



Symposium

**RELIGION IN ANTHROPOCENE
AND DIGITAL CULTURE**

Portorož - Portorose, May 29-30, 2023

PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS

Symposium
RELIGION IN ANTHROPOCENE AND DIGITAL CULTURE

Portorož / Portorose, St. Bernardin Resort
May 29–30, 2023

PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS



KOPER 2023

Symposium RELIGION IN ANTHROPOCENE AND DIGITAL CULTURE

Programme and Abstracts

Editors/Urednici: Nadja Furlan Štante, Karin Šmid

Editor-in-Chief of the Publishing House/Glavni in odgovorni urednik založbe: Tilen Glavina

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Technical Editor/Tehnična urednica: Alenka Obid

Design/Oblikovanje: Alenka Obid

Layout/Prelom: Alenka Obid, Barbara Pandev

Cover photograph/Fotografija na naslovnici: Shutterstock

Publisher/Izdajatelj: Science and Research Centre Koper, Annales ZRS/
Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče Koper, Annales ZRS

For the publisher/Za izdajatelja: Rado Pišot

Online edition, available at: <http://www.zrs-kp.si/index.php/research-2/zalozba/monografije/>

This symposium has been financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS), through the project Constructive Theology in the Age of the Anthropocene and Digital Culture (P6-0434).

Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

COBISS.SI-ID 153365507

ISBN 978-961-7195-15-6 (PDF)

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ABOUT THE SYPOSIUM

The primary goal of the symposium is to analyse and establish links between theological and ethical perspectives on the environment, on the one hand, and digital technologies, on the other. The starting point is the increasing intertwinement of natural and digital environments for contemporary and future life on our planet. The development and increasing use of advanced digital technologies and artificial intelligence raise several challenging ethical questions. Understanding these challenges and formulating theologically reflective responses to them are important aspects of digital theology, as defined by Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and John Kurlberg (2019).

Digital culture is the context within which we increasingly do theology, thus, digital theology impacts both theology as a discipline and digital culture within which we live.

This symposium draws upon, contributes to, and brings together the fields of theology, philosophy, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, philosophy of technology, and digital humanities. More precisely it brings together methodologies and epistemologies from Creation theology, eco-theology, eco-feminism, theological anthropology, philosophical theology, post-metaphysical philosophy of religion, digital philosophy and cosmotheology, philosophy and ethics of AI, and human-machine relationships. It also addresses questions raised by digital theology through the lenses of the alternative theologies of pantheism, panentheism and panpsychism.

In this context presentations can focus on a variety of topics including, but not limited to the main pillars of the research programme:

- Cohabitation with-in nature and digitality – Mainstream (Christian) and Alternative (Christian Ecofeminist) Perspectives
- Human Distinctiveness, Embodiment and Relationship in a Digital Age
- Digital Philosophy and Religion – Perspectives from Christian Philosophical Theology

- Textuality and Transcendence in Digital Age from the Perspective of Postmodern Philosophy of Religion
- Sociological and Anthropological (Re)interpretations of Practical Theology in a Networked Society
- Seeking the Divine: from Virtual Realities to Humanoids - Anthropological, Societal, and Economic Implications

SYMPOSIUM ORGANISED BY

Science and Research Centre Koper

Members of the Research Programme

“Constructive Theology in the Age of Digital Culture and Anthropocene”

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Karin Šmid

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PROGRAMME

Symposium

RELIGION IN ANTHROPOCENE AND DIGITAL CULTURE

St. Bernardin Resort Portorož - Portorose, Hotel Histriion, May 29–30, 2023

Address: Obala 2b, 6320 Portorož

MONDAY, MAY 29, 2023

9.00–9.45 CEST

Registration

10.00–10.15 CEST

Welcome address

Panel 1

Chair: **Nadja Furlan Štante**

- 10:15–11:00 **Gorazd Andrejč** and **Matej Mertik**:
Pancomputationalism and the Relationship between
Science and Religion
- 11:00–11:35 **Noreen Herzfeld**: The Banality of Technological Evil
- 11:35–12:10 **Lenart Škof**: Elemental Philosophical Theology:
Meditations on an Age of the Post-Anthropocene
- 12:10–12:45 **Victoria Dos Santos**: Reframing Ontologies in Digital
Religion: An Exploration of Animistic Interactions in
Online Neopagan Rituals

13.00–15.00 CEST

LUNCH BREAK

Panel 2

Chair: **Gorazd Andrejč**

- 15:00–15:35 **Luka Trebežnik:** The Textual Character of Religious Existence in the Digital Age
- 15:35–16:10 **Nadja Furlan Štante:** Beyond Paternalistic and Patriarchal Conceptualization of Nature – Cohabitation with-in Nature and Digitality
- 16:10–16:45 **Blaž Lenarčič:** Wish you were here: Presence of Individuals in the ICT Mediated Society within the Context of Religious Practices
- 16:45–17:20 **Maja Gutman:** Mapping Dreams with Digital Technologies: Synergies between Close and Distant Reading

17.20–18.00 CEST

COFFEE BREAK

18.00–19.00 CEST

KEYNOTE LECTURE:

Victor J. Krebs: Dreaming in the Digital Age – Posthuman Thoughts on the Technological Pharmakon

19.00 CEST

SYMPOSIUM DINNER

TUESDAY, May 30, 2023

Panel 3

Chair: **Maja Gutman**

10:00–10:45 **Gašper Mithans:** Studying Religion and Slovenian Immigration to the U.S. Using Digital Interviewing

10:45–11:20 **Karin Šmid:** Visual Presence of Religions in the Cityscape of Maribor

11.20–12.00 CEST

COFFEE BREAK

12:00–13:00 CET

Closing Remarks – Future Plans of the Research Programme Group

13:30–15:30 CET

LUNCH and Meeting of Institute for Philosophical and Religious Studies
ZRS Koper

ABSTRACTS

PANCOMPUTATIONALISM AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Gorazd ANDREJČ

Science and Research Centre Koper and University of Groningen

Matej MERTIK

Science and Research Centre Koper and ECM AlmaMater

Pancomputationalism is the position that all physical systems, i.e. physical reality as such at a fundamental level performs computations and hence it is, in a sense, a 'giant computer'. In this paper, we examine pancomputationalism from the perspective of the ongoing philosophical debate about the most appropriate way to understand the relationship between science and religion. In particular, we will analyze the *ontic* type of pancomputationalism in the light of an Nonoverlapping Magisteria (NOMA) view on science and religion. NOMA claims that scientific and religious claims, reasonings and justifications, are two distinct intellectual magisteria that, if done appropriately, do not overlap or encroach into each other's territories (Gould 2002). The ontic pancomputationalism is 'the most metaphysical' among pancomputationalist perspectives, claiming that computation is the fundamental or ultimate reality underlying the physical reality (and not the other way around). Since ontic pancomputationalists make both empirical and metaphysical claims and do not always clearly distinguished between them (c.f. Piccinini and Maley 2021), such pancomputationalism is very problematic from the NOMA perspective. However, it could also be argued - the other way around - that ontic pancomputationalism makes possible a particular and new critique of the NOMA model of science and religion. In our talk, we will explore what is at stake for philosophy of science and religion in this 'clash' between NOMA and ontic pancomputationalism.

Keywords: Pancomputationalism, digital universe, nonoverlapping magisteria, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, science and religion

REFRAMING ONTOLOGIES IN DIGITAL RELIGION: AN EXPLORATION OF ANIMISTIC INTERACTIONS IN ONLINE NEOPAGAN RITUALS

Victoria DOS SANTOS

Science and Research Centre Koper

In our high-tech milieu, digital religious practices have been growing globally, challenging the conception that lived religion cannot be experienced online. As happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual platforms were the only available option for many religious traditions, showing how – besides religious textual contents – ritual practices of an embodied nature can also take place online. Therefore, what appears to be a decisive question is not if religion can coexist with digital media but, instead, how this interrelation can offer new ways of understanding and relating to both ‘the digital’ and religion. This situation calls not only for a reconceptualization of how ‘material religion’ (Morgan 2009) can take place in the online context but, in particular, stresses the importance of integrating other ontologies to better appreciate the growing cohabitation of humans and the digital otherness. As argued by Achille Mbembe, other cosmological engagements can help to refrain the human/non-human relationships in the techno-scientific age (Newell and Pype 2021).

In this presentation, I propose animism as an "ontological strategy" (Marenko and van Allen 2016) to think about interaction with the digital otherness, especially in a world of ubiquitous computing. By exploring so-called neopagan online rituals, I shall examine and illustrate how religious material culture may be articulated online and how other ontological considerations, such as animism, allow neopagans to feel an actual sense of presence in virtual environments and to interact with them from a non-instrumentalizing perspective. I will particularly focus on ritual practices taking place on social virtual platforms, which, together with digital games, are the media where one can better observe online sensuous interactions. Finally, I will also show how this new conception of animism connects to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls ‘dialogism’, a condition that recognizes the multiplicity of perspectives and voices. Dialogue challenges the self-sufficiency posture

of being the only 'subject' among 'objects' and denies the possibility of not getting involved with the otherness. For such reasons, approaching the digital through an animistic ontology can help us acknowledge the convergence of humans with the techno-digital otherness and explore, on deeper levels, contemporary posthuman experiences taking place in the religious context.

Keywords: digital religion, animism, embodiment, posthumanism, dialogis

BEYOND PATERNALISTIC AND PATRIARCHAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF NATURE - COHABITATION WITH-IN NATURE AND DIGITALITY

Nadja FURLAN ŠTANTE

Science and Research Centre Koper

This presentation explores the intersections that connect environmental concerns and ethical issues related to digital technologies from the perspective of theological ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism assumes that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature stem from the same constellation of phenomena: patriarchal domination, dualistic anthropologies, and (today) global hypercapitalism. Ecofeminism experiences patriarchy as a conflictual system built on an exploitative hierarchical relationship that displaces equality, unity, and the interconnectedness of all living beings in the web of life. It sees creation as one body encompassing diverse ecosystems (Radford Ruether, Sally McFague). From this perspective, contrary to some recent ecofeminist theological interpretations (e.g., E. Graham, 2019 and J. Thweatt-Bates, 2012), the development of human-like AI and cyborgs could also be understood as products of global capitalism and a form of "power over" inextricably linked to the oppressive force of the patriarchal system. We will critically examine the philosophy of human-like AI from this perspective, asking whether the Strong AI programme and the pursuit of human-like AI robots depend on a mechanistic worldview that is largely responsible for domination and destruction. On the other hand, we will also consider that any biocentric view must take into account the fact that the technology of genetic engineering (and even the ancient technology of selective breeding) already contains elements of human agency or "interference" with nature. From this perspective we will rethink human entanglements with the-more-than-human natural world.

Key words: ecofeminist theology, nature, digitality, *metanoia*.

MAPPING DREAMS WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: SYNERGIES BETWEEN CLOSE AND DISTANT READING

Maja GUTMAN MUŠIČ

Science and Research Centre Koper

The *2020 Dreams* is a born-digital monograph that examines the impact of epochal events in 2020 on individual and collective dreaming. The project's methodological objective was to computationally compare over 2,000 dream reports to approximately 35,000 Associated Press news articles using Natural Language Processing tools and human close reading. Over 22 million pairwise comparisons were calculated and mapped in order to identify the semantic relationships between the dream report and the reality as experienced through coverage in the media. In addition to empirical analysis, one of the primary goals of the project was to analyze and reconsider our position in the context of expanding digital data repositories and computer processing power and to gain a better understanding of how, why, and to what extent we can use Artificial Intelligence tools, as well as how these tools impact our reasoning. In addition to addressing platformization, datafication of cultural repositories, and AI ethics, the study poses deeper issues regarding our present and future treatment of digital technologies.

The presentation will comprise a visual and navigational exploration of the beta version of the project to demonstrate how linear or non-hierarchical (rhizomatic) digital work can be explored. In the fall of this year, the *2020 Dreams* will be published digitally by Stanford University Press.

Key words: dreams, NLP tools, continuities, human-machine anthropology

THE BANALITY OF TECHNOLOGICAL EVIL

Noreen HERZFELD

*Science and Research Centre Koper and St. John's University
and the College of St. Benedict*

Computer technology, as opposed to traditional manufacturing, has long been labeled a “clean” technology. However, computing actually consumes a vast amount of resources and is ecologically destructive in multiple ways. We will take a brief look at the ecological costs of social media, cybercurrency, and recent advances in AI and note how this ecological footprint is hidden behind banal terminology, metaphorical thinking, and business plans that promote addictive and unnecessary usage.

Keywords: climate change, social media, cybercurrency, AI, ecological footprint, Arendt

DREAMING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: POSTHUMAN THOUGHTS ON THE TECHNOLOGICAL PHARMAKON

Victor J. KREBS

Pontifical Catholic University of Peru

Technology possesses us with the unconscious recklessness and irreverence of the titan, but it also inspires us to poetic reverie, to dream beyond our limits, providing thus the creative impetus that has sustained the passage of human being through time, our engagement in the universal chorus and the vital flow of the cosmos. The Greeks called this paradoxical condition -of being both destructive and creative, a remedy as well as a poison- a *pharmakon*. At the very heart of human being lies the technological *pharmakon*: We evolve not only endosomatically but also exosomatically (Stiegler), not only biologically but also culturally, not just through genes, but through memes as well. In every technological extension we are literally projecting our dreams in the modulations that it makes possible and making them real according to the new resources it provides. Digital algorithms are the latest form of that modulation. I want to ask how human experience and culture are affected by our increasing reliance on algorithms? What are the spiritual costs of displacing human thinking with artificial intelligence? I assume what we might call an existential-phenomenological attitude towards our technological experience and sharpen the psychoanalytic eye, to claim that dreams function psychically to define the boundary between reality and fantasy, and that the digital is intervening at the boundary; with what we may call its virtual dreams, it is affecting - both positively and negatively- our ability to distinguish reality from fantasy. I explore the epistemological and existential consequences of this digital perturbation in light of the pharmacological nature of technology.

Keywords: philosophy, psychoanalysis, digital technology, dreaming, artificial intelligence, algorithms, reality, fantasy, virtuality, digital life, posthuman, anthropocene.

WISH YOU WERE HERE: PRESENCE OF INDIVIDUALS IN THE ICT MEDIATED SOCIETY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Blaž LENARČIČ

Science and Research Centre Koper

Explaining familiar social phenomena and placing them in new social contexts is not exactly new to sociology. In fact, one of its fundamental tasks is to (re)interpret phenomena under new conditions of social action. In this sense, contemporary society is characterized by constant change, which poses a serious challenge to the already established and/or traditional social forms and concepts. Since the first half of the 1990s, we have been witnessing a (re)interpretation of social dynamics and entities that we already know from physical space, but which have been extended or transferred to cyberspace through the increasingly massive use of information and communication technologies (ICT). One such example is the presence of individuals in social interactions, which is (still) based on the premise that physical presence and unmediated (face-to-face) interaction are the most authentic and only true manifestation of the communication process, hierarchically supreme, and that other forms (i.e., ICT-mediated) are subordinate to them. Especially during the pandemic COVID-19, among others also religious rituals and meetings started to be mediated by ICT due to the restrictions on physical proximity to limit spread of the virus. Thus, the aim of the contribution is to present the concept of individual's presence in the ICT mediated society within the context of religion. Namely, how religious communities negotiate demands for physical distance in accord with their religious and spiritual aspirations to establish presence and togetherness.

Keywords: information-communication technology, religion, presence, contemporary society, network society, responsive to Islam, esp. Christology, theology of the Trinity, and Mariology.

STUDYING RELIGION AND SLOVENIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S. USING DIGITAL INTERVIEWING

Gašper MITHANS

Science and Research Centre Koper

The paper aims to open a discussion into what became a widely used practice during the pandemic, addressing the questions, among others, how we understand the 'field' and the role of digitally-mediated methods in qualitative and ethnographic research. Furthermore, is this approach – which has been especially by anthropologists often designated as an unsatisfactory substitute during the state of exception – an equally valid research practice, drawing on the experiences of interviewing Slovene Americans in California in 2020 via Zoom and Skype. The advantages and disadvantages of digital interviewing will be considered, and, in particular, the question in which circumstances this approach continues to be useful today taking into account the methodology, most of which has been developed very recently. To that end, a necessary distinction has to be made between the rather vague field of 'virtual ethnography' and already well-established 'netnography'.

Keywords: Slovenian emigration to the U.S., history, ethnic parish, ethnography, digital interviewing

ELEMENTAL PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY: MEDITATIONS ON AN AGE OF THE POST-ANTHROPOCENE

Lenart ŠKOF

Science and Research Centre Koper and ISH AlmaMater

The first part of our meditations will focus on selected topics from our most recent book *God in Post-Christianity: An Elemental Philosophical Theology* (forthcoming in 2023) – especially as related to the topics of deep incarnation, elemental (and quantum) entanglement of our co-being, and the materially-energetic conspiracy of human beings with the elements of nature. Based on this constellation, in the second part, we will discuss a recent theological work of Ilia Delio on technology and AI. The main focus of our elaborations will be on a possibility to see technology (in particular the AI and computers) as being integral to the evolution of conscious life on the Earth. Finally, we will conclude our contribution with reflection on the possibilities of a future transformation of our inner (cosmico-spiritual) energy towards more-than-human or even divine layers of Being.

Keywords: philosophical theology, elemental philosophy, cosmic energy, quantum entanglement, Ilia Delio, divinization, post-Anthropocene

VISUAL PRESENCE OF RELIGIONS IN THE CITYSCAPE OF MARIBOR

Karin ŠMID

Science and Research Centre Koper

The presence of religion in space is most tangible in its material existence in the form of architectural and sculptural objects. Despite the relative longevity of architectural monuments, their surroundings, use, and meaning are changing in the *longue durée*. Thus, the spaces take on a polysemic and often dissonant character. They co-create society through their presence and function while being redefined in return.

This paper focuses on the manifestation of religious identity in the public space of Maribor; how the town square with the main church has been redefined, how (in)visible are the monuments of the various Christian communities in the town, which meanings holds the Minorite Monastery, which has been deconsecrated at the end of 18th century. The questions will be addressed with methods of digital humanities, to visualize and understand the causes, consequences, and circumstances of changes over the long 20th century to the present day.

Keywords: visual identity; public space; dissonant heritage

THE TEXTUAL CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS EXISTENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Luka TREBEŽNIK

Science and Research Centre Koper

In an age when it seems that the tools based on the large language models will once again turn completely all dimensions of modern existence upside down, theological reflection must look back at its own textual character. The paper will be based on Jacques Derrida's thesis that "there is no outside-text" and will offer reflections on the theological consequences of this statement. Some commentators rightly claim that it is a statement that heralds the end of theological references to truth, for them Derrida's reading strategy, which has come to be known as deconstruction, appears as a "hermeneutic of the death of God". On the other hand, there are also thinkers who understand this pantextual dimension, "the end of the book and the beginning of the writing" as good news for theology, which, of course, must shake off the old predicates of absolute possession of knowledge and affirm its own textual and contextual character.

Key words: textuality, deconstruction, hermeneutics, radical theology, logocentrism

NOTES





ISBN 978-961-7195-15-6

