

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

**TECHNOLOGY AND RELIGION:
Structural affinities and
cultural challenges**

Glasgow, Scotland-UK, 14-16 October 2009

Convened by:

Werner G. Jeanrond and Ward Blanton

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

Executive Summary

This exploratory workshop was held at the University of Glasgow from the 14th to 16th October, 2009. The group included 21 participants representing 13 different countries. Five additional participants, three from Germany and two from Italy, were forced to cancel just prior to our proceedings due to illness and injury and alternative academic commitments.

Our meetings were held in three venues in and around the University of Glasgow. An initial welcome, presentations, remarks, and introduction to the subject by the workshop convenors were given alongside a traditional Scottish dinner at Glasgow's Grosvenor Hilton Hotel where all the foreign participants stayed during the workshop. Subsequent meetings were held in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the heart of the University of Glasgow's historic main campus. Meals and receptions were offered in some of the University's most beautiful rooms overlooking Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Museum and Gallery.

Such backdrops constituted a rich and ample environment for our academic conversations. The atmosphere of our discussions was invariably warm and provocatively interdisciplinary throughout. Discussions begun in our group meetings always carried over into informal settings over coffee, refreshments and meals, and participants in the meetings frequently referred to insights generated through such less formal moments of encounter and dialogue. The goal of our workshop was to begin to formulate the appropriate questions, and to discern the most fruitful forms of interdisciplinary research network, which would allow us to rethink the mutual affectation between religion and communicative technologies. As thinkers both present and absent (e.g. Jan Assman and Hent de Vries) have begun to recognize in different but interrelated fields, ours is a time during which "all miracles are online" in the sense that substantial transformations of religion occur primarily along those media channels by which religions now expand themselves and organize particular modes of experience. Such transformations cast doubt on the way earlier scholarship imagined religion in *opposition* to categories of the technological – whether as spirituality, a sense of worldhood, or as an experience of the subject's place in the cosmos and in relation to the future.

The key to our meetings, therefore, was to begin to formulate models by which to analyze religious subjectivities and mediating tele-technological practices as intimately related, even obverse sides of the same coin of affect and sociality. Our meeting approached this topic in three primary respects:

First, if standard set pieces of modern continental thought (G. W. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Max Weber, Walter Benjamin, et. al.) were premised in significant ways on the stark distinction between the orientations and social tendencies of religion and tele-technologies, what are some of the implications, for philosophy, for contemporary critical theories of culture, for the social sciences, of a questioning of this fundamental axiom? Closely related, what would a critique of the assumed antagonism between religious and technological modes of being do to standard narrations of the secular? These questions constituted the starting point for all of our discussions.

Second, these questions were teased out comparatively into multiple examples from different disciplines and epochs. In this respect, our meeting wrestled with new ways to re-frame inherited assumptions by beginning to articulate a religio-technological archive of sorts, examples of ancient, modern, and contemporary religiosities that may be understood as inextricably related with media history (imagined in the broadest sense). Such articulation of a new archive of examples of subjectivities that are ambiguously technological and sacral or liturgical was essential to our more formal, theoretical concerns about how to frame contemporary religiosities in terms of contemporary communicative technologies. Our meeting explored very profitably the way there can be no serious mapping of contemporary “religious mediations” (Meyer) without significantly developed comparative counterpoints. Without these counterpoints (our proposal assumed and our meeting confirmed) our thinking tends to import too many assumptions about religion and technology alike under names like the ‘modern’, the ‘secular’, or the ‘contemporary’. If, we argued, our understanding of contemporary religious mediations will escape modern dichotomies between religion *and* communicative technology, an essential part of the development of new conceptual models will be a deeper awareness of earlier epochs of religious mediation.

Scientific Content of the Meeting

The initial meeting took place during and after dinner on the evening of arrival day. This first conversation followed a formal welcome by both the organisers and by the Head of Department of Theology and Religious Studies. The logistics of the workshop was explained.

Prior to the beginning of Session 1, Professor Javier Esparcia Pérez, on behalf of the ESF, outlined the different programmes and funding opportunities initiated, organised and administered by the ESF.

Session 1: Technological Transformations of Religion in a Global Age

Professor Birgit Meyer gave an opening anthropological presentation of the way new communications networks (cellular phones, digital photography, internet access) are changing the shape of religious communities and the nature of witness to religious experience in West Africa. So intimate are the transformations of networks of communicative technologies and religious experience that, she argued, we should no longer speak of religion *and* media, as if these were distinct spheres, but rather of *religious mediation*. Such an approach, our conversations confirmed again and again, constitutes a new model for understanding both religion and communicative technologies that has scarcely begun to affect received modes of understanding within these multiple fields.

Professor Bengt Kristensson Uggla responded to Meyer's presentation with an exploration of the contribution of contemporary hermeneutics to Meyer's anthropologically oriented analysis of the way we need to generate new categories of religion and technology that keep pace with the mutually affecting transformations of both within contemporary global culture.

Session 2: Media Ecologies, Technical Embodiments and Religious Identity

Professor Siegfried Zielinski extended the opening programmatic statements of Meyer by exploring the way histories of the Western concept of 'belief' and the concept of

'machine' were remarkably interrelated. He showed these links very persuasively by presenting us with a rich pictorial archive of 'praying machines'. Zielinski argued that large scale genealogies of religion and technology (his "deep time of the media" or "media archaeologies") must extend back behind the modern period in order to show other possibilities to think about religion and the technological in a way that does not assume a fundamental (and, he argued, very modern) split between 'belief' and 'technical manipulation'. Zielinski concluded by discussing the promising nature of such genealogical work for a radical and creative rethinking of contemporary religio-technical phenomena in and outside of Europe.

Professor Jan-Olav Henriksen responded to Zielinski by describing some of the ways techniques of meditation, prayer, and other monastic exercises also reveal an essential intertwining of an act and experience of belief, on the one hand, and technological manipulation, on the other. As a result, a broader typology of religious identity is emerging.

Session 3: Return of Religion in Europe: Secularization and Post-Secularization

Professor Ola Sigurdson discussed the conditions of religion in today's Europe. Secularization did not give rise to the disappearance of religion in Europe but to the radical transformation of religion, e.g. modernization and pluralization of religion. The liberal distinction between religion and politics and the resulting de-institutionalization and privatization of religion have led to a neglect of attention to the social body of religion. Our post-secular climate invites religious institutions anew to reclaim their own social embodiments and thus to overcome the privatizing reductions of religion.

In response to Sigurdson, Dr. Jayne Svenungsson discussed different conceptualizations of secularization and agreed with Sigurdson that the issue can no longer be a dichotomy between secularization and religion. Rather she proposed to treat of secularization and religion together when reflecting on the lasting significance of the Enlightenment.

Professor Lieven Boeve added that the religious development in modern Europe should be understood more in terms of de-traditionalization rather than secularization. The implications of post-Christian particularity, religious autonomy, religious pluralism and religious interaction for emerging forms of religious self-understanding need to be discussed today.

Session 4: Communicative Technologies and Religious Revolution

Professor Caroline Vander Stichele drew on comparative interests in early Christian religion and contemporary spiritual practice to describe how yogic practices and experiences are disseminated, mediated, and consumed today via internet and ipod users in Europe. Comparing this phenomenon with early Christian religion in multicultural contexts, Vander Stichele articulated how new technologies and new portability of spiritual practices were transforming religious and spiritual identity within Europe, producing new forms of cultural hybridity.

Also comparing ancient and contemporary interplay of religion and communications technologies, Dr. Ward Blanton showed how Augustine's expansive theological system mirrored and in essential ways mimicked rhetoric about the Rome, the sovereignty of which was often imagined to be indicated in the supremacy of the Roman 'postal system'. Blanton showed particularly how ideas about Roman sovereignty, imagined in terms of the efficiency of the Roman postal system, found analogous articulation in theological terms within Augustine's meditations on angels as divine messengers, the very theological idea he used to indicate the supremacy of the Christian "city of God" over against the "pagan" city. Blanton argued that such studies, part of his new *Apparatus and Belief* project, open new ways to conceptualize the 'theologico-postal' history of the West.

Professor Edmund Arens felt the two presentations to be of central significance for contemporary discussions of his specialty, Habermasian visions of communicative rationality, particularly as their historical detail demands a reworking of Habermasian distinctions between free and coerced forms of dialogue. Religion needs to be understood as a life practice rather than as a worldview.

Session 5: The Impact of Technology on the Religious Subject

Professor Arne Grøn approached human beings as self-interpreting animals. In religion human beings interpret their own existence with an emphasis on the intertwinement of activity and passivity, acting and suffering. Subjectivity takes place between interiority and exteriority. It is embodied, embedded and extended. The relation between religion and technology is open – and open for ambiguities. Heidegger criticized the instrumentalization of technology, yet he did not develop a sense of the ambiguity of subjectivity. Hence rather than resisting technology, the task ahead is to develop resistance to those aspirations within technological thinking that intend to construct the super-human in order to overcome ambiguity. The subjectivity implied in technology consists in being affected: we cannot take technologies as means to an end which we define, but we are always ourselves affected.

Professor Anne Kull responded by agreeing that technology was part of human nature and that it intensified ambiguity. She examined a number of metaphors which might characterize the institution of church in our cyber-age. All churches could be considered to be virtual churches since none could be said to have reached their full potential. Reflecting on the challenges of information technology Kull wondered in what way this development might lead to a new reformation of Christian faith and embodiment and in what way it might lead to new forms of social exclusion. Ultimately, new technologies raise the question of human becoming and of human-divine relationship in new and challenging ways.

Session 6: Discussion of Future Collaboration

Professor Werner G. Jeanrond chaired this final session of the workshop in which three goals were achieved by the participants:

(1) The establishment of an inventory of issues, dimensions and categories for further work on the relationship between religion and technology. This list includes the following: religion as technology, technology and the religious past, information technology and human and religious emancipation, the relationship between the virtual and the real church, forms of religious mediation (scripture, printing, art,

photography, imagery, internet, propaganda etc.), religious entertainment, religious communication, and the politics of religious mediation.

(2) The consideration of appropriate research methodologies. The discussion dealt with problems and challenges of religious conceptualization, contextualization, phenomenology, empirical research, the combined focus on embodiment of both subjectivity and community, and the limits of cyber mediation.

(3) A discussion of possible future cooperation and interesting project ideas. Religious praxis after the media; religious and social change; religion, media and power; multidisciplinary approaches to religion and technology (avoiding fragmentation); religion, media and social change; subjectivity and decision making in the age of high technology; material religion; religion and machinery; the religious person as inventor/engineer.

Assessment of the Results

As an exploratory workshop, our meeting was a striking success which made very clear several ways forward for an agenda setting interdisciplinary cooperation within an emerging network of European scholars and media practitioners. To summarize, the workshop suggests such a project would proceed most fruitfully in light of three mutually reinforcing foci.

1) **Construction of new theoretical models.** First, we should work to synthesize, or to present in formal models, new developments within European religious phenomena, using communicative technology and developments within media markets as the primary sites through which to analyze these phenomena. As Birgit Meyer argued persuasively in her presentation (in keeping with the research and basic intuitions behind the original construction of our workshop proposal), in order to keep pace with contemporary European religiosities or spiritualities, contemporary theory of religion and culture must start with a category like “religious mediation” rather than positing separate categories like religion *and* media or religion *and* communicative technology which must subsequently be united. Among other issues, our group described repeatedly how this new approach allows us to get to grips with the *materiality* of contemporary religious phenomena, the way contemporary religious affects are profoundly intertwined with the socialities, user experiences, and

economic and technical design of new communicative technologies. That is, current global productions, contestations, and dissemination of religious phenomena are best imagined as affective systems inextricable from niche markets, product placing, and the proliferation of new communicative infrastructures. In this respect, future work of this interdisciplinary European network must find new theoretical languages that express more immediately the remarkable ways in which new communicative media intimately affect the experience, communicability, volatilities or violent antagonisms, and implicit forms of verification of contemporary religions or spiritualities. To this end, our workshop suggested that contemporary continental philosophy, particularly phenomenological approaches to media studies and religious history, prove particularly useful for reworking our understanding of religion, secularity, and material mediations of information.

2) Construction of a comparative archive to support new theoretical models. In addition to new theoretical models that keep pace with contemporary religious embodiments within new media constellations, our workshop made very clear that any effort to understand the present, or even modernity more generally, demands significant comparative counterpoints. As presentations by Siegfried Zielinski and Ward Blanton made clear, for example, much more work is called for in order to understand the modes in which pre-modern religion *was already* a phenomenon of mediating technologies. In this respect, the question concerning religion and technology is *decidedly not* only a problem of industrialization, mass media, and the unprecedented rise of modern tele-technologies. An effective large scale project would therefore be one in which theorists' syntheses or formal models would emerge in conversation not only with contemporary religious phenomena but also with a developed archive of examples of the intertwining of religion and communicative techniques and technologies which constitutes the religio-technological imagination of the West. As Zielinski cogently argues, it is only as we become aware of the "deep ecologies" of religion and media which already affect (generally without our recognizing them) contemporary life that contemporary models of religion and media will stop reinforcing a historical misconceptions and shallow self-descriptions of religion and the question of technology as a modern legacy or modern problem only.

In keeping with the original proposal, the group felt that an excellent way to move forward with this comparative arm of the project is to focus on Scriptural Media, analyzing the emergence, consolidation, and limits of the practices and ideas of the Biblical and the Quranic as essential moments wherein the politico-theological imaginations of the West encounter their identity, internal logics, and limits. Such a focus would capitalize on the strengths of Biblical Studies programs at the Universities of Glasgow and Amsterdam as well as dramatic reworking of ancient Near Eastern religion and media in the work of Jan Assmann, Giorgio Agamben, Régis Debray, and others who have all expressed interest in the project's future.

3) Sketching the design of new media and new spiritualities. Our workshop stressed the ways it is of no use to repeat inherited or traditional conversations about religion, technology, community, and so on. In order to generate new theory and a new archive for religious and media studies, the project must emerge from an international network that is genuinely experimental and forward looking. In this respect, our meeting suggested that a future network move even farther afield from nineteenth century models of the Humanities or Theological Studies. Rather, further meetings should emerge in constant interaction with departments of media studies and with those actively engaged in the design, manufacture, and marketing of new communicative technologies. In this respect, for example, Glasgow's representation on this project has already begun to include members of Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute, but we also plan to network much more aggressively with centres of media history and cultural theory elsewhere in Europe. Such a move is in keeping with original efforts to include Friedrich Kittler (Humboldt University, Berlin), Giorgio Agamben (University LUAV, Venice), Paolo Aposito (University of Rome), and many others, but also partners like the Centre Georges-Pompidou and Bernard Stiegler in Paris, who has also expressed an interest in working together on these topics.

Ultimately, the project must be inventive, networking new models, new archives, and even new networks of designers, as it were, of a phenomenon that will be both spiritual and technological. With this last focus of the project we will be more concerted in our efforts to extrapolate from our constructions a contemporary European vision of technologically mediated life.

Future plans. We are very grateful to the European Science Foundation for its generous funding of our exploratory workshop. The meeting made clear to us the value of moving away from inherited normative questioning about religion or the secular in order to inhabit a more experimental and interdisciplinary space for the production of new forms of knowledge of and about “religious mediations”. In light of the plan sketched above, we are currently considering the modes in which we could propose a larger project in keeping with the Framework Programme. We would also be very eager to develop a strong proposal for the ESF Networking Programme.

FINAL PROGRAMME

Wednesday 14 October 2009

Afternoon	<i>Arrival Glasgow Grosvenor Hilton Hotel</i>
18.00	Meeting, Terrace Lounge in the Hilton Hotel
18.30	Welcome and Dinner at the Hilton Hotel, Kibble Suite
20.10	Introduction to the workshop by the convenors

Thursday 15 October 2009

Each session will start with the presentation of a position paper and include time for discussion. Sessions will be held in the Ground Floor Teaching Room in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, 4, The Square, University of Glasgow

09.00	Welcome by Convenors Prof. Werner G. Jeanrond and Dr. Ward Blanton
09.10-09.30	Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF) Prof. Javier Esparcia Pérez Standing Committee for Social Sciences (SCSS)
09.30-13.00	Morning Sessions:
09.30-11.00	Session 1: Technological Transformations of Religion in a Global Age Ward Blanton, chair Birgit Mayer (VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands) Bengt Kristensson Ugglå (Åbo Academy, Finland)

- 11.00-11.30 *Coffee / Tea Break*
- 11.30-13.00 **Session 2: Media Ecologies, Technical Embodiments and Religious Identity**
- Ward Blanton, chair**
- Siegfried Zielinski** (Universität der Künste Berlin, Institut für zeitbasierte Medien, Germany)
- Jan-Olav Henriksen** (MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo, Norway)
- 13.00-14.00 *Lunch, Main University Building, Melville Room*
- 14.00-17.30 Afternoon Sessions**
- 14.00-15.30 **Session 3: Return of Religion in Europe: Secularization and Post-Secularization**
- Werner G. Jeanrond, chair**
- Ola Sigurdson** (University of Gothenburg, Sweden)
- Jayne Svenungsson** (Stockholm School of Theology, Sweden)
- Lieven Boeve** (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium)
- 15.30-16.00 *Coffee / tea break*
- 16.00-17.30 **Session 4: Communicative Technologies and Religious Revolution**
- Werner G. Jeanrond, chair**
- Caroline Vander Stichele** (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
- Ward Blanton** (University of Glasgow, UK)
- Edmund Arens** (Universität Luzern, Switzerland)
- 18.00 *Dinner, Main University Building, Melville Room*
- 20.00 Informal Discussion Groups

Friday 16 October 2009

- 09.00-13.00 Morning Sessions**
- 09.00-10.30 **Session 5: The Impact of Technology on the Religious Subject**
- Ward Blanton, chair**

	Arne Grøn (University of Copenhagen, Denmark)
	Anne Kull (University of Tartu, Estonia)
10.30-11.00	<i>Coffee / Tea Break</i>
11.00-13.00	Session 6: Discussion of Future Collaboration
	Werner G. Jeanrond (University of Glasgow, UK)
13.00-14.00	<i>Lunch, Main University Building, Robing Room</i>
14.00	<i>End of Workshop and departure</i>

Statistical Information on Participants

Convenors:

Prof. Jeanrond, male, UK, 50+

Dr. Blanton, male, UK, 30+

Participants:

Dr. Adam, male, UK, 50+

Prof. Arens, male, CH, 50+

Prof. Boeve, male, BE, 40+

Dr. Gil, female, PT, 30+

Prof. Grøn, male, DK, 50+

Prof. Henriksen, male, NO, 40+

Prof. Kittler, male, DE, 50+

Prof. Kristensson Uggla, male, FI, 40+

Prof. Kull, female, EE, 40+

Prof. Meyer, female, NL, 40+

Prof. Moxnes, male, NO, 60+

Mr. Moynes, male, IE, 50+

Dr. Plazaola, male, ES, 30+

Dr. Sherwood, female, UK, 40+

Prof. Siddiqui, female, UK, 40+

Prof. Sigurdson, male, SE, 40+

Dr. Svenungsson, female, SE, 30+

Prof. Vander Stichele, female, NL, 40+

Prof. Zielinski, male, DE, 50+

In all:

- 14 men and 7 women
- 13 European countries represented: 5 participants from Glasgow, UK, and 16 participants from 12 European countries
- 20 scholars working in universities and 1 media expert (Mr. Moynes) working in broadcasting

Rapporteur:

Prof. Esparcia Pérez, male, ES, 40

Glasgow, 25 February 2010

Werner G. Jeanrond and Ward Blanton