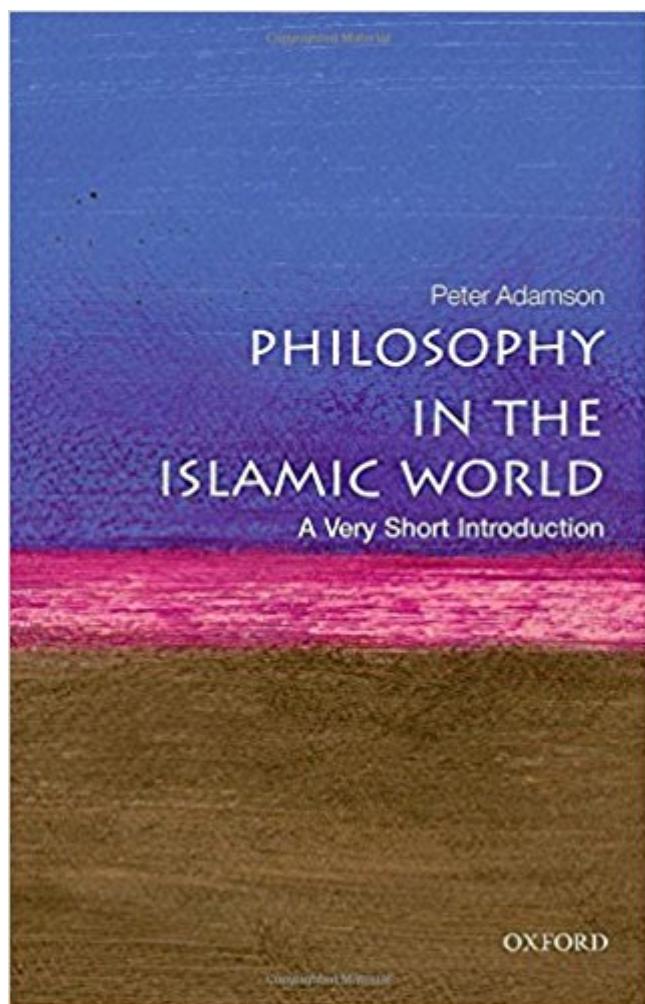


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# Philosophy In The Islamic World: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



## Synopsis

In the history of philosophy, few topics are so relevant to today's cultural and political landscape as philosophy in the Islamic world. Yet, this remains one of the lesser-known philosophical traditions. In this Very Short Introduction, Peter Adamson explores the history of philosophy among Muslims, Jews, and Christians living in Islamic lands, from its historical background to thinkers in the twentieth century. Introducing the main philosophical themes of the Islamic world, Adamson integrates ideas from the Islamic and Abrahamic faiths to consider the broad philosophical questions that continue to invite debate: What is the relationship between reason and religious belief? What is the possibility of proving God's existence? What is the nature of knowledge?

Drawing on the most recent research in the field, this book challenges the assumption of the cultural decline of philosophy and science in the Islamic world by demonstrating its rich heritage and overlap with other faiths and philosophies. **ABOUT THE SERIES:** The Very Short Introductions series from Oxford University Press contains hundreds of titles in almost every subject area. These pocket-sized books are the perfect way to get ahead in a new subject quickly. Our expert authors combine facts, analysis, perspective, new ideas, and enthusiasm to make interesting and challenging topics highly readable.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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Peter Adamson is Professor of Late Ancient and Arabic Philosophy at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. In 2014, he was awarded the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Award for Translation, with Peter E. Pormann for *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindi* (OUP, 2012). He has published widely in ancient and medieval philosophy as well as hosting the popular History of Philosophy podcast, whose episodes are appearing as a series of books with OUP, entitled *A History of Philosophy without any Gaps*.

Adamson's podcasts and attempts to catalog and explicate the entire history of philosophy is incredibly fascinating and useful, and this is a wonderful, if brief addition to his work. It is, however, a whirlwind tour of Philosophy in the Islamic World including Arab Christian and diaspora Jewish philosophers. Building on both the disputes in early Arabic theology as well as building on Aristotle, one sees medieval arabic philosophy develop and somewhat predate a lot of the later medieval and early modern debates in Christian philosophy as well as being a continuation of classical philosophy. Adamson does a good job of showing how tensions between syncretic, mystical, and rationalists threads really color Islamic and Arab philosophy as well as trying to work through various forms of the unity of God and even intellect. The variety of names can be overwhelming given some of the lack of references for later Islamic philosophers, particularly once Ottoman and Safavid's become dominant. An excellent introduction that only suffers from perhaps too much information in too small a book.

Very few western scholars are as well equipped as Peter Adamson to expound the philosophy and theology that emerged and thrived in the Islamic World beginning in the 8th century. He is a renowned scholar of ancient and Arabic philosophy with a joint appointment at Kings College, England and the University of Munich. His highly regarded podcast, which is also the basis for a multi-volume history of philosophy in progress, is encyclopedic in scope, tracing the history of philosophy from the Presocratics to the present. He is especially strong on Islam's Golden Age during which Greek and Hellenistic philosophy was translated into Arabic and Persian, and brilliant thinkers like Al-Farrabi and Avicenna thrived. However, perhaps because of his extremely detailed knowledge in this area, he may not be the perfect candidate for compressing the

philosophy of the Islamic World down to a slim paperback. To be sure, his erudition shows through, and there is much to be learned here, but at times there is more information than space to unfold it in a measured and palatable fashion. The first chapter, aptly entitled, *A Whirlwind Historical Tour*, is a highly condensed historical overview of the topic. It is, I think, the weakest chapter due to an excess of undefined terms, philosophical movements and a barrage of names unlikely to mean much to a newcomer. At 30 pages (out of a total 144pp) it does detract slightly from an otherwise fine book. Thankfully, the remaining chapters are far more satisfying as Adamson carefully unpacks some of the most important doctrines and ideas of the great philosophers, theologians and mystics of the Islamic World. If you do read the book, it might be a good idea to re-read the "Whirlwind Tour" (Ch. 1) again after reading the more substantive chapters. It will probably make more sense the second time. There aren't a lot of slim paperbacks covering this material, so if you want to learn about these diverse and centuries-spanning philosophical developments without a text-book and accompanying reader, this may be as good a place as any to start. An annotated bibliography for further reading would have been welcome, but the book does boast several helpful maps in the beginning and a timeline with parallel developments in politics and philosophy at the end. Once you get past chapter one, the exposition is clear and the material is organized thematically (e.g. Reason and Revelation, God and Being, Eternity, Knowledge etc.). He covers some of the contributions of several key philosophers in a skillful and concise way, including Al-Khindi, al-Farrabi, Avicenna, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun and Mulla Sadra. He also explains the religious and theological views of the Mutazillites (who were often associated with the early philosophers) and the Asharites who reacted against what they saw as an overvaluation of Reason by philosophers who, they thought, severely downplayed the role of Revelation). He explains how the early philosophers' ideas were incorporated into later mystical (largely Sufi) works. Finally, in a very condensed chapter on ethics and politics, he discusses the contributions of both ancient and modern thinkers and ideas. As far as the modern period goes, he makes reference to such late 19th and early 20th C Islamic Modernists as al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal-- important reformers who were drawn to modern Western science and philosophy incorporating them selectively into their vision of Islam in the modern world. There is passing mention of Ayatollah Khomeini and the 1979 Revolution in Iran. Adamson also discusses the recently deceased Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, author of *Beyond the Veil*. Interestingly he does not mention, even in passing, Sayyed Qutb or any other Islamists that have influenced violent extremists. The only other concise intro-level book of this kind that I know is *Islamic Philosophy* by Majid Fakhry, another fine scholar. That book is part of the "Beginners' Guides Series" issued by OneWorld press. At 200 pp, it covers roughly the same

thinkers and movements from 8th to 20th century. It might be worth looking at a sample/preview on and comparing it with the Adamson sample. They are both good introductions, and the difference is probably more a matter of taste than anything else. *Islamic Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide (Beginner's Guides)* Meanwhile, Peter Adamson is due to publish Vol. 3 of his *History of Philosophy Without Gaps* later this year. It happens to be the volume that covers philosophy in the Islamic world during the formative stage of its development. As it is based on his fastidious and thorough podcast, it will almost certainly be a better and far more comprehensive entry point into the material than this good (but not great) overview.

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