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## Book Review

# Kristin Merle / Ilona Nord (eds.), Mediatisierung religiöser Kultur

**Praktisch-theologische Standortbestimmungen  
im interdisziplinären Kontext (Mediatization of  
Religious Culture. Practical Theological Assess-  
ments in an Interdisciplinary Context)**

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The volume *Mediatisierung religiöser Kultur (Mediatization of Religious Culture)*, edited by Kristin Merle and Ilona Nord, is focused on media and religion from a practical-theological perspective. It is based on several years of research on the mediatization of religion undertaken within the framework of the subject group “Practical Theology”, part of the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie. The book analyzes and reflects on contemporary digitalization and mediatization processes in terms of their social and (practical-) theological relevance. The two editors assume the existence of a “cultural change” that embraces religion and religiosity. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, they understand religion and religiosity as part of culture, as a “web of meanings” (p. 10). An important aspect of this cultural change is digitalization, or mediatization, as the authors term it. Merle and Nord note that they focus primarily on the lived effects of the mediatization process.

To dive into this topic, this volume brings together 22 contributions in German and English from very different fields. It is organized into five sec-

tions, which illuminate the topic in light of approaches employed by cultural theory, communication science, media science, anthropology, ethics, empirical studies, and practical theology.

The first part is entitled “Understandings from the Perspective of Cultural Theory, Communication Science and Media Science”. Friedrich Krotz introduces the concept of mediatization from the perspective of communication and media studies, emphasizing the radical change in the media that is having ever-greater effect on everyday lives, society, and culture. He distinguishes between two transformations: of technical media and associated media services and of everyday life, culture, and society, which is a consequence of changed human communication. Krotz favours the term “mediatization” since it contains an aesthetic, social, and cultural dimension in addition to the technical one evident in “digitalization”. In his essay, Krotz highlights four research perspectives on mediatization: the central research perspective on current development, the historical perspective, the critical perspective, and the prognostic perspective. He notes the effects of change on both individual religiosity and religious institutions and considers the consequences for religion and religious studies as well as for practical theological research. The second contribution in this section, by Stefan Meier, looks at the concept of multimodality and explains a theory of sociosemantics. Meier advances questions that could be employed in multimodality analysis, testing them with posters advertising Kirchentag 2019, a church congress held in Dortmund.

The interview with Felix Stalder, professor for Digital Culture at the Zurich University of Arts, conducted by Kristin Merle in 2019 is particularly noteworthy. Stalder, who coined the term “Kultur der Digitalität” (culture of digitality), begins by explaining the difference between “Digitalisierung” (digitalization) and “Digitalität” (digitality) and proceeds then to consider changes to life under conditions of digitality. The interview makes evident that – according to Stalder – in the “culture of digitality” academic work is also changing. As the amount of material increases, tools are deployed to make it easier to handle this abundance, “the boundary between science and non-science” (p. 64) becomes blurred, and we experience a “politicization of science”. In this very readable article, the reader also learns why Stalder believes that scientists must become more involved in public discourse (p. 65) and what role he proposes religion might play in our current complex world.

In the second section, which takes up anthropological and ethical perspectives, Charles Ess examines how philosophical ethics might access the

phenomenon of religions, considering in particular digital religion, online death studies, media theory and existential media studies. Gotlind Ulshöfer examines media ethics in the digital age, while Klaas Huizing focusses on Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus* (2017) and his interpretation of the phenomenon religion.

From this section I would like to highlight Amanda Lagerkvist's contribution, which engages with artificial intelligence. Lagerkvist seeks to examine the extent to which AI-driven abstract imaginings of the future are inevitable and explores "how such imaginings become living myths by looking at how technology is involved in broader appropriations of future form" (p. 92, all translations mine). Lagerkvist draws on the philosophy of Karl Jaspers and in particular his notion of "Grenzsituationen" (borderline situations). Lagerkvist calls for attention to be paid to digital borderline situations, for responsible action, and for methods that foster hope (p. 114). She identifies one method in the development of an existential ethic that includes AI designers in bearing responsibility for an inclusive and open future (p. 114).

A contribution by Felix Roleder on digitalization processes, especially with regard to phenomena in social networks, opens the third section, which presents empirical research. According to Roleder, religious and church life can be understood as a social network (p. 174), and he considers opportunities for network research in the online space. Ines Sura examines the connection between gaming and religious education by focusing on the implicit religiosity of gamers who come from deconfessionalized life contexts. She describes the computer game as "the most successful medium of the 21st century" (p. 196), biographically relevant for many young people and playing an important role in their lives with its "digital sections of the world" (p. 198). She presents the results of a qualitative interview study in which she interviewed 17 young people between the ages of 14 and 25 who consider themselves to belong to computer game culture, points to religious elements in computer games, and highlights opportunities for skill development through methods of "creative gaming". Ultimately, against this backdrop Sura appeals to religious educationists to give greater consideration to gaming and "game-based learning" and thereby aid religious education and digital empowerment.

Also in the third part, in their article "The Right to the Road. On Pilgrimage, Media and Churches in a Thirdspace Perspective" Birgitte Lerheim and Roger Jensen examine the interdependencies of media and current manifes-

tations of pilgrimage. In “Digitalisierungsprozesse im Religionsunterricht” (Digitalization Processes in Religious Instruction), Oliver Adam, Elke Wagner and Ilona Nord provide an interim report on the interdisciplinary and sociological research project Religious Education Laboratory digital (RELab digital). The goal of the project is “to develop a realistic understanding of the everyday practices of religious education teachers in the digitalized classroom” (p. 226). The authors examine how teachers can guide and organize lessons with digital media. They first describe the project and then present an exemplary case portrait, which they evaluate from the perspectives of the sociology of practice and the didactics of religion. The authors conclude with an exciting outlook on the next phases of the project.

In the fourth article in this section, “Robotik in der christlichen Religionspraxis” (Robotics in Christian Religious Practice), Ilona Nord and Charles Ess in cooperation with Jörn Hurtienne and Thomas Schlag consider the discourse on robotics and the first empirical research on robotics in the domain of religious communication. The authors point to current and future uses of robotics in the field of religions and specifically to issues surrounding authority, identity, community, ritual, and also the concept of religion itself (p. 230). They refer to their study on “BlessU2”, a blessing robot, and present an idea proposed by Gabriele Trovato, associate professor in Shibaura Institute of Technology (Tokyo), for the development of theomorphic robots. While Shinto and Buddhist religious practices can already include robotics in large temple complexes, the idea is provocative for Christian theologians and those working in the European context – especially with regard to the first commandment (p. 246). The authors elaborate their thoughts on Trovato’s theses, interrogate the concept of theomorphic robots, and formulate objections.

And in the final contribution in this section on empirical research, an article entitled “Investigating Media Appropriation. Photo Elicitation as a Tool for Collecting Data from the Media Repertoire”, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Hannah Grüenthal introduce “elicitation” as a method for generating data. They present their research project, which gives “insight into the role that media do play in the dynamic religious landscape” (p. 272).

The fourth section looks at subdisciplines of practical theology: Gerald Kretzschmar offers an overview of church digitalization initiatives and surveys their implications for church theory. Swantje Luthe encourages discussion related to pastoral care. Marcell Saß focuses on liturgy, and Wolfgang Beck explores homiletics. In Manfred Pirner’s contribution, entitled “Digital

Religion? Die Digitalisierung der Lebenswelt als theologische und religionspädagogische Herausforderung” (Digitalization of the Environment as a Theological and Religious Pedagogical Challenge), three possible definitions of the relationship between digitalization and religion are sketched: religion in digital media, digital media in religion, and digital media as religion (substitute) (p. 341). Ideas of mediatization are then used to broaden the approach to connections between digital media and religion, specifically in relation to theological, educational-theoretical, and religious-didactical elements of religious education. The article includes a ranked table of the most frequently downloaded apps on the topic of religion from the Google Play Store and examines the extent to which the smartphone can be a “life companion”.

The fifth and final section of the volume contains contributions on the significance of mediatization for (self-)understanding and tasks of practical theology. Christian Grethlein places the challenges of digitalization of the “communication of the gospel” in a practical-theological overall context. He identifies a threat in the economic orientation of search engines and the opportunity presented by the Internet for realizing the priesthood of all believers, by enabling communication free of hierarchy. Thomas Schlag follows on with a stimulating article, “Public God-Speech in Digital Society”, in which he problematizes digital forms of religious speech about God and their implications for practical theology.

Wilhelm Gräß’s contribution, “Die ‘Digitalisierung’ religiöser Kommunikation als Thema der Praktischen Theologie” (The ‘Digitalization’ of Religious Communication as a Topic of Practical Theology), is particularly noteworthy for its references to other articles in this volume and can be read as valuable commentary on the volume as a whole. Finally, in “Transformatives Wissen kreieren!” (Creating Transformative Knowledge), co-editor Kristin Merle points to structural changes in the public sphere and the tasks they present to practical theology.

The articles brought together for *Mediatisierung religiöser Kultur (Mediatization of Religious Culture)* are thought-provoking and full of insight into a highly topical field. The range of perspectives will attract in turn a range of scholars from different disciplines. Reading this excellent volume makes eminently clear that (practical) theology must deal with the phenomena of the “Kultur der Digitalität” (culture of digitality) in which we all inevitably find ourselves. As (practical) theologians, we must ask how as humans – alongside AI and robots – we can locate ourselves religiously in mediatized cul-

ture. As the editors note, theologians or practical theologians will continue to be called upon to explore fundamental issues such as how human beings are to understand their role in the world and how the inaccessible might be captured through symbolic representation. But, they astutely recognize, issues of digitalization or mediatization will enable them to turn anew to those issues, collaboratively and energetically and adopting the interdisciplinary perspective this book champions (p. 18).