He reached an epistemological dead end, and found his way out not through logic alone but through what he called "a light which God cast into my breast" — certain knowledge, *ilm al-yaqin*, grounded in both discipline and spiritual realisation.

He is often blamed for "killing" Islamic science with his *Tahafut al-Falasifa — The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. But read closely, the *Tahafut* did not reject reason; it attacked **overreach**. Al-Ghazali explicitly preserved logic and mathematics — logic, he said, is the scale by which we weigh arguments. What he destroyed was not science but *scientism*: the assumption that unaided reason suffices for every kind of truth. His distinction between *taqlid* (blind imitation) and *tahqiq* (verified, realised knowledge) is a direct challenge to our own age of copy-pasted certainties and "internet muftis."

Al-Ghazali's critique of the philosophers set up the single greatest debate in Islamic thought — his challenge, and Ibn Rushd's reply.

> ***For the full narrative of that debate, see The Question That Never Dies*** *— the Falah Digital micro-course on al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd.*

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Al-Ghazali realised most of his deepest beliefs were inherited and unexamined. Which of yours would survive the same scrutiny?
2. He distinguished killing *science* from killing *scientism*. Where do you see unaided reason overreaching today?

Lesson 5 — Ibn Rushd: The Commentator

Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) — Averroes — was reason's most formidable defender, and he mounted his defence from inside the law. A *qadi* (judge) and master of jurisprudence in twelfth-century Córdoba, working under the puritanical Almohad dynasty, he answered al-Ghazali's critique not with philosophy from the outside but with a legal brief from within.

His argument, in the *Fasl al-Maqal* (The Decisive Treatise), is a syllogism of real audacity. The Qur'an commands people to reflect on creation and use their intellect to know the Creator. Philosophy is the most rigorous form of such reflection. Therefore the study of philosophy is not merely permitted but **obligatory** for those capable of it — and to ban philosophy is, in effect, to ban obedience to God. "Truth does not contradict truth," he wrote; where reason and revealed text appear to clash, the fault lies in a misreading of the text, not in reason.

In the Latin West he became known simply as **The Commentator** — where medieval Europe called Aristotle "The Philosopher," it called Ibn Rushd the one who unlocked him. His exhaustive commentaries, translated in Toledo, lit a fire at the University of Paris so unsettling that the Church condemned "Averroist" propositions in 1277. Through him, Aristotelian rationalism reached the European scholastics and fed, eventually, into the Enlightenment.

His caliph, under political pressure, later exiled him and burned his books — yet the ideas survived through translation and controversy, and some scholars trace a line from his hermeneutics to modern constitutional thought. The roots of

reason, as he might have said, are hard to eradicate even when the effort is sustained and well-funded.

> ***For the full narrative of his clash with al-Ghazali, see The Question That Never Dies*** *— the Falah Digital micro-course on al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd.*

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Ibn Rushd argued reason is a religious *duty*, not a threat to faith. How would that reframe arguments you have heard that pit the two against each other?
2. His books were burned, yet his ideas outlived the fire. What makes an idea survive the attempt to erase it?

Lesson 6 — Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi: The Light of the Mystics

Not all the roots of reason run through logic. Two mystics mapped the inner world the philosophers left unlit, and their centuries-old visions have found surprising new relevance in our "post-secular" age.

Suhrawardi (1154–1191), the "Master of Illumination," looked at the dry Aristotelianism of his day and saw a philosophy that had lost its soul. His answer was *Hikmat al-Ishraq* — the **Philosophy of Illumination** — less an academic system than an initiation. True knowledge, he argued, cannot come through discursive reason alone; the intellect must be purified until it is struck by direct, intuitive "light." Reality itself he pictured as a descending hierarchy of light, from the Light of Lights (God) down to the shadowy edge of matter, which is not dead but the dimmest degree of that same radiance. He was executed at thirty-seven on charges of heresy; his ideas went underground and survived.

Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), the "Greatest Master," mapped the ontology to match. His great theme is *wahdat al-wujud* — the **Unity of Being**: one true Existence, with the cosmos as a mirror in which the Divine contemplates its own names and attributes. Every atom, every person, every falling leaf is a *mazhar*, a locus of divine self-disclosure; God relates to the world as the ocean to the wave. From this flows an ethic of startling generosity — "let your heart be a receptacle for every form" — and an ecology that treats the earth not as a store of resources but as a living theophany.

Modern thinkers keep catching up to them: Whitehead's universe of "becoming" echoes Ibn Arabi's perpetual renewal of creation; Levinas's ethics of the Other's face rhymes with the Unity of Being. Reason cut off entirely from the transcendent, these mystics suggest, risks becoming a cold and even destructive tool. The roots of reason, on their reading, are watered by the light.

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Suhrawardi insisted some knowledge can only be *experienced*, not argued. Where in your life has that been true?
2. If every person and thing is a "mirror of the Divine," how would that change the way you treat what is in front of you?

Lesson 7 — Al-Razi and Ibn Taymiyya: The Long Shadow of Reform

The tradition does not end in harmony. It ends — and continues — in an argument about **reform** itself, carried by two opposed giants whose instincts still structure every debate in the modern Muslim world.

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1150–1210) was the great synthesiser. He refused to choose between *falsafa* (philosophy) and *kalam* (theology), and tried to weave Avicennan logic into the fabric of Ash'arite theology. The irony of his life is that in using philosophy to defend the faith, he nearly let philosophy subvert it — subjecting orthodox doctrine to such relentless rational scrutiny that, by some accounts, he made God look like a philosophical abstraction. Near the end he is said to have confessed that ultimate truth was better found in the plain revelation of the Qur'an than in the dizzying heights of dialectic. He reformed theology by *expanding* it.

Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) concluded the bridge al-Razi built was a trap, and set about dismantling it — often from a prison cell in Damascus. He argued that reliance on unaided reason substituted the created intellect for the Creator's word, and turned the philosophers' own logical tools against them. He reformed theology by *contracting* it, stripping away philosophical and mystical accretion to return to the faith's "pristine origins." His shadow is long: both quietist Salafism and violent Salafi-jihadism claim him, abstracting his specific rulings into sweeping principles.

But the caricature misses the pragmatist. Ibn Taymiyya made expansive use of *maslaha* (public interest), developed workable frameworks for ethical finance, and wrote a surprisingly flexible jurisprudence for Muslims living as minorities. Reform, in his lineage, has meant a *return* rather than a forward march — and the quietist, the jihadist, and the pragmatist each "return" to something different. The tradition's deepest unresolved question is simply this: **what should reform actually mean?**

PAUSE AND THINK

1. Al-Razi reformed by expanding, Ibn Taymiyya by contracting — both believed they were saving the faith. Which instinct do you trust more, and why?
2. In the West reform means moving forward; in this lineage it often means returning. What are the hidden costs of each direction?

Where to Go From Here

You have now met the seven minds and heard the conversation take shape: al-Kindi opening the door, al-Farabi designing the city, Ibn Sina mapping the self, al-Ghazali pressing the critique, Ibn Rushd answering it, the mystics lighting the inner world, and al-Razi and Ibn Taymiyya setting the terms of reform that still bind us.

Two of them have whole Falah courses of their own — al-Farabi in *The Virtuous City*, and the al-Ghazali–Ibn Rushd clash in *The Question That Never Dies* — and Ibn Sina is explored further in the Falah Cast *Al-Shifa* episodes. Follow the ones who gripped you.

And when you are ready to move from the *thinkers* to the *questions* they argued over — logic and language, nature and cosmos, ethics, politics, law, economics, reform, and the future — continue with **Roots of Reason Part III, *The Questions That Shape Muslim Thought*.**

Thank you for learning with Falah Digital.