Resonance, Risk, and Religion
Gerd Theissen and Hartmut Rosa on Religious Resonance
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Risk and Resonance

Editorial

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In this article, we offer an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and sociology, critically assessing the concept of resonance in the theologian Gerd Theißen and the sociologist Hartmut Rosa. While the discipline of sociology has often been framed on the assumption that religions are merely social constructions of reality, both Theißen and Rosa take religious resonance experiences to exemplify a responsive attitude to reality. We begin by exploring physical and neurobiological instances of resonance as a general background for the use of acoustic metaphors in describing human relations between self and world. On this basis, we establish a critical dialogue between Theißen and Rosa, attending in particular to the ways in which risks of non-responsiveness appear on the horizon of resonance experiences. The central issue is how religious semantics may deal with the risks involved in human interactions with a reality that appears to be both generous and dangerous.

Keywords: Resonance, Risk, Hartmut Rosa, Gerd Theißen, Theory of Religion

1. Introduction

The dialogue between theology and sociology is more feasible than the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences insofar as both theology and sociology belong to the wider family of human sciences, and even sometimes address similar subject matters.

Intense dialogues within the two fields took place in the beginning of the 19th century when sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) and liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) discussed topics such as secularization and the difference between Eastern and Western religious traditions (see, for instance, Graf 2006, 2018). Since the 1960s and 1970s, however, the theoretical dialogue between theology and sociology was damped if not foreclosed by the assumption of leading sociologists of knowledge that religions are to be treated as ‘social constructions’ of reality. In The Social Construction of Reality, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann established a wedge between sociology on the one hand, and philosophy and theology on the
other (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966], 13–16). On their view of sociology, religion was to be interpreted as “the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established” (Berger 1973 [1967], 34). Even though Berger was aware that it remained an open question whether religion “may also be something more than that” (195), only later did he explore contemporary religion as a potential candidate for truth, beginning with *A Rumor of Angels* (Berger 1969) and continuing with *The Heretical Imperative* (Berger 1979).

Berger and other sociologists of religion ended up criticizing the empirical assumption of secularization as an irreversible process. In his early work, however, Berger still insisted on bracketing this ‘more’ within the framework of sociology as science. In this manner, the Marxian view of religion as socially determined was combined with a Freudian assumption of religion as wishful projections of the human psyche onto the external world. Insofar as main paradigms in sociology left out of account religious truth claims (including religious views of what is going on within the social sphere itself), theologians often developed similarly strong counter-sociological critiques of the disguised ontology of sociological paradigms.

Bearing this historical background in mind, it is striking that a sociologist in the critical tradition of the Frankfurt school such as Hartmut Rosa gives a central role to religion in his sociological theory of resonance, and even articulates contours of a theory of religion that places responsivity (rather than productivity) at its center. For Rosa, religion is more about *finding* meaning than about hyperactively *producing* meaning ‘out of the blue,’ as it were.

In this endeavor, however, Rosa’s view of religious resonance is ante-dated by a similar proposal from the German New Testament scholar Gerd Theißen, who developed his approach to religious resonance in a widely forgotten German book, *Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben oder: Was hält der Religionskritik stand?* (Theißen 1978), translated as *A Critical Faith: A Case for Religion* (Theißen 1979). The aim of this essay is to analyze similarities and differences between the two hitherto unrelated scholars on religious resonance, and to discuss in particular how they deal with the less responsive aspects of reality, including acute experiences of absurdity and

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1 An early example is Niklas Luhmann’s and Wolfhart Pannenberg’s discussion on the universality of religion (Luhmann and Pannenberg 1978) featuring Pannenberg’s uncompromising critique of the unquestioned projection hypothesis. A later example is John Milbank’s sweeping critique of classical sociologists such as Durkheim and Weber, and his similarly strong critique of Peter L. Berger, as nihilists in disguise (Milbank 2006 [1990], 101–06, 130–36).

2 Not long ago, Theißen noted that Rosa, in his book *Resonanz*, “has recently interpreted religion as experience of resonance, without having related himself to my [earlier] interpretation” (Theißen 2018, 35).
dumb’ experiences of reality. Religious resonance is always accompanied by non-responsive experience, as emphasized by Theißen and Rosa, and resonance experiences themselves entail risks, as we will argue.

2. From Physics to Resonating Bodies

Before discussing uses of the concept of resonance in theories of religion, we begin by reviewing some basic example of resonance as a physical and acoustic phenomenon.

As the theoretical physicist Richard Feynman once noted, the phenomenon of resonance can be identified in such diverse phenomena as the large-scale atmosphere of the earth and the small-scale phenomenon of a sodium chloride crystal. Feynman points out that “[t]here are many circumstances in nature in which something is ‘oscillating’ and in which the resonance phenomenon occurs” (Feynman 1961, ch. 23). In what follows, we will refer to some characteristics of physical resonance in classical physics while confining ourselves to a few illuminative examples, leaving out of account Feynman’s examples of resonance at quantum level.

The phenomenon of resonance depends upon the ability of bodies to vibrate. The vibrations of bodies follow natural frequencies specific to each type of body. A bass string, for example, vibrates at lower frequencies than a string of a ukulele, thus producing a lower note. Vibrations in one body, however, can make another body vibrate if the frequency with which the first body vibrates is close enough to the other body’s natural frequencies. This is what physicists refer to as ‘resonance’:

Resonance is thus the condition in which a time-dependent force can transmit large amounts of energy to another oscillating object. In the absence of damping, resonance occurs when the frequency of a physical force matches a natural frequency at which the object oscillates (Cutnell and Johnson 2012, 292).

Resonance, in this physical sense, is a relation between two bodies that are able to vibrate. What we could call the ‘vibrator’ sends out energetic vibrations and the ‘resonator’ receives the vibrations and begins itself to vibrate in new ways. The Latin root of the word ‘resonance,’ resono, entails the prefix re- (meaning ‘back’ or ‘again’) and sonare, which means ‘to sound.’ Thus, resonare denotes meanings such as to ‘echo,’ to ‘return sound,’ and to ‘resound.’

Such resonance differs from what we may call ‘forced vibration,’ which occurs when one body influences another body without itself vibrating. A body can absorb the energy input from the non-vibrating influencer by vibrating within its own natural frequency spectrum. Resonance, in
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contrast, requires a body that vibrates with a frequency capable of activating another body’s range of natural frequencies. The finger hitting the tuning fork is what we could call a non-vibrating ‘influencer.’ However, holding a vibrating tuning fork up against a second tuning fork will cause the second tuning fork to vibrate. This is a relationship of resonance.

The ability of bodies to vibrate enables them to cumulate vibrational energy. When a parent pushes his or her child on a swing, the swing begins to oscillate. If the parent follows the swing’s natural frequency, adding energy every time, the swing will go higher and higher – which would not happen, had the child been sitting on a wall pushed by the parent. Thus, the ability of the body to enter into a resonant relationship enhances the body’s capability to absorb energy (Cutnell and Johnson 2012, 292).

The ability to absorb energy also creates certain risks. If the vibrator maintains its energy inputs into the resonator, the resonator may break. A wine-glass, for example, may shatter when affected by a sound, which is constantly close enough to the natural frequency of the wine glass. The energy absorbed into the resonating system can thus cause a break-down of the system.

November 7, 1940, the Tacoma Narrows Bridge collapsed in Washington State. This collapse has often been used as a textbook example of the risk of resonance. However, research has shown that this particular bridge did not collapse due to resonating with the vibrating wind. Clearly the gale winds played a decisive role at the time, but, from a physical perspective, not one of resonance (Billah and Scanlan 1991). The wind did not produce a periodicity anywhere close to the natural frequency of the bridge. Therefore, the wind did not play the role of a ‘vibrator’ to a resonating bridge. Rather, the “more or less steady flow of air” (Green and Unruh 2006, 707) was an ‘influencer,’ more similar to a bow’s steady flow on a violin string, which creates vibrations in the string, hence producing music – until the vibrations are so strong that the string breaks.

So far, we have discussed influencers, vibrators and resonance phenomena from a purely physical perspective. Here, resonance occurs as a result of one body’s absorption of another body’s energetic effects. In a more extended sense, resonance may also be used in neurology and biology. As argued by German psychiatrist and body phenomenologist Thomas Fuchs,

3 Cutnell and Johnson give the example of the Bay of Fundy, which has unusually high tide because the water happens to flow in and out of this bay with a frequency very close to the frequency of the moon tide.
4 Markus Mühling rightly emphasizes that the phenomenon of resonance transcends simple representational views of the brain-organism-environment relations (Mühling 2014, 77–85).
for example, “the ongoing ‘resonance’ of brain and organism is the presupposition for conscious experience” (Fuchs 2008, 142). The physiological body (Körper) is itself dependent upon flows of resonance that both propel and balance one another, but also the lived body (Leib) is experiencing itself as being in contact with, and indeed responding to, its wider ecological environment.

Likewise, evolution is not determined by genes-and-traits in individual organisms in isolation, but takes the form of a wider exploration of ecospace at population level, in which groups are enframed in abiotic structures, and themselves change the abiotic conditions in an ongoing niche-construction. Beaver dams, for example, facilitate a new sense of home (internal resonance) formed along with the evolutionary trajectories in the adjacent ecospace (Gregersen 2017). As Markus Mühling puts it, below the threshold of natural selection we find that “an organism resonates with the environment through natural selection as the environment resonates with the population’s niche constructing activity” (Mühling 2014, 157).

Resonance, in this proposal, supports an understanding of evolution that is more organism-and-ecology-oriented than allowed for in gene-centered versions of Neo-Darwinism. We would make the amendment, though, that while organisms may well have an awareness of a passive-active interaction with their specific environments, we take Mühling’s reference to environments ‘resonating’ with organismic activity to be too general in nature. There may well be particular cases of actual physical processes of resonance in biological environments, but they will be rare and unsystematic.

3. Religion and Experiences of Resonance: Gerd Theißen

In 1978, Gerd Theißen published Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben (Theißen 1978), translated as A Critical Faith: A Case for Religion (Theißen 1979). The American title rightly underlines that the book is conceived as an apology for religion. This translated version adds that “religion is grounded in the human condition,” and that “religion is profoundly un-modern

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5 As quoted in Mühling 2014, 79.
6 See the special issue of Zygon 52:2 (2017) on “Holistic Biology: What It Is And Why It Matters,” especially on the difference between the British tradition of focusing on genes and gene-traits versus the broader American tradition of the Darwinian Synthesis, which understands genes in the context of organisms, and organisms in the context of populations (Depew and Weber 2017).
7 In the same year, the same translation was published in London by SCM Press, but under a less apologetic title: On Having a Critical Faith.
but finds its opportunities in the shortcomings of modernity” (Theißen 1979, 26).

Theißen builds on Arnold Gehlen’s *Urmensch und Spätkultur* from 1964, pointing out that while animals react to their environments mainly by their instincts, human beings “do not know how to respond” since the world does not trigger specific reactions in us but rather “a fascination that evokes the desire to accord with the reality experienced, to respond to it, and in so doing to grow beyond our everyday world” (Theißen 1979, 13; 1978, 24). *Argumente für einen kritischen Glauben* can thus be read as a precursor for Theißen’s later interpretation of biblical faith in an evolutionary perspective, in which he argues that human culture has the option of dealing with the consequences of natural selection in counter-selectionist patterns of human behavior, regulated by codes of mercy mediated in institutions of care-taking for the poor and needy (Theißen 1984, English translation 2000)8.

In *A Critical Faith*, the criticism of religion that Theißen considers is primarily the Marxist and Freudian projection hypotheses. In the contemporary psychology of the 1970s, religion was interpreted partly as regression, partly as resentment, and in Marxist sociology as opium for the people, respectively as fetishism (Theißen 1979, 6–7; 1978, 17–18). Theißen acknowledges that religion can take on distortive forms, and he fully accepts the view that human concepts of the divine recurrently take on psychomorphic, biomorphic, or sociomorphic forms. God, for example, is perceived as a purposive designer, as a living God who establishes social covenants and communions (Theißen 1979, 30–31; 1978, 45–46). Religious symbolism is inescapably anthropomorphic.

Nonetheless, Theißen argues for potential contact zones between religious expressions and reality: “The anthropomorphic interpretation of reality is a poetic account (*Darstellung*) of experiences, which can be meaningful even without an anthropomorphic interpretation” (Theißen 1979, 32; 1978, 47). At this junction, Theißen refers to experiences of resonance, and to the corresponding lack of resonance in experiences of absurdity. Without discrediting concepts of a divine mind and will in toto, he argues for a broader theory of religion that points to religious experiences without the assumption of a preset divine purpose.

Accordingly, Theißen proposes an initial definition of religion as follows: “Religion is sensitivity towards the resonance and absurdity of reality” (Theißen 1979, 34; 1978, 49). Absurdity is defined as the ‘refusal of

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8 While Theißen’s book on *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach* has been widely received in science-religions discussion, this is not the case regarding *A Critical Faith: A Case for Religion*. An exception is Wentzel van Huysteen (van Huysteen 1989).
resonance; but Theißen is aware that the experience of absurdity is not purely anthropomorphic either, since absurdity, in the words of Camus, is born out of a confrontation between a human quest for meaning and the “unreasonable silence of the world” (Theißen 1979, 34; 1978, 49). Here, we interpret Theißen to mean that the real problem is not anthropomorphism per se (which is inescapable) but a conception of religion as a purely human projection. Theißen therefore argues in a phenomenological vein for the co-constitution of experiences of absurdity and resonance:

Just as in any experience of absurdity there is an echo of the disappointed expectation of resonance, so in every experience of resonance there is an echo of the conquest of absurdity, i.e., the awareness that resonance is not normal but improbable and wondrous (Theißen 1979, 34, trans. corrected; 1978, 49).

Theißen coins the term “resonance experience” as a comprehensive concept summing up various forms of a “responsive attitude to reality” (Theißen 1979, 33; 1978, 48). His argument can be reconstructed in three steps. First, the experience of resonance is prior to experiences of intentionality, whether in the form of a self-productive human intentionality, or in the form of an (anthropocentric) ascription of purpose to divinity.

What I have in mind is the image of a sounding-board (Klangkörper) which picks up the vibration of a string and amplifies it to produce a clear tone, without it being the actual purpose of the sounding board to produce such resonance (Theißen 1979, 33; 1978, 48).

So far Theißen’s account is in line with resonance as a physical phenomenon as described above. Yet Theißen is interested in a theory of religion that entails elements of a pre-intentional engagement with reality, which nonetheless involves subjective elements. Here we come to a second characteristic of Theißen’s use of resonance. In human experience, resonance is not merely an objective phenomenon, for “[t]he subjective reaction of the person involved is also taken into account; what we encounter sets off profound vibrations in us. It affects both our emotions and our sense of purpose” (Theißen 1979, 33). An experience of resonance releases and sets in motion deep-seated emotional affects that also have motivational (i.e., ethical) effects. This aspect is important for Theißen’s general understanding of religion as comprising cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects.

9 The English translation does not quite cover Theißen’s emphasis on human subjectivity, nor on the motivational aspects of resonance experience. Compare with the German original: “[D]ie betroffene Subjektivität wird mitgedacht: Das erfahrende Gegenüber löst in uns tiefgehende Schwingungen aus. Es hat emotionale und motivationale Bedeutung” (Theißen 1978, 48). Put in terms of Rosa’s terminology, experiences of resonance do not only have objective affects, but also subjective emotions (Rosa 2016, 187 et passim).
Reconstructing Theißen’s concept of resonance in terms of a general theory of religion, we may say that experiences of resonance offer a cognitive window to pre-existing structural affinities; yet these affinities will have to be taken into the subjective awareness of human beings, and be interpreted in collective religious frameworks in order to make the world a home for human beings. “Religion is a collective attempt to relate the whole universe to humanity and by transforming the objective structures of the world into motivations for human behavior, to make the world a home” (Theißen 1979, 18; 1978, 29). Curiously, this collective aspect of Theißen’s understanding of classic religion is largely absent from his later interpretations of religious resonance from a contemporary perspective.

Third, resonance involves a back and forth movement between two poles of “sender and receiver, of passivity and activity. The movement can start from either pole” (Theißen 1979, 33; 1978, 48). From one perspective, human beings search for resonance as they search for making the world a home, but from another perspective, preexisting structures are also capable of propelling the sense of resonance into human awareness\(^\text{10}\). In responding to reality, human beings encounter a sense of an “obligation,” or even “demands of reality” (Theißen 1979, 33, cf. 26; 1978, 48, cf. 39). We interpret this to mean that in experiences of resonance, the is-ought difference is temporarily overcome.

Substantively, Theißen exemplifies the two-sided relation of the religious experience of resonance at four different levels. First, in the nomological resonance (which is closest to the natural sciences), the religious experiences focus on the structural symmetries between large- and small-scale natural processes, as expressed in the unexpected mathematicity of such otherwise diverse natural processes. In science-religion discussions, we are aware of this nomological resonance experience from Eugene P. Wigner’s famous reference to the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics” (Wigner 1960). Theißen makes clear, however, that the scientific experience of a fit between applied mathematics and reality is not eo ipso religious but only becomes religious by adding the perspective that nature has its own value independent of an instrumentalist human perspective (Theißen 1979, 38; 1978, 54). When the structural affinities between the human mind and the universe gain the quality of an ‘appeal’ that prompts a human response, the scientific understanding of the mathematicity of reality may thus, on a second-order

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religious reflection, become an object of religious experience. What in science is a cognitive awareness (hereby confirming the objective aspect of religious resonance) is in religious emotion transformed into an experience of attraction that motivates a new human activity (Theißen 1979, 34–35; 1978, 49–50).

A second type of resonance appears in the interactions between human beings. Here not only the ethical appeal comes to the fore, but also what Theißen calls the ‘interpretative resonance’ emerging out of the potential experiences of incomprehensibility. As elsewhere, resonance is characterized by a “conversion in which spontaneity becomes receptivity, activity becomes passivity” (Theißen 1979, 40; 1978, 56), and Theißen follows Romanticist thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and J. W. Goethe in accentuating passivity in religious experience (Theißen 1979, 44; 1978, 60). Other examples of this type of resonance experience come from erotic attraction to bodies that invoke communication due to their experienced charm. Reversely, experiences of absurdity may arise from observing the absence of social solidarity. Religion is also characterized by a passion to diminish suffering and help the needy. In such cases, experiences of non-responsiveness propel actions that are directed towards others (as in the prophetic traditions). Resonance, in these cases, does not relate to what is but to what should be, but is painfully not. The religious longing for justice and social resonance is thus born out of experiences of absurdity (Theißen 1979, 41–45; 1978, 57–61).

A third level of resonance can be found in the organological awe for the experience of non-human creatures, as aptly expressed in Albert Schweitzer concept of the reverence for life as “a deep-seated solidarity with all living creatures” (Theißen 1979, 46; 1978, 63). At this place, Theißen refers back to the earlier mythic understanding of human beings as fellow-agents and partners with other creatures in all things, and he opts for reaching a balance between a modern understanding of human beings as special creatures and archaic notions of humans as joined to all other things: “[W]e must make a clear distinction between the experience among human beings and outside them, but we must not separate the two groups” (Theißen 1979, 46; 1978, 62–63). Theißen’s emphasis on reverence for life seems to run counter to his reliance on Gehlen’s theory of human culture, which rather sets human beings apart from other creatures. The reason for Theißen’s principal distinction between intra-human resonance and resonance with non-human nature may be ethically motivated. How else secure human beings as special ethical subjects for care?

As soon as Theißen addresses a fourth level of resonance, the experience of beauty, this distinction dissipates, since the aesthetic experience of
resonance “comprises resonance between human beings and resonance with the world beyond” (Theißen 1979, 49; 1978, 65). It is the sense of beauty that transcends the borderline between humanity and the non-human world. There is erotic attraction, as there is also attraction to mountains and the sea.

Yet also the non-human environment calls for a variety of human involvements, since human nature is not bound by instinctual reactions. We confine ourselves to two examples, given by Theißen. Going to the Alps specifically for the recreational purpose of regaining strength can sometimes be counter-acted by the beautiful scenery of snowy hills that invite the skier to make new curves following the ‘expectations,’ as it were, of the landscape’s beauty. The human concern of relaxation is here trumped by the appeals of the landscape to explore new forms of human resonance with the non-human environment (Theißen 1979, 25–26; 1978, 27–28). Likewise, the falling of fresh snow may invite a form of explorative resonance of fragile structures:

[A] snowflake shines on your hand. You have to look at it whether you want to or not; it shines out with its miraculous design. Then it quivers. The fine points that give it shape contract, and it is no more. It has melted, died out on your hand (Theißen 1979, 47; 1978, 64).

Thus, there is a fecundity of forms that appeal to our sense of wonder, just as non-human life forms speak to us by their strange otherness of their will to life and self-expression.

At all of these levels of resonance, we have to do with occasional experiences elucidated by a hermeneutically guided phenomenology. Experiences of resonance are not everywhere but are contingent on examples that nonetheless have some recurring qualitative traits. Yet, the very contingent fact that anything exists at all opens itself up to the amazement of our existence: the accidental character (Zufälligkeit) of our own existence resonates with the accidental character (Zufälligkeit) of all things; the mystery of being finds an echo in the riddle of our individual and contingent existence; it connects nomological, interpretative, organological and aesthetic experiences of the holy (Theißen 1979, 51; 1978, 68).

As we earlier noticed, the existential level is present in all experiences of resonance, given with the subjective responsiveness to the encounter with an otherness that appeals to us. The existential amazement is with us at any time, also when we are not living in positive attunements to reality; likewise, experiences of transience, loss, and meaninglessness also accompany the existential experience of resonance as its dark background.

In this context, Theißen offers his interpretation of the concept of God as referring to “the inexhaustible abundance of resonances (die unerschöpfbare Resonanzfülle) in reality … which perhaps remains undisclosed and

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unrealized; which time and again stands out against the dark background of possible absurdity” (Theißen 1979, 53; 1978, 70). At the same time, however, Theißen insists that God is more than the cosmic field of resonance and absurdity. Theißen thus establishes a distinction between divine transcendence and the world of creation since religious aspirations are not covered by what can be experienced within the world, but there is no disjunction either, since resonance and absurdity is all that we can experience of a more encompassing, hence transcendent, divine reality.

Theißen’s 1978-book offers his broadest and strongest explanation of religious resonance to date. He develops contours of a general theory of religion that responds to psychological and social critiques of religion, and does so by referring to aspects of religious experience that may not be present everywhere but are still recognizable from ordinary human experience. In Theißen’s Glaubenssätze: Ein kritischer Katechismus from 2012, the concept of resonance takes a central position too. Again, experiences of resonance are taken to be an experience of meaning (Theißen 2012, 78). Moreover, the two-poled character of resonance is emphasized as well. While most often human beings are the first to open up and imbue the world with meaning, sometimes non-human reality takes the active role by making its stamp on the human awareness, the latter being an echo of the former, as when an I encounters a Thou11. Finally, also in the poetic theology offered in Theißen’s critical catechism, he highlights the motivational aspects of experiences of resonance and absurdity: Religious experience requires us first to discover resonance, then to experience resonance from a first-hand perspective, and finally, it commits us to expanding the experience of resonance to other people (Theißen 2012, 101).

In this later work, however, there is a new tendency to turn resonance into a metaphysical concept about what makes the world a coherent whole, a symphony in which all elements are adjusted to one another:

Resonance connects all things, everything is not only in conflict and competition. All things and systems enable kindred things and systems to vibrate. All things become a whole that are adjusted to one another. The world is a large symphony, and in this symphony of life we are only a small melody. God is their unknown conductor. In faith, the abundance of resonance in the world becomes a mirror of divine glory12.


12 Our translation of Theißen 2012, 89–90: “Resonanz verbindet alle Dinge. Das All ist nicht nur Konflikt und Konkurrenz. Alle Dinge und Systeme lassen verwandte Dinge...
Theissen is here expanding his 1978-book on religious experience into an all-encompassing theological view of the cosmos. More occasional religious experiences feed into a vision that still makes a distinction between the divine composer and conductor and the great cosmic symphony, but brings them even closer. What is gained from this metaphysical extension is a widening of scope of the narrower existential resonance of the 1978-book. The corresponding danger is that the concrete social mediations of resonance experience may disappear from the picture so that the religious ‘I’ is placed in a Cosmos of meaning without the contradictions of everyday life that challenge the metaphor of the symphony as all-encompassing. We now turn to Hartmut Rosa’s sociologically guided phenomenology of resonance.

4. Religion as the Promise of Resonance: Hartmut Rosa

The backdrop of Rosa’s theory of resonance is a critical analysis of modern life as marred by a continuously increasing acceleration. By addressing problematic features of late modern societies, Rosa continues the tradition of critical sociology, a tradition reaching from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to contemporary German philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. For Rosa, the most problematic trait of modern society is its demand for continuous growth in all spheres of life. Society is modern, he argues, if the only way it can keep its institutions stable is by continually growing (Rosa 2019 [2018], 14–15). This feature of modern life structures both temporal and spatial experiences in questionable ways. The temporal experience of contemporary society is one of acceleration, resulting in breathlessness and stress\(^\text{13}\). The spatial experience of modern life is one of aggression, as human beings relate to the world in terms of conquest and expansion into ever wider parts of the world\(^\text{14}\). For our purpose in this

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\(^{13}\) Rosa unfolds this criticism in his monograph *Beschleunigung: Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (Rosa 2005), translated as *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (Rosa 2015), and later in *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Rosa 2010).

\(^{14}\) This line of argument is further developed in Rosa’s latest – at the time of this writing – work *Unverfügbarkeit*; here he uses the German term *Weltreichweitenvergrößerung* (Rosa 2019 [2018], 16) for the expansionist approach of modern lifestyles (cf. Rosa 2016, 45 et passim).
article, the spatial concern is crucial, since an expansionist life of aggression precludes a life in resonance.

Rosa’s argument is that the good life requires experiences of ‘resonance’ with one’s surroundings.\textsuperscript{15} Rosa’s main interest is not to develop a critical sociology that first and foremost focuses on the just distribution of resources – in terms of economics, or in terms of the social infight for recognition. Such a sociological approach only confirms the capitalist assumption that more resources equals more happiness (Rosa 2016, 23). Rather, Rosa daringly suggests a theory of what makes life worth living:

In the course of a lifetime, all subjects have experiences of resonance that are constitutive for them … In this perspective, one’s conduct of life develops from the search for constitutive oases of resonance and from the complementary endeavor to avoid repetitions of desert experiences.\textsuperscript{16}

Like Theißen, Rosa employs the metaphor of resonance from the world of physics, a metaphor that has musical and thereby emotional implications. Rosa insists, however, that resonance is more than a metaphor since the term ‘resonance’ denotes a specific relationship (Rosa 2017a, 314) that captures the mutuality of being able to reach, touch, and move the world – and being reached, touched, and moved by the world oneself (Rosa 2016, 25). Resonance precludes the attempt at controlling the immediate and broader environments of human lifeforms. In the terminology proposed above (section 3), a vibrator cannot use violence to create resonance; resonance can only occur if the vibrator meets a frequency close to the system’s own frequency. Also in social reality, relationships of resonance require respect for the other person’s dignity and life orientation.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} The main source to Rosa’s ideas on resonance is his magnum opus Resonanz from 2016, which is currently being translated into English. Already in 2017, two discussion volumes have surfaced: a sociological volume entitled Resonanzen und Dissonanzen: Hartmut Rosas kritische Theorie in der Diskussion (Peters and Schulz 2017) and a volume with theological criticism: Zu schnell für Gott? Theologische Kontroversen zu Beschleunigung und Resonanz (Kläden and Schüssler 2017). Also in 2017, a theme issue of the journal Soziologische Revue (2017, 40:2) offered three articles engaging Rosa’s book from a sociological point of view.

\textsuperscript{16} Our translation of Rosa 2016, 34–35: “[A]lle Subjekte machen im Laufe ihres Lebens konstitutive Resonanzerfahrungen … Lebensführung entwickelt sich in dieser Perspektive aus der Suche nach jenen konstitutiven Resonanzoasen und aus dem komplementären Bestreben, die Wiederholung der Wüstenerfahrungen zu vermeiden.”

\textsuperscript{17} It should be noted at this point that Rosa’s conception – in contrast to Theißen’s – does not presuppose a theory of subjectivity: “Resonance is radically relational … Subjects are always already the result of specific world relations – which explicitly leaves the possibility open that the subject of resonance experiences may also be dyads, triads or collectives” (Rosa 2017a, 320, our translation).
When applied to social relations, however, the term resonance undergoes a transformation. Rosa suggests to distinguish between two aspects of physical resonance: The first is that of mutual influence between two physical systems, the second the specific case of a synchronous consonance between vibrator and resonator.

Physically, it is possible to distinguish between a resonance of response, which would describe the relation of mutual influence, and a resonance of synchronicity as the relation’s end point (the consonance). For the sociology of world relation, only the first would be binding. A consonance between self and world is not only impossible, it also categorically subverts the conditions of resonance, since it precludes the encounter with a different other18.

For the sociological use of the term, the goal can thus never be consonance (Gleichklang), which would imply assimilation. The two (or more) parties must each retain their own voices.

As we saw above, Theißen highlights four forms of resonance within the fullness of human resonance experiences: 1) nomological resonance between structural symmetries in natural processes, 2) social resonance between human beings, 3) organological resonance with non-human creatures, and 4) aesthetic resonance. In Theißen’s interpretation, the symbol ‘God’ stands for this ‘abundance of resonance,’ which is taken up in his concept of 5) existential resonance. With remarkable similarity, and yet subtle differences, Rosa distinguishes what he calls three ‘axes of resonances.’ The first axis concerns resonance between human beings. Since human beings are on equal footing with one other, Rosa calls this axis ‘horizontal.’ This corresponds to Theißen’s second form of inter-human resonance. Theißen’s third form of resonance is mirrored in Rosa’s observation that human beings may come to experience things and artefacts as vibrating. “The baker experiences his dough … and the scientist experiences her formulae as responsive counterparts, as if speaking with their own voice”19 – this is what Rosa calls a ‘diagonal’ axis of resonance. Finally, resonance can occur along a ‘vertical’ axis pointing towards nature, art, history – and religion. While Theißen

18 Our translation of Rosa 2017a, 315: “Physikalisch lässt sich hier zwischen einer Response-Resonanz, welche das Verhältnis wechselseitiger Einwirkung beschreibt, und einer Synchronresonanz als deren Endergebnis (dem Gleichklang) unterscheiden; für die Soziologie der Weltbeziehung maßgebend ist jedoch allein die ersteren: Ein Gleichklang zwischen Selbst und Welt ist nicht nur unmöglich, sondern unterläuft kategorial die Bedingungen von Resonanz, weil er die Begegnung mit einem differenten Anderen ausschließt.”

saw aesthetic resonance as a distinct form and God as the vibrator behind all forms of resonance, Rosa lumps together aesthetic and religious resonance within one sphere that – together with nature and history – concerns the totality of life in and beyond human beings, but thereby sets the stage for human life orientation (Rosa 2016, 331). This comes close to Theißen’s concept of existential resonance, though Rosa explicates the concrete natural and social mediations of resonance.

In Rosa, religion presupposes that “the original form of being is a relation of resonance rather than alienation.” Relationality is central to etymology of ‘religion’ as *re-ligare*, the Latin term for being ‘re-bound’ into the basic relations. From this perspective, Rosa interprets the concept of God as the idea that the world at its root is something “responsive” (*Antwortendes*) that is even “approaching and accommodating” (*Entgegenkommendes*) and understanding (*Verstehendes*) the human situation (Rosa 2016, 435). Whether Rosa would go so far as Theißen does in his consideration of God as the transcendent ground of all resonance is uncertain. But – as we shall see below – Rosa does not shy away from offering theological interpretations, also from within the religious symbol system.

Rosa is aware that his distinction between horizontal, diagonal, and vertical axes of resonance should not be seen as a separation of independent spheres; most often they coincide. By way of example, rituals combine the three axes. Rosa mentions the Christian celebration of the Eucharist along with the entrance march of soccer players at a World Cup as examples of rites that combine vertical elements (religious celebration or historical significance) with horizontal elements (the gathering of people) and diagonal elements (bread and wine around the table or the football in the playing field) (Rosa 2016, 297). Curiously, Rosa does not particularly reflect on the ethical and vocational aspects of religion, aspects which Theißen emphasizes.

If resonance is a voice of a world come alive, then the main threat to resonance experiences is alienation. While Theißen used the more existentialist term ‘absurdity’ as the counterpoint to resonance, Rosa remains in the sociological sphere by insisting on the term ‘alienation.’ While the term alienation in itself has no musical connotations, Rosa suggests that alienation comes in two quasi-auditory forms. The world – or segments of the world – can appear as silent, as if the world takes no interest in one’s flourishing, as if one

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20 Later, Rosa considers the possibility of distinguishing a fourth axis concerning one’s relation to oneself (*Selbstbeziehung*) (Rosa 2017a, 321).

is of no importance to the world. But the world can also appear as repugnant, as if the world seeks nothing but to diminish and destroy one’s integrity and sense of self (Rosa 2016, 56). The physical basis of this point might be that certain vibrations can interfere with established relationships of mutual resonance, causing a halt to already established resonance experiences.

For Theißen, resonance and absurdity are related to each other dialectically in the sense that they coexist with one another: We only sense resonance at the backdrop of absurdity, and vice versa. Rosa approaches this question somewhat differently, adding a layer of complexity that we have not found in Theißen. Rosa emphasizes that resonance and alienation are not the same as consonance and dissonance. Rosa offers the example of a very neat interior decoration to conclude that a harmonious decoration may very well lead to alienation. Conversely, experiences of dissonance – being rebuked in a situation where one has actually behaved in a misplaced manner – may stir a deeper sense of resonance (Rosa 2016, 317). At this juncture, Rosa’s theory of religion is able to combine resonance with religious symbols like the crucifixion or the divine judgment, which do not confront human beings with harmony and consonance. Experiences of negativity may thus be part of resonance experiences, if the negativity is experienced within a framework of sustaining relationships. For Rosa, the opposite of resonance, then, is not dissonance – it is alienation. What prompts alienation, however, is the threat of untamed acceleration, and the human tendency of responding aggressively to situations of stress.

The anthropological vantage point for Rosa’s view of religion is that human beings long for relationships of resonance, especially at times when the world appears as something alien to them. While one may experience sections of the world as silent or even repugnant, the religious proposition is that the ultimate reality is one that vibrates and calls forth relationships of resonance. In Rosa, the promise of religion is that God listens and will somehow find a way of responding: “someone is listening to you, someone understands you, and this someone can find ways and means to reach you and respond to you”22. “Religion appears as the promise that the world or the universe or God also talks (or sings) to us when we are unable to hear it, when all axes of resonance have become silent”23.

23 Our translation of Rosa 2016, 447: “Religion erscheint dann als das Versprechen, dass die Welt oder das Universum oder Gott auch dann zu uns spricht (oder singt), wenn wir sie nicht zu hören vermögen, wenn uns alle Resonanzachsen verstummt sind.”
We understand these important aspects of Rosa’s view of religion as descriptions of how religion works at the social and personal level, rather than as general theological statements. From the sociological perspective of every-day religion, Rosa points to the prior fact that central parts of religious life in modernity are based on the promise and expectation of resonance – even where it is not here and now experienced as such.

Rosa’s theory of religion brings to the forefront experiences of negativity and alienation in his concept of religion. Therefore, it is surprising to read Michael Schüßler’s theological critique of Rosa for being too much influenced by Romanticism. True enough, Rosa suggests that the good life entails positive experiences of resonance. However, Schüßler polemically extrapolates this suggestion to cover all features of his theory of religion. Wanting to state a theological difference, Schüßler argues that “one can count on God when all sorts of resonance remains absent.”24 However, this quote looks remarkably similar to something that Rosa actually subscribes to. In accordance with the doctrine of justification by faith, Rosa suggests that religious resonance is not primarily something to search for and long for, but something to receive (Rosa 2019, 68, compare Schüßler 2017, 171 and O. Fuchs 2017, 133).

Rosa even goes into the particularities of the Christian symbol system, interpreting Jesus’ words on the cross according to the Gospel of Mark (15:34) and Matthew (27:46): “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For Rosa, these words become a cry for resonance at a time of extreme alienation (Rosa 2016, 441). Adding to this suggestion, we would suggest that the symbol of the resurrection similarly signifies God’s transformative way of responding to the repugnance of the cross, thus re-constituting the world as one of ultimate resonance.

Concerning criticisms of religion, Rosa takes a different approach than Theißen. In the 1970s, Theißen conceived his theory of religion on the basis of the critique of religion for being a human projection, hence helplessly anthropomorphic. Rosa appears to invert the focus. Rosa begins with giving a positive role to religion within his theory of resonance. Religion entails a promise of resonance when no experience of resonance appears at a given time or circumstance. By deploying the same notion of resonance to both inner-worldly and divine-human relations, Rosa’s view of religion may perhaps be vulnerable to the criticism of being too anthropomorphic. This,

24 Our translation of Schüßler 2017, 169: “Mit Gott ist nämlich dann zu rechnen, wenn alle Resonanz ausbleibt.”
however, is not Rosa’s concern as a sociologist discussing the condition for living a good life.\footnote{Perhaps, this is the blessing of a sociologist working as a philosopher of religion in disguise. We note the similarity to the later development of Peter L. Berger (Berger 1979).}

Rosa’s theory, however, also raises critical concerns against religious practices, placing requirements on religious authorities and on the use of religious symbols. To experience a relationship of resonance, both the vibrator and the resonator need to exhibit a dynamic firmness that is neither too rigid nor too shapeless (Rosa 2016, 282–83). Applied to religious resonance, this means that both the social structure of lived religion and the religious person require a similar firmness which is neither rigid, as can be experienced in fundamentalist groups, nor simply shapeless, as can be experienced in forms of religion too concerned with pleasing the public (Rosa 2016, 452). However, like other forms of resonance, religious resonance cannot be controlled in advance. Resonance requires that each body has a frequency of its own, a voice of its own, which is able to interfere with another vibrating body. Only religions that are able to allow such a relationship of mutuality between the vibrator and the resonator can contribute to meaningful experiences of resonance.

Rosa’s theory of religion is universalistic in the sense that no religion is excluded from the possibility of contributing to good life – if only it can vibrate! Yet, Rosa also makes explicit interpretations from the Christian symbol system. For instance, Rosa offers interpretations of the symbol of the cross as the connection between horizontal and vertical axes of resonance (Rosa 2016, 444). Regarding the Trinitarian doctrine of \textit{perichoresis}, Rosa suggests that it shows how God is inherently relational and striving for resonance (Rosa 2016, 446). For a sociologist, such interpretations are striking in themselves. Even though Rosa, as a sociologist, is not interested in textual interpretations, he is remarkably unafraid of extending his theory into central symbols of a particular religion.

Evaluating the branches of Christian beliefs according to his theory of resonance, Rosa also reflects on differences between Protestant and Catholic culture. He argues with Weber that while Catholicism with all its “expressive places” (\textit{sprechende Orte}) constitutes a larger space of possibility for resonance, Protestantism expresses a “disenchantment and reification” (\textit{Entzauberung und Verdinglichung}) of the world (Rosa 2016, 648).

However, we would argue that Weber’s analysis, and so also Rosa’s historical analysis, may come short. Surely, the dawn of the Lutheran reformation is also the beginning of a great risk, the \textit{risk of dismantling} a series of
traditional instances of religious resonance, such as indulgences, great liturgies, and the devotion of saints. The religious risk of Protestantism, however, opened the horizon for a different approach to religious resonance. Rather than religious resonance being monopolized by the church or reserved to specific places of religious expression (buildings, home altars, saints), ordinary believers should be able to discover realms of religious resonance in all spheres of life, particularly in their everyday life. Parental care, the vocation of one’s day job as a dentist or a banker, even taking responsibility for civil government are, so the Reformers, instruments of God’s passion for a life in service of the neighbor. Not only the church but the entire existence could thus become a place of religious resonance. This view is not only presented in complex theological works but seeps down into catechetical instruction. In his catechetical interpretation from 1529 of the First Commandment, ‘You are to have no other gods,’ the Reformer Martin Luther harshly criticized the idols – be they money and property, prestige and family honor, or the Pope and his saints; yet he ended in an instruction to pastors, teachers, and the ‘common people’ to trust in God alone, and then “expect him to give us only good things; for it is he who gives body, life, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessary temporal and eternal blessings” (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 389).

Dismantlement of traditional forms, however, always comes with the risk that new realms of resonance prove less convincing and less persevering than the old, if the new forms are carried by new embodiments, habits, and rituals. Yet being able to experience religious resonance within all realms of human existence, even in everyday life, was the opportunity that the Protestant Reformers opened up.

While Rosa is certainly no theologian, he does not limit religious resonance to special places, either. As mentioned above, the distinction between the three axes is, Rosa admits, somewhat arbitrary. Religious resonance may be relevant in the everyday lived reality of work and school, according to Rosa: “in plenty of areas, e.g. at work or in school, not only horizontal, but

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26 Rosa uses a thought structure similar to ours when considering puberty. In puberty, Rosa argues, the world goes silent, but puberty enables finding new and other spheres of resonance (Rosa 2016, 323). After puberty, spheres of resonance have become reflected in a new and more thorough way.

27 This theological tradition finds a strong continuation in what has been called Scandinavian Creation Theology in the vein of K.E. Logstrup, Regin Prenter, and Gustaf Wingren. For an introduction to this movement, see Gregersen, Kristensson Uggl, and Wyller 2017.
also diagonal and vertical relations of resonance are in play.”

This understanding certainly lends itself to a Protestant interpretation of religion as relevant for the everyday vicissitudes of life.

All searches for resonance, including the religious, entails the risk that resonance never occurs. Increasing one's search for resonance might even increase the risk of it never occurring. Resonance is indisposability, as Rosa has unfolded in his most recent book *Unverfügbarkeit*, fully aware that his key term “indisposability” is influenced by the theologian Rudolf Bultmann (Rosa 2019, 67). Resonance, not least religious resonance, Rosa argues, is not something one can bring about forcefully: “[W]hether resonance ensues and with which result remains indisposably open.”

To illustrate his notion of indisposability, Rosa draws attention to a snowfall, much like Theissen did concerning aesthetic resonance. A snowfall manifests what human beings cannot bring about themselves – except for the technologies of ski resorts – and which we cannot appropriate for any of our own purposes: “When we take it into our hands, it melts away between our fingers, when we take it into our house, it flows away again, when we pack it into our freezer, it stops being snow.”

In Rosa's mind, a snowfall offers an opportunity for resonance, especially, we might add, when one is capable of enjoying its complex structure or its opportunity for play rather than seeing it as trouble for tomorrow’s commute. With such examples in mind, Rosa finds it appropriate to call resonance a gift, even a grace, which is given, but to which the receiver should also make him- or herself available (Rosa 2019, 69).

Still, the indispensability of resonance also makes it clear that it entails a risk, namely the risk of remaining stuck in alienation. Running a risk in order to achieve something may destroy the possibility of achieving it. Risk is, however, not only involved in religious resonance, but also in other human encounters with resonance.

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29 Our translation of Rosa 2019, 67–68: “Ob sich Resonanz einstellt und was ihr Ergebnis sein wird, bleibt unverfügbar offen.”

30 Our translation of Rosa 2019, 7: “Wenn wir ihn in die Hand nehmen, zerrinnt er uns zwischen den Fingern, wenn wir ihn ins Haus holen, fließt er davon, und wenn wir ihn in die Tiefkühltruhe packen, hört er auf Schnee zu sein.”

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5. Risks of (Religious) Resonance

Before discussing the inherent risks of resonance experiences, we wish to clarify different types of risk assessment, including the distinction between quantitative and qualitative risk assessments.

The term risk concerns possible adverse events. Risk can denote the adverse event itself (cancer is a risk of smoking) but also the probability of that event (smoking results in a X% risk of getting cancer). Finally, risk can also be a measure of the impact, creating a more general risk-equation: risk = probability times severity (Hansson 2011). This risk-equation is capable of taking into consideration the combined severity of threats with regard to different domains, such as the impact of lung cancer, and its potential treatments, in the domains of health, politics, and finance. Solving this equation for possible pathways of decision creates a point of comparison which enables decision makers to consider which path to follow (see Boholm and Corvellec 2016). Thus, risks are always risks for somebody in a specific respect, as emphasized in the relational theory of risk (Boholm and Corvellec 2011; Christoffersen 2018).

Furthermore, risk equations can be solved in more quantitative and more qualitative ways. If data are available, the ‘frequentist method’ will allow a calculation of probabilities based on similar past occurrences. As such, the frequentist method assumes that the future resembles the past. However, as former American Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld pointed out, knowledge concerning the future can be divided into three categories, two of them considering the possibility that the future turns out differently than the past.

First, there are ‘known knowns.’ The future entails the possibility of events that we know that we know about, because they occurred in the past or can be evidenced in the present. We know about the possibility of getting lung cancer from smoking, and there are data available to let us calculate its probability.

Second, there are ‘known unknowns,’ which are the things we know that we know nothing about, perhaps because they have never happened before. The frequentist method of risk assessment, basing its risk calculation on data, has a hard time accounting for such events. The known unknowns require a different, more qualitative approach, what is called a ‘Bayesian’ approach to risk. If there are no data available, decision makers will have

31 For the entire quote from Rumsfeld, see Seely 2003, 2.
32 For the distinction between frequentist and Bayesian risk, see Dahlberg 2017, 38–40, and Christoffersen 2019, 20–23.
to make use of their own discernment – or the judgment of experts – to determine the risk-level. A quasi-quantified approach to a basically Bayesian risk evaluation is appointing a number from 1–5 to the probability and the impact, and multiplying them. A more clearly qualitative Bayesian risk evaluation dominates everyday decision-making. People compare possible paths based on their assumption of possible positive and negative outcomes. They base their risk assessment either on a rational basis, say conferring from the shape of a die that the probability of four eyes is 1/6, or on an empirical basis, conferring to decisions from one’s experience with playing yatzy (Gigerenzer 2003, 26–27).

Finally, we have the third category of the ‘unknown unknowns.’ We have to acknowledge the possibility of things we do not even know we do not know anything about, events whose actuality take us wholly by surprise. Using airplanes as weapons, as it was done in the 9/11-terrorist attacks, was the immediate background for Rumsfeld’s typology. Unknown unknowns constitute the limit of both frequentist and Bayesian approaches to risk, and to the human possibility of predicting the future.

Whether these risks can be prevented at all is a matter of some discussion, which has given rise to a more accurate way of conceptualizing the problem in Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann distinguishes risk from danger on account of the genesis of the threat. If the threat arises from outside oneself, it constitutes a danger. If the threat derives from oneself, it is a risk (Luhmann 1991, 30–38). The key question for Luhmann is ‘for whom’: For whom is this a threat? Whether climate change constitutes a risk or a danger depends on whether the contemporary Western society identifies with its own industrialized past, as well as on contemporary abilities to lower emissions of greenhouse gasses. In Luhmann’s terminology, climate change is a risk for Western society, but may be seen as externally imposed danger for societies around the world that have not benefitted from industrialization, but suffer the consequences of climate change.

The distinction between risk and danger clarifies that risk involves one’s personal engagement, much like resonance experiences. Danger, by contrast, denotes a threat that is independent, and prior to, human decisions. People run risks, thus exposing themselves to new sources of harm. Usually, however, risk-taking people only expose themselves to harm for the purpose of achieving greater goods (Gregersen 2003, 367). Thus, there is always a positive side to risk. Risk assessments, however, usually focus on possible negative outcomes. This stands in contrast to chance. Taking a chance implies the possibility of a negative outcome, but it focuses on the positive gains. Thus, the same course of human action can be described as running a risk and as
taking a chance, but the focus is somewhat different. Running a risk implies a focus on the possibility of things going wrong, while taking a chance focuses on the possibility of things going right.

With this overview of risk semantics in mind, we now turn to considerations of the risks involved in various types of resonance, as described by Theißen and Rosa. This consideration also serves as a way of summing up the main results of this article’s investigation of resonance experiences in Theißen and Rosa. First, Theißen discussed nomological resonance, defined as the structural affinity between applied mathematics and the exterior world. From a purely scientific point of view, neither risks nor dangers exist within this form of resonance, since there is no ‘for whom’ involved in uncovering given structures of natural processes. Nonetheless, there remains the risk of not being sufficiently correct in the scientific description of the basic structure of reality, and any engineer runs the risk of overlooking aspects of reality not covered by science, or not taken sufficiently into account by the constructor. The religious interpretation of nomological resonance, however, take the additional risk of falsely assuming some form of ordering power behind nomological affinities.

Second, on the level of inter-human resonance, people are intimately intertwined through their everyday communication. As the Danish phenomenologist K. E. Løgstrup has pointed out,

One never has something to do with another person without having a part of the other person’s life in one’s hand. It may be a very small matter, involving only a passing mood, a dampening or quickening of spirit, a deepening or removal of some dislike. But it may also be a matter of tremendous scope that can determine if the life of the other flourishes or not (Løgstrup 1997 [1956], 15–16, translation altered).

As emphasized also by Theißen and Rosa, experiences of resonance emerge spontaneously from the interactions with other people. From this prior fact of interdependence, Løgstrup argues, follows an ethical demand for taking care of the life of the persons to whom one has gained access. Similar to Theißen’s view on resonance, Løgstrup shows how the is-ought dichotomy is out of question in ethical situations where the ethical option of evading the communication is foreclosed unless one hurts another person significantly. In this sense, a moral obligation (the ‘ought’) arises from the already established situation (the ‘is’). Moreover, resonance can sometimes only ensue through a productive dissonance. Communicative resonance does not always involve a harmonious relationship between likeminded and even partners; in honest relationships criticism is necessary in order to avoid a flattery that is not able to move any of the partners closer to one another, and into contact with pertinent issues (21). What this means in ethical practice,
depends on the concreteness of the situation, the involved people, the tacit power relations between those involved, and ethical discernment. As such, there is also the risk of inattentiveness to the other person’s zone of inviolability (Logstrup 2007, 121n3). Transgressing another person’s zone of intimacy is an example of an interpersonal aggression that inevitably results in alienation. However, as both Rosa and Løgstrup argue, even with the most good-willed and attentive approach towards the other who is in need of being welcomed, resonance can neither be ensured nor controlled: The risk always remains that one’s communication will be received as an affront.

Third, the aesthetic experience of resonance, as we saw it in Theissen, entails its own inherent risks. On the one hand, there is the risk of overusing the beauty of certain landscapes. The diver enjoying the beauty of coral reefs is accompanied by hundreds of other divers that together spoil the beauty for each other. On the other hand, the risk remains of being overly attracted to the beauty. In search for natural resonance, the off-piste skier may overlook dangers lurking in the mountain landscape. Even the experience of aesthetic resonance has its own built-in dangers.

Finally, the search for positive religious resonances entails the risk of looking for divine purpose in the world at the expense of a realistic appraisal of life’s absurdities. In this regard, both Rosa and Theissen are helpful for contemporary philosophy of religion, committed as they are to a view of religion that takes experiences of danger, absurdity, and alienation seriously, while maintaining a sense for the generosity of the divine promise to let the final reality of the world be one of resonance.

In a remarkable passage on the difference between metaphysics and religion, K. E. Logstrup notes: “[I]f we move from the ascertainment that the universe is relevant to us to the question of whether we are relevant to the universe, we have gone from metaphysics to religion” (Logstrup 1995 [1979], 248). At its core, the concept of resonance concerns the mutual intertwine- ment of metaphysical awareness and religious reflection, thus underscor- ing the relevance of resonance experiences for contemporary philosophy of religion.

References


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