Doing Theology in Digital Society

Towards a Digital, Networked Theology

Heidi A. Campbell[1]

[1]Professor and Presidential Impact Fellow Texas A&M University College Station, USA

heidic@tamu.edu

Abstract. In this short essay I seek to address what doing theology in a digital society could and should look like, and what unique conditions of living in a society that is wrapped in digital technology needs to be considered within theological discourse. I approach this by suggesting an approach that I describe as "digital networked theology" and use this space to raise issues of what individuals in Christian and religious education, as well as theologians, need to keep in mind when moving into this new area of reflection.

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1   Introduction: What is Digital Society?

What is this digital society that we are evolving into? The digital society can be explained by recognizing we live in a world where digital technologies and structures are all around us, shaping our patterns and behaviors in our everyday lives. We cannot escape the impact of the digital in the world we live in, even if we choose to ignore or reject the use of these technologies. We especially see that digital media are shaping our contemporary social relationships, how we connect with one another, and how we see one another, both in religious and educational contexts. As our contemporary social relationships and practices are being influenced by the shape of this new digital media, they begin to reflect conditions of living in a digital, networked society.

The term 'network society' is used in sociological research to talk about how we have become a world wrapped in technology, and built upon a distinct social technician infrastructure that support it. Increasingly our interactions are facilitated through the computer and social media. The result is that our social connections are increasingly mediated, decentralize and yet still interconnected [1]. What this means is that when we communicate to people through technology, we see a re-connecting and a loosening of our communication practices. The mediation of this screen can also lead a depersonalization of this interactions, distancing us from one another. As this happens it becomes easier to challenge a traditional values and practices, as we import them into digital spaces. Individuals no longer have to go to a religious educator to find information about faith, they can simply Google their spiritual questions online. Individuals then have the choice about whether or not they will to listen to the advice of religious leaders, or abide by the guidelines they give. Instead internet users can go to 'Pastor Google' and search out their advice on religious topics or the answers they

prefer. We can see how this bypassing of traditional gatekeepers creates a new opportunity for people to engage in their faith, while also setting new challenges for traditional religious institutions and communities.

2   What is Theology in a Digital Society?

What happens to theology in such digital spaces and in a digital society? The idea of what constitutes digital theology is an area that is still being worked on and developed. Digital theology has been referred to as a new sub-discipline of theological studies. It is an interdisciplinary conversation bringing together people from sociology or religion, theology, and media studies, to look at the multiple was theological discourse might be shaped, informed, and stretched because of the digital space people now live in on a regular basis.

One aspect of this approach is looking at the extent to which previous discussion within Christian ethics apply to our technology use, especially the technologies that have become part of our daily routines and life, like smart phones that have become an extra appendage in many respects. Digital theology is also about taking an anthropological approach, considering how previous theological discussion of the Creator and creation relate to what it means to live in a world where our media have become an extension of ourselves. It questions how we understand humanity when we are more and more integrated with technology, whether that be nanotechnologies and regenerative medicine, or wearable computing that comes into our clothing and we carry with us on a regular basis.

Digital theology is also about the study of God in and for digital culture, considering how our understanding of God should inform our beliefs about and relationship to new technologies. This requires bringing not only our knowledge of, but relationship with Christ into that space, and asking what he would say about the culture and how should interact with others within it.

3   What is Theology in a Digital Society?

In our book Network Theology [2] Stephen Garner and I try to unpack this idea that we live in a technological age, that functions as a network of social relationship mediated by technology. We are called to recognize and understand how this network society works, and the cultural context it created. I define the idea of network theology-- which is I see as one approach to digital theology-- as theology being in dialogue with technology and media culture seeking to understand it and then culture it in line with our faith calling. Network theology overs a framework for personal and communal reflection on how faith can be understood and ethically practiced in out digital culture. By bringing together a theologian who works in computing, and myself --a media scholar who studied theolog-- this book seeks to facilitate a vital conversation, asking how can we be faithful in using our technology and also how can we use it in our relationships to benefit one another and the body of Christ. At its heart it is about theology being in dialogue and understanding with this new manifestation of culture,

but not being consumed or driven by the culture. This means we faithfully use technology in a relationship to our Christian beliefs, without bending to the will and goals of technology alone.

In summary, we approach Networked Theology as theology that must be included in dialogue with technology and media culture, this offers us a framework for personal and communal reflection on how faith can be understood and ethically practiced in a digital culture.

4   Where is my Neighbor in the Network?

In Network Theology [3], Garner and myself look at many different themes. One of the most prevalent themes surrounds the questions of who is my neighbor in a digital age, and where is my neighbor in a digital age? This gets to the heart of the integration of the digital society and the relationships of traditional community and communion.

We can look at neighborhoods as places where we live and locate ourselves in the world. These are places where we encounter God in our interactions with friends and family and experience a community of faith. It can be a place where we find a community that we can call our own, which gives us identity and accountability. We argue that digital environments can also be seen as neighborhoods in a new way. Digital environments can also become neighborhoods, where we find a sense of identity, encounter God, find communal reflection through various digital platforms, though technologically mediated space they can still developed or cultured so they become a place where we can manifest care and love for one another.

The digital neighborhoods in which people can meet are vast and divers. They can include online landscapes, anywhere from Facebook and WhatsApp to Twitter or Tik Tock. They provide a space where we can create and visualize our religious identities. This is because digital platforms present us with options to select and present our identity through the images, names and links we associate ourselves with. This means we are given a unique opportunity each time we join a digital platform or community. It is a choice about how and to what extent we will perform and act out our Christian faith, as well as affirm who we are and what we want to stand for. Seeing digital neighborhoods digital environments as places where we can reflect our faith, encounters God and find others committed to faithful communal reflection, provides a completely different understanding of the purpose and opportunities offered by the digital. Instead of just disconnecting us from our faith and Christian community, it can be seen as new gathering space where we can be connected to people we might otherwise be separated from, by time or distance.

5   Lessons from Digital Ecclesiology

We also must recognize that we are living in interesting historical moment. We are slowly, but surely coming out of the global COVID-19 pandemic, in which there has been a huge opportunity for the Church to be both challenged by technology as well

as learn from it. In a collection of essays, I put together during the pandemic called Digital Ecclesiology [4] I called on theologians and religious educators from all over the world to reflect on how the Church should respond to this moment. I asked them, what would you say to the church and to people leading churches that are trying to navigate this challenging moment in history. The past few years have been characterized by struggles, learning how to use new communication technologies to bring religious worship services online. At the same time leaders has to learn how to understand this new environment, many had ignored or rejected because they assumed it to be too aggressive towards faith, or anti-Christian in some aspects.

Some of the themes and findings that came out of this book is that churches need to consider the long-term implications of adopting digital practices, and how this may shape the future of the church. For many churches, creating online worship opportunities has not just been a one-time 'experiment' in going online. Many actually found a new way to reach and ability to connect with people over time and space. Churches were able to reconnect with past members or attendees, as well as new people who had not been able to participate in their community before. This forced digital experiment should be seen as a long-term investment in technology, and consider how digital tools can be used to further the gospel and shape the church moving forward.

In Digital Ecclesiology [5], many writers also looked at the idea of this experience of moving church online as a way to provide a rich space for reflection on who the body of Christ is called to be and what the role of the church is. The experience of moving services online provides ground for rethinking practical and theological aspects of the churches' worship and mission. We need to consider what can be learned from these experiences of challenge provided by digital technology. Some of the new practices may challenge traditional models of ecclesiology (or understanding of the church and theology). Leaders need to take time and consider to what extent does their liturgical and ecclesiological practices need to adapt to the digital culture and hybrid worship, or consider in what ways might they offer a chance to reflection in accepted traditions and practice in church spaces.

6   What is Digital, Networked Theory?

In light of these reflections, what is a digital networked theology? I believe it involves reflecting on the digitization of culture, not just digital technologies, but how processes of digitization create new ways of thinking. For example, it focuses our attention on consider how technological practices, such as hyperlinks, change our patterns of thinking and behavior. Our attention is drawn not to just one static page, but the process of a journey. We need to ask how these aspects processes of digitization and technology create new ways of learning, knowing, being, and practice.

Digital networked theology also asks us to reflects on the embeddedness of technologies in our everyday lives. Technologies are not going away. In fact, they are becoming more and more integrated into our environments, including how we do our shopping, how our government functions, how education works, and how our churches are run. We need to consider the ways the technologies that surround us and influ-

ence our lives. This can require us to shape our technologies in line with our religious and scriptural values. Thus, we also need to look at the implications of this change for Christian faith and practices.

Change is not something churches should be afraid of, in each and every period of history the Christian church has had to discern the times they were living in, and adapt some aspects of their message and practice to it. On this note, there are many implications in the way that technologies lead us or encourage us to look at other through the screen and how to interact with others. Some of those practices and new ways of interacting are actually very coherent and in line with scripture and Christian faith and practices. Whereas others may actually encourage behaviors that are problematic. For example, some patterns of use and practice of digital media actually place too much emphasis on choice and the preferences of the individual, and less on the responsibilities of the community of faith, which conflicts with much Christian teaching.

7   Thoughts on Moving Towards a Digital, Networked Theology?

As we educators think about moving towards teaching about theology and Christian principles in this network society, we need to ask ourselves two foundational questions: What should this area of digital network theology look like, and what should the main conversation points be?

Firstly, this digital "networked" theology should needs to recognize the role of technology in our current society, and its online and offline emerging intersections and trends. The church and religious educators can no longer see online spaces or online teaching environments as 'the other', and that the preferred context for theological engagement is offline. We live in an increasingly global and networked world, and the continued rise of new political, social and health situations and issues mean we will continually be called engage with aspects of the digital. Christian education and ministry must transition from being only based in traditional, offline spaces, to consider the possibilities offered by partnered engagement in mediated and online contexts. We need to look at how those online and offline spaces of interaction and work can be seen as interconnected, rather than opposing towards one another. We need to see digital and embodied spaces as being linked and integrated, rather than being opposed or resistant to one another.

This digital networked theology that I am pointing to also needs to look at what humans are and are becoming because of our technology. Some people describe this as a post-human condition and predict that we, at some point, may become something more than human as we integrate, embrace, and bring technologies into our bodies and lifestyles. We need educators that understand this relationship; how it is forming, how it is evolving and where do we speak truth and Christ in those situations.

Finally, digital networked theology needs to be grounded in a contextual theological approach. For example, the conversations I have in the USA and where I live in Texas about digital theology may be very different those you have in Indonesia or

where you find your classroom because of the cultural concerns and patterns of technology engagement fond there. That being said, we all need to understand the culture we live in is infused with digital traits and technologies, so we all need to bring this recognition into our theological conversations. We need to identify and proclaim the uniqueness that our cultures and our perspectives have to give. I believe people, especially in the West, need to be open and listen to voices of the church from around the world. Instead of being so Eurocentric, we need to look and benefit from the perspectives that come from other voices, other areas of religious education and representations of the church. This digital networked theology that is being created and called for must be one that fully sees the need for theology to be diverse collaboration and conversation. This means calling the overlooked voices from the global south to the table to share their perspective and insights; and even being will to step aside so that their insights and wisdom can be share and incorporated into this new area of theological discourse.

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