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Four Provocations on Digital Theology: A Response

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The Tension between Religion and Media Technology

I offer this reflection on digital theology as a media scholar, trained as a theologian, working in a public, state-run, secular university. This is a setting in which I regularly have to argue for and defend studying religion in a digital context, and argue the importance of paying close attention to religious discourse in contemporary culture. I have learned to be prepared to regularly speak to the relevance of religious scholarship, not just to administrators or members of my academic disciplines, communication and media studies, but also to colleagues with whom I share hallway space, who find my research novel but are unsure about its significance.

But I have not only had to defend my study of religion within the academy; I have also had to defend my focus on studying media and digital technology when standing amongst scholars of religion and theology. In 1998 I remember standing before my committee of well-regarded Scottish and English theologians at the end of my first year of the PhD program at the University of Edinburgh. My task was to defend my PhD proposal for a study of email-based online Christian communities, which, I proposed, offered an interesting site to study emerging understandings of online religious community and church online. Committee members sat wide-eyed as I explained how the people were using the then-new technology of the internet for religious purposes, and the potential implications this had for ecclesiology. When I finished my presentation there was silence, until one member said, “So they do church on the internet?” and, “and they really call what they do, online church?” Another member then jumped in and denounced the preposterous idea of doing church via media technology, sure the “internet is likely to go the way of Betamax and 8-track tapes, just a passing tech fad,” and claimed my topic would surely become an outdated experiment, because the “church can never be disembodied.”

While I passed my defense, other mentors in the field of communication and media studies discouraged me from working on the area of technology and theology for my PhD work. I remember one mentor I deeply respected described my area of research as “career suicide,” since I was daring to suggest theology had a valuable contribution to make to understanding and evaluating the internet. Yet, despite these discouragements and the fact that I spent the first decade of my career trying to justify and defend my study of religion and the internet, I persevered. Twenty-two years later, the concept of a church functioning online has become more accepted. Yet even in mid-2019, just months before the COVID-19 global pandemic, I found myself at a

conference session having to defend the idea of using theological concepts to analyze technology trends, and, in another session, explaining why current theological discourses can benefit from theoretical frameworks used in media studies.

Despite objections and opinions, I still hold theology has a crucial role to play, not just in critiquing tech work, but in providing categories and tools for deeper ethical reflection on technology and pointing to strategies for framing the nature of humanity in a digital world. Therefore, I was deeply encouraged when I was asked to be a panel respondent to the “What is Digital Theology?” panel presented at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), and to see how the concept of digital theology is being developed and defined by various scholars who take the intersection between technology and theology seriously. The panel discussed an article published earlier that year by Philips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg that similarly sought to define digital theology, suggesting 4 possible versions or focal points of digital theology.¹ Digital Theology 1, or DT1 as they referred to it, focuses on using digital technology to teach theology in the 21st century. DT2 focuses on the new kinds of knowledge and research approaches that can be facilitated by digital tools and cultures. DT3 is the “reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digital culture,” where attention is paid to the theological concepts and approaches that can be used to analyze digital media and interpret digital practices. DT4 refers to a theological and ethical critique of digital society and its tools.

Based on my background and over two decades of work studying Christian groups’ and communities’ religious negotiations with digital technology, I find DT3 and DT4 the most compelling areas in which digital theology can make a contribution to the academy. These versions of digital theology are able to build on work begun in the 1980s and 1990s under the umbrella of public theology, looking at how technology shapes modern society and work practices, as scholars sought to speak into the social systems and culture this engagement gave rise to. Work under the umbrella of DT3 and 4 could offer theological terms and strategies to engage in ethical interpretive work. It is here that digital theology moved from the pragmatic to the prophetic voice, as it speaks into the culture and social policy that frame the human-technology relationship in both promising and problematic ways for a human future. While the other approaches to digital theology have value, if we think of the development of theology as a 21st-century interest within the discipline, what is most needed is a digital theology that can speak into the public sphere where ethical and moral decision making is discussed and solidified. What we need is a digital theology that is

articulate, relevant to the times we live in, and able to be heard amongst competing voices that frame technology in our society.

However, theology in general has a significant public relations problem outside the confines of the church. Theology often fails to recognize that outside its guild, it is no longer seen as the “queen of sciences” by the academy and society. It also has not had a strong track record of clearly communicating with a broad non-specialist audience. Because digital theology, especially DT3 and DT4, engages a topic of high interest within contemporary society—i.e., how technology shapes human culture—I believe it has the potential to challenge and change this general perception. This can be done not only by connecting with tangible ethical debates surrounding the social uses of digital media influencing multiple levels and spheres of society, but also by offering alternative narratives of the human future informed by technological innovation and progress. However, in order to become such a vibrant discourse, several issues for conversation and reflection must be raised.

Here I offer several brief provocations, or areas in need of serious reflection within this emerging area of theological discourse. These four critical provocations are made not because I am cynical or unconvinced about the prospects of digital theology, or because I question the potential impact it can have on the wider field and beyond. Rather, because I am a long-term advocate of what theology has to offer public discussions about the role technology plays in society, I assert the need to consider the ways in which theology disadvantages itself in the public sphere by its current status and presented ethos.

Four Provocations

1. *Digital theology, just as the field of theology in general, has to fight to be heard in the sphere of scholarly exchange.*

As Europe and America become increasingly secular cultures, the voice of religion is being increasingly marginalized in public life. Theology has too long been content to speak in closed rooms, as theologians talk amongst themselves about what should be done but are lax in their efforts to move beyond those confines. I believe theology in general in its current state and practices often contributes to its cultural marginalization by having such an inward-looking and practicing focus.

If theology and digital theology are to move beyond the closed spaces of specialist and academic discourse to be actual contributors to public discourse and thinking on the

nature of technology and its social-cultural impact, change must occur. First, these disciplines must realize and take note of the fact that they are late coming to the table in offering reflection on the existential and spiritual implications of technology, ethical practices, and digital media and offering guidelines to society on balanced human-machine relations. These conversations have been happening for four decades in the fields of philosophy of technology, media ethics, and science and religion. In the last two decades, new fields of study such as cyber-philosophy, information ethics, and internet studies have taken on these topics and offered concrete policy statements and guidelines that are now being used to influence American public policy and even National Science Foundation funding agendas.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, digital theology must become fluent in these arenas and map previous discourse on academic perspectives on how the nature of humanity, technology, and information have been presented and framed in this work. From this basis, insights can be gained as to where theological studies can contribute to, support, and challenge these established discourses and mindsets. I strongly believe the emergence of digital theology provides a unique opportunity to do theology differently in a digital age. In our increasingly secularized society, traditional theological tenants and denominational teachings are no longer common knowledge, not only within broader society, but even within the church. Digital theology should not just offer the truths it claims about the nature of humanity and the creative work of “techne” and their relationships within the created order as if these were commonly held beliefs or facts. Rather, digital theology must offer its insights as conversation points to argue their value and demonstrate how they offer solutions or insights that can be given serious consideration when it comes to thinking through ethical stances on technology. Core beliefs about humanity and its relationship to the created order as these follow from traditional teachings cannot be taken as a given within the church, let alone broader culture. Digital theology must engage in public discourse about what theology can contribute to broader social problems and conditions.

2. Digital theology must unpack and offer a technological apologetic for its work and existence.

Because theology is currently often disregarded as a valued contributor to public debates about the digital, digital theology must construct what I describe as a technological apologetic for its work and contributions. The term “technological apologetic” is an idea I have developed over the last decade in my research on religious digital creatives (RDCs). The technological apologetic is the story RDCs tell

those inside and outside their faith communities to spotlight why they engage in digital work and ministry and how they see this work contributes to building the life and mission of the church. The technological apologetic is a story about one's beliefs and motivations that frames why an individual engages with technology in the way they do and how this work can benefit and contribute to a larger cultural context.

Digital theology must do the same. While there are different strains and expression of DT, and each may have slightly different goals, a common ground needs to be identified—why theologians are engaging in this work, what are the unique insights digital theology can offer the church to understand current culture, and how these aspects can serve the broader society. At the heart of a technological apologetic is a justification narrative centered on assumptions about the nature of Christian community, the role of church in society, and the relationship of technology to the CFRC (creation-fall-redemption-consummation) narrative. This must address common assumptions about the relationship between religious institutions and technology, in which both are seen to be, and often function as if they are, conceptually and/or structurally at odds with digital media. The narrative must also recognize the fact that external digital-technological culture is often framed as if it is in competition with religion, because of the flexible, dynamic, and individualistic user-centered nature of the internet. The narrative must explain itself, not as an apology for digital theology's existence, but as a move to build a concrete platform from which it can speak, showing its relevance and offering desperately needed insight.

3. Digital theology should choose to be prophetic, rather than reactionary to technology.

It is easy to throw stones at the problems of the technological society. But too few theologians and academics offer more than critiques of digital media. What we need instead are prophetic insights and responses that offer hopeful solutions. Rather than simply adapting to or reacting against current discourses about technology and society, digital theology should choose to cultivate a prophetic spirit, as I believe it already has a prophetic calling. Since the 1980s, media scholars studying ethics and the nature of technology have been advocating that Christian scholars have a responsibility to speak in a prophetic voice about the influence and relationship of technology on the human experience. Clifford Christians describes the Christian response to technology and media as one that focuses on the value-laden nature of technological enterprise that often goes unnoticed or unquestioned in the public sphere, creating a set of cultural practices embedded with value-laden assumptions around it.² He argues it is the responsibility of the Christian community, which

theology is one part of, to bear prophetic witness to these conditions and related practices. He suggests that as technology has become a key shaping force in society, it is often assumed and goes unquestioned; it needs to be carefully interrogated. It is not the technology itself that is problematic but the surrounding social practices or conditions it encourages, as well as cultural trends toward the sacralization of the technology as salvation. Prophetic witness is the call for digital theologians to speak to the ways technology shapes human freedom/dependency and autonomy and to unmask and question the path or endpoint these trends lead to. Like the need for a technological apologetic, the call to digital theologians to prophetically witness is one that offers teaching and insights that can enable people to question the agenda of technological society, as well as offering hopeful opportunities for response, not just a rallying cry for the rejection of the technology.

4. Digital theology must act as a truly global and inclusive discourse to be relevant.

Finally, if digital theology is to truly be representative of a global discourse, it must do better at including diverse and global representatives in that conversation. As I looked around the room in which the AAR “What is Digital Theology?” panel took place, part of the problem was very clear. Discussion about theology and technology too often privileges white male scholars. The Anglo-dominant male-bias is part of both the history and current legacy of theology. It represents only a select set of voices—ones that often come from a privileged cultural position. Digital theology has not only an opportunity but, I believe, a mandate to not do theology as it has always been done. It needs to seek out conversation partners within the world of theology, partners from diverse and underrepresented cultural and gendered contexts. I applaud the work begun by the Center for Digital Theology in Durham, which has begun its work by consciously cultivating collaborations with groups in Singapore, the Ukraine, and South Africa. More such work needs to be done to seek insights from these voices and theological representatives from the non-Western world, individuals who are being impacted greatly by the social-technical forces of globalization. The challenge that lies ahead is great, as encouraging diversity will mean some of the traditional and established voices in the field will have to yield their speaking time to encourage and give space to valuable but previously ignored voices within the church. Will digital theology lead humbly by example? Will some of the privileged be willing to go as far as giving up their own seat at the table, one they may have worked hard for and earned, to elevate others so they can contribute their cultural perspective? If digital theology is willing to do this, it will raise the discourse’s public credibility as a space that values diversity and global perspectives. This scholarly humility will make an important

statement by visibly demonstrating the countercultural response theology suggests it represents in the public sphere.

We need to not just encourage these diverse voices to become part of the conversation, but to go to them and learn how they are seeking to respond theologically to the rise of technological culture. Digital theology has the opportunity to present a new model of doing theology with the technological tools it studies. My hope is that members of this newly forming guild will take up this call for creative engagement and the call to social action to help birth an area of study that shows innovation, collaboration, humility, and a passion to make theology a valued discourse partner in public responses to our technological society.

My hope is that scholars engaged in digital theology will become conversational thought leaders modeling new ways to conceive of and perform theology in an international and interdisciplinary context. I believe theology can add a vital and missing dimension to current cultural discourses about the role of technology in society and the understood nature of the digital.

Footnotes

1. Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Jonas Kurlberg, "Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network," *Open Theology* 5, no. 1 (2019). <https://doi:10.1515/opth-2019-0003>. ↵
2. Clifford Christians, "Prophetic Witness to a Technicistic Society," in *Responsible Technology*, ed. Stephen Monsma (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). ↵