



Editorial

Theologies of the Digital

HANNA REICHEL AND FREDERIKE VAN OORSCHOT

cursorjournal@gmail.com

In the digital age, all aspects and subsystems of life are undergoing transformations, sometimes radically and other times subtly. What, if anything, can theology as a discipline contribute to the analysis, conceptualization and assessment of the emergent logics of “the digital”? And how are theological concepts and topics themselves transformed by “the digital”?

These questions were taken up by a group of theologians from the USA and Germany in November 2019. It was a theological experiment: exploring constructive approaches to relate theological thought to digitalization. In planning this workshop, we wanted to bring two interests together: On the one hand, we were looking for impulses for interdisciplinary reflection on the digital that makes visible what theology has to offer to reflect on “the digital” – digital technologies, changing media structures and emergent cultures. On the other hand, we want theological thinking and modeling to be challenged and enriched by contemporary developments, prompting us to rethink theological conceptions such as authority, the human person, freedom etc. Since this crossover is a somewhat untypical endeavor for theologians, we felt the need to organize a workshop as a constructive space for developing ideas in an explorative and creative manner.

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR EXPLORATIVE THEOLOGY
CZETH_3 (2022) S. 7–10

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.17885/HEIUP.CZETH.2022.3.24524](https://doi.org/10.17885/HEIUP.CZETH.2022.3.24524)

ZUVOR VERÖFFENTLICHT AUF PUBPUB: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.21428/fb61f6aa.25f7038e](https://doi.org/10.21428/fb61f6aa.25f7038e)

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The contributors challenged themselves to use dogmatic loci as lenses to read and interpret contemporary developments in the context of digitalization, as well as challenge and reformulate theological insights in light of said developments. Proposals were invited to be tentative or bold in experimenting with new ideas. Because of this open nature of the inquiry, the workshop was conducted in an exploratory and collaborative spirit – linking theology and the digital also in terms of form and performance.

Therefore the conference did not only discuss cutting edge technologies and the societal transformations they engender, it also made use of them to create a different mode of engagement: more intimate and more open, more collegial and more critical, more interactive and more focused. Papers were posted to *pubpub* ahead of time and advertised via twitter (#theodigital2019). Public input was solicited and encouraged. The involved online platforms allowed for a participatory discussion before, during, and after the workshop. The contributing scholars came together at *Princeton Theological Seminary* and the *Center of Theological Inquiry* in November 2019, with additional support by the *Forschungsstelle der evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft in Heidelberg* and the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*. One scholar participated remotely from Germany. Workshop participants were invited to read and comment each others' contributions in preparation for the discussion. During the meetings, the contributing scholars as well as a select group of respondents and graduate students presented formulated responses to open up discussion, while the audience was at all times invited to further add questions and comments online. Designated persons would collect these responses and feed them back into the live discussion.

For our workshop, we identified four salient areas of exploration: theological anthropology with special emphasis on accountability and diversity; concepts of freedom; memory and knowledge; and scripture as authority and interface.

A first session centered on theological anthropology: “the human person.” In her contribution, “Digital Spiritual Embodiment: Power, Difference, and Interdependence,” Kate Ott reflected on the relationship between embodiment and digitality and described ways in which digital technology fosters a sense of the self as plural and interconnected: networked ways of being in the world. Florian Höhne added a Bonhoefferian reading with “The Porous Mask: A Theological Reflection on Concepts of Personhood and Personal Agency in the Digital Age.”

The second session explored conceptions of freedom. Benedikt Friedrich compared the free open software movement with the transformation of the church by the Reformation and proposed an ecumenical model of negotiation of differences in anal-

ogy to the standards of the free open software movement to foster free communal processes. Peter Dabrock addressed the impact of big data on Western democracy and individual privacy and presented perspectives for an ethic of data sovereignty and data governance for personal freedom in digital spaces in “From data protection to data sovereignty.” In a critical response to Dabrock’s underlying optimism, Hanna Reichel pointed out deeper structural transformations through the technologies employed and reflected on the relationship between knowledge, surveillance, and freedom from the doctrine of omniscience in “Worldmaking knowledge: What the doctrine of omniscience can help us understand about digitization.”

The third session dove into theological understandings of biblical authority in a time of its technological reproduction, hypertextualization, and potential delimitation. Michael Hemenway presented collaborative work from the *Experimental Humanities Lab @ the Iliff School of Theology* in “Bible as Interface: Reading Bible with Machines” and mused how our understanding of scripture changes when it is read and produced by machines. Hemenway’s phrase of the “bible as interface” then prompted Frederike van Oorschot to doctrinal reflection on the authority of scripture in her contribution, “Scripture as Interface: A Hermeneutical Reflection on a Concept based in Media Theory.”

In a final session on “Memory and Knowledge,” Clifford Anderson drew out the hermeneutical and epistemic challenges of deep fakes in “A New Hermeneutics of Suspicion? The Challenge of deepfakes to Theological Epistemology.” Gotlind Ulshöfer investigated practices of memory and the theological implications of the digitization of biblical sources in “Changes in Remembrance? The Digitalization of Biblical Texts under Theological and Ethical Considerations.”

These four sessions always followed the same rough blue print: scholarly proposals from different contexts, pre-circulated, a response drawing out issues and perspectives emergent between them, collection of comments, and extensive time and space for discussion.

Linking the possibilities of a digital platform with the analogue and embodied community of the workshop experience was especially rewarding. The discussions were enriched both by exchanges and feedback among the scholars in anticipation of the event as well as by third parties before and during the live workshop. The platform also allowed to present the contributions to a broader public, and partially engage it in our conversation in different media, e.g., on Twitter. The version tracking on

Cursor_ allowed for transparency in how inputs were processed, discussed, and led to revisions.

In our discussions at and around the conference, further topics emerged that we envisioned discussing in a similar manner: “power,” “subalternity,” “media(lity),” “reality,” and “community.” These open questions as well as the success of the format inspired us to aim for a follow-up conference, which took place at the *Berlin Institute for Public Theology* in April 2021 in collaboration with the *Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft*. Due to pandemic conditions, this second conference took place in fully virtual form, as well as with more interdisciplinary contributions after this more exclusively theological first installment.

We were excited to see how interdisciplinary perspectives and constructive collaborative work emerged in the format of this workshop. The discussions demonstrated that participants were able to relate to different contributions and weave new connections between different areas of knowledge and their discursive and disciplinary contexts. What we had hoped for, emerged: innovative perspectives, lively discussion, collaborative and constructive explorations to open ends. We are deeply grateful to the participants for their boldness and openness to participate in this theological experiment, and in the generosity of our hosts and sponsors to facilitate this space. We hope that more discussion can be generated through the collection of all contributions into this journal volume, and that others might be inspired to similar collaborative explorations in their own fields.