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Doing Theology Digitally



Nomos

Technik und Religion | Technology and Religion

herausgegeben von | edited by

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Band | Volume 1

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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

1st Edition 2026

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Published by

Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden
www.nomos.de

Production of the printed version:

Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden

ISBN 978-3-7560-0894-0 (Print)

ISBN 978-3-7489-1641-3 (ePDF)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748916413>



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Preface

Theology is becoming increasingly digital, mirroring broader transformations across the humanities. The rise of the Digital Humanities exemplifies how scholarly inquiry is reshaped when methods, sources, and epistemic frameworks shift into digital environments. Theology does not stand apart from these developments; rather, it remains in conversation with them. It is within this interdisciplinary exchange that the field commonly referred to as *Digital Theology* has emerged.

Digital Theology is not a static discipline but a dynamic, evolving field of inquiry. It encompasses both the theological analysis of digital culture—a *theology of the digital*—and the use of digital tools, platforms, and data in theological research and religious practice—a *theology with and within the digital*. Current work in the field includes the critical adoption of digital methods, the examination of how digital cultures reconfigure religious authority, belonging, and ritual, the identification of digital trends in religious life, and the development of new interdisciplinary methodologies and digital epistemologies.

Although theology is a scholarly discipline, it remains closely connected to the life of the church and its congregations. The COVID-19 pandemic made this particularly visible: congregations that previously had no digital presence often underwent an accelerated digital transformation, as digital meetings were, for a time, the only means of maintaining parish life. Even where digital activities have since been reduced, there has been no return to a pre-pandemic status quo. Digital engagement has become a persistent dimension of ecclesial life, and for many individuals, the first encounter with a congregation now occurs online.

The Protestant Church in the Rhineland, like many churches in Europe, is currently engaged in a broader reform process that includes a commitment to becoming more digital. Digital communication plays a crucial role in engaging members whose connection to congregational life is only peripheral. Understanding the member journey—from birth and baptism through different phases of life—can help congregations design digital touchpoints that are not merely transactional but support meaningful ecclesial belonging across a lifetime. Digital tools can also assist with planning, administration, and communication, thereby freeing resources

for preaching, pastoral ministry, and pastoral care. At the same time, new questions emerge: How might congregations employ artificial intelligence responsibly? What ethical and theological frameworks should guide such use? And where might a deliberate refusal of AI be theologically warranted?

Wherever ecclesial practice changes, theological reflection must accompany it. The scientific study of digital ecclesial practices is essential for responsible leadership and governance within the church. Digital Theology offers a necessary academic framework for such reflection by drawing upon ecclesiology, ethics, practical theology, media studies, and the sociology of religion.

Theology must respond to contemporary social realities. Our societies are undergoing rapid digital transformation—consider only the developments in artificial intelligence in the past three years since ChatGPT became available to the public. These shifts require theological engagement not merely at the level of application but also at the levels of hermeneutics, anthropology, and epistemology: How is knowledge mediated? How is community constituted? What forms of embodiment and presence are possible in digital spaces? Theology can and should contribute to these questions, but such work necessarily occurs in dialogue with other academic disciplines.

Digital environments bring religious actors, traditions, and discourses into contact beyond institutional boundaries, often through algorithmic patterns of visibility. This creates opportunities for interreligious encounter as well as new forms of contestation—such as influencer-based forms of religious authority and competing digital truth claims. For this reason, Christian theology must participate in academic and interreligious dialogue rather than retreat into internal discourse. It is therefore especially significant that this volume includes Islamic perspectives that contribute to this shared scholarly conversation.

Although *Digital Theology* has become an established term, the title of this volume goes further. *Doing Theology Digitally* emphasizes the processual and performative character of theology: theology occurs in its enactment—in research, ministry, interpretation, discourse, and communal life—and today this enactment increasingly unfolds within digitally mediated contexts.

The contributions in this book originate from two international workshops held at RWTH Aachen University and the University of Cologne, both located within the region of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland.

For this reason, we were pleased to support the publication with a grant towards publishing costs.

My sincere thanks go to the contributors to this volume for their scholarly engagement and for advancing this emerging discourse. It is my hope that this book will make a meaningful contribution to the further development of Digital Theology and inspire continued interdisciplinary research and responsible practice in digital contexts.

Dr. Thorsten Latzel

Praeses of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland

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