

Digital Theology: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Digital theology is the use of digital technologies to communicate, mediate, or teach theology. It is a discipline situated within the field of practical theology. It essentially explores the mutual relationship between theology and digital technologies. The digitalization of religion transforms the way we practice, experience, worship, and reshape our faiths. Our beliefs are products of the technology and information to which we have access. The media (or channels) we choose to communicate a message alters the message. Society has a role in governing and adapting technology for human use. The Church has the option to change the way it does “media.” It has been claimed that the media are today the most credible sources of social and cultural information. This paper provides an overview on the relationship and challenges of digital technology on church and faith.

KEYWORDS: *technology, digitalization, digital technology, digital theology, digital religion, online religion*

INTRODUCTION

The digital age or information age, with its prolific use of the Internet and social media, has created many changes in human society—from the way we work, relate, and worship around the world. Internet also provides the means to search for God in ways different from the traditional channels. With about half of the world's population having access to the Internet, this technology is also changing the way we maintain religious and spiritual life. The digital age calls for theological reflections that may lead to a new brand of theology called digital theology or cybertheology [1].

Religion is recognized as a social-cultural system of designated behaviors, practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, ethics, and other elements that relate to supernatural, spiritual, and sacred. Theology takes God and His relationship to human beings as its subject matters. Studying theology seems to be an act of intellectual humility. The humility comes from theology's assumption to know the transcendent God. The digitalization of religion transforms the way we practice our faith and worship. In a healthy society,

religion plays an important role. Religious practices are embedded in people's everyday lives. Individuals can choose to ignore mediating authorities as they can directly access online content on their own. Digital theology shares many elements with online religion. Like online religion, digital theology refers to religious participation occurring online, as shown in Figure 1 [2]. The last few decades has witnessed a rapid transformation in the study of religion. Although digital theology has roots in traditional religions, it has developed independently.

Technological innovations are causing social changes across many aspects of life in the twenty-first century. Digital technology is a major cultural force which has significant bearings on human societies. It changes the way that theology is taught and disseminated. It dictates where theological communications can take place and who can participate in them. Whether we like or not, digital technology is ubiquitous and is becoming part of our everyday life. The Christian church is changing through its engagement with social media and its use of digital technology in

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worship, in pastoral practice, and in evangelism. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled many churches to run services online, from zoom services to online communion, with the implications of digitizing church services. Three major transformations related to the global COVID-19 pandemic have been observed. The first is the move of worship into the online environment. The second transformation is that seminaries and divinity schools have been moving in the direction of online learning like other higher institutions of learning. The third transformation is that the pandemic has made people more aware of the inequities and the injustices that plague our society [3].

WHAT IS DIGITAL THEOLOGY?

Theology is the critical study of the nature of God and His interaction with the mankind. Christian theology cannot fail to consider the effects of digital technology on human lives, particularly one's relationship with God and with others. There are a number of terms being used to reflect the nature of theology in the digital age. These terms include "digital theology," "theology in a digital age," "cybertheology," and "theology of the Internet." Pope Benedict stated that this form of spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship" [4].

Digital theology is an emerging field that is gaining traction with scholars of computer science, theology, sociology, and religion. It deals with the reality that the church has to cope with the emerging pervasive digital culture. This demands new theological communications and new approaches. Digital theology should not be confused with digital religion, which is concerned with how religion is shaped by and is present in digital culture and media. Digital religion is more focused on the phenomena of religion in digital culture, while digital theology is the critical study of the nature of God and His interaction with the world [5]. Digital theology is mainly viewed as a spin-off to digital humanities and in parallel to digital religion.

Digital theology can be regarded as having four levels or waves as shown in Figure 2 and explained as follows [3]:

➤ *Digital Level 1:* This is the use of digital technology to communicate or teach theology as a traditional academic subject. The move toward more online learning is represented by this level, where our traditional theological subjects are taught in the digital environment.

➤ *Digital Level 2:* This is theological research enabled by digitalization or digital culture, in which the discipline of theology itself is transformed using digital technologies. All the contributors continue to engage in research and writing, whether at homes or on campus.

➤ *Digital Level 3:* This is a sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality and digital culture. The increase in online worship opportunities connects with this level.

➤ *Digital Level 4:* This is a prophetic re-appraisal of digitality in the light of theological ethics, providing commentary, and critique of the ubiquity of technology. Black Lives Matter and other movements that use digital means to bring about social change reside at this level.

APPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL THEOLOGY

Digital theology is a rich system of theological concepts inspired by computers. It is a distinctive religious system that competes with other religions. Increasingly, individuals, churches, and religious actors are encountering religion through various forms of digital media. The following are typical areas where digital theology is used.

➤ *Spiritual Revolution:* Digital technology is being used by theologians when they use their laptops or desktops, when they communicate through websites, and when they use new tools for biblical interpretation [6]. Digital religion also provides the theologians with helpful tools for self reflection on the use of digital and media culture. Digital religion is leading to a "spiritual revolution" among many youths. More and more people are turning towards digital media for spirituality such as chat groups with pastors, online sermons, and interaction through Facebook.

➤ *Spirituality:* In the digital age, spirituality is a puzzling phenomenon. Our current spirituality is deeply embedded in the socio-economic condition of our society. Religion circulates through social media, news, radio, television, film, journalism, and other entertainment media. To understand religion today, we must understand how religious ideas and practices are communicated, learned, represented, and embraced or resisted through media. We need to understand the theological implications of the Internet, particularly in regards to human relationships with God and with one another [7].

➤ *Digital Religion:* Digital religion spaces engage with people in their congregations. Some use

technology to hold Bible studies, worship services, and a Christian dating tool. The most common types of online religious activities include religious information online, online worship in cyberchurches, online worship/rituals (such as e-prayer and virtual pilgrimages), online missionary activities, and religious online communities. Digital religion deals with the influence religion and new media have upon one another. Religion, though transcendental, has now also become digital. It is changed by this spread and appropriation of religion through digital media [8].

- *Political Theology*: This complements digital theology. To state the obvious, power is a central notion in the Christian doctrine of God. It is equally eminent in the political sphere. Digital theology needs to address both the administration of power by market and media and the technologies that form the background mechanisms for such functioning of power. Along with the expansion of the realm of political theology into the digital, we can discern an expansion of theological loci that inform the digital imaginary. Digital theology is not neutral with regard to the objects it studies. As previous versions of political theology, digital theology participates in a politics of ideas [9].

BENEFITS

Religion has been transformed by digital technology. Technology should be regarded as a wonderful gift from God. We are blessed to live in the digital age and benefit so much from digital technology in our daily lives. How many lives have been saved by cell phones? How many separated families have been kept together by Zoom, Skype, teleconference, and Face Time? How many sermons and messages have been spread around the world using social media? [10].

CHALLENGES

The Internet provides new challenges in method and in preserving the integrity of ethical practices in research.

There are still some people who are still trying the “no technology” approach. They claim that the dangers are too great; the consequences are too awful. They would not buy it, and they will ban our children from using it. Therefore, they tend to keep separate from the world by rejecting technology. This approach is not realistic and it seems impossible. They need to understand that digital technology is pervasive and looking ways to avoid is like avoid breathing.

Some view technology as a terror and give the impression that it is all “of the devil.” The devil does not create and invent technology. He abuses it and perverts it into sinful uses. The more we remind ourselves of God’s omnipresence and omniscience, the more we will seek to use technology to please God and not provoke His wrath. God is pleased to see truth instead of falsehood on Facebook. As a Judge, God will one day call us to account how we spend our time online [10].

Some critics have regarded digital theology as having a poor understanding of technology and digital culture. Conversations about religion, technology, and ethics always invoke differences in views across fields of scholarship. As a social movement, digital theology is poorly organized and highly fragmented. It is now challenging to separate online and offline spaces and activities; this is also true of digital religion as online and offline religious spaces.

CONCLUSION

Digital religion is concerned with how current dynamics of digitalization influence, shape, and transform the religious practices. It is a burgeoning field. It involves reflecting on the digitalization of society and its implications for Christian faith and practice in individuals and institutions. As more religious practices are taking place in online environments, the possibilities for researchers to discover insights are increased. Today, digital religion as online and offline religious spaces become blurred.

Several contemporary phenomena indicate the interest in digital theology worldwide. If you want to know more on how digital theology is impacting the Church, there are a number of courses you can choose from. A lot of theological seminaries and universities are now offering graduate courses and degrees in digital theology. They prepare men and women for ministry and mission in a digital age. They offer a unique opportunity for theological reflection on digitalization of society and its implications for the contemporary Christian faith and practice [12]. More information on digital theology can be found in the books in [13-20] and the following related journals:

- Religion
- Religions
- Religion Digital
- Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture
- Review of Religious Research
- Journal of the American Academy of Religion.

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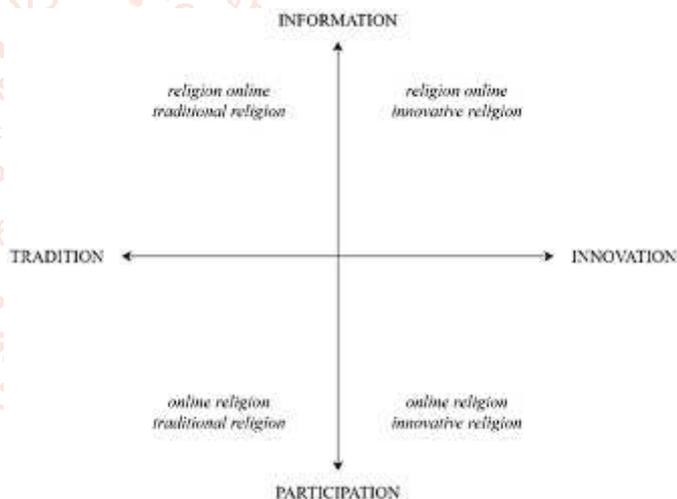


Figure 1 Visualizing the frame for mapping digital religion [2].

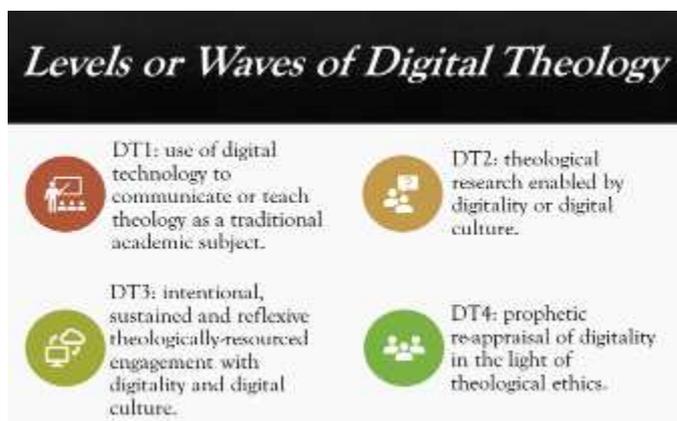


Figure 2 Digital theology viewed as having four levels or waves [3].