

Review

Religion and the Philosophy of Life. By Gavin Flood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 464 pages. \$50.00. (Hardback).

Comprehensive theories of religion are a mark of modernity. They attempt to make sense of an elusive, persistent, and less rational human trait that challenges scientific and critical enquiry. Indeed, for several analysts, religion meant the last frontier, the most demanding subject for a wide program trying to describe and control all reality, including personal and social dimensions. The last few decades has seen a shift in the study of religion, as it becomes more and more a legitimate subject of scientific research, and as such, it is less prone to big theories, and more the subject of specialized and detailed studies that apply reductive approaches, as distinctive of the scientific method. However, I am not sure that the ambition to build big theories has faded away. Some contemporary scholars find it hard to resist the temptation to build big theories of religion, applying newer theoretical frameworks, or reflecting new sensitivities and interests gained in cultural fashions. Certainly, it is still a signature of our modern times to try to come to terms with religion in the most accurate and comprehensive way, after being able to decipher its specific traits.

Gavin Flood is a recognized expert in the field of Hinduist studies, based in Oxford; coming to religion from a non-Western tradition, he brings a new and refreshing perspective to a field dominated by western scholars. He is also well versed in contemporary Continental philosophy, which he skillfully applies in this text. He is—besides that—acquainted with scientific approaches to human conditions. His new book displays a vast erudition that covers both the field of religious studies and 20th-century philosophy, combining the two streams into a grand theory of religion as an expression—perhaps the greatest and broadest—of life in all its highest dimensions. That convergence allows him to represent religion in terms of a steady pursuit of life or life's fulfillment. Flood skillfully connects religion with life as an intelligent move, a combination able to reveal essential aspects of religion, otherwise neglected in other recent attempts to understand it. Indeed, Flood is looking for an integration of scientific views and humanistic insight, avoiding the reductionism that hinders many new proposals.

The book comprises a long Introduction and three parts: “The theory of life itself”; “Religious civilizations”; and “Philosophies of life itself”, 11 chapters in all. These chapters are mostly well-documented presentations about how life is conceived and articulated in great religious traditions and contemporary philosophical schools. The author combines an in-depth analysis of life with the most accurate means, and its expression in religion, where that particular lens allows him to better discern religions' efforts at promoting life.

The Introduction sets the stage, showing religion's role at promoting civilization, channeling and managing vital energy, and how both—religion and civilization—become the ground for reaching better living conditions for all. This is a claim made against the criticism and suspicion often raised against religious

forms that appear as rather agencies repressing life and even closer to death and destructive tendencies. Civilizations are analyzed in terms of "niche construction" aimed at life flourishing, according to a broadly accepted evolutionary model, and that process is attained through social cognition, language, and ritual activity, where religion plays a central role. Religions are in that great picture "pathways to life, as well as expression of life, that aim at integration and transformation" (p. 6). Complex cultural evolutionary pressures are behind that process that has led to better living conditions in which religions play a central role. The implicit anthropology points to humans as beings trying to live better lives to express life in a higher and freer ways. Civilizations and religions can be described as expressions and narratives to deploy life potential or to curtail its limits. With the right hermeneutic, we could get deeper into both social instances when seen as serving life as their main scope.

The first chapter addresses a dilemma that haunts all attempts to put science and religion in dialogue: what is the most fitting and convenient cue to understand life: the scientific, biological and mechanistic, or the vitalist, philosophical and organicist? The two main models or traditions since the early modern times appear as exclusive and clouding our understanding. However, it is possible to get a nonreductive account of scientific explanations, for instance of human sociality or empathy as evolutionary drives, and then to apply them to religion as big theories at the macro- and the micro-levels. Indeed, religion is composed of prosocial trends, language, and ritual ordering of time and space, giving rise to cosmic meaning. Communication is essential here, as religions create a realm of encounter and meaning, channeling life energies and social bonds. That big picture integrates the genetic and the cultural evolution in a whole, through niche construction, language and broadly shared meaning.

The task of building a convincing, all-encompassing theory of religion is pursued in the next chapter, where again, the author tries to avoid the reductivist short sights and to develop the cultural model of niche construction, language, meaning, and ritual that contribute to life affirmation and self-repair. That scope is completed with an analysis of sacrifice, resorting to some 20th-century philosophers, asserting religions' connection with life as self-repair and projection beyond death.

Once these categories have been established, the second part of the book deals with three great civilizations with their respective religious traditions: the "Sacrificial imaginary" linked to the Hinduist tradition; the "Earth under heaven," corresponding to the Chinese; and the "Transforming life" model, seen in Greek and Abrahamic traditions. These three big families become clear purveyors of life or expressions that assist in channeling humanity's highest living aspirations.

The third part of the book is more philosophical. It engages with a significant number of Continental authors who have tried to make sense of the concept of life, applying the phenomenological prism, trying to describe life in its own terms. The analysis delves into attempts to render a view of life in sheer immanent ways, subtracted from religious or transcending impulses. This creates the possibility to recover a religious or even theological insight, allowing religious impulse for life to reconnect with contemporary sensitivity, more prone to feel life in itself and to avoid every remission to a different realm. Even the topic of resurrection

appears as linked to that effort at reestablishing life as the priority and the main scope of religious faith. That motive emerges in contrast with what is called "dark vitalism" bearing to death in totalitarian politics, and secular attempts to stablish sacrality. The counterpoint is the synthesis between nature and grace, inspired by De Lubac's theology, as a healing role beyond too abstract or disincarnated religious forms.

In the last chapter of this third part, Flood tries to restore religion as a way to transform "bio-energy" through face-to-face encounter, language, and ritual, seeking repair and healing, beyond the shortcuts of systems theory, or systemic reduction, into a more personal and human-centered experience. His view emphasizes the convergence of different civilizations into a shared motif. As a result, a final definition can be proposed: "religion is the mode of group sociality that transforms the bio-energy of the face-to-face into higher-level signifying systems of narrative and law that reflexively control the face-to-face encounter, that channel the desire for life, and that seek to address alienation from life" (p. 382). The chapter ends with an advocacy for religion as the most fitting way to channel that immediate bio-energy into meaning and life's higher expression, even in secular cultures in which alternative means are tried and practiced.

The book closes with an Epilogue under the intriguing title "Modernity and the life of holiness." The author—in contrast with claims in former chapter—prospects a secularized version of the traditional religious impulse to enhance life and to project meaning, after the current dismissal of that previous framework, a kind of lay spirituality or vitalism, together with new technical means, which could play a similar role and provide the same repairing capacity as religions have accomplished for a so long time.

This is a really engaging book and a healthy reading for those who tread paths of science, philosophy, and religion and try to bring them together for the benefit of these three areas of knowledge. Indeed, this book reveals the fecundity of that transdisciplinary approach, and it even suggests a model for possible attempts to combine those interacting fields. Obviously, that encyclopedic travail cannot cover all the ground of current scientific, philosophical, and theological study of religion, which is now immensely vast and knows different expressions and schools, between the most reductivist or materialist, and those more comprehensive and open. It is simply impossible to account in a book for all that reach and vast panorama. However, Flood has provided an interesting and well-documented view on how we can get into religion in a serious way, resorting to the best recent scientific production, and engaging with great thinkers.

The limits of that great project are evident when trying to get together such an eclectic set of theories and methods. As just an example, the use of Niklas Luhmann systems theory applied to religion does not fit well for anybody acquainted with that great and inspiring work. However, the criticism could move some steps higher to identify a new version of a subtle and insidious modern maneuver aimed at overcoming religion (or the so-called *Aufhebung*), a move that haunts modern thought at least since Hegel: any big theory on religion usually ends by showing its end or its substitution by something else, more rational or more akin with modern and scientific views. In that sense, the entire project would become aporetic, revealing a hidden dynamic in which the attempt to understand religion in more

rational and comprehensive terms leads to its dismissal and passing. The only pending point is to rightly use what we did learn from religious traditions and to apply those teachings outside a transcending schema. It would be a pity if those interesting efforts at combining scientific and humanistic analysis with religious wisdom end with the impression that we can dispense with religion, as some anachronistic rest, a move that would mean the end of the dialogue between science and religion, to be replaced by science absorbing religion and its functions. A sad finale for this project!

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