

Religion as a Spectrum: Introducing Religionesque Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Religious diversity can be studied in terms of institutional, denominational belonging and in terms of non-institutional, alternative, spiritual, non-religious beliefs and practices. The latter category is the focus of this article. This work is a theoretical summary based on empirical research on three Hungarian festivals and seeks to show how festival experiences can be understood from a religious studies perspective. Qualitative assessment led to the observation that there are three different interpretations of religion among the participants: church, faith and religion. Conversations revealed that, for individuals, these categories are interrelated but ultimately mean three different things. Furthermore, these categories are further differentiated from spirituality or other alternative terms. The focus of researching the festivals is the collective and individual experience. This article argues that the diversity of religion can be captured in the *experience* and that there is something between religion and non-religion. *Religionesque* is an umbrella term intended to capture different interpretations and shows that these experiences differ only in interpretation and intensity, the essential experience being similar for everyone. This suggests that religion can be understood as an experience and that religion is a spectrum rather than a dichotomous category or hierarchical system.

KEYWORDS

religious spectrum, religionesque, empirical studies, religious studies, religious diversity.

Introduction

Religious diversity can be studied in terms of institutional denominational belonging, and in terms of non-institutional, alternative, spiritual, non-religious beliefs and practices. The latter category is the focus of this paper. This work is a theoretical summary based on empirical research on three Hungarian festivals and seeks to show how festival experiences can be understood from a religious studies perspective.

There is an extensive body of research in the field of festival studies, and this is no coincidence: temporary festive events have been present throughout history, helping people to celebrate, to let go, to escape structure and to create a “moment in and out of time.” (Turner 1969, 96). Naturally, these events are interesting from a religious studies perspective, as they generate intense, ritualistic, collective, and individual experiences by creating a special space and time that only exists for the period of the festival. These characteristics impart a special, and for some, even mystical meaning, often subject to religious and spiritual interpretations. Contemporary religious studies research on festivals and temporary events usually starts from the two classical approaches of *liminality and communitas* (Turner 1969) and *collective effervescence* (Durkheim 1964). It examines participants’ attitudes, behaviour, and experiences, the event’s symbolism, structure, semantics, and the ritualistic dimensions of the festivals (Heidl 2024; Giorgi and Giorda 2023; Nita and Kidwell 2022; Pike 2022; Lucia 2020; Testa 2019; Abdurrohman 2016; St John and Gauthier 2015; Povedák 2014; Gauthier 2014; McHugh and Fletchall 2012; Duffy et al. 2011; Kirchner 2011; St John 2006; Olaveson 2004).

Some of these studies distinguish specific characteristics of religious, ritualistic, and collective experiences, providing an opportunity to understand *religion* - separating it from the institution and from personal beliefs - as an experience. To understand religion as it is lived, experienced, and practised in everyday life is a feature of well-established approaches, such as vernacular (Bowman 2022; Bowman and Valk 2015; Primiano 1995) and lived (Ammerman 2021; M. B. McGuire 2008; Orsi 2010; 1997) religion. Lived, or vernacular, religion, opens up the topic to understand and examine it in everyday life and shows that the category of religion has many interpretative possibilities.

After introducing the empirical background of this theoretical paper, I will present theories that deal with religious or religion-related experiences. I will introduce characteristics that have been distinguished by other scholars to describe these experiences and demonstrate their relation to religion. The theories presented below will show that examining such experiences aims to ‘lift out’ the experience from institutional religion and scrutinize them from outside of religious systems, eventually allowing the religious interpretation to fade into the background. However, all of these approaches claim that religion cannot be fully separated from these experiences, and uplifted, intense experiences and emotions can be investigated from a religious studies perspective. Throughout the discussion, I explain what I mean by ‘religionesque’ and how this term can be used as an analytical tool in empirical research without replacing already existing terms such as religion or spirituality. In the end, I revise my model of religionesque and argue that when religion is understood as a spectrum, it provides space for different interpretations of religionesque experiences for everyone, regardless of religious beliefs or affiliation.

Empirical Background

Even though this paper is a theoretical investigation, the empirical background has to be mentioned. I have studied three Hungarian festivals: Everness, a mindfulness festival; Lélek, a Catholic festival; and Fekete Zaj, a music festival, focusing on the event experience (Heidl 2024; 2023c; 2023a).

I have identified four dimensions of event experience that represent the four main aspects influencing participants’ experiences. These dimensions include the *spatiotemporal* aspects of the event, the *symbols* and objects present, along with the symbolic meaning attached to the event, the collective experience and the event *community*, and individual, *inward experiences*. These four dimensions form the basis of my conceptual approach, which I call “event religion”. Event religion describes a phenomenon that

creates a temporary community through shared activities, forming a quasi-liminal phase and thereby endowing the place, time and symbols present with religionesque significance. During this period, the person shows a high responsiveness to mystical, peak, resonance and flow experiences, thus gaining a temporary religionesque experience (Heidl 2023b). The use of the term ‘religionesque’ in the definition of event religion indicates that I have previously introduced and established this term. The present paper aims to deepen its meaning and employ it on a more theoretical level.

The study of contemporary transient events using the conceptual approach of event religion can illustrate the presence of the four dimensions of experience mentioned above, highlighting both similarities and differences among participants. This research shows that, irrespective of religious affiliation, participants frequently employ religious and spiritual semantics, interpreting their festival experiences as *religions*, *mystical*, or *transcendental*.

My empirical work has revealed that experiences similarly described by festival participants can be interpreted in various ways: as religious, non-religious, or something in between. My aim is to situate this research within a broader discussion about religious experiences and demonstrate that religion is diverse not only on an institutional and collective level but also on an individual level. This diversity creates social cohesion while simultaneously allowing for unique individual interpretations, which can vary from person to person despite having shared properties.

To understand the significance of examining religion within the context of three very different events - one traditionally religious, one ‘spiritual’, and one non-religious - it is necessary to first introduce these festivals.

The Everness festival is organised each year in Siófok, Hungary, next to lake Balaton. Nowadays it is the largest mindfulness festival in the country (the name *Everness* implies not only the word *eternity* but also the word *awareness*, as in mental awareness). A six-year long quantitative research project by the research team of the University of Szeged¹, supplemented by moderate participation and observation and in 2021 by semi-structured interviews by the author of this article, have provided the basis for the establishment of a conceptual approach to event religion (Heidl 2024; 2023c). The Everness festival features diverse programmes focused on mindfulness, spirituality, and mental awareness. It hosts Hungarian and international performers, lecturers, and coaches covering topics such as spirituality, body-mind-soul balance, sexuality, yoga, meditation, dance, and popular psychology. These programmes incorporate varying degrees of religious elements, often drawing on Asian religions, neo-paganism, and ancient Hungarian mythologies, while moving away from Christian traditions. The festival’s attendance fluctuates yearly, with approximately 1,000 participants in the year 2021. This figure excludes organisers, performers, vendors, and volunteers. Demographically, half of the participants came from Budapest, Hungary’s capital, and 65% were women. In terms of age, the majority fell within the 30-39 and 40-49 age groups. The overrepresentation of women at such events is not unexpected, given the global trend of middle-aged women seeking alternative spiritual practices (Woodhead 2007). Of the surveyed participants, 65% identified themselves as *spiritual but not religious*.

The Lélek festival is a Catholic event, but open to all Christian denominations, in Szombathely, Hungary. I visited this event in 2022 to conduct a short comparative case study with semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The event revolves around the Holy Spirit (Lélek means ‘spirit’ in Hungarian), in connection with (but partly distinct from) Pentecost. The event is primarily aimed at addressing young Christians, following the example of the Loretto festival². It was held in a Catholic school, with approximately 500 participants per day, for the first time in 2022. Musical programmes, glorifications, prayer circles, and workshops were held here, and a holy mass was included in the

¹ The research was carried out by Réka Szilárdi, András Máté-Tóth and in 2021 by myself. Special thanks to both of them for their help and support. From 2020 to 2023, the research was supported by the DFG-funded IGS research team at the Max Weber Kolleg, Erfurt. I am grateful to my supervisors and my mentor, Hartmut Rosa, Franz Winter and Karl Baier.

² <https://loretto.at/international/>

programme in the school's gymnasium. This is also an important detail because the festival brought religion *out of* the church (Povedák 2014), so to speak, creating a more liberated atmosphere for the young participants without the rules of a church building. A quantitative survey was not conducted here, so the demographic data are based only on observations and interviews: there were roughly equal proportions of men and women, the presence of young people was more significant, as whole classes of students from the school took part in the event. The presence of families and married couples was also significant, and priests and nuns also attended the festival. The older age groups usually accompanied their children and relatives to the event. All my interviewees were Roman Catholics.

The Fekete Zaj festival is a rock-metal music festival (Fekete Zaj means Black Noise in Hungarian) but provides a platform for a wide variety of music and non-musical programmes. It is held at a campsite every year on the border of Mátrafüred and Gyöngyös. In 2022, I conducted interview research and ethnography here, similar to the Lélek festival. In addition to the concerts, visitors can participate in sports activities and board games during the day, attend literary and artistic programmes and exhibitions, and go hiking in the forest and the Mátra mountain. Roughly 900-1000 people attended the festival. A quantitative survey was not conducted here either, so the data is based on observations and interviews: men and women were present at the event roughly equally. The presence of young families and large groups of friends was typical. Many regular guests were at the festival. At least 50-60% of the participants came from Budapest. Participants self-identified as non-religious, non-denominational, atheist, or spiritual but not religious (Heidl 2023a).

My research has demonstrated that despite differing religious beliefs and affiliations in the three events, participants' experiences share similar characteristics that can be examined using tools from religious studies. The methodology of examining religion in these settings was not coercive; rather than posing direct questions about religion, the qualitative semi-structured interview questions inquired about how participants *experience the space and time of the festival, the objects and motifs they engage with, their experiences of the festival community, and how they describe their own inner experiences*. The final question asked participants about their connection to religion and/or spirituality and what these terms mean to them. The order of the questions is crucial, aiming not to *impose* religion on the settings but to uncover subtle *traces* of religion-related interpretations and semantics.

All three case studies revealed that participants use concepts and terms with religious origins or related to religion/spirituality, irrespective of their beliefs. The qualitative assessment at the three festivals also led to the observation that among participants, three different interpretations of religion emerge: *church, faith, and religion*. Conversations disclosed that for individuals, these concepts are interconnected but eventually signify three separate things. This differentiation is often accompanied by a distinctive element from religion, such as *spirituality* or other alternative interpretations.

Defining religion and spirituality in these settings is challenging owing to the wide variety of understandings of these two terms. In my PhD project, I have collected several definitions for both terms and concluded that, in the definition of religion in these environments, it is most appropriate to employ the lived/vernacular religious approach. As for the definition of spirituality, it is most appropriate to rely on the interpretations of the event participants. In the aforementioned settings, this implies that spirituality is either a *spiritual but not religious* approach (Casanova 2020; Fuller 2001; Erlandson 2000), i.e. one incorporating religious elements but reinterpreting them according to one's own beliefs, or a more psychological approach that promotes body-soul-mind balance, using spiritual/religious elements (Heidl 2023b). The setting-specific definition of spirituality was also necessary because the term itself sometimes appears derogatory (*'spiri'*, especially at Everness) that people might want to distance themselves from. Nevertheless, they still call their beliefs or practices spiritual, as it is the 'lesser evil' of the religious-spiritual pair of concepts in their view.

Many festival participants employed religious semantics, borrowed elements from world religions with a special focus on Asian religions and philosophies (Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism), and believed in a higher power without necessarily labelling it as god or divine, but rather as energies, transcendent,

ancient power, Mother Earth, or simply an ineffable thing. The empirical analysis of these beliefs and experiences cannot lead to categorising these beliefs and practices as clearly religious or spiritual. Therefore, as a methodological tool, I have coined the term ‘religionesque’ to overcome these difficulties (Heidl 2023d).

The Varieties of Religionesque Experiences³

In order to explore the many different interpretations, I have introduced the term ‘religionesque’ as an umbrella term for the various concepts and categories used by event participants. This demonstrates that lived religious and spiritual experiences differ primarily in interpretation and intensity, but the essence and characteristics of the experience are similar for everyone (Heidl 2023d). I believe that every experience with religious connotations, semantics, origins, and so on, qualifies as a religionesque experience. These experiences can be religious, non-religious, or something in between, with an *-esque* nature. Any term can fit into this category: religious, spiritual, mystical, transcendent, sacred, holy, or experiences that will be introduced below, such as flow, peak-experience, or resonance. The essence of this categorisation is that a wide variety of religionesque experiences exist, sharing similar characteristics and interpretations but always differing from each other, owing to the individual who experiences them. Collecting the common elements of these can show the different forms of experience that are placed under this umbrella term. Many studies have dealt with this before, the most influential of which was William James’ *Varieties of the Religious Experience* (1902). Starting with him, the following paragraphs introduce the elements of the religious, peak-, flow, and collective experience and resonant relationships. I argue that all the experiences described by these theories can be understood as religionesque.

Research typically commences with the well-known categories of religious experience established by William James in 1902. His objective was to disentangle religion from institutional bonds⁴ and examine religious experiences outside the confines of institutional religion. That is, to demonstrate that a religious experience has four main characteristics applicable to everyone, regardless of their religious affiliation. The four elements described by him were: ineffability (meaning one cannot adequately describe what is happening because they have no words for it), noetic quality (indicating a profound sense and experiencing it as the *real* reality), passivity (suggesting a higher power’s presence, exerting more control over the experience than the individual), and transiency (signifying these experiences last only a moment, a few minutes, and no longer than 1.5 hours) (James 2008, 267–68).

Since James represents a psychological approach, it is worth considering the theories of other psychologists who have dealt with such experiences. These theories often appear in positive psychology, which focuses on human well-being, mental health, and balance. A representative figure is Abraham Maslow, who, building on the work of James and John Dewey (Dewey 1934), has lifted out such experiences even more from the wrappings of religion and created the concept of peak-experience. He outlined 25 different - and often conflicting - characteristics of the peak experience (Maslow 2021; 2011), many of which have religious connotations, such as the experience of the holy, the sacred, the divine. Peak experiences also involve elements of awe, creatureliness, surrender, mystery, piety, gratitude (Maslow 2021, 46), or the feeling of eternity, universality, disorientation in time and space, self-validation, humility, worship, and similar emotions (Maslow 2021, 77–102; 2011, 69–91).

Another important positive psychologist, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, has established a theory that, at first glance, may not have religious connotations, but he sees it as suitable for the analysis of religious experiences (Csíkszentmihályi 2009, 5 and 76). He introduces the concept of the now-popular flow experience. In describing this, he also emphasises the distortion of space and time and the experiencing

³ The title of this section is a tribute to William James’ famous work, *The Varieties of the Religious Experience* (James 1902/2008)

⁴ His approach is criticised for its subjective bias because of his clear rejection of the institution of the church (Taylor 2003). However, his work on mystical and religious experience had great influence on later studies of the topic in religious studies, psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology and other disciplines. Traces of his theory can be found in all the other theories I mention in this chapter.

of positive and inexplicable feelings (Csíkszentmihályi 2009, 71). One common point in the psychology of Maslow and Csíkszentmihályi is that they believe the feelings induced by peak experiences and flow experiences can be transferred to everyday life, aiding in overcoming negative feelings and difficult periods, and even enhancing concentration at work. The latter is particularly typical of Csíkszentmihályi, who claims that controlling the flow experience can be learned and applied while working, as the person is strongly motivated to achieve a goal by the positive feelings and strong concentration gained in the experience (Csíkszentmihályi 2009).

The varieties of religious experience are, of course, also interesting for cultural anthropology and sociology. In these fields, the emphasis is mostly on the ritualistic and Durkheimian aspect of collective experiences. However, by empirically examining individuals' personal experiences, similar characteristics can be distinguished here as in the previously mentioned psychological theories. For instance, the anthropologist Tim Olaveson, in the early 2000s, recognised elements of rave experiences, which he examined through the theories of collective effervescence and *communitas*. Among others, he described these characteristics of connectedness as *electricity, exaltation, enthusiasm, embodied, non-rational, emotional, communal, and collective* (Olaveson 2004, 88). These elements, he argues, have strong religious connotations, and he concludes that even though 'raving' cannot be categorised as a new religious movement, it has strong non-institutional religious characteristics (Olaveson 2004).

Hartmut Rosa's social theory, i.e. the sociology of the good life, the resonance theory (Rosa 2019), is beginning to gain a similar popularity to Maslow's and Csíkszentmihályi's concepts. Resonance describes a kind of relationship between a person and the world, which can happen on several axes: horizontally social relationships are created, diagonally resonant relationships are formed with objects and places, vertically, with more abstract things, such as nature or a higher power (Rosa 2019). Rosa also talks about a fourth, self-axis, which focuses on the person's relationship with their own feelings, perceptions, and body (Rosa 2020a). Rosa, like James, separates four elements in the resonant relationship. These are affection, as the subject feels 'called upon' and touched by something or someone; self-efficacy, as the subject responds to this affection by touching and influencing the object or entity; transformation, which describes how in this relationship both subject and object transform; and uncontrollability, as resonance cannot be predicted or controlled - and this happens only if the person does not try to force it, but rather just lets it happen (Rosa 2019, 174; 2020b, 32–39). This last characteristic is especially interesting from the viewpoint that it contradicts Csíkszentmihályi's and Maslow's idea of the experience being controllable. However, this does not mean that one or the other is correct: it means that, just like Maslow's characteristics of the peak experience, these kinds of relationships with the world (resonance, flow, peak experience, and religious experience) often have contradictory features. In as much as they are similar to everyone, at the same time, everyone perceives them, experiences them, and interprets them subjectively, which can naturally cause differences. Therefore, whether one experiences a controllable or an uncontrollable relationship depends on the person, on the circumstances, on the situation, or on the object of the experience.

These theories are all suitable for analysing religious experiences. Of course, they are not flawless: they all look for common characteristics and elements, but they also emphasise that each experience is unique and subjective to the person. These are errors or biases that can probably never be completely corrected or overcome, since we have no means to assess a person's inner subjective being, feelings and experiences. We can only rely on what we see and what is told to us - and in this case, linguistic and interpretive distortions have to be reckoned with, just as when the scholar interprets the findings. Perhaps this is why there are so many different theories to describe very similar things. Perhaps these things are less different than we think; we just perceive and interpret them differently. However, no matter how similar these experiences are, it is also certain that each experience belongs to the given person, which they experience and interpret to their liking. Still, the scientific approach can be important, especially from the point of view of the sociology of religion. Sociology mostly deals with the processes and functioning of society and groups, often forgetting the person behind the data, sociologists argue (Altglas and Wood 2018, 1; Danz and Deibl 2023, x), which is why it is important to examine personal

experience from a sociological point of view. From the perspective of religious studies, it is worth examining these because *religion* is a constantly changing, transforming and reinterpreted concept, but it is often difficult to accept these changes at the institutional level. I believe that different religious interpretations need to be given space in the study of religions, in order for religion to have an inclusive power for contemporary people instead of an exclusionary one. Starting from the experience, it can reveal that interpretations of religion are different, but at a very deep level, at the level of individual and community experience, we can discover many similarities.

In my previous work, I have defined *religionesque* as “*something that has religious characteristics, semantics or nature, looks similar to religion but is not actually religion*” (Heidl 2023d, 23). *Religionesque* experience is *an experience that has characteristics of resonant and/or religious/mystical experiences, but the experiencer has no clear affiliation with religious institutions and/or has spiritual or muddled beliefs* (Heidl 2023d, 24). In this article, I expand the definition of *religionesque* experience by incorporating the other theories discussed above and present an earlier proposed model to use it as an analytical tool. However, as in this earlier model, I focused mainly on James’ and Rosa’s theories, creating a ‘set’ for the *religionesque* experiences, in this work, I rethink this model and suggest that *religionesque* experiences are more suitably looked at as if they were encompassing a myriad forms of experiences that can be found on the spectrum of religion.

Religionesque as an Analytical Tool

The term was created to bridge the interpretational and methodological problems that arise during empirical research. In a religiously ambiguous environment, where the appearance of muddled belief (Gilliat-Ray 2005) is common, other, previously used, or traditional terms are not always adequate. This use of the *-esque* ending as an analytical tool has already occurred with other terms, starting with the *carnavalesque* (Bakhtin 1984) performance modes, to the terms *folkloresque* (Foster and Tolbert 2016) and *ritualesque* (Santino 2009). Interestingly, most of these concepts are primarily used in the examination of temporary events. Festivals and similar transient events serve as gathering points for the most diverse visitors, interpretations, and experiences, so that their ideas, beliefs and experiences are less graspable than in a closed or institutional environment. This may also be true because the event, in its transitoriness and ephemeral nature, can awaken in people such images and experiences as they do not have the opportunity to experience in everyday life. Therefore, it may happen that during an intense, physically and mentally challenging happy temporary event, even a non-religious person can live through *religionesque* experiences. Alessandro Testa has observed something similar during the Czech carnival. According to him, even atheistic and non-religious participants started to believe in the ‘magical power’ of the event, and suspended their disbelief for the time of the ritual, in that temporal and spatial setting of the performance (Testa 2023b, 109–10). This means that a temporary event has such an unidentified power that it can make people believe in magic or something *religionesque* for the time of the event. Testa also uses the term *religionesque* in connection with the process of re-enchantment⁵.

In this model (Fig. 1), I have explained that religious experiences can be *religionesque* experiences and resonant relationships, and *religionesque* experiences can be resonant relationships (Heidl 2023d, 24). However, not all resonant relationships are *religionesque*; resonance is a term applicable in other disciplines and describes a wider set of feelings, emotions, and experiences, similar to flow and peak-experiences. When these do not have religious connotations, they cannot be described as *religionesque*. Nevertheless, depending on how intense they are, and how the experiencer interprets them, they can be understood as *religionesque*. This model includes all terms that one could use to describe these

⁵ I was pleased to discover not long ago that Testa has also started to use the term *religionesque* in connection with the concept of re-enchantment. I mentioned in my paper on *religionesque* (Heidl 2023d), based on one of his earlier articles - in which he had not yet used the term (Testa 2017) - that I suggest re-enchantment categories should be described as *religionesque*. Independently of this, he has revised this same article (Testa 2023a), and started to use the term (*religionesque*, as well as *religionoid* as a synonym) in a similar way as I did. In his latest book, he mentions the term a few times (Testa 2023b). This coincidence is the confirmation for me that *religionesque* is indeed a needed term in religious studies, especially in temporary event settings, a field in which we both work.

experiences (sacred, holy, transcendent, or god, divine, energies, etc). However, these terms can also mean various things: for example, the atheist can also describe something as ‘sacred’ just to emphasise its importance, but this does not mean that they believe in its magical or sacred power. Or they do so, for the duration of the event.

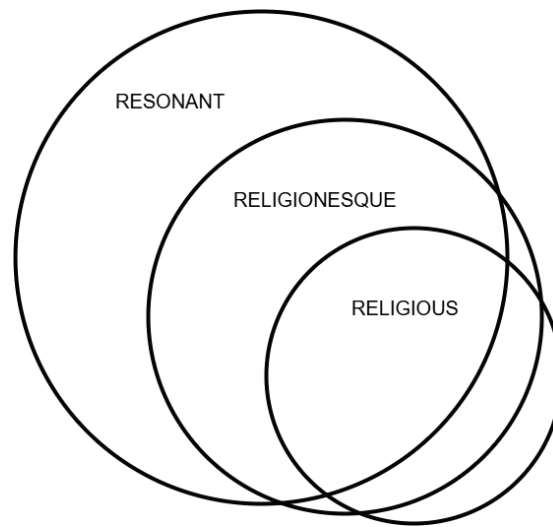


Figure 1. The model of resonant-religionesque-religious experience. Taken from Heidl 2023c, 24.

Several models can be constructed for such interpretations. The above model can be criticised for implying some sort of hierarchy between the three types of experiences (relationships) it displays. However, this is not the intention: in addition to the similarities and possible common characteristics of the experiences, it seeks to point out that differences can be found between these experiences as well. For example, as I have mentioned several times in this article, in the interpretation, as well as in the intensity of the experience⁶, which may vary from individual to individual and from situation to situation. Yet the commonalities suggest that we are talking about some sort of religionesque experience.

When we start to supplement the model, with terms like flow, peak-experience and similar theories, perhaps the best solution is not to talk about overlapping sets from here on, but about a model in which all interpretations fit clearly, without implying any hierarchical relationship between them: a spectrum.

Religion as a Spectrum

This work illustrates that a theory in progress always has flaws and one should leave room for innovation and improvement. The set of religionesque experiences I introduced earlier focused on three theories: William James’ religious experience, which now counts as a classic and has established a basis for many important works on religious experiences; Hartmut Rosa’s resonance theory, which is nowadays one of the most popular approaches in social theory; and I have placed my own term of religionesque between the two theories that influenced my work the most. Now, it is time to expand this idea and welcome further theories, terms, concepts, and interpretations. Therefore, the set introduced earlier should be transformed. I suggest looking at religion as a spectrum, and I introduce a preliminary model of how this spectrum can be imagined (Fig. 2).

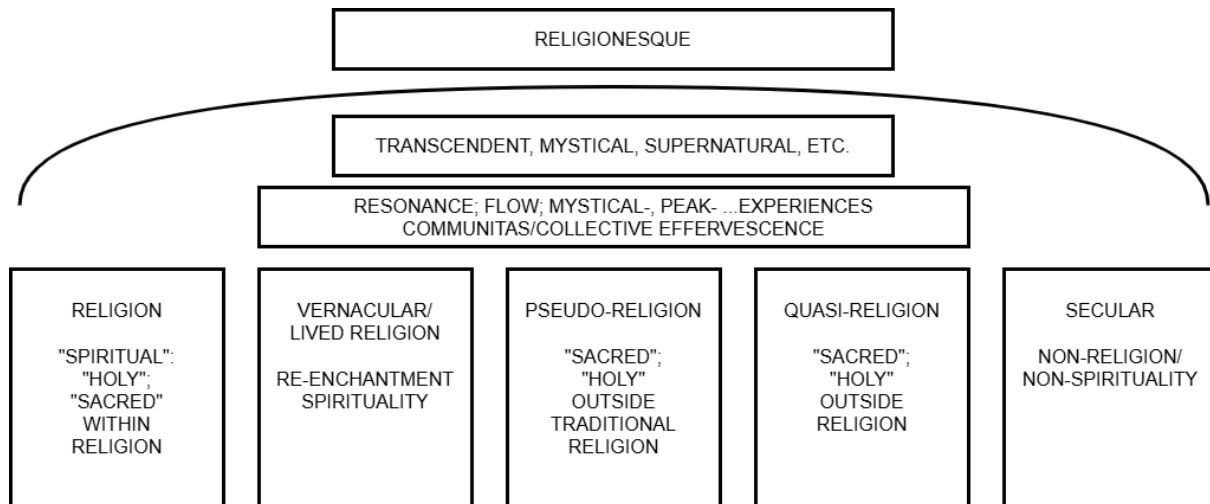


Figure 2. Religion as a spectrum. Everyone on the spectrum can have experiences such as flow, peak-, resonance etc; everyone on the spectrum can have different interpretations and names for it such as transcendent, mystical, supernatural etc. Religionesque above the spectrum as an umbrella (term) for the different interpretations. This figure can be supplemented with other terms not discussed in the article.

The reason for this choice is that a spectrum suggests a scale that has no lower or higher values, much like the colour spectrum of the rainbow. Looking at social and other human phenomena as a spectrum allows many concepts to exist next to each other without creating a hierarchy. In political science, the term political spectrum is often used to show the political attitudes of people (e.g. Whitmarsh and Corner 2017; Ostiguy 2009; Maddox and Lilie 1984). The term autism spectrum was introduced to avoid derogatory differentiation among people who are dealing with various forms of autism (Johnson and Myers 2007; Lord et al. 2000). Gender could also be viewed as a spectrum, as it can differ in interpretation from person to person without creating a hierarchy between the terms used (J. K. McGuire et al. 2020; Rahilly 2020). These spectrums suggest that many different variations and interpretations of a phenomenon exist, and everything or everyone on a specific spectrum is an individual and a unique instance of that said phenomenon. It shows that they all have similarities, but the intensity and interpretation differ, perhaps from person to person.

Previous works connected to religion have dealt with this idea in the context of the ‘spectrum of worldviews’ (Vroom 2006) and with the ‘religious-secular spectrum’ in the American context (Keysar 2014). This latter work has identified a single, unified scale of religiosity by analysing quantitative data based on three dimensions of American religiosity: belonging, behaviour, and belief. This was a case study using *belief in evolution* as a comparative basis. Continuing and rethinking these works, my suggestion is that looking at religion as a spectrum gives a place to all beliefs and experiences that have connections to religion or are religionesque. Therefore, it does not matter whether one is at the religious or the secular end of the spectrum or somewhere in between; they all have the ability to live through religionesque experiences and to interpret their beliefs and experiences as sacred, holy, transcendent, supernatural, or the like. The interpretation of these terms will always differ from person to person, but they all have something in common: a religionesque nature.

The applicability of this model and the perspective of looking at religion as an experience can be supported by the viewpoint of Hendrik Vroom, who argues that “[w]e do not choose them [worldviews] as we do a new suit or dress. We have had experiences that began to determine our view of life - we have learned insights and made them our own” (Vroom 2006, 300). Experience is a key element in our life philosophy, be it religious or not. Humans like to experience everything in their own skin, and experiencing something inexplicable, ineffable, or mystical that we have no logical explanation for can have a great influence on our beliefs and can change our outlook on life and on religion.

Looking at religion as a spectrum, when we accept that *the essence of religion* (or religion itself) *is the experience*, suggests that many different forms of religion exist - probably just as many as people in the world - and experiencing it has common characteristics, but people call them, live them, and remember them differently. Perhaps they do not even call them religion but spiritual, transcendent, an ancient power, energy, or they do not have any words to describe them because of their ineffable nature. But they can be experienced, regardless of religious affiliation, and there is a place for everyone on the spectrum, without implying a hierarchy between the types of experiences or a dichotomy of religious and non-religious, sacral and secular, religious and spiritual, sacred and profane, and so on.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate two key claims: firstly, that religion can be understood as an experience; and secondly, that religion should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a dichotomous category. Employing “religionesque” as an analytical tool to encompass various terms and interpretations describing these experiences can be beneficial for empirical research. Following the discussion, a re-evaluation of the term “religionesque” is proposed here. I propose that *religionesque encompasses the diverse interpretations, beliefs and experiences on the spectrum of religion that individuals connect to religion or that have religious origins and connotations*. Positioned on this spectrum are a myriad of beliefs, experiences and interpretations, each of which can be described as having a religionesque nature. The term emphasises the variety of ways individuals encounter the ineffable, mystical, transcendent, supernatural and so on, regardless of their religious affiliations, fostering an inclusive approach to examine a multitude of experiences that are connected to religion. Therefore, I redefine religionesque experience as follows. *Religionesque experience has characteristics of such experiences that can be placed on the spectrum of religion, but the experiencer has no clear affiliation with religious institutions, and/or has no clear interpretation of the subject of their experience or belief, and/or has spiritual or muddled beliefs*.

Understanding religion as a spectrum implies that everyone with religionesque experiences finds a place on it. A broader interpretation allows for the inclusion of more aspects in the concept of religion, emphasising similarities over differences in a religiously diverse world. This approach aims to contribute to the development of a more understanding society.

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