**A Brief Guide to the world of Philosophy of Religion**

Philosophy is said to be the mother of all disciplines. It is the oldest of all disciplines and gave rise to modern science as we know it today as both social and natural sciences have their roots in philosophy. Modern sciences either directly emerged from philosophy or are very closely related to philosophical questions. Understanding philosophy and of course, the way problems are addressed by philosophers is therefore the key to understanding of science as we know it today.

**Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophers**

The “love for wisdom” (English translation of the Greek word philosophia) dates back to the ancient times in both the East and West. Although the fundamental questions of philosophy have been dealt with very early, the history of the Western philosophy begins with the ancient Greek philosophers in Asia Minor in the 6th century BC. Thales of Miletus who is regarded as the first ancient Greek philosopher had profoundly influenced other Greek thinkers, encouraging them to search for the answers in nature rather than supernatural world. The next centuries saw the rise of philosophical schools throughout Greece and emergence of some of the greatest thinkers of Western philosophy including Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato and of course, Aristotle.

Ancient Greek philosophy continued to flourish in the Western world throughout the Roman period in the form of Hellenistic and then Greco-Roman philosophy that was dominated by Greco-Roman philosophers of Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch and Plotinus, to mention only a few. The late Roman period, however, also saw the rise of Early Christian philosophers such as Augustine of Hippo (also known as St. Augustine) who profoundly influenced medieval philosophy that was completely dominated by theological questions.

**Medieval Philosophers**

The fall of the Western Roman Empire marked the end of the Greco-Roman philosophy and many of the greatest philosophical works have been lost. But in contrary to the common misconception, medieval philosophers were not only dealing with questions such as how many angels can stand on the head of a pin nor completely ignored the works of Greco-Roman philosophers. At the same time, the works that have been lost in the West after the fall of Rome found their way back to Europe through Muslim conquests and later the Crusades. Medieval philosophers, although preoccupied with theological questions, did not reject the Greco-Roman philosophy but worked on how to reconcile it with the Christian reasoning, especially the Aristotle’s logic. This was finally achieved by St. Thomas Aquinas who is considered one of the most important medieval philosophers.

**Modern Philosophers**

The Late Middle Ages and Early Modern period were marked by an increased interest in ancient philosophy independently from the Christian Church and scholasticism that dominated the medieval thought. Renaissance movement that would eventually spread throughout Europe emphasised rationalism and empiricism which in turn gave rise to the Age of Reason and modern philosophy. Erasmus, Niccolo Machiavelli, Galileo Galilei and Francis Bacon marked the beginning of departure from the medieval approach to fundamental philosophical questions which was furthered by the 17th century philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, Blaise Pascal, Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, John Locke and George Berkeley, to mention only a few of the greatest names of the 17th century philosophy.

The works of the 17th century philosophers have profoundly influenced the next generation of thinkers such as Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Thomas Pain and Adam Smith who laid the foundation to the so-called Enlightenment, while many also played an important role in the far-reaching political changes that took place in the 18th century including the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

The 19th century philosophers, although greatly influenced by the Enlightenment ideas, introduced a number of new concepts including idealism (the German schools), utilitarianism (Britain), Marxism, existentialism, pragmatism and positivism. Some of the greatest names of the 19th century philosophy include Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Friedrich Nietzsche and Auguste Comte who is also regarded as the founder of the modern discipline of sociology.

**Contemporary Philosophers**

Contemporary philosophy refers to period from the beginning of the 20th century until the present-day. The 20th century saw the professionalisation of the discipline. Some of the most prominent philosophers of the 20th and 21st centuries are Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Claude Levi-Strauss,.

**Eastern Philosophy**

Eastern philosophy which encompasses Chinese, Japanese, Indian and other Far Eastern philosophies as well as Jewish and Islamic philosophies (although the latter two are sometimes also considered as a part of Western philosophy) developed independently from Western philosophy. Generally, Eastern philosophers were not as occupied with questions relating to the nature of God although both Jewish and Islamic philosophers were just as focused on reconciling new ideas with Judaism and Islam as their western colleagues. Far Eastern philosophers mostly dealt with the questions of ethics, morality, justice, etc. rather than religious truths. But some such as Confucius and Tao for instance, gave rise to religions and state ideologies.

**The difference between theology and the Philosophy of Religion**

**Theology** involves clarifying religious beliefs and expanding on them, seeing how they relate to each other and spelling out their implications for believers in the context of religious life. Within Christianity, theological debate might include questions of whether those who live on after death in a spiritual form can see what is going on in the physical world they have left behind; questions of how Jesus could be both God and human at the same time; questions of the true meaning of scriptural terms, and discussions of how they might be applied in a culture different from the one in which they were written. Sometimes, theological study involves or overlaps with the philosophy of religion, but often the two are distinct.

**Philosophy of religion** concerns itself with exploring religious beliefs and concepts to see whether they can stand up to rational argument. Different beliefs about religious ideas (including beliefs in atheist ideas as well as theistic belief) are examined, using logic and reasoned criticism, in an attempt to deepen understanding, to separate the true from the false where possible, and to clarify the implications of committing to particular choices of faith. The philosophy of religion involves raising many different questions, for example:

* Does the concept of 'God' make rational sense?
* Are there good reasons to believe that God exists?
* Is it possible to talk of God in a meaningful way?
* Is religious belief compatible with other kinds of belief, such as belief in the claims of science?
* Does it make sense to suggest that God acts in the world through miracles?
* Does it make sense to talk of life after death?

Some religious believers object to the idea of subjecting their beliefs to philosophical scrutiny. They argue that the truths of religion are given by God and can therefore be trusted completely with faith; questioning them suggests that we know better than God and might be able to prove God wrong. They suggest that if we have difficulty understanding religious truths, then the fault lies with our own intellectual limitations. Others, however, argue that it is impossible to have faith in something without understanding it, and that beliefs which do not stand up to philosophical investigation are not worth holding.