

Digital Theology

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This entry seeks to illustrate that as far as digital culture is the environment of our lives, it is the context of our theologising. It will begin by discussing why digital theological engagement is inevitable and thereafter discuss some of the doctrinal focus areas and debates within digital theology to date.

Table of Contents

1. Technology as Environment for Theologising

2. Exploring Doctrine in Digital Culture

3. Conclusion

Recommended Literature

Citations

Citation Style

Metadata

Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Technology as Environment for Theologising

The significance of technology for theology can be illustrated by the fact that since the Enlightenment, much of systematic theology can be seen as a response to techno-science and its supposed secularising impact. Digital technology is both continuous and discontinuous from modern technology. The tech industry is still driven by efficiency, productivity, and replicability; logics that are a legacy of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. It is nevertheless possible for disparate societal narratives to co-exist and one could equally argue that the digital revolution correlates more closely to postmodernity than to modernity. Graham Ward argues that by creating a parallel reality of sorts, cyberspace breaks the secularising „cycle of imminence“ constructed under a modern scientific worldview. The internet makes the transcendent more conceivable, contributing to a more open milieu for theologians to engage in.^[1] This would suggest that the conditions in which we theologise are changing under digitality.

Another way to reflect on the relation between theology and digital technology is through a media study lens. Here the influence of media scholars such as [Walter Ong](#) ^{GND} and [Marshall McLuhan](#) ^{GND} is keenly felt. [Dennis Ford](#) ^{GND} explores the impact of social media culture upon popular theologising. He muses that the “digital god” appears in many different forms, is always available, always present, and “customizable.”^[2] Customizable, since online individuals can find any theology that resonates with their outlook. Another example is [Paul Soukup](#) ^{GND}, who speaks of how a digital media ecology offers theology “a new freedom of expression,”^[3] as theological discourses are globalised and emancipated from the grip of academia and religious institutions. [Peter Horsfield](#) ^{GND} argues that in such a context academic theologians must learn to compete through creative and humorous communication or risk becoming irrelevant.^[4]

Another point of connection relates to linguistics and language in digital culture. If language can itself be conceived of as technology (that is, as a tool that extends human capability), then it follows that systematic theology is unavoidably technological. Thus, one of the tasks of digital theology is to investigate, to scrape, digital culture for language and metaphors that can upgrade our understanding of God. We will see some examples of this in the discussion below. It is also interesting to note that digital culture is already steeped in theological language and the internet attributed with divine characteristics. So much so, that [Eric Steinhart](#) ^{GND} uses „digital theology“ to denote this religious dimension of technological discourses.^[5] This serves to illustrate that theological language becomes a reservoir for meaning-making in digital culture.

Today, as the context of our lives, digitality therefore cannot be ignored in our theologising. A primary task of digital theology (DT), then, can be conceived of as a “reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality.”^[6] From this premise, we can begin to explore DT and systematics more directly through illustrating how Christian doctrines have been considered within digital culture.

2. Exploring Doctrine in Digital Culture

From the existing literature, it is apparent that digitality more immediately invites exploration of some doctrines more than others. The doctrine of God has so far received scant attention in DT. This is surprising given the divine attributes commonly ascribed to the internet. An interesting exception is [Hanna Reichel's](#) ^{GND} exploration of the doctrines of omnipotence and omnipresence as heuristic lenses to interrogate the digital. Reichel demonstrates the value of this approach when contrasting perfect divine knowing with datafied knowledge, which in comparison is reductionist and riddled with biases.^[7]

[Philip Hefner's](#) ^{GND} anthropology of “created co-creators” also relates to the doctrine of God.^[8] The conceptualisation of humans as co-creators (cf. art. Creation) raises questions concerning how human creativity relates to that of God, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and the nature of God. “Created co-creator” has been widely used in DT in relation to human creativity and anthropology. In a recent monograph, [Ximian Xu](#) ^{GND}, for example, contends that as the creation of creatures who image God, Artificial Intelligence (AI) may in some limited ways reflect the divine, which in turn forms the basis of our ethical engagement with this technology.^[9]

Theological anthropology has for good reasons been a particularly fruitful area of engagement and an important source of ethical debate in digital societies. As the outcome of human imagination, culture and creativity, technologies are intimately related to human identity and self-understanding. This interconnectedness is only heightened with the development of AI technologies, which are created to mirror and extend human capacity. Theologies of the imago Dei have often been mobilised as a polemic to shore up human uniqueness and dignity in the face of the perceived dehumanising threat of trans- and posthumanist discourses and AI.^[10] Privileging a relational approach to the *imago Dei*, [Noreen Herzfeld](#) ^{GND} critiques the emphasis on human cognition commonly assumed in AI developments as anthropologically reductionist.^[11] Others have suggested that theological anthropologies need

revising in light of technological developments. As AI applications supersede some human cognitive capabilities, Marius Dorobantu ^{GND} proposes that a theological anthropology of human uniqueness predicated on human rationality can no longer be sustained. Instead, Dorobantu locates human uniqueness vis-à-vis the machine in “cognitive vulnerability,” through which love and beauty are made possible. ^[12] Scott Midson ^{GND} rejects theologies of human uniqueness as inherently oppressive. In the face of exclusionary functionalist and substantive notions of the *imago Dei*, Midson mobilises the cyborg figure as a metaphor and locates the *imago Dei* in a “critical relationality,” through which humans are seen as interdependent with creation, creatures and technologies. ^[13]

Theologies of human nature have historically not only been rooted in the doctrine of creation, but also in Christology and the incarnation. Here, the cyborg has been deployed to reinvestigate the human and divine natures of Christ. Recasting Christ as a cyborgic “hybrid creature,” Anne Kull ^{GND} seeks to destabilise essentialising categorisations of the human. The cyborg Christ is an emancipatory figure furthering human choice. ^[14] The hybridity of the cyborg reopens the dispute at the heart of the Chalcedonian creed by challenging the hypostatic union. For Jeanine Thweatt-Bates ^{GND} the cyborg positively breaks the impasse of Chalcedon, between two ontological natures, and between Alexandria and Antioch. The cyborg moves beyond these ancient disputes towards hyper-relationality, in which the relationship between the divine and human, rather than their substances, comes to the fore. ^[15]

Conversations about the incarnation or incarnational theologies lend themselves to another major doctrinal focus of DT, namely ecclesiology. This focus derives from the need to theologically consider experiences of digitally mediated ecclesial practices that are prevalent in the church today. Questions of gathering, participation, sacramentality, embodiment in worship, and the local vis-à-vis the church universal are foregrounded. How such questions are answered has tended to be consistent with pre-existing ecclesial commitments, ^[16] and in turn has a bearing upon how technology is used and implemented. It is, however, difficult to find examples of ecclesiological innovation. Exceptions include the drawing upon digital language, such as “the network” ^[17] and “hybridity,” ^[18] to investigate the structure and nature of the church in digital societies.

Finally, societal discourses of technology are often future oriented, and technological innovations are laden with the hopes of the inventor(s). This accounts for the extensive reflection on eschatology within DT. Salvific hope in technological progress has here been contrasted with the Christian hope for a New Creation. Ron Cole-Turner ^{GND}, for example, contrasts the posthumanist vision of a disembodied virtual immortality with the Christian hope of the bodily resurrection. ^[19] In Michael Paulus’ ^{GND} treatise on apocalyptic imagination in AI narratives, he contends that a “Babylonian” AI empire building can be subverted by an imagination of love, symbolised by the New Jerusalem. ^[20] However, theologians are not unanimous on what the eschaton entails, the processes of arriving there and the role of technology within it. As an outlier, we could mention Teilhard de Chardin’s ^{GND} eschatological vision of the “Noosphere,” a state of universal consciousness, computer networks further the evolutionary processes towards this eschaton. ^[21] Conversations like these seem abstract, but how we conceive the future and what we hope for, shape our actions in the present, individually and collectively.

3. Conclusion

This brief survey has highlighted some of the key considerations, themes and doctrinal engagement in DT. What these examples illustrate is not only the demand for deep reflection on the implications of digitality, but also the theological potential of such reflection. One might note that systematic theological engagement with digitality is not altogether systematic. There is a sense of incompleteness with notable gaps in the literature. For instance, although not altogether absent, pneumatology ^[22] and the doctrine of creation ^[23] lack sustained reflection. There are also methodological developments to consider. So far, the application of Digital Humanities methodologies has mostly been limited to biblical studies. ^[24] Finally, with the rise of AI there is a renewed opportunity to draw from the deep

well of systematic theology to offer wisdom for digital societies. There is indeed ample work for (digital) theologians to do.

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