



**Gavin Flood:** *Religion and the Philosophy of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 464 pp.

In recent decades scholars in philosophy, theology, and religious studies have discussed the merits of concepts such as *worldviews* (for example, Ninian Smart) and *views of life* (for example, Anders Jeffner). These concepts aim to offer a more neutral umbrella that covers both religions and various secular counterparts, and their pros and cons have been the subject of lively discussion. Flood's ambitious and demanding book introduces another concept with a similar but perhaps narrower focus, *philosophies of life*. Much like worldviews and views of life, philosophies of life are both descriptive and prescriptive – they portray life in a certain way and offer guidance for how to accomplish a better state. As Flood puts it, philosophies of life have an ambition to 'articulate what life itself is and to develop ways of living that enhance life' (1). That is, they focus explicitly on what we can say about *life* (more than about the universe or God), and this means that where a student of worldviews would naturally take physics as a fundamental dialogue partner, Flood is much more interested in disciplines that particularly focus on life and its development (especially evolutionary biology and cognitive science/neuroscience). Besides these sources, he also charts the philosophies of life of several religious traditions (under the headings 'Indic', 'Chinese', and

'Greek and Abrahamic traditions') and secular Western philosophies. (If I were to add a critical comment here, it is that it would have been interesting to learn more about the various integrative attempts made from within these religious traditions in encounters with contemporary science; that is, how contemporary insights about life are treated within these religious traditions today.)

Such a project is full of hermeneutical challenges: the different scientific and academic disciplines discussed in the book, as well as the different philosophies and religious traditions that are taken up, all rely, explicitly and/or implicitly, on various conceptions of human life, and thus on philosophies of life. Secular philosophies are influenced by both Greek and (primarily) Christian thought, but they have also greatly affected Christian theology and religious studies. Any student will also have descriptive and normative conceptions that together add up to something similar to a philosophy of life, and there is no neutral ground on which to stand to handle such questions. Concerning Flood's approach, this is unavoidable, given that the human being is both the inquirer and object of inquiry, and that to understand ourselves, we need to take into account the histories of ways of understanding ourselves (and human life generally). In line with approaches such as Habermas's and Stevenson's (in *Ten Theories of Human Nature*), Flood suggests that religions typically offer a description of human life as fundamentally flawed

but capable of self-repair (but only with the help of religious insight, practices, and/or powers). However, the kind of self-repair needed and the way to achieve it differs in different religions.

Flood points out that the different Religious-Cosmic Models and their respective philosophies of life that have been developed throughout human history have been questioned by two relative newcomers on the stage: what he calls the Galilean Mathematical Model; and the Kantian-Humanist Model. Both these models suffer, according to Flood, from a one-sidedness and hence a lack of integration: the Galilean-Mathematical Model privileges the third-person perspective; the Kantian-Humanist the first-person perspective. Neither can offer a comprehensive account of life, but each is necessary for an 'integrated approach to human reality'. Hence, Flood seeks to draw on both to deepen our understanding of life, civilization, and religion – and perhaps most importantly, the interplay between the three.

In the first part of the book, Flood draws on various scientific disciplines to explain why human beings form religions that shape and are shaped by civilizations. The explanations he offers are not in terms of some simple causation but of necessary features of human beings as *religious* beings, such as the ability to use language, prosociality, and so on. These necessary features are crucial for understanding how human beings can come to shape religions but cannot – and should not

attempt to – explain religion *away*. He borrows the term 'niche construction' from biology, suggesting that just as organisms in evolution are never passive objects – since they shape the environments in which natural selection occurs – religions, too, can be seen as a kind of niche in which prosocial behaviour and other features are channelled in particular directions. However, he continues, accounts that stop there become reductionist, because they disregard the insights of the Kantian-Humanist Model, and not least how religions *appeal* to human beings; that is, how they offer something to us as the conscious beings, all too aware of our own mortality and shortcomings, that we actually are. Hence, the need for integrative approaches. The niches that religions comprise are loaded with meaning and thus appeal to beings in need of self-repair, but without integration we are left with impoverished evolutionary and cognitive science-based explanations that disregard meaning or with meaning-seeking explanations that devise religions from thin air, or pure thought, so to speak, which in turn offer an impoverished view of religions in all their complexity.

Throughout the book, Flood returns to the ambition to find explanations of religion and the problems with both the reductionist Galilean-Mathematical Model and the overly consciousness-oriented Kantian-Humanist Model. His alternative centres on the concept of 'bio-energy', which is the 'power of life itself coming to articulation through social cognition

that has material or physical effects on the brains and behaviours of social actors' (372). Communication (not least verbal) transforms agents both physically and socially and the meaning-systems with which they live, so we have a range of feedback loops between the different biological and social forces, and the systems of meaning they create. Unless we understand (human) life itself and its dynamics, we will be unable to comprehend phenomena such as religions, phenomena that simultaneously contain their own understandings of life.

In his discussion of different Religious-Cosmic Models, Flood uses the concept of sacrifice as a hermeneutical key, arguing that cathartic and gift-exchange models of sacrifice are too instrumental and overlook its character as a 'refusal of nothingness and death' (95). This refusal in turn takes different forms and helps shape civilizations in different directions, but it is consonant with the ambivalent relationship between religion and civilization that he traces. Religions affirm communal values necessary for the maintenance of civilized life, but – especially after the axial era – also *renounce* those values as obstacles to a more authentic and deeper life. Of course, *what* is renounced and the kind of goals striven for vary between the traditions that Flood discusses, but he traces a similar pattern in each: sacrifice is renunciation of certain goods for the obtaining of other goods considered more durable and worthwhile. This simultaneous upholding

and renouncing of communal values makes religious traditions dynamic elements of the civilizations of which they are formative elements.

Flood's approach to religion as a distinctly human phenomenon because of the kind of beings we are and the interactions in which beings like us typically come to engage also entails the idea that even if organized religions were to disappear, or be significantly weakened as in Europe, 'there is still the need for repair and human fulfilment, the human longing for meaning and place' (389). The form this will take depends on and simultaneously affects the political and social landscape. The New Age turn to 'de-centred and individualistic' forms of authority, for example, 'assume[s] a new kind of political order and perhaps an emergent global community' (392). This brings us back to the interplay between religions and civilizations.

Flood covers a lot of territory in this book and moves between many different disciplines. In times of ever-increasing specialization and often rather heated debates about the relationship between different scientific and academic disciplines' contributions to studies of religion, its broad scope and integrative ambitions to give many perspectives their due are refreshingly unfashionable.

**Ulf Zackariasson**  
Uppsala University

ULF ZACKARIASSON is associate professor of philosophy of religion at the Department of Theology at Uppsala University. Email: ulf.zackariasson@teol.uu.se