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Defining Digital Theology

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The task seemed simple enough – to try to define what we meant by Digital Theology. In the paper which myself, Kyle and Jonas put together, we end up with four different categories of digital theology ranging from theology taught through digital pedagogy through to a prophetic re-appraisal of digitality in the light of theological ethics.¹ In prior conversations held in both Finland with Erkki Sutinen's group and at the first Symposium in Durham comprising a group of digital theologians drawn from across the world, we focused on DT3 as the kind of Digital Theology we wanted to highlight: *the intentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture*.

There are probably lots of alternative definitions and more popular ways of putting it.² Theologians, like other scholars, are not averse to wanting to stake out their own field of research or their niche within that research. Perhaps that's the problem with so many research theses and so much need for originality after two thousand years. So, in biblical studies there is often the controversy over whether the use of the genitive in a specific phrase is subjective or objective. Is it the "faith of Jesus" or "faith in Jesus," or perhaps now even more complex the "faithfulness of Christ" or "faithfulness based on Christ." The original Greek language of course is flexible enough to allow for the ambiguities, but contemporary forensic biblical studies need to ensure the precise meaning, often so that we can ensure that we are in the right camp of biblical scholars.

To some extent this may be a game of semantics that we just need to be less exercised about. For example, we already have monographs/edited collections in digital anthropology,³ many contributions to digital pedagogy,⁴ and importantly a collected edition on digital ethnography⁵ and a whole library full of books on digital religion – many of which have been written by or edited by people on this panel or in this room. And, of course, within the field of digital religion there is the classic issue about online religion or religion online, initially explored by Christopher Helland.⁶ The difference Helland proposed was that religion online was a presentation of offline religious practice in the web – a kind of Web 1.0 informational presentation – while online religion was the actual practice of religion mediated through digital technology, the working out of religious practice in its many different forms specifically online. Of course, it isn't really either one or the other. Religion is performed in a hybrid space which is both physical and digital and across diverse platforms and models. As such, there is a kind of ambiguity even within the much more established field of Digital Religion, although it feels like the social science orientation of Digital Religion makes

religion into the equivalent of the objective genitive in Pauline studies. Digital Religion in its different forms is an object to be studied rather than a practice to be explored.

Digital Theology is a bit different it seems to me. But then other digital subjects are different too. For example, Sarah Pink's work on digital ethnography seeks to explore the impact of digitalisation (the latest word to explore the increasing embeddedness of digital tech into our everyday lives) into the everyday life of everyday people. She and her colleagues talk about different case studies where they look at how different practices are mediated through digital and non-digital modes of engagement and seek to highlight the potentially unnoticed increase of engagement through digital devices. Pink argues that doing digital ethnography means not focusing on the digital but rather allowing the digital to be seen amongst the everyday practices of individuals. Focusing on the digital fetishises those devices and makes them more than they are. Instead, focusing on how individuals act, how they interact, how they carry on their everyday lives, allows digital engagement to come to the fore. So, the different rituals around waking up in the morning are explored in a case study which does not highlight to the subject whether digital is part of the process, or another case study in which different women connect with their friends and other female family members. If ethnographers verbally highlighted the obvious use of digital technology, then it could well lead to the subjects being more aware of the need to engage with the digital rather than the ethnographer witnessing actual behavior – a kind of confirmation bias, perhaps?

On the other hand, in a recent book on the Bible, Digital Culture and Social Media,⁷ I made use of Abby Day's concept of performative faith.⁸ In doing that I read an article in which Mia Lövheim questioned both how too often we separate media as something other than religious reflection and also how we might do an ethnography of performative digital faith:⁹

Conceptualizing religion as mediation emphasizes that we cannot understand contemporary religion without studying how it is mediated [...]. Day's multi-dimensional model underlines the importance of place, body, and relations as the means through which the performance of belief takes place. However, the increasing mediation through print, electronic, and not least digital media in contemporary society makes clear that the dimension of mediatization needs to be developed in Day's model. Many of the examples described in the book seem to assume that belief is mediated only through face-to-face relations. But what does it mean for the idea of belief as performative and social that in today's digital

world close relationships for many people are mediated through e-mail, Skype, text messages, and social network sites such as Facebook and YouTube?

Similarly, Digital Pedagogy highlights the digital as the governing part of the subject categorisation. Here at AARSBL there are sessions on both the advocacy of digital teaching skills to promote student engagement and a paper on getting rid of tech from the classroom setting. THATCamp offered a whole day of exploration of digital humanities within the religion/biblical studies fields. But the focus seems more akin to Computing for Humanities rather than Digital Humanities or Digital Theology. The focus is on how we make use of digital technology within pedagogical practice or rather how we stop digital technology destroying digital practice with the latter an increasing expression of “techlash” with articles from MIT supporting business studies of the potential problems of using video conferencing as a form of educational engagement or even of allowing students to use tech in the classroom since some studies argue that the best results are achieved by students who use pen and paper rather than a tablet or a laptop in class.¹⁰

So, let’s get back to Digital Theology: the intentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture.

The words for that strapline were chosen carefully. Digital Theology seeks to focus on both of its constituent words. It brings together both the digitalisation of theology (although I have some anxiety of limiting digital culture to digitalisation) and the historical and contemporary process of theological reflection. In other words, both words matter, both words need to be seen as being in relationship to one another in an intentional, sustained and reflective way. In Digital Theology, we need to explore both the impact of digital culture on the study of theology, and the impact of theology on the study of digital culture.

The impact of digital culture to the study of theology itself is more complex yet. The very fact that we, as scholars, make use of word processors, digital image capture, online library resources, social media research groups and do our theological reflection within a now virtually ubiquitous digital culture, means that we are all digital theologians (as I wrote that I re-heard Amber Case declaring “We are all actually cyborgs”).¹¹ Melissa Terras spoke about this in her inaugural lecture at UCL: The ubiquity and embeddedness of digital culture means that we cannot escape its influence in everything we do as scholars.¹² This point is well described in Christine Hine’s exploration in *Ethnography of the Internet: Embedded, Embodied, Everyday*.¹³

But at the same time, we also need to be able to have enough critical distance to ask ourselves how this ubiquity affects our own research. It offers us a new almost unlimited resource of research material (as an object of study) but does our digital practice (as a subjective practice) affect the way we do this research. And to extend this further, does that ubiquitous digital engagement change the way that we explore theology? Certainly, the rise of transhumanism, the misplaced anthropomorphism of machine learning into sentient AI, the exploration of priesthood, sacraments and worship into potential virtual or avatar-based experiences adds different layers to our thinking about the theological world. You could take any theological doctrine and explore the shifts needed to embrace the world of digitality – creation, incarnation, salvation, theological anthropology, sanctification, death, theosis. This is digital theology – the thinking through of the impact of digitalisation on theology itself – not just on theological practice, but on theological doctrine itself.

One brief example: Jean Luc Marion's exploration of the impact of the viscosity of digital culture and his querying of the difference between an idol and an icon – an idol as an image which goes nowhere, which signifies only itself, which lacks the capacity to move us forward, deeper, higher.¹⁴ The idol has no superfluity of significance. An icon on the other hand overflows with significance and takes the reader/viewer/interpreter deeper into its signification. Like Rowan Williams' exploration of icons, which reminds us that in Eastern Orthodox teaching the icon bears the connection with heaven, indeed in its writing the icon embeds the very nature of the divine into its essence and becomes a pathway for reflection on the divine because of that connection, because of the superfluity of its nature.¹⁵ The idol remains wholly embedded in the everyday, the mundane. The icon connects the divine and the mundane, heaven and earth, it takes the reader beyond the physicality into divinity. In digital theology we might ask whether digitalisation is an idol or an icon in Marion's terms? Or is it both? Is iconicity in the eye of the beholder?

Digital Theology is also about querying the theological impact of the digital. My own recent work has focused on the impact of the digital on bible reading practices, as well as playing around with the bible and film and theological anthropology.¹⁶ That research has both explored the impact of digital culture on bible engagement but also queried the theological impact of the digital. So, in an unpublished paper on *Blade Runner 2049* at last year's SBL, I queried the treatment of female androids and women in the film as a continuation of biblical tropes of violence against women. In other places, I've mentioned the increasing awareness that biases against minorities already

represented within existing data are now infecting machine learning and potentially future sentient AI by allowing those data sets to be the basis of the machine learning algorithms. In other words, algorithms are being taught to embrace our biases. We can even see this in Bible Reading apps which use data-centric models to produce a “Verse for the Day”. In my research on the Bible and Social Media, I have shown a shift towards therapeutic verses within social media representations of the Bible and a concurrent shift away from representations including Jesus, God, death, crucifixion or indeed any direct act by God. Actions tend to be self-initiated and focused on therapeutic behaviour. I do something which enhances my own wellbeing or the wellbeing of those around me. This shift is similar to Christian Smith/Melinda Denquist’s “moralistic therapeutic deism.”¹⁷ Classically this shift is seen in John 3:16 being replaced by Jeremiah 29:11 as the most tweeted verse across most cultures. If that shift is real and it does seem to be evidenced in the sharing of the Bible online), then it means that data-centric choices of “Verse of the Day” will also reflect that shift. In turn that means that more people will share that therapeutic verse for the day and over time fewer and fewer people will ever read a doctrinal or propositional text on social media simply because the algorithms will push the therapeutic because that’s what they think we want to see!

Digital Theology needs to ask theological, ethical and practical questions of the digital world and of digitalisation. Those questions are about ethics – how are we using technology to promote wellbeing – but they also need to be about theological doctrine and religious practice and about the homogenisation of theology and religious practice into a kind of digital norm, a norm imposed by the conventions and affordances of digital culture itself. Theology has questions to ask about diversity, inclusion and pedagogy rather than simply accepting the digital conformity.

Enough. What do we mean by Digital Theology? It is the intentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture.

Footnotes

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- 2.

For a good selection, see *Cursor_*; especially Clifford Anderson. (2019) “Digital Humanities and the Future of the Digital”; See also Pauline Cheong et al. (2012). *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*. Peter Lang, which includes an important article by Peter Horsfeld, “‘A Moderate Diversity of Books?’ The challenge of new media to the practice of Christian theology.” pp.243-258) and Heidi Campbell. *Digital Theology*. (2013). Routledge. Heidi and Stephen Garner have produced a useful textbook on what they refer to as ‘networked theology’: Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner. (2016). *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. Baker Academic.

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