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Doing God in Digital Culture: How Digitality is Shaping Theology

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1. Introduction

Every era births its revolution. Our own age is arguably defined by “the 4th revolution” – the expansion of digital information and communication technologies that are, as Luciano Floridi states, “pervasively, profoundly, and relentlessly” reshaping all spheres of life including human identity, activity and thought.¹ This article suggests ways in which the emerging conditions of digitality have a bearing on our theologizing. I will first propose that the digital condition is becoming the new horizon for theological enquiry. More specifically, it is suggested that digital cultures disrupt the immanence of modernity thereby creating a climate more attuned to theological utterances. I then turn to theories deriving from media studies to discuss the impact of digital communication technology on notions of God in our culture. Finally, I show how concepts and metaphors from digital technology can inform theological debates over doctrine.

I am here consciously limiting the discussion to exemplify ways in which digitality informs theology; however, I see digital theology as a reciprocal conversation between the two.² This approach has been taken because I want to draw attention to and illustrate why theology needs to pay attention to digitality. In so doing, I seek to offer an apologia for digital theology.

2. Speaking about God under the conditions of digital culture

One of the major recognitions in late-modern theology is that in as far as theology is a human activity it can never be free from the historical and cultural situation of the theologian.³ This affirmation calls for a self-reflectivity of one’s own situatedness.

From John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*⁴ to Charles Taylor’s *Secular Age*⁵ there is today an abundance of theological writing mapping the major cultural and intellectual shifts in the Western world over the last few centuries and the implications of these for theology. One such historiography is Graham Ward’s chapter “A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace”, which in broad strokes outlines the transition from modernity to postmodernity. Published in 1997 the chapter makes for an interesting conversation partner not least due to Ward’s assertion that “[s]urfing the net is the ultimate postmodern experience.”⁶ For Ward, cyberspace epitomises the logic of postmodernity. Consider the following phrases that he uses to describe the internet: omnipresence, multilocality, endless pleasures, time disappears, boredom is

deflated, drug of the ever new, without commitment, nomadic, undefined spatiality, anonymous, reality is malleable, fantasy, ceaseless journeying. All of these readily resonate with the cultural phenomena of postmodernity.

On Ward's reading the postmodern moment can be traced to Nietzsche's genealogy of knowledge. With the assertion that there are no epistemological foundations on which universal knowledge can be constructed, the modern project collapses. Postmodern ontology assumes that reality, much like cyberspace, is in a constant flux with no fixed anchors. As modernity gave way to a postmodern condition theology finds itself in a new environment, and for Ward this has essentially positive ramifications. If the immanence of modernity made it difficult for theological voices to be heard, postmodern epistemology offers new possibilities. Cyberspace concurs with postmodernism in its challenge to modern conceptions of time and space by puncturing "the circle of immanence" opening up to a different dimension, a parallel reality.⁷ This episteme affords a post-secular space in which theological voices yet again can be heard.

Ward's characterisation of the internet is perhaps outdated, yet his contention that the internet implies post-secularity stands. As the internet becomes more embodied, embedded and everyday – to borrow from sociologist Christine Hine⁸ – we conceive of it less as a parallel reality. We stand on the cusp of the 4th industrial revolution with its immersive experiences and augmented reality, and where the distinction between real/virtual will become increasingly blurred. It is exactly this blurring that invites a different conception of reality, of time and space, breaking the frame of immanence. Arguably this signals a return to something akin to a premodern notion of personhood that Charles Taylor has labelled the *porous* self. In Taylor's account, in a premodern enchanted world external forces, such as spirits, were seen to have the power to act upon the porous individual. In the modern era, as the notion of *buffered* selfhood emerged, it erected firmer boundaries between the self and other things. It is this shift that Taylor sees as the key to understanding the rise of secularity. I suggest that in a digital age, the blurring of boundaries between real and virtual resurrects a version of the *porous* self. In this re-enchanted digital age, forces of a different dimension have a direct bearing upon us. Beyond the epistemological shifts exemplified by cyberspace that Ward speaks of, digital media itself contributes to the post-secularization of society by permitting a broader theological engagement in a digitalized world. For example, social media challenges the hegemony of often secular media companies. Through new media, religious actors and institutions have found new platforms, enabling them to circumvent previous gatekeepers reaching audiences more directly.

Digitality is then the new horizon of theological enquiry. For professional theologians with positions at academic institutions this promises a more benign environment in which their voices can be heard. Nevertheless, while the digital world might be one of re-enchantment it is also one of pluralism. As Peter Horsfield notes, the internet is a competitive space in which theologians are compelled to use accessible language and find creative ways of being heard or they risk becoming irrelevant.⁹

3. A Digitally Mediated God

A related source of influence on theology is the impact of digital media on our notions of God. God's self-revelation is always mediated, whether through God's breath (ruach) in creation or human agents, burning bushes, sacraments, sacred texts or the incarnation itself. A number of theologians/sociologists have explored the theological implications of various forms of mediation and the media culture they create.¹⁰ The most expansive treatise to date is Dennis Ford's *A Theology for a Mediated God*, which builds upon media theorist Marshall McLuhan's thesis that "the medium is the message." McLuhan's central idea is that we need to pay attention to how communication technologies impact social dynamics and culture. It is through this lens that Ford investigates how digital media shapes our notions of God. He makes a number of assertions. Firstly, he suggests that the God of the internet is polymorphic. The multisensory and multimedia nature of the internet means that God is mediated in many different forms. Notions about God are often fragmented, communicated in memes and soundbites that challenge single conceptions of God. As a result, God becomes less authoritarian. Secondly, God in a digital culture is omniscient and omnipresent. The God of the internet is a God that knows everything and is immediately knowable, readily available at any time and place. Thirdly, he claims that online we can find any theology to support our particular outlook. As we choose which aspects of God we affirm or reject God becomes 'customizable'. Fourthly, in Web 2.0 God meets all of our needs and answers our questions, marking a shift from traditional Christian ideas that it is the individual who serves God and not the other way around. Fifthly, the immersive world of gaming and VR invites imagination of a reality that is not yet but still has an effect on the here and now. In theological terms, this is the distinction between the reality of now and the future coming of the kingdom. More significantly, encountering God in an immersive online environment is experiential rather than abstract and rational. Finally, the interactivity of Web 2.0 is analogous to the body of Christ. The God of social media invites us to social engagement and

community. But on the flip side God risks becoming an idol of the collective judgement of our online community.¹¹

While Ford's thesis is compelling and intuitive, a few comments are in place. A critique levied at McLuhan – which I believe applies to Ford – is that his thesis is too deterministic and neglects user agency.¹² This is all the more evident in the context of the interactivity of Web 2.0. How individuals and communities use digital technology is itself culturally conditioned. That is, how technology is understood and utilised depends on each user's social imagination. This points towards difficult questions of causation and the direction of influence. For instance, when using Google trends Peter Phillips has discovered that 'therapeutic' bible verses which speak to the individual's well-being have in recent years been the most popular.¹³ This seems to confirm Ford's thesis that digital media promotes a self-focused spirituality. However, is that an inevitable outcome of new communication technology or a reflection of cultural uses of technology? Claims concerning the causal link between digital communications technology and changing notions about God need to be handled with caution.

Further, Ford's portrayal of the internet as unbounded space with endless possibilities and freedoms needs to be checked. We are seeing and will see a significant shift towards greater control. The internet is undergoing a process of institutionalisation as communities create new social norms that dictate individuals' online behaviour, and state regulations are being brought in to address some of the abuses.¹⁴ Furthermore, many state actors, not least the Chinese government, are using the internet for surveillance and propaganda extending its reach and control. The algorithms and persuasive technology in the software design of tech giants' platforms constantly influence what users see and how they engage. Further, while the internet has disrupted old authorities, new ones are emerging.¹⁵ In the religious sphere companies such as YouVersion wield significant influence on how hundreds of millions of individuals read the bible. Finally, users are becoming more self-controlled about what they share on social media in response to its negative side and the potential for abuse.

Thus, while the exact correlation between technological mediation and theology remains complex, it is nevertheless important to consider. If my observation that the internet is becoming a more controlled space is correct, then we will see a turn towards notions about the divine as not only omnipresent, but omnipotent, which suggests the emergence of new forms of religious fundamentalism and religious authorities.

4. Digital language, metaphors and God

My third case of God in digital culture illustrates how the tech world contains a rich repository out of which concepts and metaphors can be brought to shed light and insights on theological conversations and debates. As Kathryn Tanner contends, Christian identity has always been “parasitic”, borrowing the language and metaphors of “other ways of life” in order to establish its own meaning.¹⁶ Digitality, thus, affords a new language to speak about God, clarifying, illuminating and challenging held doctrines and theologies. There are multiple examples such as Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner’s use of the “network” metaphor to describe faith and practice in networked societies,¹⁷ or Benedikt Friedrich’s use of the free software movement as an analogy to Pauline conceptions of freedom in a paper recently published for Cursor.¹⁸

I will, however, focus here on Ilia Delio’s concept of Cyborg Christogenesis. Delio is not the first theologian to annex the cyborg figure as a symbol of the incarnation. In Anne Kull’s reading of Donna Haraway, she suggests that the figure of the cyborg draws our attention to the politics of the incarnation as a destabilizer of “reified categories” whether human or divine.¹⁹ Delio’s treatise, however, is located within contemporary debates on the impassibility and immutability of God, and thereby also reopens the question of the human/divine nature of Christ.

Delio builds on Teilhard de Chardin’s exploration of emerging ideas of evolution in the wake of Einstein’s quantum theory. Quantum theory suggests a more dynamic understanding of the universe in which all things are interconnected and in constant flux. In Delio’s interpretation, Teilhard here derives the potential for a more dynamic understanding of the cosmos and its relation to God, “whereby we see creation not as a static world, but a relationship between the dynamic being of God and a world in process of coming to be.”²⁰ Thus, while God’s nature is different from creation, God has entered into a relationship with the cosmos itself through the Incarnation. Entangled with the world, God is the energy or the motion that propels the world in constant forward moving evolutionary process towards unification.²¹

It is in the context of this discussion that Delio summons the symbol of the cyborg. The cyborg is a hybrid creature in which the distinction between the technological and organic has been blurred. While Haraway mobilizes the cyborg as an iconoclast railing against the dualistic personhood of modernity,²² Delio uses the symbol to speak of the hybridization of the human/divine dualism in the incarnation: “The cyborg is the

modern symbol of the incarnation in that divinity and humanity are hybridized.”²³ In Christ, God became a hybrid cyborg blurring the divine/creation distinction. In Christ, God is then something new, recognizable but yet wholly different, signalling a new symbiotic relation between God and the world. Bringing this hybridized view of the incarnation to our understanding of the Trinity, Delio argues that the divine love of the Triune persons necessitates the creativity that results in the creation. But further, the eternal movement of love brings the world into unity with the Godhead. Because love is seen as movement it implies an openness, in this case an openness to a cyborgic symbiosis with the world.

In this way Delio’s use of the symbol of the cyborg, bringing the language of digital culture into conversation with traditional theological debates over the nature of God and Christ, adds another interpretative lens. Delio’s arguments are likely to be controversial, to the extent that Teilhard remains controversial. The myth of evolutionary progress has been challenged for its inability to resolve the problem of evil. As with several modern theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann,²⁴ Delio contests the impassibility of God, but does a changeable God undermine the possibility of Christian hope? Or, as Thomas Weinandy argues, is God’s free love conditioned by impassibility?²⁵ Do the Monophysitic tendencies in the hybridization of the human/divine nature in Delio’s Christogenetic Cyborg call into question the hypostatic union of the Chalcedonian Creed? Or does the hybridization of the cyborg provide a fruitful language to overcome the implied dualism of the incarnation?

5. Conclusion

I have advanced examples to suggest how emerging digital culture has a bearing on our theologizing, thereby suggesting that the digital revolution needs to be taken seriously for the sake of theology itself. Digitalization is not a phenomenon that theologians can choose to engage with or not. The reality is that although theology has yet to untap the computational methodologies applied in digital humanities, digitalization has already altered theological method. At the very least, we are all writing on digital devices, we are all publishing and reading digital texts, broadcasting our latest flashes of genius on social media, and drawing upon tech for our teaching and research. We even use machine learning to correct our texts. In this conclusion I have used the machine learning software GPT-2 to construct sentences for me as a precursor for what possibly is to come. This should at a minimum give cause to pause for self-reflection.

Digital theology could be dismissed as another “fad-theology,” a jumping on the bandwagon in the instrumentalization of the latest trends for academic gain. Yet, “the digital revolution promises to be as transformative for theology as for many other spheres of human activity.” The digital is already the backdrop to all theologizing and the very conditions which define the theological enterprise. The sheer ubiquity of the digital means that it will soon fall into the taken for granted background noise that informs our social practices. Just as we take it for granted that all our theological writings take shape through the tapping of keys on our digital devices, we will soon stop noticing the novelty of digitality and how it shapes us. Digital theology will eventually just become theology. But at this point in time the digital revolution is still disruptive enough to stimulate our theological imagination. Now is the time for digital theology.

Footnotes

1. Luciano Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vi. [↵](#)
2. See Peter M. 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 (2019). [↵](#)
3. See, S.B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992). [↵](#)
4. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993). [↵](#)
5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). [↵](#)
6. Graham Ward, 'Introduction, or, a Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,' in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), xv. [↵](#)
7. Ibid., xli. [↵](#)
8. Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). [↵](#)
9. Peter Horsfield, 'Moderate Diversity of Books?' the Challenge of New Media to the Practice of Christian Theology,' in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture:*

Perspectives Practices and Futures ed. Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, and Stefan Gelfgren (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 257. [↵](#)

10. E.g. Peter Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015) [↵](#)

11. Dennis Ford, *A Theology for a Mediated God: How New Media Shapes Our Notions About Divinity* (New York: Routledge, 2016). [↵](#)

12. See Robin Williams and David Edge, 'The Social Shaping of Technology,' *Research Policy* 25, no. 6 (1996). [↵](#)

13. Peter M. Phillips, *The Bible, Social Media and Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2020), 88-90. [↵](#)

14. For example, the German government brought in new legislation, NetzDG, on 1st January 2018 to tackle hate speech and 'illegal content' on social media. It put greater onus on social media companies to remove such content including threats of violence and 'insult of public office'. [↵](#)

15. See B. J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* (San Fransisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003). [↵](#)

16. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997)113. [↵](#)

17. Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). [↵](#)

18. Benedikt Friedrich, 'Exploring Freedom: A Conversation between Floss-Culture and Theological Practices of Freedom,' *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie* 3 (2019). [↵](#)

19. Anne Kull, 'Cyborg Embodiment and the Incarnation,' *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28, no. 3-4 (2001), 284. [↵](#)

20. Ilia Delio, 'Trinitizing the Universe: Teilhard's Theogenesis and the Dynamism of Love,' *Open Theology*, no. 4 (2018), 161-2. [↵](#)

21. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evoution* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1969), 171-2. [↵](#)

22. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Socialist Review* (1985). [↗](#)
23. Delio, "Trinitizing the Universe," 164. [↗](#)
24. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God : The Cross of Christ as the Aoundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2001), ch. 6. [↗](#)
25. Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 164-5. [↗](#)