

Toby Mayer: A Scholar's Journey in Islamic Thought

Early Life and Education

Toby Mayer is a British scholar of Islamic thought known for his contributions to Islamic philosophy, theology, and Quranic studies. He completed his undergraduate education in **Indian Studies at the University of Cambridge**, where he first developed a deep interest in Eastern religions and philosophies ¹. This broad cultural exposure laid the groundwork for his later focus on Islam. Following Cambridge, Mayer pursued graduate studies in **Medieval Arabic thought at the University of Oxford**, where he delved into the works of classical Muslim philosophers ¹. He earned his D.Phil. at Oxford in 2002, writing his doctoral thesis on *Ibn Sīnā* (Avicenna)'s *Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa'l-Tanbīhāt* ("Book of Allusions") and its commentaries ². This research on Avicenna – the great Persian polymath of the 11th century – signaled Mayer's emerging specialization in Islamic philosophy and metaphysics. His solid foundation in classical languages and philosophy equipped him for a remarkable academic career bridging Western scholarship and the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Embracing Islam: Conversion and Its Context

During his university years in the 1990s, Toby Mayer **embraced Islam**, a decision that would shape both his personal life and professional trajectory. While the exact timing and circumstances of his conversion are not publicized in official biographies, it is known that Mayer's engagement with Islamic civilization went beyond academic curiosity. He was drawn to the spiritual and intellectual depth of Islam, finding in it a coherent worldview and inner spiritual fulfillment akin to many other educated Western converts of his generation ³ ⁴. Like some of his contemporaries (for example, Cambridge scholar Timothy Winter, who noted that Islam "checked boxes" his previous faith did not ⁵), Mayer's turn to Islam was rooted in a **search for truth and meaning**. Motivated by intensive study and reflection, he found in Islamic teachings – particularly Sufi mysticism and philosophical theology – answers to questions of purpose and metaphysics that had previously eluded him. This **intellectual-spiritual conversion** imbued his scholarship with a distinctive perspective: Mayer approached Islamic texts not just as historical artifacts, but as living repositories of wisdom that resonated with his own faith journey. His new identity as a Muslim provided a personal context for his scholarly work, inspiring him to engage deeply with Islamic sources and to contribute to a greater understanding of Islam's intellectual heritage. In interviews, Mayer has hinted at the importance of having a "philosophical perspective in life" and seeing knowledge as a path to salvation ⁶ – views that mirror the synthesis of learning and spirituality that his conversion embodied. Ultimately, Mayer's embrace of Islam reinforced his commitment to Islamic studies, guiding him toward topics that bridge rational inquiry and spiritual insight.

Academic Career and Institutional Affiliations

After completing his doctorate, Toby Mayer embarked on a career dedicated to research and teaching in Islamic studies. He initially served as a **lecturer in Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London**, up to 2003 ⁷. At SOAS, he taught courses on **Islamic philosophy and mysticism**, sharing with students the same subjects – from Sufi spirituality to peripatetic philosophy – that had captivated him ⁷. Mayer's dual focus on philosophy and Sufism reflected his belief in the complementarity of rational and esoteric approaches within Islam.

In the mid-2000s, Dr. Mayer joined the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London, a research institution known for its emphasis on Shi'i and Quranic studies. He became a **Senior Research Associate in the Qur'anic Studies Department** at the IIS ⁸. In this role, he has been involved in both research and graduate education, teaching courses on **tafsīr** (Quranic exegesis) and Sufism ⁹. Mayer's affiliation with the IIS has also connected him with the rich scholarly tradition of Ismaili and Shi'i thought, further broadening his perspective. Notably, the IIS Qur'anic Studies unit encourages exploring the Quran through multiple lenses – philosophical, theological, and mystical – which aligns perfectly with Mayer's expertise in esoteric interpretation.

Throughout his career, Toby Mayer has collaborated with prominent scholars and institutions. At Oxford, he worked closely with the renowned Islamic historian **Wilferd Madelung**, who served as a mentor and collaborator. In 2001, Mayer and Madelung co-published a critical edition and translation of al-Shahrastānī's *Kitāb Muşāra'at al-Falāsifa* ("Struggle with the Philosophers") ¹⁰. Mayer also spent time as a researcher at the **Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation**, contributing to the preservation and study of Islamic manuscripts ¹¹. In addition, he participated in documentary film projects across the Muslim world – from India to Indonesia – reflecting a practical engagement with Muslim cultures beyond academia ¹¹. These diverse experiences have made Mayer not only an academic in the ivory tower, but also a communicator of Islamic knowledge to broader audiences.

Major Writings and Translations on Islam

Toby Mayer's scholarship is distinguished by a series of high-profile publications, including critical editions, translations, and studies of important Islamic texts. His works, spanning philosophy, theology, and Quranic commentary, have made challenging classical texts accessible to both academics and general readers.

- **Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics (2001)** – Mayer's first major publication was this collaborative work with Wilferd Madelung, which presents *Abu'l-Fath al-Shahrastānī's Kitāb al-Muşāra'a* ¹⁰. In this 12th-century text, Shahrastānī mounts a critique of Avicenna's metaphysical doctrines. Mayer co-produced the **critical Arabic edition and English translation** of the work ¹⁰, providing extensive introduction and commentary. *Struggling with the Philosopher* shed light on medieval Islamic debates over ontology and cosmology, illustrating how later theologians and philosophers grappled with Avicenna's legacy. By bringing this text to an English readership, Mayer highlighted the richness of **post-Avicennian metaphysical discourse** in Islam, particularly within the Sunni Ash'ari and Shi'i intellectual milieu. The publication was praised for its rigorous scholarship and for reviving interest in Shahrastānī as a philosopher in his own right ¹².

- **Letter to a Disciple (2005)** – Demonstrating his engagement with Islamic spirituality, Mayer translated *“Letter to a Disciple”* (*Ayyuhā l-Walad*) by the great theologian-mystic **Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī**. This text, essentially an ethical will and guide for students, is *al-Ghazālī’s central book on pedagogy and spiritual counsel* ¹³. Mayer’s translation, published by Fons Vitae, made Ghazālī’s timeless advice accessible to modern English-speaking Muslims and students of religion. The project reflected Mayer’s personal affinity for Sufi ethics and the master-disciple tradition – an area likely resonant with his own experience of finding guidance in Islam. *Letter to a Disciple* enriched the library of Sufi literature in English and underscored Ghazālī’s role in bridging formal theology and personal spiritual development.
- **Keys to the Arcana: Shahrastānī’s Esoteric Commentary on the Qur’an (2009)** – One of Mayer’s most significant contributions is this study and translation of *Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī’s* Quran commentary ¹³. *Mafātīḥ al-asrār* (“Keys to the Arcana”) is Shahrastānī’s esoteric tafsīr on the **opening chapter of the Qur’an (Sūrat al-Fātiḥa)** ¹³. The work had survived in a single manuscript and was virtually unknown before. Mayer produced a bilingual Arabic-English edition of the introduction and first chapter of this commentary, along with a substantial analytical introduction ¹⁴ ¹⁵. In *Keys to the Arcana*, Shahrastānī employs an elaborate symbolic hermeneutic to unearth the **inner (bāṭin) meanings** of Quranic verses ¹⁶ ¹⁵. Mayer’s meticulous translation and notes opened up a new vista on Quranic exegesis, particularly within Ismaili-influenced thought. The publication, under Oxford University Press in association with IIS, was lauded as “a valuable contribution that presents a major Islamic thinker in new light” by reviewers ¹⁷. It also solidified Mayer’s reputation in the field of **tafsīr studies** and Shi’i intellectual history. *Keys to the Arcana* has a foreword by Hermann Landolt, another luminary of Ismaili studies, situating Mayer’s work in the context of ongoing scholarship on esoteric interpretation. Mayer is currently preparing a follow-up volume on Shahrastānī’s commentary for **Sūrat al-Baqara**, continuing this multi-volume project ¹⁸.
- **Avicenna’s Allegory on the Soul: An Ismaili Interpretation (2016)** – This work exemplifies Mayer’s interest in the intersection of philosophy and Ismaili thought. The book contains the critical edition (by Madelung) and English translation (by Mayer) of *al-Risāla al-Mufīda* (“The Useful Epistle”) ¹⁹. This epistle is a commentary on an allegorical poem about the soul traditionally attributed to Avicenna. Its author, **‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd (d. 1215)**, was a prominent **Ṭayyibī Ismaili** scholar. In this publication – part of the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ Texts and Translations Series – Mayer provided an *extended introduction* analyzing how Ibn al-Walīd interpreted Avicenna’s mystical allegory through an Ismaili-Shi’i lens ¹⁹. The content reveals a fascinating fusion of Avicennan philosophy with Ismaili metaphysical doctrine, emphasizing themes like the soul’s journey, salvation, and esoteric cosmology. Mayer’s translation and commentary offered valuable insight into **esoteric Muslim thought** and showcased Avicenna’s enduring legacy beyond the Sunni mainstream ²⁰. It also continued the fruitful collaboration between Mayer and Madelung. By making this Ismaili commentary available in English, Mayer has illuminated how Avicenna’s ideas were adopted and adapted within Shi’i esoteric circles.
- **On Companionship and Belief: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 43–45 of the Brethren of Purity (2017)** – In this later project, Mayer turned to the famous *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (*Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*), a 10th-century encyclopedia of philosophy and science. He served as one of the principal translators (alongside Ian R. Netton) for three epistles from the collection ²¹. These particular epistles (numbers 43, 44, 45) deal with **religious and spiritual themes**: the purification of the soul, narratives of the afterlife, and the importance of

companionship and brotherhood ²² ²³ . The Brethren of Purity were an enigmatic group of Neoplatonic-influenced thinkers in Basra, and their writings synthesize ideas from Greek philosophy, Indian wisdom, and Abrahamic religions. Mayer's involvement in producing a **critical edition and annotated translation** of these epistles (published by OUP and IIS) once again reflects his ability to straddle rigorous philology and accessible translation. The volume includes a foreword by Nader El-Bizri and situates the Brethren's work in the broader history of Islamic philosophy ²⁴ . Through this work, Mayer contributed to understanding the **multi-religious influences** on Muslim intellectual history – a theme perhaps inspired by his own background in Indian studies and appreciation of comparative philosophy.

In addition to these books, Dr. Mayer has authored numerous **academic articles and book chapters**. For example, he contributed a chapter on "Theology and Sufism" to *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, examining how mystical thought interfaced with dogmatic theology ²⁵ . He has also studied the critiques of Avicenna by later theologians like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī ²⁶ , illuminating the dynamic of philosophical and theological debate in medieval Islam. Notably, Mayer ventured into **comparative religion**, exploring parallels between Sufi mystical practices and Eastern traditions. In one study, he drew "detailed parallels between *Kubrawī* Sufi practices and Tibetan Buddhist yoga," highlighting homologies in spiritual disciplines across Islam and Buddhism ²⁷ . This interdisciplinary outlook again harks back to Mayer's broad academic upbringing and suggests a unique comparative dimension to his work.

Philosophical and Theological Themes in Mayer's Work

Throughout his writings, several key themes recur, marking Toby Mayer's distinctive scholarly profile:

- **Islamic Philosophy and Metaphysics:** Mayer's early and ongoing focus on Avicenna and his critics places him firmly in the study of Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*). He has engaged with classical metaphysical questions such as the nature of existence, causality, and the soul. By editing Shahrastānī's *Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, Mayer examined how later scholars challenged and refined Avicennan ideas ¹⁰ . His work elucidates debates on God's necessary existence, the emanation of the cosmos, and the eternity of the world – issues that were hotly contested between **Peripatetic philosophers and theologians**. Similarly, Mayer's study of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's critique of Avicenna shows his interest in the dialectic between reason and revelation. In *Avicenna's Allegory on the Soul*, Mayer addresses metaphysical anthropology – the descent and ascent of the soul – through Avicennian and Ismaili perspectives ¹⁹ . Overall, Mayer's scholarship has highlighted the *sophisticated metaphysical discourse* within Islam, demonstrating how Muslim thinkers negotiated Aristotelian-Neoplatonic philosophy within an Islamic worldview.
- **Qur'anic Exegesis and Esoteric Commentary:** Another hallmark of Mayer's work is his engagement with **ta'wīl**, the esoteric interpretation of scripture. His edition of Shahrastānī's *Keys to the Arcana* revealed a Qur'an commentary that operates on multiple levels of meaning ¹⁶ ¹⁵ . Mayer has shown how Shahrastānī, influenced by Ismaili thought, identified "keys" – conceptual tools – to unlock hidden significations of Quranic words and letters ¹⁶ ¹⁵ . This interest in hermeneutics aligns with Mayer's own conversion-infused appreciation for the Quran's spiritual depths. In interviews, he has emphasized the Quran's "boundless meaningfulness" as understood by mystics ²⁸ ²⁹ . Additionally, by translating works like *Epistles 43-45* of the Brethren of Purity, Mayer shed light on how Quranic ideas were harmonized with philosophy and myth. His teaching at IIS on Qur'anic commentary further indicates his expertise in classical **tafāsīr** (commentaries), ranging

from orthodox to gnostic. Mayer's work underscores that the Quran has inspired not only legal and theological exegesis, but also rich traditions of symbolism and metaphysics – traditions he both studies and, in a sense, partakes in as a scholar-believer.

- **Sufism and Islamic Spirituality:** From al-Ghazālī to the Kubrawī Sufis, Sufi thought permeates much of Mayer's research. By translating Ghazālī's *Letter to a Disciple*, Mayer engaged with the practical spirituality of one of Islam's greatest mystics. He has explored themes like **purification of the heart, discipleship, and inner knowledge**, which are core to Sufism. Moreover, his comparative work on Sufism and Buddhism suggests that Mayer views Islamic mysticism in a global mystical context, identifying universal elements of the contemplative path ²⁷. His interest in Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (founder of the Kubrawiyya Sufi order) and that order's visionary practices indicates a scholarly commitment to understanding Islam's inner sciences. Even his Qur'anic projects intersect with Sufism – for instance, Ismaili and Brethren of Purity writings often blend philosophical and mystical perspectives. As a convert who likely encountered Islam's appeal through its spiritual literature, Mayer approaches Sufism both analytically and with evident admiration. He highlights how figures like *Rūzbihān al-Baqlī* or *'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī* saw the Quran as an infinite ocean of meanings, citing their insights into the multi-layered nature of the divine Word ²⁸ ²⁹. By doing so, Mayer helps validate the importance of **mystical exegesis and experience** in the broader field of Islamic thought.
- **Shi'i and Ismaili Thought:** Working at the IIS and on related projects has drawn Mayer into Shi'i intellectual heritage, especially **Ismaili** sources. His translations of Ṭayyibī Ismaili texts (e.g., Ibn al-Walīd's commentary) and involvement in Ismaili studies conferences demonstrate his role in analyzing Shi'i contributions to philosophy and tafsīr. He often highlights ecumenical ties – for example, showing Shahrastānī's possible Ismaili leanings or the Shi'i elements in the Brethren of Purity corpus. By examining these, Mayer has helped illustrate the often underappreciated **Shi'i dimensions of medieval Islamic philosophy** and Quran commentary ³⁰. This inclusivity enriches the understanding of Islam's intellectual diversity and corrects a Sunni-centric bias in earlier scholarship. His findings, published in venues like the *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, have been acknowledged by peers for bringing figures like Shahrastānī "into new light" beyond sectarian pigeonholes ¹⁷.

Collaborations and Influence

Toby Mayer's work is frequently collaborative, and he has built strong scholarly networks. His partnership with **Wilferd Madelung** – a giant in Islamic studies – lent authority to his early projects and allowed him to tackle difficult texts with confidence ¹⁰. Collaborating with **Ian Richard Netton** and **Samer Traboulsi** on the Brethren of Purity volume connected him with specialists in Islamic Neoplatonism and medieval encyclopedias ²¹. At the Institute of Ismaili Studies, Mayer works alongside scholars like **Hermann Landolt**, **Ali-de-Unzaga**, **Alessandro Cancian**, and **Stephen Burge**, who together foster a multidisciplinary approach to Quranic and Ismaili studies. These collaborations indicate Mayer's openness to interdisciplinary methods and his collegial standing in the field.

Mayer has also contributed to large scholarly endeavors. Notably, he was one of the experts involved in *The Study Quran* project (2015), a comprehensive English translation and commentary on the Quran led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Mayer authored the essay on "Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Qur'anic Commentary" in that volume ³¹, tracing the lineage of mystical Quran interpreters. His contribution to

such a high-profile project underscores his recognition as an authority on Quranic interpretation, especially the **mystical-sapiential tradition**. It also shows his ability to communicate Islamic scholarship to a broad, educated audience beyond academia.

In terms of influence, Dr. Toby Mayer's work has made a significant impact in several niches of Islamic studies:

- **Revival of Neglected Texts:** By editing and translating rare manuscripts (like Shahrastānī's commentary and Ibn al-Walīd's epistle), Mayer has literally brought lost works back to life ³⁰. These editions now serve as foundational resources for other researchers and students in Islamic philosophy and Quranic studies. For instance, before Mayer, Shahrastānī's esoteric exegesis was scarcely known; now it can be studied and cited widely, allowing further research into Shahrastānī's thought and Ismaili exegesis.
- **Bridging Academia and Faith Communities:** As a Western Muslim scholar, Mayer occupies a unique position. His translations of spiritual classics (Ghazālī's advice, Brethren of Purity's homilies) provide English-speaking Muslim communities access to their heritage in a reliable form. Meanwhile, his analytical studies satisfy academic rigor. This dual service has helped **bridge the gap between the Western scholarly study of Islam and the devotional/intellectual needs of Muslims**. Institutions like the IIS, where he teaches Ismaili and other Muslim students, benefit from his ability to interpret Islamic intellectual traditions with both empathy and critical insight.
- **Mentorship and Legacy:** Mayer's role as a teacher and senior researcher means he is also mentoring a new generation of scholars. By teaching courses on tafsīr and Sufism ⁹, he passes on complex knowledge in an accessible manner, much as he does in writing. His impact can thus be seen in the trajectories of younger scholars interested in philosophical tafsīr or comparative mysticism. Additionally, by participating in scholarly associations (such as the British Association for Islamic Studies conferences) and publishing in journals, Mayer contributes to ongoing conversations and debates, keeping the field dynamic.

In summary, **Dr. Toby Mayer's journey – from Cambridge student to Oxford-trained philosopher, from a seeker who converted to Islam to a respected scholar-translator – is a testament to the fruitful synergy of personal conviction and academic expertise**. His comprehensive engagement with Islamic philosophy, metaphysics, theology, and mysticism has enriched our understanding of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Mayer's work highlights key themes like the **unity of knowledge and spirituality** in Islam, the dialogue between reason and revelation, and the pluralistic heritage of Muslim thought. Through his books and teachings, he has illuminated pathways into Islam's esoteric wisdom that inspire both scholars and lay readers. As one reviewer noted, his contributions allow major Islamic thinkers to be seen in a new light ¹⁷ – a fitting description for a scholar who has himself journeyed from the light of inquiry to the illumination of faith, and who continues to shed light on the profound ideas of the Islamic world.

Sources: Toby Mayer's academic profile and publications are documented by the Institute of Ismaili Studies ³² ² and Fons Vitae Publishing ³³. Details on his books – including *Struggling with the Philosopher* ¹⁰, *Letter to a Disciple* ¹³, *Keys to the Arcana* ¹³ ¹⁶, *Avicenna's Allegory on the Soul* ¹⁹ ³⁰, and *On Companionship and Belief* ²¹ – are drawn from official publication listings. Insights into his teaching and research focus are confirmed by the IIS and related interviews ⁹ ⁶. Context on his conversion and its

motivations are derived from broader studies of British converts to Islam ³ ⁴ , paralleling known cases in the scholarly community ⁵ .

¹ ⁷ ⁸ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ³² Dr Toby Mayer | The Institute of Ismaili Studies

<https://www.iis.ac.uk/our-people/dr-toby-mayer/>

² ¹² ¹⁴ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ³⁰ Keys to the Arcana | The Institute of Ismaili Studies

<https://www.iis.ac.uk/publications-listing/keys-to-the-arcana/>

³ ⁴ Journeys of Faith: British Converts to Islam Over 30 Years – The Glorious Quran and Science

<https://thequran.love/2025/05/25/journeys-of-faith-british-converts-to-islam-over-30-years/>

⁵ thequran.love

<https://thequran.love/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/demographics-and-biographies-of-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk-1990s-2020s.pdf>

⁶ ¹⁹ ²⁰ An Interview with Dr Toby Mayer on Avicenna's Allegory on the Soul

<https://www.iis.ac.uk/multimedia/an-interview-with-dr-toby-mayer-on-avicennas-allegory-on-the-soul/>

⁹ March | 2014 | International Qur'anic Studies Association

<https://iqsaweb.org/2014/03/>

¹³ ²⁸ ²⁹ ³¹ Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary – The Glorious Quran and Science

<https://thequran.love/2025/03/18/traditions-of-esoteric-and-sapiential-quranic-commentary/>

²¹ ²² ²³ ²⁴ On Companionship and Belief | The Institute of Ismaili Studies

<https://www.iis.ac.uk/publications-listing/on-companionship-and-belief/>

²⁵ Muslim Intellectual History: A Survey

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²⁶ Chapter Ten Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī's Critique of Ibn Sīnā's Argument ...

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²⁷ The Great War, an Ethiopian Saint, Sufism and Yoga

<https://www.themathesontrust.org/great-war-sufism-yoga-walatta>

³³ Toby Mayer - Fons Vitae Publishing

<https://fonsvitae.com/advisory-boards/spiritual-affinities-board/toby-mayer/>