Introduction

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"Doing Theology" was a new approach to religious scholars in the academic field at the advent of liberation theology. EATWOT, the *Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* has developed a theology rooted in their own socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts**,** rather than relying solely on academic theological categories. Liberation theology had the will to answer relevant questions, and in the past these questions were really addressed by the society to theologians. But academic theology–especially from Western or classical traditions–has voiced several criticisms of this Doing Theology approach, though often these critiques reflect broader tensions between contextual studies and a systematic theological understanding.

Today Doing Theology is not a task which comes to us from another part of the world, rather than a practical approach which is imposed on theology by other cultures of knowledge. For a long, very long time, perhaps for a too long period, theology has resisted being relevant in a practical sense. Today, however, after it opened up to cybernetics in the 1970s, later to the nuclear and genetic engineering debate and finally to the broad field of technological developments as a whole, the situation is completely different. While theology in the western world was still being asked what it could achieve until the beginning of the 21st century, today this question remains mostly unasked. Instead, theology now has to do both: it has to extract the questions it wants to answer from the living world itself and it has to find answers.

As the living world is no longer an analogue one, Doing Theology cannot be an analogue issue. Doing Theology must become a task to be fulfilled in the digital. But here, the same questions arise as in the criticism of doing liberation theology: Isn't the digital sphere too politicized for theology? Digital Theology is often seen as more political and economical than theological, as the methods are purely bound to international players such as tech companies and the well know Chinese or American stakeholders. Prioritizing liberation, anti-colonialism, and economic justice might therefore not be a contradiction to doctrinal reflection or metaphysical coherence, but rather to the practical world we live in. However, the question is right.

But *theology is always political and economical, too.* Traditional theology just masks its alignment with other forms of power.

The second critcism, whether Doing Theology reinterprets core Christian doctrines (e.g., Christology, soteriology) in ways that depart from classical creeds, needs also our attention. Here, we need to understand that doctrines are an outcome of practical questions. Doctrines describe the diverse premises of the belief systems under which the various social groups operate. In normative terms, Doing Theology follows the condition of not being neutral, but of demanding neutrality with regard to lifestyles and beliefs in the development, application and regulation of cultural systems. This is particularly important in the area of digitalization, as the question here is: "How can we counteract culturally generated polarizations?"

Divergent assertions of meaning are specific forms of commentary on modernization processes and thus on risks as their side effects. Doing Theology Digitally is an offer to understands the study of religion in the context of solving digital problems. Only in this way can we succeed in opening up local situations on a global scale without idealizing or culturalizing them. This is particularly necessary in view of the increasing polarization in the digital debate. "Denominational groups" have already formed that are more hostile to each other than mutually appreciative and open. Such a confrontational situation has tangible consequences that need to be broken through by communicating denominational dynamics, for example in relation to the specifics of human intelligence.

Today, Artificial Intelligence has long been an integral part of our everyday lives. How do we deal with the inherent laws of AI and its inherent compulsion to use it? Who makes the more relevant assessment–the machine or us? Humans solve questions with intuition, instinct and experience. AI, on the other hand, evaluates biometric data. Do we trust the data more than our own perception?

Doing Theology Digitally is not a technological advance – it is like a revolution of an ancient culture, comparable to settling down or industrialization. Due to the significance of the topic, we must reinvent our understanding of things such as group intelligence, individual intelligence or social movement in order to approach the anthropologically central questions.

However, by emphasizing local cultural and social conditions, we risk fragmenting theology into disconnected local theologies without a unifying framework. The fear that theology loses its universal claims and becomes anthropology or sociology, comes to our mind. But methodologically, if academic theologians (especially in analytic or systematic traditions) argue

that the digital lacks rigorous method or philosophical depth, then they have just a new task. Doing Theology Digitally challenges our academic discipline by emphasizing local cultures and experiences in the digital, political and social liberation through the digital, and describing God for the digital (natives).

In this volume, we refer to the active and engaged process of exploring, interpreting, and articulating the meaning of religious beliefs for the digital world, especially within the specific faith traditions of Christianity and Islam as well as secular religious politics. This involves engaging with sacred texts, doctrines, traditions, lived experiences, and community practices, with the goal of understanding and expressing what it means to relate to the divine.

Doing Theology is like playing music in a tradition you love and live in; Doing Theology Digitally is like studying music with affection, maybe with curiosity even if this music is purely artificial. One thing will remain our human task: Sense-making in the digital.

This volume has 2 parts: (A) Digitization and Theology: Surveying the Field, and (B) Digital Practice: Entering the Field. In the first part we concentrate on fundamental issues which point to the transition from the analogue to the digital world.

The mathematician *Carina Geldhauser* together with *Hermann Diebel-Fischer* and *Martin Kutz* asks whether the Process of Quantifying Life Behavior changes our understanding of sovereignty of description and sovereignty of interpretation. While reflecting on the Role of Theology in these processes, her answer is optimistic: In future, the fundamental questions of theology will be posed in other contexts, and our search for answers will also change. But it is precisely this interdisciplinary expectation that ensures that theology needs to continue in dealing with the fundamental questions of life.

Frank Schwabe, Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief until 2025, gives a report about the international initiative in Germany to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in the digital sphere and in the field of AI. This endeavor is practically underpinned by current initiatives of the German government. The digital is marked as a contested and politicized space shaped by corporate interests, governmental regulation, and algorithmic power. Schwabe frames the digital as a double-edged sword: a vital space for religious expression and interfaith dialogue, but also a domain vulnerable to hate speech, disinformation, and surveillance. His alarm is particularly directed at the deregulation of content moderation by tech giants. He proposes a human-rights-based

approach to digital governance, advocating for international cooperation, regulatory frameworks, and ethical design.

Ramazan Özgü follows this way when describing new forms of regulation of the digital space by the EU. Especially interesting is the role of religions as co-designers of these processes. Özgü examines the legal and political implications of EU-level digital regulation for religious institutions, particularly Christian churches. The author argues that the digital space is not simply a platform but a normative environment where power is exercised through regulation. Thus, digitalization is a regulatory and political process that challenges existing institutional arrangements and requires proactive engagement from churches. Churches, as both subjects and shapers of these transformations, must assert their voice in shaping the ethical and legal contours of digital governance. Thus, digital space becomes not only a technical domain but a critical site of negotiation for institutional identity and societal influence.

Ryan Haecker illustrates in his profound study how cybernetics points beyond its secular origins to an older and higher theological ground that has been explored by the Jesuits. Secular cybernetics, whether among the heirs of Norbert Wiener or Martin Heidegger, fails to answer the question of who is the controlling agent of cybernetics. In Gilbert Simondon, technics is recalled as primordially concurrent with the production of all individuals, in Bernard Stiegler, this originary technicity is held to be the more essential supplement, and in Yuk Hui, this occidental narrative of technics is released into a plurality of cosmotechnical visions. Erich Przywara's new system of analogical metaphysics, along with Henri de Lubac's deconstruction of pure nature, is more radically naturalized and historicized in Teilhard de Chardin's vision of cosmic evolution converging upon the Omega-Point of Christogenesis. From this eternal end, Christ is upheld as the centre around which all technics revolve, the function of recursion is an objectified reflection, and the reflectivity of human thought is a dark mirror around which spirals the hyper-luminous circuits of the angelic choirs. 'Jesuit Cybernetics' recalls, from the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, how cybernetic recursion is but an objectified form of human reflection, is angelically mediated by the essential proportions of the analogy of being, and is radically centered on the divine reflection of the Son upon the Father in the Holy Trinity.

The second part starts with *Mohammad Gharaibeh et al.*, who provide a very appropriately profiled insight to the relation between Islam and

Digitality. They focus on media and its hermeneutics, not forgetting the technical coining of both.

Christian Sterzik and *Ralf Peter Reimann* introduce us to a very exciting data analysis and the practice of data management in the Protestant church. They advocate for data-informed decision-making while also recognizing the theological and ethical boundaries of quantifying Church life.

Benedict Totsche does the similar with respect to church history and biblical data by using MAXQDA. He advocates for data-informed decision-making while also recognizing the theological and ethical boundaries of quantifying religious life. Totsche argues that while digital tools can uncover new patterns in historical sources, they must be used critically and contextually. The "digital" here refers to methodological enhancement through computational analysis, not a paradigmatic shift in theology itself. Totsche is cautious: he warns against unreflective enthusiasm and stresses that digital tools are aids, not replacements for traditional scholarly judgment. He sees value in using digital methods to manage large volumes of data and codify qualitative information but emphasizes that these techniques can also introduce distortions if not rigorously applied. Doing Digital Theology must therefore be grounded in methodological clarity, and distant reading should be understood as a complement–not an alternative–to close reading.

Ralf Peter Reimann, co-editor of this volume, describes the AI-XR Martin Luther avatar and explains how how this experiment is being used in the proclamation of the gospel. This showcase for digital theology as a lived experience makes the digital not just a medium of communication, rather than a space of theological experimentation. The avatar acts as a theological interlocutor, embodying Luther's persona in a way that invites users to engage with the Reformer's ideas in immersive, dialogical ways. Drawing on Christopher Helland's distinction between "religion online" and "online religion", Reimann argues that the digital space itself becomes a site of religious practice. In this view, digitality expands the boundaries of the sacred by enabling new forms of embodiment, presence, and participation. It is not merely representational but constitutive of new theological encounters. The avatar becomes a theological tool, prompting questions about authenticity, tradition, and contemporary relevance. Doing Theology here is experiential, performative, and theological as it redefines how faith is mediated, experienced, and co-constructed in virtual environments.

The Yale librarian *Clifford B. Anderson* gives an example for the widely spread biases which we find in the digital word. For Anderson, the "digital"

is not just a repository of data but a social epistemological environment shaped by the practices of its contributors. He emphasizes the concept of "relational epistemology," where knowledge creation is situated within communal, ethical, and theological responsibilities. The digital here is both opportunity and battleground: it offers platforms for democratizing religious knowledge but also reproduces existing inequalities unless actively challenged. He critiques the fallacy of treating digital platforms like Wikipedia as monolithic authorities, underscoring the human, relational, and often biased processes behind them. Ultimately, Anderson frames digitality as an ethical frontier in theological scholarship, requiring careful consideration of inclusion, narrative framing, and representation. His theological engagement with the digital emphasizes the need for critical literacy and collaborative activism to make the digital sphere more equitable, especially for underrepresented.

Finally, *Marie Meyer* shows, how Religious Education can point to Narratives of Self-Construction in the Context of Digitality among young people. She explores the intersection of digitality and identity construction among youth. Drawing on sociological and psychological theories, she refers not merely to technological tools but to a cultural and pedagogical phenomenon. The digital is a space where self-representation, feedback loops, and visual communication shape identity formation. She uses Armin Nassehi's and Felix Stalder's theories to frame digitality as a structure of modern society, where technologies make visible and accelerate social patterns. The "digital" is thus a mode of existence, influencing not just communication but perception and epistemology. Meyer advocates for a religious pedagogy that critically engages with these processes. She proposes that educators must help students cultivate "media competence", not just technical skills, but critical understanding, ethical reflection, and creative expression. This includes awareness of phenomena like performative authenticity, the influence of influencers, and the emotional dynamics of online interaction. Digitality, in her analysis, reshapes the theological and pedagogical task of guiding youth through identity questions, making it imperative for religious education to adapt both its tools and conceptual foundations.

The shift of Doing Theology Digitally has implications for how the transcendent is understood. Digitization is an anthropological movement advocating the enhancement of human capacities through technology. While its emergence challenges the traditional boundaries between nature, culture, and spirituality, it is also often framed as a scientific endeavor. But nevertheless, it is also a characteristic that resembles religious movements,

from the visions of technological singularity to ritualistic practices like bio-hacking or self-enhancement. This volume explores how the practice of digitization apart from ideologies is reshaping contemporary theologies as well as religious practices. It interrogates the entanglements between technological *utopianism* and the enduring human quest for transcendence.

We cannot understand the Digital Age without mentioning AI, bioengineering, genetics and neurotechnologies. These endeavors have created narratives that permeate in our global discourses, raising profound questions about the freedom of religion or belief, spiritual identity, and meaning-making. Where Christianity and Islam locate transcendence in metaphysical realms, the digital posits that it can be engineered–whether through mind uploading, AI integration, or radical life extension. This shift blurs the immanent/transcendent divide, giving rise to hybrid "techno-spiritualities". The sacred and secular sphere together reimagine divinity in the form of data. In this way salvation is being redefined as scalability, the soul as a software and the creative spirit as data mining. So the urgency of the topic lies in the potential of the digital to redefine religiosity itself, as algorithmic governance and augmented consciousness.

Despite growing interest in the ethical and scientific implications, the religious dimensions of the digital remain underestimated. However, scholarly debates often polarize. While proponents frame it as post-theistic enlightenment, this volume bridges that divide by treating the digital as a living belief system within and outside religion itself. All authors employ anthropological methods to map how adherents navigate the promises and paradoxes of the digital. The relationship to existing religions is therefore dialectical. Some papers reject spirituality outright, while others consciously appropriate theological tropes. Conversely, religious groups increasingly engage with digital technologies, from Christian theology advocating a tech-assisted grace to East-Asian biohackers exploring meditation-enhancing implants. These entanglements reveal an interreligious dynamic. The digital may propose a moral and also religious universalism, but at the end every single context needs to reinterpret it through its local cultural and ethical lenses. In this perspective, our volume shall be understood as one contribution to this glocalisation of the digital, which may accompany us throughout the next century.

Our trust- and belief-based practices reframe the transcendent as more accessible, networked, and participatory. It emphasizes relationality and presence in virtual spaces, challenging traditional notions of divine distance or mystery. While digital tools can democratize access to theological voices

and experiences of the sacred, they may also risk reducing transcendence to something overly familiar, curated, or commodified. The transcendent is thus reimagined as both immanent in digital engagement and elusive beyond algorithms. In this way the theological task changes and remains the same. The whole volume is an outcome of two international workshops which took place at RWTH Aachen University (September 28 to October 1, 2021) and the University of Cologne (September 27 to 28, 2023). The article of Frank Schwabe is based on the 2024 International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Berlin. Language, citation and layout in this volume fulfill the requirements of the bilingualism used. The authors of the respective papers are responsible for the use of gender-specific language or other deviations from the usual use of language. The editors are thankful to all contributors for their originality and patience throughout the publication process. A special acknowledgment is also extended to Yentl Wolff, student assistant at the Institute of Protestant Theology at the University of Bamberg, for the valuable assistance provided in proofreading the volume.

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