

## **Philosophy in a Nutshell: Religion and Society**

by Kathleen Karlsen, MA

Throughout history, one of the major philosophical debates has centered around the problem of God and religion. Connected to this debate is the question of morality and society. A basic controversy in this arena is whether science and religion are in competition with one another or if they are addressing different concerns. Are religious issues such as the meaning of life and the existence of God beyond the realm of science? Can the efficacy of religion be proven? Does it matter?

If the assumption that God and religion do matter is accepted, what type of proof can be offered for the existence of God? The "argument from agreement" approach holds that belief in God is so widespread that He must actually exist. The "argument from Scripture" is based on writings concerning God. The "argument from design" approach insists that our complicated and rational world must have been designed by a supreme being.

Additionally, the "argument from religious experience" may prove that God exists to the one who has had the experience, but can this serve as the basis for anyone else's belief? A final argument for God's existence is the moral argument which postulates a lawgiver outside the universe. Proofs to the contrary, namely that God does not exist, center mainly around the problem of evil and the issue of faith.

Morality and society are a major area of philosophical inquiry closely connected to the question of God and religion. Determining what is right and wrong is obviously a critical issue for the relationships between people which form the basis of society as a whole. This is not just a question of obeying versus breaking rules. How does one balance one's own interests and desires with the rights of others? Is there a universal morality or only one which is relative to circumstances and the society in which one lives? Social relativism and ethical relativism are based on the latter postulation.

Ethical absolutism opposes ethical relativism and states that there is only one correct ultimate principle or set of principles. Three variations of this view are egoism, utilitarianism and formalism. Egoists weigh every act based on the standard of self-interest. Utilitarians seek acts that will produce the greatest happiness both for themselves and all others concerned. This leads to a debate over the meaning of happiness. Is happiness measured as pleasure or as other intangibles such as beauty or personal growth? On the other hand, a formalist will consider ultimate principles rather than the consequences of actions.

The scope of philosophy encompasses or underlies every known field of inquiry. The ability to go about one's daily business in spite of recognizing the possibility that all reality may be different from what one formerly believed seems to be a prerequisite for surviving such an intensive and ruthless process.

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