
Digital Religion – Digital Theology

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Introduction

Scholarly discourse evaluating the digital turn in biblical and religious studies is at an early stage in its development, as attested to by the creation of two new book series in 2016: *Introduction to Digital Humanities: Religion* (IDH, de Gruyter), and *Digital Biblical Studies* (DBS, Brill). Previously, Heidi Campbell published an overview of the topic (Campbell 2013), developed in further publications (Campbell-Althenhofen 2015, Campbell-Garner 2016). In a recent overview, Carrie Schroeder develops two central questions on the topic: “what does it mean for Biblical Studies to be marginal to the Digital Humanities when DH is a field positioning itself as transformative for the humanities? How can our expertise in Biblical Studies influence and shape Digital Humanities for the better?” (Schroeder 2016). Using her field, Coptic studies, as an example she shows that the particular skills and needs of a marginal field within a marginal field can be a strong driver in DH.

Consequently, and for the first time at a DH meeting, this ninety-minute panel session asks what is the impact of the digital turn on religious studies and theology, and to what extent these somewhat marginal fields can bring something specific to the big DH tent. They particularly focus on textuality and on the symbolic impact of the “book” as attested to in the expression, “religions of the book,” coined in a programmatic lecture given in 1870 by F. Max Müller (2010). The symbolic, Western impact of books and writing was amplified by this notion, born at the time when the legal status of printed texts and authorship was completely secured in Western culture (Clivaz 2012).

For centuries, “books were perceived as a ‘wide angle’ from which it was possible for everything to be observed, related to, and perhaps even decided” (Carrière-Eco 2009). The panel will consequently consider the hypothesis that the DH have been deeply influenced by this fascination with textuality and books during the first decades of their development; while keeping “the discourse of written texts” as a central pillar to the discussion according to the words of Roberto Busa, a foundational DH figure (Busa 2004). Busa’s relationship to Biblical and religious materials has played a role in his approach to the computing field, as Jones point out (Jones 2016). The double impact of the book and the notion of “religions of the book”, successful in Western culture since the 19th century, provides an opening to understanding why DH in religious fields is still so focused on textuality. Indeed, when we collect examples of DH studies in diverse religious fields, we are unsurprisingly faced with very textual DH (Clivaz et al. 2016e). This observation strengthens the necessity for religions in DH to consider the [multimodal and multicultural turn](#) provoked by digital culture.

With these different questions in mind, five panelists will participate in the presentations (sixty minutes in total) and a thirty-minute panel discussion that will be moderated by Claire Clivaz representing the Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics, Vital-IT (Lausanne, CH). The following five speakers have agreed to participate and to discuss the general topic from the perspectives of their own research projects. In alphabetical order:

A Neophyte Proselytizes for Digital Humanities Pedagogy

Emily S. Clark

This presentation explores the ways in which Digital Humanities can enhance a Religious Studies classroom by focusing on two assignments that ask new questions of traditional course materials. The first is a

project that was the culmination of a month's work collaboratively amongst a class of 25 students with a database platform (Omeka). This project entailed the digitization of archival photographs of a Native American community from 1916, along with the reading of Jesuit mission material (Clark et al. 2016). The second is an assignment that took two class periods and introduced students to data visualization (Voyant). This assignment introduced students to the differences between close reading and distant reading, along with practicing both on excerpts from Jesuit mission documents (Mentrak – Bucko, 2016).

Topic Modeling the Bible

Paul Dilley

The talk will present the first full-scale topic model of the Bible and related literature in four different languages: Greek, Latin, Syriac and English. It will discuss both technical aspects of the process (e.g., the use or not of lemmatization; retention or removal of function words; optimal number of topics), as well as what we gain from comparing topic models of the same corpus translated into different languages. The presentation will focus on the interpretive gains and losses involved in topic modeling, one of the richest strategies of distant reading to the Bible which has been the subject of centuries of minute examination of the close reading tradition which Moretti has pointedly labeled a “theological exercise” (Moretti 2013).

Digital Lives: Reading Moravian Memoirs in the Age of the Internet

Katherine M. Faul

An international collaborative research project (USA, Sweden, Germany) is developing a digital platform for the investigation of the metadata and text of Moravian memoirs, composed since the mid-18th century by members of the Moravian Church to be read at their funeral (over 65,000 memoirs, housed in Germany and the US, Faul 1997). Less than 10% of the earliest manuscripts have been published. The developing digital interface (moravianlives.org) allows for geospatial and chronological visualization of author's birth and death place (Haskins 2007). This paper will investigate the intersection of the digital, the autobiographical, and the sacred in the age of the internet. How can the act of reading the lives of thousands of Moravians also be understood as an act of reconstituting the “invisible church” ? (van Dijk, 2007; Eakin 2014).

Material Religions in a Digital World

Rachel McBride-Lindsey

For much of the modern era, religion and theology have been intertwined in a decidedly material world. Over the last several decades, students of religion have begun to carve out intellectual headroom for an approach to material culture that recognizes objects and images as generative sources of theological inquiry and religious practice. Cultural institutions can be an effective tool for inviting researchers and the public into physical spaces and into contact with deeper dimensions of the material world. At the same time, these very contributions work against methodological gains in the study of material culture. Rachel McBride-Lindsay's presentation starts with this tension and draws from pedagogical attempts to incorporate digital platforms into projects anchored in the study of objects.

Exploring developmental patterns within Digital Theology Research within the Digital Humanities

Peter Phillips

Campbell and Altenhofen (2015) explore four waves in digital research development in theology and religion back into the late twentieth century. Their wave pattern picks up both historical and technological trends and patterns in research. However, a three wave theory dominates discussion within introductions to the Digital Humanities, discussed by David Berry (2011) and in the *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*. It tends to reflect modes of research, or groups of methodologies used in research rather than time periods. Reflecting on CODEC's own experience of Digital Theology in association with a range of other scholars, this paper will assess whether too many waves are a problem in our methodological theorizing.

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