

Digital Humanities in Biblical Studies and Theology

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Embedded, not Plugged-In: Digital Humanities and Fair Participation in Systematic Theological Research

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Abstract: The article examines the disparity in use of digital humanities tools and resources among the theological disciplines, highlighting the question of why systematic theology has struggled to follow the digital turn. The author argues that issues of fairness in access and use of digital resources in knowledge production constitute an important set of concerns for systematic theologians in considering appropriate uses of the digital in their research. The article suggests that there are indeed reasons for methodological innovation in systematic theology in reaction to the digital revolution in humanities research – not, however, toward more plugged-in methods but toward methods embedded in life with the poor, underrepresented, and excluded. Three principles for a methodological “reboot” in systematic theology are given, which offer directions for further research as well as material for debate.

Keywords: Digital theology; Systematic theology; Colonizing knowledge; Theological method

Introduction: digital humanities, systematic theology and the cultivation of good knowledge

As is presently the case for many universities, departments, and faculties, the theological faculty at my university has recognized the need to address the challenges and opportunities presented to us by the dawn of the digital humanities age. And also like many other scholars in the humanities, I for my part have had to admit that I am unsure about how to do this. I would not speak for colleagues, but I can say for myself that for several years I have viewed the approaching digital cloud as casting the humanities into a dark shadow, perhaps, more apocalyptically, a dark age: In the place of material texts and embodied experiences, which take extensive time and repetition into account and are incorporated into research and learning, we are given online teaching and research platforms that offer self-paced modules and instant evaluation, both of which encourage students to itemize and compress the learning process by working ahead or waiting until the last minute. In the place of in-depth intersubjective conversation and group textual analysis in the context of which knowledge is a product of strenuous listening and synthesis, we are offered online virtual classrooms that isolate learners and individualize learning. I still worry about these things, but I also have to be honest that these trendy tails have been wagging the scientific dog since long before the digital revolution: An online quiz is no worse than a fill-in-the-blank paper exam when the subject matter is Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Nor would I hesitate to acknowledge that I and my scholarship already benefit greatly from digitalization in several ways, whether in the form of online databases or the use of search

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functions in the use of critical editions of important philosophers and theologians. Finally, whether or not the trend is necessarily or uniquely bad for the humanities in general and theology in particular, the trend toward digitalization of contemporary life has achieved such a level of comprehensiveness that to ignore it would be foolish.

I understand that I am in no way unique with respect to my slow reception of the digital turn. As Tim Hutchings, one of the most prominent new theorists of Christian receptions of the digital revolution, has written, “religion is still a marginal presence in the digital humanities.”¹ This is not a result of IT engineers and designers and digital humanities scholars not taking religion seriously. For theology, it may be due in part to a cautious and even suspicious attitude in theological assessments of the technological. The current relationship between theology and the digital humanities might be captured in a somewhat humorous way by paraphrasing and adapting the opening lines from Harry Frankfurt’s essay “On Bullshit”:

One of the most salient features of modern research is that so much of it is going digital. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we systematic theologians tend to take the situation for granted. Most systematic theologians are rather confident of their ability to recognize digital humanities and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what digital humanities is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory.²

So how might we imagine and theorize a digital turn in systematic theology? An appropriate concept of digital humanities is needed for the specific kind of work each humanities scholar wishes to undertake. The humanities are not being remade for the digital but rather the digital for the humanities, and this is true no less for systematic theology than for the humanities in general. Across the humanities disciplines today, scholars should not feel themselves required to convert or even conform the objects of their study to new trends, but rather to consider which digital tools and formats might best assist them in the investigation of their already existing research problems and try these out in the trenches.

It remains the case that systematic theology has found little use for digital humanities in its teaching and research beyond the use of e-learning platforms and electronic library resources common to many humanities disciplines. In part one of the following, I summarize aspects of the reception of digital humanities research and teaching methods in other theological disciplines. I argue that a focus on the ready ability to use existing digital technologies to create quantifiable research has led to an initial preferential association of the digital with text-based and data-based theological work. Thus far systematic theology has seen only very limited *use* for digital humanities tools in its teaching or research methods even though it has recognized significant questions the digital revolution poses for systematic theological *reflection*.

A brief second section considers the potential concentration of powers of knowledge in the hands of those with the capabilities to use digital technologies efficiently, reliably, and sustainably. Here I call attention to the importance for systematic theology of developing a just engagement with the digital.

This serves as a transition to part three, where I outline a “rebooting” of systematic theological practice, but without giving a priority to the digital *per se*. The comprehensive digital revolution of the whole of modern society – including the university – combined with the relative lack of a compelling and unique need for digital technologies on the part of systematic theologians to be able to do whatever it is we do calls into question the mutual relevance of the digital and the doctrinal. The current pragmatic pressure on scientific disciplines to show their usefulness presents those of us engaged in systematic theological research with an opportunity to re-evaluate, at a basic level what is it exactly that systematic theology does, what purposes does it serve, for whom, and how does it perform that work. While this constellation of questions cannot be fully mapped in the space of a single article, I nevertheless use them to chart a course to understand a more empirically oriented systematic theology as the study of reflected religious speech and actions organizing individual and communal life within some total conception of reality. I want to propose that the *facilitation of communication*, and thereby of self-interpretation and self-understanding,

¹ Hutchings, “Digital Humanities and the Study of Religion,” 293.

² Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 1.

become a primary horizon on which to set our sights for the use of digital humanities resources in systematic theology. And yet, from this proposal it follows that priority should be given within systematic theology to *developing participation opportunities* for those whose voices and opportunities for self-determination are limited by geopolitical exclusion. To the extent that the use of digital tools and methods can serve this end, they should be developed as enthusiastically as possible. But the priority remains for now offline, on real persons and communities and the articulation and communication of their self-understanding before the totality of reality.

1 Current receptions of digital humanities in theological work (state of the art)

The field of methods, resources, theories, and questions demarcated by the term “digital humanities,” though relatively new as far as the history of science goes, is nevertheless vast and complicated. It may be difficult to formulate a single, satisfactory definition of what the digital humanities *are*,³ but the general characterization of what the digital humanities *do* offered by Ashley Reed seems helpful enough for the purposes of the present essay: “The digital humanities integrate computer applications with humanities research, pedagogy, and dissemination. It is most helpful to think of the digital humanities, not as a field or a discipline, but as a set of loosely related methodologies and projects that stretch across fields and disciplines and even across sites of knowledge production.”⁴ That latter qualification concerning sites of knowledge production holds particular importance for the proposal outlined below. But for the moment, a quick summary of some of the intersections of digital humanities methods and theological research will be helpful, even though a rigorous theology of the digital humanities exceeds the scope of the present essay.⁵

On the one hand, there are several *uses* of the digital appearing in theological research and teaching. Over the past few years, several articles have appeared that outline some of the opportunities created by innovations in the digital humanities that are most directly relevant or promising for theological teaching and research. These resources and methods have so far focused heavily on text, including text creation, dissemination, storage and management, as well as linguistic analysis and related tools. They have correspondingly created opportunities focused in the fields of theological librarianship and biblical studies. Biblical exegesis programs like Bibleworks (no longer in business) and Accordance appeared over twenty years ago and have contributed to the creation of a whole sub-market for digitization of texts used in biblical exegesis and research on the history of Christianity. This emphasis on text is evident in Kent Gerber’s short article “Getting Involved with the Digital Humanities in Theology, Biblical Studies and Religious Studies.” Gerber lists and summarizes several available digital humanities methods as relevant for research in theology, but he focuses on engaging them as library resources.⁶ Similarly Reed’s article, cited above, on digital humanities and teaching in religion also outlines a diversity of digital tools and methods and the humanities disciplines engaging them, but nevertheless likewise focuses on digital textual archives, databases, and data or textual analysis as primary offerings of the digital humanities to the study of religion.⁷

Alongside the numerous centers for digital humanities that have been formed in recent years, the CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology at Durham University is currently the only one devoted specifically to the interface of the digital and theological. At the CODEC center, too, a primary focus seems to be given to

³ Gerber points to the more than 800 definitions for the digital humanities collected by <http://whatisdigitalhumanities.com/>. Gerber, “Getting Involved,” 6.

⁴ Reed, “Digital Humanities and the Study and Teaching of North American Religions,” 307.

⁵ Throughout this essay, the focus remains on the intersection of digital humanities and theology generally, and systematic theology in particular. Thus, the overview summarized here does not take into consideration the broader relationship between digital humanities and the study of religion, except where directly relevant.

⁶ Gerber, “Getting Involved,” 7.

⁷ Reed, “Digital Humanities and the Study and Teaching of North American Religions.” See also Smiley, “Theological Librarianship in the Age of Digital Humanities.”

the biblical text, but this time in the form of bible engagement. Peter Phillips, the director of the center, has recently summarized the center's research focuses in "The Pixelated Text" as resting "on contemporary biblical literacy, the mediation of the Bible in digital culture, and a world-first MA in digital theology, as well as engagement with creative industries, parachurch agencies and denominational bodies."⁸ Phillips charts three waves in theological engagement with digital humanities – a past, a present, and a possible future – and all three focus on the Bible: digitization of manuscripts, Bible apps, and "AI-like applications that you would not normally link to biblical studies."⁹ According to their website, all of the center's current projects reflect this research focus on biblical literacy, discipleship resources, or congregational studies on biblical literacy.¹⁰

Beyond the study of the Bible and the digital archiving of texts, advanced programs combining digital and fluorescent spectroscopy manuscript analysis of handwritten texts (including, for example, lecture notes, sermons, and letters) has application in the context of the creation of critical editions of the works of important thinkers, and thus in this connection finds a certain relevance in systematic theology as well.¹¹ Clifford Anderson, Associate University Librarian at Vanderbilt University, has outlined several projects recently completed or currently underway that illustrate a more extensive interface between theology and digital humanities.¹² These include familiar resources like HathiTrust as well as discussions of the use of text mining and visualization of word occurrences in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Further away still from an exegetical or history-of-Christianity focus, the use of large quantities of data holds relevance for projects in practical theology that use quantitative empirical methods to analyze church demographics, for instance.¹³ Finally, the growing number of online courses (some as free and/or video courses), several now on topics in religion, deserves mention. Introductions to the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the major world religions, and a variety of courses on topics in ethics among others are being offered online by leading universities including Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, and St. John's Nottingham via platforms like Edx and Coursera and their own sites. Internet video-hosting sites like YouTube, Vimeo and teachable.com, of course, also host enormous volumes of content in a variety of formats and degrees of quality.

The digital revolution does present systematic theology with an abundance of material for theological reflection. Although the looming significance of the digital for Christian-theological understandings has been noted from pastoral perspectives and through popular-cultural lenses,¹⁴ systematic theological assessment of the digital is still an emerging sub-field. The development of technologies that mediate an increasing integration of all human communications with one another or that are intimately integrated with our bodies, then interlinked via digital networks – all allegedly to improve human health and performance – raises significant concerns over data protection, body sovereignty, and the mediated nature of identity and self-understandings. These and other challenges in turn raise questions about the ways the digital, on the one hand, and evolving forms of church, understandings of God, or models of human dignity, on the other hand, mutually inform one another. A growing body of research on the significance of digital innovations for Christian faith and practice undertaken by sociologists and scholars of religion

⁸ Phillips, "The Pixelated Text," 406.

⁹ Ibid., 409.

¹⁰ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/codec/project/>.

¹¹ For one recent example of this kind of research see Hahn, "Analyse der Schreibmaterialien Schleiermachers," 885–894. Schleiermacher is, of course, well-known as one of the founders of modern theological study and research methods, though this research was prepared for the volume devoted to his lectures on pedagogy.

¹² Anderson, "Digital Humanities and the Future of Theology."

¹³ See for example the annual report of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, "Gezählt 2018. Zahlen und Fakten zum kirchlichen Leben." While not drawing on data of the size and complexity of studies common in informatics and the natural sciences, this kind of document illustrates the contribution of statistical analysis and data visualization that are used in practical-theological and ecclesiastical research.

¹⁴ Godwin, "Triathalons, Ultramarathons and Ambitious Baking: Why is Modern Leisure so Competitive?"; McGrath, *Theology and Science Fiction*; Merritt, "Is AI a Threat to Christianity?"; Sweet, *Viral*.

exists.¹⁵ And some systematic theologians have also started to reflect, for example, on the interrelation of flourishing and human enhancement as well as transhumanism.¹⁶ There is every reason to expect this area of theological inquiry will grow in size and significance, whether in research directed toward the socio-religious significance of seemingly innocuous trends like gamification (of exercise routines, study habits, and every hobby imaginable) or in relation to more unsettling advances in the field of artificial intelligence.¹⁷

But no compelling and unique *use* for digital technologies in systematic theological work has yet presented itself. This may have much to do with systematic theologians' own reticence. What Anderson observes concerning theology in relation to the digital humanities generally is likely just as true of systematic theology in relation to the other theological disciplines. "My suspicion," he writes, "is that theological scholars may appreciate what their colleagues in other disciplines are doing, but see them as irrelevant to theological inquiry."¹⁸ Why would this be the case? Is it because systematic theology concerns itself primarily with concepts and textual communications – whether in seminar, conference, or publication contexts – and, while email and word processing make these things more efficient, they hardly count as work in digital humanities? For some, this may be the reason. But I have different reasons. In the following section, I want to indicate why systematic theologians may have reason to view the digital turn – in particular its hegemonic tendencies – with a certain caution.

2 Bread or circuses: digitalization for whom?

The critical observation that the relationship between theology and the digital humanities currently is a relationship, more accurately, between biblical studies, historical theology, and theological librarianship, and digital humanities, with limited further applications in quantitative research, should not be understood as a criticism. Archives, databases, and data management, manipulation and visualization tools offer much to humanities research; it is not my intention to dispute that. Moreover, it is neither surprising nor in any way *per se* concerning that theological librarianship and biblical studies should be the first fields of major application for what the digital humanities have to offer. In consequence, for those institutions not wanting to fall behind the trend, projects and positions in biblical studies and historical disciplines may receive priority for now, for established methodologies in those fields coincide and integrate well with already existing technologies and directions of innovation (for example, manuscript and text work, stylometry, data mining, visualization of interactions with texts and so on).

Nevertheless, there are reasons to remain alert. The potential ways that a digital humanities focus can influence the production of knowledge and even the identification of what counts as desirable knowledge should be held in mind, for the intersection of societal evolution and economic viability can condition the perception of virtuosity in research at the digital humanities crossroads. As universities, foundations, and nationally funded institutes decide that, in order to stay at the cutting edge of research and teaching, significant attention and financial resources need to be devoted to centers, clusters, and general emphases on the digital humanities, then disciplines and faculties in the humanities will correspondingly value (meaning, fund or pursue funding for) research programs that reflect this emphasis. In the process, what counts as desirable knowledge can also shift to favor the *capabilities of digital tools and resources* and the *concerns of those in a position to deploy them*.¹⁹

¹⁵ Bielo, "Digital Scholarship and the Critical Study of Religion"; Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion*; DeRogatis and Weiner, "Turning Students into Scholars"; Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*; Phillips, "The Pixelated Text"; Clarke et al., eds., *The Ethics of Human Enhancement: Understanding the Debate*.

¹⁶ See Victoria Lorrimar's recent theological interpretation of visions of human flourishing in discussions of human enhancement and transhumanism; Lorrimar, "Human Flourishing."

¹⁷ Duffer, "As Artificial Intelligence Advances, What are its Religious Implications?"; Godwin, "Triathalons, Ultramarathons and Ambitious Baking: Why is Modern Leisure so Competitive?"

¹⁸ Anderson, "Digital Humanities and the Future of Theology."

¹⁹ This is similar to the concern articulated by Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon in a recent article on the undemocratic consequences of the digital revolution's democratic promises; Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon, "A Place to Stand," 867–868.

This potential concern observed in university contexts is simply the arrival of a broader societal trend in Western, developed countries. The Roman poet and satirist Juvenal famously coined the phrase *panem et circenses* – bread and circus games – to refer to the popular consumption of distractions and the political implications, and often intentions, of such appeasement. Neil Postman's contemporary critique of American popular culture in the 1980s, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, also comes to mind.²⁰ By way of example, I refer again to the concept of “gamification.” Gamification refers generally to the incorporation of elements of game-play like points, accomplishments, and competition against others into everyday life activities. In its popular forms, gamification is symptomatic of the social and economic inequalities that the digital revolution can exacerbate. Opportunities to participate in and contribute to culture-making boosts the social capital of its producers. As culture production has gone increasingly online globally, this re-confirms the position of privilege enjoyed by those with access to significant digital resources and the ability to deploy them in meaningful and active way.

While the concept of gamification has become especially important in areas of economic activity related to consumer engagement with products and or via social networks, it is increasingly being explored in higher education in the development of pedagogical methodologies that can effectively teach people who have grown up in a digital world.²¹ In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman warns against the oppression of a people resulting from their addiction to amusements and the accompanying numbing of their powers of critical reflection and analysis. But I have a different locale of oppression in mind: where does the digital turn leave those without robust access to those resources or the ability to produce and deploy them in a meaningful way? In one empirical study of 120 papers on gamification that were published between 2011–2014, a table reviewing the papers' countries of origin locates this interest overwhelmingly in Western Europe and North America. South Africa is the only African country to even appear on the list.²² For those being dragged behind the drivers in the revolutions of the digital circus, the concern is not over the apathy brought on by amusement but for bread, for a spot at the table.

Attention should be given to ensuring that the drive toward digital humanities not become a form of what Thomas L. McPhail has theorized as “electronic colonialism” or “eColonialism.”²³ The term may seem self-explanatory; namely, to the extent that communications infrastructures are created and controlled predominately by, for example, European countries, the USA, China, Japan, and South Korea, and to the extent that other countries rely on this infrastructure, the latter become beholden to or dependent on the former. But McPhail focuses his analysis not only on the hard forms of this domination but places just as much significance on soft forms. Apple may be interested in which smartphone a person uses, and Vodafone in which network provider supplies the internet connection, but Amazon and Facebook are much more interested in understanding and even shaping persons' and institutions' world outlook and senses of identity or legitimacy as those things relate to predictable, marketizable behaviors. McPhail's *Development Communication* highlights the challenge for present deliberations about the production of fair theological knowledge in an era of digital humanities: resisting eColonialism is not as simple as advocating bottom-up models or going to the “grassroots.”²⁴ Such an approach is not possible because contemporary life is too comprehensively delocalized by mass- and specifically social-media. Rather, fair theological knowledge would require as a minimum fair participation in ongoing communication concerning what counts as worth knowing, what forms can legitimate knowledge and learning take, and what level of universality do digitally-oriented and transculturally shared knowledge and learning formats hold, or what local knowledges are represented and how. As decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo argues, a presupposition of the “universality of knowledge” persists in much research that is done from Western academic contexts.

²⁰ Postman, “Amusing Ourselves to Death.”

²¹ A large and growing literature exists on the interface of gamification and education. For a recent quantitative summary of methods and trends in the field, see Majuri, Koivisto, and Hamari, “Gamification of Education and Learning.” For a more critical assessment of some objections see Karagiorga and Niemann, “Gamification and Game-Based Learning.”

²² Caponetto, Earp, and Ott, “Gamification and Education: A Literature Review,” 52.

²³ McPhail published *Electronic Colonialism* already in 1981. A summary of some of that book's arguments with connections to the more contemporary moment can be found in his 2014 article for the *World Financial Review*, “eColonialism Theory.”

²⁴ McPhail, *Development Communication*, 1–20.

This attitude expressed itself classically in the form of the encyclopedia and continues to find expression in the outweighed legitimacy that is given to the quantitative. One gets the impression that *real* research results require countable data. But attention must be given to the way this orientation can defer self-critical awareness that knowledge “is not simply a question of what is known (for example, the encyclopedia). Mainly, it is a question of who is in a position to know.”²⁵

It is not my intention to argue against the digital turn in the humanities, generally, or against gamification, to mention just one example. Indeed, keeping our focus on Africa, eLearning initiatives and resources, including the use of gamification elements in education, are being developed in many African countries as an important effort in realizing the UN Millennium Goal of “Education for All.”²⁶ Still, universities in wealthy Western contexts who are eager for their humanities departments to develop digitally must guard against underwriting yet another wave of colonization in the form of a sequestering of knowledge for those with extensive and above all *expensive* access to research resources relying upon digital technologies. The digital humanities turn risks privileging those contexts – scientific and institutional but no less, and most concerning to me, geographical and cultural – that are best positioned, which is to say, that have the *capabilities* in the form of infrastructure, resources and wealth, to make the digital turn both quickly, reliably, and sustainably.

Building on this critique, I want to propose that there may be a different way of viewing the relationship between systematic theology and the digital than seeing systematic theology as behind or indifferent to the digital turn. The digital turn may indeed be calling us to update our methods, but that does not necessarily mean that the digital becomes a top priority. The conditions of doing theology in a tightly interconnected, globalized world in which each tiny corner of the globe hangs suspended in webs of interdependence with every other but with vastly disparate and disproportionate degrees of participation and self-determination opportunities, call for the development of methods in systematic theology that are firstly embedded in life with the poor, underrepresented, and excluded and only secondarily plugged-in.

3 Embedded, not plugged-in: rebooting systematic theological work

Anita Cloete has recently argued concerning theological reflection in a digital culture that digital technologies are neither inherently liberating nor inherently oppressive. Instead, the digital is best regarded as “value neutral until it is applied and the consequences of the application indicate whether it was used positively or negatively,” for digital technologies are neither created nor used “in a vacuum, but [are] rather a social construction and when used, [are] guided by social and institutional values.”²⁷ Within the field of Christian systematic theology, we should thus be careful to avoid two pitfalls. On the one hand, we will need to resist the colonization of the means of production of and access to theological knowledge on the part of wealthy, well-positioned Western nations and churches. On the other hand, we should be aware of the self-isolation and extinction of vital theologies that will inevitably result in the West if we fail to recognize non-Western theologies as legitimate and up-to-standard, let alone important knowledges. In this final section, I want to propose a reboot for systematic theology that responds to the concern outlined in the previous section, a reboot that is embedded in life with the poor, underrepresented, and excluded in societies around the world and then, only in service of that, plugged-in. The challenges of engaging the digital while maintaining a preference for the poor and the excluded calls for a re-thinking of methods and best practices in theological research that will support *mutual meaningful participation in global conversations* among theological

²⁵ Mignolo, *On Decoloniality*, 207.

²⁶ The international “eLearning Africa” Portal and its annual conferences are one of the most prominent and active hubs for these developments. Their programs can viewed at: <https://ela-newsportal.com>. Gamification and education in Africa seems to be a very nascent field; Ngnaoussi Elongué Cedric Christian of Ghana published several short articles in 2018 on their interconnection to the “eLearning Africa” portal and on the eLearning Industry online community; see Christian, “Why Should We Develop More Mobile Serious Games in Africa?”

²⁷ Cloete, “Living in a Digital Culture,” 3.

researchers across global contexts. The purpose is to cultivate fair knowledge because *fair* knowledge is essential to reaching the goal of *good* knowledge.

An appropriate concept of the digital humanities for systematic theology presupposes a particular understanding of the humanities, systematic theology, and their relation to one another. For that reason, I want to begin by summarizing my vision of a humanistic education, informed as it is by Western traditions. Second, I ask what systematic theology does in relation to this vision, and I outline a paradigm for humanistic systematic theological work. In the conclusion to the article, I ask what forms of digital participation might be used productively in service of systematic theological research working with this paradigm.

Based on readings through the texts of classical Western sources like Plato's *Republic* and the Hebrew prophets to those of early humanists like della Mirandola at its more formal Renaissance beginnings, I regard the humanities as a general but exhaustive and still subtle study of the nature of human life in the world and of how to live it well. Thus, rather than a primary focus on discrete measurement and mechanization – one is almost tempted to say, the “digital” – humanistic study has focused on meaning, communication, expression, and feeling as these things are encoded in language, thought, and community – continuously and analogically, with plenty of “noise” interrupting the signal. The humanist's disciplinary toolbox includes multiple items: the study of history and rhetoric; philology and philosophy; the plastic, performing, and literary arts; theology and religion. Across the spectrum of these disciplines, both historically and contemporaneously, one common denominator has been a focus on understanding the nexus of value and capability, worth and power in human life: what is worth knowing or doing, and how can this be accomplished? And as attention is given to the relativity and contingency of human longings and our ability to realize them, that most basic of humanistic technologies comes to the fore, namely, the *techné* or “skill” of politics, or organizing flourishing and sustainable life together with others. Hence, the humanities might be summarized as the pursuit of wisdom in cultivating and maintaining good life in community. In its various modes, humanistic study seeks to understand more deeply human life in the past, to imagine creatively possible hopeful futures, and to organize social structures in the present in ways that serve individual and communal well-being.

With the rise of historicism in the post-Enlightenment period, the credibility of research in humanities disciplines began to depend increasingly on scholars' ability to document and demonstrate their claims with verifiable data and repeatable experimental (or field) research. This trend continued through the twentieth-century as a more generally empirical orientation began to win recognition in the historical and emerging social sciences. The study of religion was no exception. The so-called History of Religions School that formed initially in Göttingen in the 1890s was instrumental in developing historical-critical and comparative methods in the study of both biblical and contemporary world religions. Theologians, too, have had to come to terms with the limitations on the reach and even nature of the claims they make that come with acceptance of the reality of a more pluralistic, global field of research, one full of diversity and disagreement. Ernst Troeltsch summarized the new conditions for theological research in arguing that theology, like any other pursuit of knowledge, works only ever on the basis of incomplete information and is therefore making judgements of probability, not certainty.²⁸

One of the unique contributions of theology to humanistic study remains its attention to the total conceptions of reality that are always present in communal life – sometimes explicitly, often not – and the ways individuals and community form their total conceptions of reality out of finite experiences, give formalized expression to them, and communicate them to one another.²⁹ Each of the theological disciplines do this in their own ways. Exegesis is the study of the texts that reflect such conceptions of early Christian communities; studies in the history of Christianity examine their evolution throughout the development of the late Roman and Byzantine periods and on through the emergence of the modern West; practical theology measures and maps them on the socio-political landscape of the present. But what about systematic theology? Like practical theologians, systematic theologians engage empirical debates when questions of

²⁸ Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” 13–14.

²⁹ This is a point I have developed with reference to Schleiermacher's theory of religion in Robinson, *Redeeming Relationship, Relationships that Redeem*, especially 1–12, 105–140.

bioethics and social ethics vis-à-vis confessional commitments arise. Like historians of Christianity, we work in each of the time periods of Christian history. Like exegetes, we even study the Bible (sometimes!). But what is the specific *métier* of systematic theological work? What does systematic theology *do* today?

I propose this question – what does systematic theology *do*? – as a new, central research question for the field. Systematic theology takes as its primary object of focus the reflected religious communications and actions organizing individual and communal life within some total conception of reality. Such a theology seeks to describe a Christian community’s understanding of itself in relation to the totality of reality as it describes and prescribes this understanding to itself in its propositions and practices of the Christian symbol. With this orientation, I am combining the work of two thinkers: on the one hand, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s definition of systematic theology as “the interconnected presentation of doctrine that has currency at any given time”³⁰ with, on the other hand, Niklas Luhmann’s sociological theory of religious communication as the self-observation of religious meanings by those who “fix” the meanings as well as via second-order observation of those observations that tracks the calibration of religious discourses within their social environments.³¹ My training in an unusual combination of disciplines has been influential in leading me to this position. I stand with one foot in the discipline of systematic theology and one foot in the field of religious studies, with my current research focus being directed toward inter- or trans-cultural theology. That is, I work in one discipline historically committed to the careful development of long, complex arguments in textual formats, and on the other hand in a field that, in addition to texts, values material objects, engagement with them, and extensive personal interactions with the communities and traditions in which these things have reality, significance, and purpose. In my research and scholarship, I seek to combine these influences, disciplines, and their traditional methods by viewing *doctrines* as *social artefacts* and paying attention to their presuppositions about and consequences for communal life. That is, I aim to observe the ways systematic theological language operates to form and guide community or what systematic theology “does.”

There are several implications for method in contemporary systematic theological research that I wish to draw out of this formulation. First, this perspective calls for an *empirical-hermeneutical approach to systematic theology*. This is necessitated by scientific epistemological expectations of verifiability, if nothing else. But it is not a skeptical reduction; it is, rather, an expansive opportunity. By correlating doctrinal concepts with empirical observation of the social phenomena giving rise to them, systematic theologians might gain deeper insight into the processes of mutual formation between groups’ total conceptions of reality and reflected or unreflected social practices, values, and skills. Theological research might then look for related phenomena in other confessions and religious or non-religious traditions and ask to what extent the religious language employed in communications about them are similar or different.³² This would have the further advantage of opening up systematic theology hermeneutically to constructive engagements with difference in pluralistic settings.

Second, the paradigm devotes *privileged focus to theologies of the socially excluded and underrepresented* in global theological conversations. Because the goal in this systematic theological paradigm is not to advance one confession or another but rather to understand the social function and significances of theological language, symbols, and practices generally, it therefore maintains a high commitment to fair representation of theological voices. The overconcentration in production of and access to theological study and communication in the West that characterizes theological work today reflects the experience and

³⁰ Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, §97.

³¹ Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion*, 17–19.

³² This suggestion is similar to Michael Smith’s recent suggestion in the *Journal of Empirical Theology* to employ “theological frames” for the “theological interpretation of social life”; Smith, “Theological Frames,” 73–75. Smith helpfully points to the recent work of Deborah Bhatti on “theological action research” in combination with that of Kathy Charmaz on Grounded Theory in the development of theological frames that can yield a more textured analysis of the varieties and wider resonances of theological discourse collected in empirical theological research, whether in the form of written or live texts, performances, or even symbols, as well as analysis of the community-forming dynamics of those communications. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, and Bhatti, Cameron, and Duce, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*.

communication of Christian faith of only a minority of the world's Christians. For this reason, systematic theologians, and not only scholars of religion and social scientists, should be eager to give special attention and devote extra resources to the development of systematic-theological work in the emerging (or, in reality, already emerged) geographical centers of Christian thought in locations around the world including African countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya, as well as South American countries like Brazil and Honduras and Southeast Asian locales like the Philippines and Singapore.

Third, a more empirical-hermeneutical systematic theology in a pluralistic world engaged with the excluded and unrepresented requires *parallel work on first-order and second-order levels* of theological discourse simultaneously and as well as comparative (in particular, intercultural and transcultural) research. Vast fields of “reflected religious communication and action organizing individual and communal life within some total conception of reality” exist around the world but in “lived” forms rather than the discursive-textual forms that are, for better or worse, still important for being able to participate in a meaningful way in global theological conversations.³³ But they can be written or brought to speech in some “interconnected presentation” or another, to refer back to Schleiermacher's definition. Thus, an emerging horizon for systematic theological work has become forms of embedded ethnographic work that seek on the level of first-order observations to assist and support the articulation of self-understandings of lived experience.³⁴ These local theologies, in turn, can become contributions to global, second-order observations of the function and significance of theology, representing and represented by the communities in which they originate.

4 Concluding thoughts and proposals

So what can the digital do for us in systematic theology to implement the kind of systematic-theological work just outlined? What do we need to be able to do, and how can tools and techniques in the digital humanities help us do that? Systematic theology as just outlined stands in a unique position within the modern university with respect to the relationship of research to teaching. For, in this paradigm, when systematic theology creates space for the formulation of the self-understandings of others (first-order description) it produces new research at the same time (for second-order analysis). I wish to be clear that I do *not* intend to advocate the exporting of Western European theological commitments; nor am I naïve about the extent to which the framing itself does this insofar as it exports an implicit Western rationality. That would be to fall prey to the very concern over knowledge colonization named in part two of this essay.

Instead, the purpose remains focused on enabling people to speak with others in and on their own terms about their total conceptions of reality and the place of their lives and of their communities' lives in it. The goal is to cultivate *opportunities for participation* in global conversations where, again, people can engage one another on a fairer, more representative, discursive footing. Thus, the question of how the digital might be taken up in this systematic-theological paradigm in ways that empower the poor, socially

³³ See the introductory chapter of McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 3–18. McGuire points to both the ever-evolving (and non-essentialist) quality of historical religions, as well as the extraordinary degree of particularity evident in the religious self-descriptions of individual persons. I am, however, more interested than McGuire was in that book in the ways this particularity works itself out in groups and discursively, where discourses are also seen as practices and artefacts maintaining a high level of particularity. I do not perceive a necessary incompatibility or mutual resistance between viewing discourses as circulating meaning, on the one hand, and embodied practice, on the other.

³⁴ Theology in North America and Great Britain has in the new millennium been following what might be described as an empirical arm. The use of empirical methods in practical, constructive and some systematic theological studies is growing, above all embedded ethnographies based on participant observation. In the first decade of the 2000s, Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis began editing a series on what was called “ordinary theology.” The series currently contains 42 titles. The first was Astley, *Ordinary Theology*. For a mid-point overview of the paradigm, see: Astley and Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*. Ordinary theology seeks to conduct “theological reflection on the church's practice,” and the studies in the series employ methods in psychology, ethnography, education, and gender studies, among others to work through related aspects of churches' self-understanding and self-formation. To mention only a few additional examples of this empirical turn see Marsh, Slade, and Azaransky, *Lived Theology*; McBride, *The Church for the World*; and in shorter form Robinson, “Fake Friends.”

excluded, and underrepresented is a question about how digital tools and resources can help build capacity – create opportunities – for meaningful participation,³⁵ and thereby realize people’s potential for living a life they have reason to value.³⁶ To put a fine point on the question, how can systematic theology use digital humanities technology, pedagogy, and research in development contexts and contexts of social exclusion?

I offer the following *questions* and *observations* as concluding thoughts to help guide consideration of productive use of digital resources within systematic theology.

Questions: What forms of reading, writing and self-reflected, intentional communication can digital tools be used to cultivate and how? What tools and resources in the digital humanities can make publication and distribution easier and more affordable? It is deeply problematic that, even though many journals are available in electronic formats, access to those journals is prohibitively expensive for those lacking affiliation with a major research university. And authors wishing to publish their work in open access formats have to pay exorbitant publication fees to do so. It is difficult to see how this does not effectively cordon off credible publishing and distribution as an elite territory for the wealthy. What can be done to undermine this injustice and make both access to research materials and publication fees more equitable for those without wealth?

Observations: One of the most simple but perhaps most profound opportunities created by the digital turn for scholarship in general has been the increased ease of swift, long-distance collaboration. It is important to acknowledge that being online filters human daily experience to an increasing extent and to assess this theologically and critically. Nevertheless, the experience of life and faith in the socio-political particularity of offline contexts remains primary for human beings, especially for the world’s most marginalized, and at least for now. It also happens to be the case that these contexts often coincide with what might be termed “key theological development zones” – that is, contexts characterized by high socio-political volatility combined with rapid growth or change in Christianity. In a sense, such contexts constitute the frontlines of theological research. But we face the perverse situation that where the most work needs to be done, the least resources are available. Thus, although it is not a new idea, nevertheless I propose systematic theologians use digital formats to collaborate more intentionally, to redistribute “theological resources” and to build professional networks. I am not advocating for a Robin Hood-style activism; rather, this can take forms that accord well with scientific best practices. For example, more systematic theologians can be intentional about developing intercultural research collaborations. This would then allow, in fact require, building an international reciprocity network of colleagues in those locations with whom to co-write grant applications and publications, to establish extended research visits for one another and for relevant students, to plan conferences, and to share literature. Contexts which significantly lack the material resources necessary for competitive theological research and education but which possess adequate access to online social media platforms can network in this way with others possessing an abundance.

Even in my own ears, these questions and observations sound hopeful but also frustratingly vague. But there are tremors of change that indicate both priorities sympathetic to those articulated here as well as directions for future development in preparing systematic theological research rooted in and based on fair participation in theological knowledge production. First, it should be noted that there are some good online resources available that are specifically proceeding from and aimed at cultivating global inclusion and participation. Globethics.net is one such resource. They offer courses (with fees adjusted by geographical region) and host an online library (though the difficulty of providing access to many journals remains) “committed to the principle of open access, to the sharing of knowledge and information for the benefit of all.”³⁷ I have no personal connection to the work or team at globethics.net, and this reference should not be taken as an advertisement. I do, however, find their resources useful and their priorities worth emulating in systematic theological work. How? This priority points, second, to a direction for further development. A present need and challenge in providing knowledge that benefits all is curating knowledge

³⁵ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 17–45, 69–100.

³⁶ The principle of realizing people’s potential to lead the kind of lives that have reason to value is the recurring refrain throughout Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom*.

³⁷ <https://www.globethics.net/10th-anniversary>.

produced by all. Another, newer project focused more specifically on integrating the digital into systematic theology is Benno Van Den Toren's new Templeton Foundation funded project "Global Christianity at Your Fingertips: Providing Online Access to Global Christian Theology, Starting with Africa."³⁸ The project description explains that the project will "include various online resources on global theology, as well as a network connecting faculty, librarians and students around the world."³⁹ To accomplish this, the project will focus on generating much more extensive bibliographies of works by African theologians than have previously been available. In turn, the generation of these bibliographies will be assisted and informed by consultations with theologians throughout French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa on site to gather resources and be advised on best forms of presentation. Finally, third, the direction in digital humanities for theology that is illustrated by "Global Christianity at Your Fingertips," nevertheless serves to highlight the (for now at least!) irreplaceability of embedded participation.

A final proposal might therefore be to combine the work of ethnographic and other empirical fieldwork-based forms of research with the methods and training of "embedded librarianship" in systematic theological research.⁴⁰ Embedded librarianship focuses, among other things, on fully integrating the librarian into research projects and teams rather than their "serving" as "one-shot" information consultants. "The librarian functions as a team member like any other – and shares responsibility for team and organization outcomes with all the other members of the team." In "the philosophy of embedded librarianship...embedded librarians need to be fully 'read into' the nature of the work being performed...Embedded librarians need a full understanding of the nature of the task and the goals of the effort."⁴¹ The idea of the embedded librarian might be expanded for empirical-hermeneutic systematic theological research. If systematic theology can be regarded as the documentation of a community's "reflected religious communications" to itself and about itself vis-à-vis its total conception of reality, then a basic task for generating participation in global conversations of systematic theologies that are more lived than written is documentation of those communities' "reflected religious communications." However, such documentation will need to be creative and flexible, and might work best by, at first, collecting church statements, sermons, video and other media, as well as even social media communications. Doing so in a meaningfully representative way would be tremendously assisted by informed methods of collections and documentality theory, which constructively analyzes the bi-directional borders between social performances, values and objects, and transcription or inscription.⁴² Partners engaged in embedded librarianship can contribute not only in these ways, but also in conducting the final, essential transformation of such collections into digitally accessible and engageable formats. For all of this, working in team research formats and, specifically, in co-operations between "classical" systematic theology, empirical-hermeneutical systematic theological research, and embedded librarianship presents an exciting horizon for the work that lies ahead.⁴³

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³⁸ <https://www.templeton.org/grant/global-christianity-at-your-fingertips-providing-online-access-to-global-christian-theology-starting-with-africa>.

³⁹ https://www.pthu.nl/en/News_and_Events/News/global-christianity-website-project-granted-175000-euro/.

⁴⁰ The work of embedded librarianship has become a major discourse in library scholarship over the last ten to fifteen years. For a very recent discussion, see Mlinar, *Embedded and Empowered*.

⁴¹ Shumaker, *The Embedded Librarian*, 4–5.

⁴² Ferraris, *Documentality: Why it is Necessary to Leave Traces*.

⁴³ I would like to thank the peer-reviewers for their helpful comments that led to improvement of the second section of this essay and provoked concrete and practical ideas for the conclusion.

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