

A NEW UPDATING OF RELIGION? ON DIGITAL RELIGIOSITIES AND RELIGIOUS TECHNOLOGIES¹

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Beth Singler's work (2023) updates a debate dear to the field of religion studies: the relationship between anthropology and technology. The idea of "updating" is good for thinking about this scenario, given the fact that the practice of "updating" software and applications is increasingly central to our digital daily lives. To put it more radically, accepting "updates" is becoming less of an option and more of an inescapable condition if the functionality of our digital daily lives is to be guaranteed. The verb "update" can be defined as to become (or make something) current, to adapt to the present day; to "modernize". As Singler points out in her debate, dealing with the relationship between religion and technology implies engaging in a debate about projects of "modernity", and in reflections on apparently dichotomous temporal aspects that come to be articulated: the "past" of religion, and the "future" of technology.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST TIMES OF RELIGION

This debate took me back to the title of a research project coordinated by Hent de Vries³, which also became the title of a series of 5 Fordham University Press publications edited by him: "*The Future of Religious Past*"⁴. As a provocation to the reader, the series presents the following question: "In what sense are the legacies of religion – its powers, words, things, and

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³ The Johns Hopkins University and the University of Amsterdam.

⁴ <https://www.fordhampress.com/series/future-religious-past/>. Accessed: 30th January, 2023.

gestures – disarticulating and re-constellating themselves as the elementary forms of life in the twenty-first century?". The books, published between 2010 and 2022, deal with the themes indicated in this question: power, words, things and gestures. In the presentation of the volume on "*Things*" (Things, 2012), edited by Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, we find the following formulation: "exploring the role and place of sacred artifacts, images, bodily fluids, sites and technologies in different locations and religious traditions, this volume re-materializes the study of religion"⁵.

The research project "*The Future of Religious Past*" began in 2002⁶, right at the beginning of the 21st century, and is the result of the impact of the idea of a "new millennium" on religious studies. As a background, the debate with the thesis of secularization, for which religion was destined, at least, to its recollection of public life and, in broader horizons, to the much-discussed "end of religion" in human life. But this, and other projects, dealt with the religions living and lived at the beginning of the 21st century, engaging in this debate on continuities and transformations of the religious from various themes, including that of "things", "materialities" and, together with these, dealing with "technologies".

Resuming the project "*The Future of Religious Past*" is a way (among others possible) to think about Beth Singler's work in continuity with a field of studies that gained momentum in the early 2000s, yielding events and publications that dealt with the relations between religion and media, and religion and technology (Meyer and Pels, 2003; Stollow, 2013)⁷. I think

⁵ <https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823239467/things/>. Accessed: January 30, 2023.

⁶ "The Future of the Religious Past program studied religion at the start of the 21st century. Traditional religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism are once again exerting a powerful pull on people. Yet new, small religious movements have also developed such as New Age, which emphasizes personal spirituality." Funding: NWO (Dutch Research Council). <https://www.nwo.nl/en/researchprogrammes/future-religious-past> Access: January 30, 2023.

⁷ See: Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment (2003); Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between(2013).

that's my way of talking about the past of this debate about the future, from the topic of religion. Thus I reverse the motto of the project, reflecting a little on "the past of the future of religion".

This choice is because I shared the present time of these debates about the future with the Dutch academic community involved in this project and other projects in the early 2000s⁸, and reading Beth Singler's work reminded me of this history that went through many technologies to think about this "tangle", as the author reinforces, between religion and technology: I remember the impact on my formation of studies articulating religion and telegraph (Stolow, 2006), cassette tapes (Hirschkind, 2009), cinema (Meyer, 2015), among other technological contexts, and how these researches were central references for my studies on religion and the internet (Machado, 2006) when I finished my doctorate on the Raelian Movement, a new religious movement that emerged in France in the 1970s. I shall come back to this in due course.

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION TODAY

But if, on the one hand, my reading of Beth Singler's work has made me retake this "past" of religion and technology studies, there is something in this update that is absolutely "of the present day". Not just a study of the field of religion and technology, Singler's work gains traction in its potent articulation between the studies of religion and digital anthropology (Horst and Miller, 2012). The analytical results of her discussion of the entanglements between AI and Religion derive from the methodological theoretical entanglement that the author makes between the anthropology of religion and digital anthropology.

⁸ Capes Scholarship – Sandwich Doctorate, 2005. Supervision: Birgit Meyer (University of Amsterdam). Pioneer Project in Mass Media and the Imagination of Religious Communities. In 2006, I also participated as a listener at the conference of the project "*The Future of Religious Past*" held in April of that year, in Amsterdam.

A second potent dimension of Singler's work is her explicit interest in engaging in dialogue and debate with religion studies, but also with technology studies, particularly those on Artificial Intelligence. Beth Singler presents us with important work so that we can think of religion in the times and in today's terms, entangled with algorithms and also made by them, but also offers very important content to think about technologies that are also made in the times and terms of a long duration of the social, cultural and religious.

These questions refer us to some of the great themes of anthropology such as the agency of things, materialities and immaterialities, techniques, sensorialities, morals, classification systems, definitions of religion, aesthetics, feelings, and values. In Singler's invitation, these ideas are indispensable for thinking about both religion and technology, whether they are together or apart. In my reading, the question that the author leaves us is: is there Artificial Intelligence not entangled with the religious, and is religion not entangled with technology?

In the entry "Technology" written by Jeremy Stolow in the book "Key words in Religion, Media and Culture" (Morgan, 2008), this author structures his debate in three axes: *religion versus technology*; *religion and technology*; and *religion as technology*. In this last session, the author states:

So, when posing the question of how "technology" would most fruitfully serve as a keyword in the study of religion and media, one might wish to try the following thought experiment: imagine any form of religious experience, practice, or knowledge and see what you have left "without technology." No instruments, tools, or devices; no architecture or clothing; no paint, musical instruments, incense, or written documents; not even the disciplined practices of bodily control-such as learned and performed methods of breathing, sitting, or gesturing with one's hands-for these too are technical practices. Even thoughts and images seem to vanish with the removal of the representational technologies of language and iconography. The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from this exercise is that "religion", however, we choose to define it, is inherently and necessarily technological (p. 194-195).

Stolow's reflection is in line with Singler's idea of "entanglement" between religion and technology. I highlight in Stolow's reflections an expanded reading of the idea of technology that, by multiplying and integrating body, technique and languages, proves to be very powerful for thinking about digital. But if there is an important continuity in these approaches when treating religion as technology, Singler's work stands out in a much less developed field in which she insists on the other direction of this arrow: *thinking of technology as religion*.

TECHNOLOGY AS RELIGION

Singler insists that the relationship between religion and the development of social systems must include a debate on technological development, not neglecting the cultural influence of religion also on these social systems. In other words, it is worth thinking, according to the author, how religious conceptions of the world operate in the development of digital technologies. An important discussion developed by Singler deals with the articulation between Artificial Intelligence and the idea of God and Christian theology. In addition to a metaphor, a parody, or an allegory, in the author's analysis, theistic debates about AI mobilize religious systems that participate in the development of technological projects, and their objectives.

If there is an accumulation of important work on the religious appropriations of technological developments to make religion, and not to make it disappear, there is little debate about the religious characteristics of technological projects that design algorithms that act "like God" or "like Gods": superintelligences, of sovereign, omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient agencies.

Singler's analyses of AI theism primarily discuss Christian theology. I wonder what the consequences would be of an approach built on other traditional religions. Somehow, thinking technology from Christianity tends to take as a basis a continuity with Western thought and the idea

of "progress", including technological progress. But studies of religion and media from Islam (Hirschkind, 2009), Hinduism (Thomas, 2021) or Haitian Voudou (Boutros, 2013), among others, show extremely potent empirical and analytical fields, and that bring to the debate other categories to think about technology. There is a contemporary challenge that urges us to think about other futures: Afro-futurism and indigenous futurism are some of these fields, as are Muslim and Hindu futurism.

These reflections call us, therefore, to insist on the importance of the critical development of more works that articulate questions about religion and technology from a perspective more assertively critical of colonialism and the Westernism of the Human Sciences. Part of this effort has been developed by Charles Hirschkind (Scott and Hirschkind, 2006 – *Powers of the Secular Modern*), based on Talal Asad's work on the genealogy of religion and the formation of the secular. Particularly in their text *Media and the Political Forms of Religion*, Hirschkind and Larkin (2008) address the theme "religion and media" accentuating the critical points of Western thought in this debate, and presenting research that consistently reinforces the need to create other analytical models for the topic, based on the demands of contemporary political and epistemological scenes. But there is undoubtedly still much to be done in this regard.

"NEW" MOVEMENTS: A WAY TO RETHINK THE FUTURE AND BORDERS OF RELIGION

In this sense, I find Beth Singler's reflections on the field of New Religious Movements (NRM) very interesting. As stated earlier, during my doctoral thesis I dedicated myself to field research on the Raelian Movement (Machado, 2006), which led me to reflect on religion, media and technology, to face the analytical challenges presented by a religious group that, in the early 2000s, defined the internet as a sacred field, and envisioned the possibility of eternal life through the upload of the personality (understood as a

set of information) in a data cloud, and its subsequent download on new and updated biological physical supports that would guarantee an infinite existence. With a scientific profile, the Raelian Movement led me to a debate on the field of imagination and science fiction to think about religious movements that adhere to a project of technological and transhuman future as a horizon of belief. The Raelian retelling of the Christian biblical text, guided by the extraterrestrials who revealed the truth about human life on Earth to their prophet Raël, is a valuable example of Christian futurism, in which the tower of Babel was actually a spaceship under construction and Samson's hair antennas for telepathic communication with alien creators. In this case, the past recorded in the Bible was already the future. It's the terrestrial humans who don't understand.

After this report full of nostalgia for futurism that captured me during the making of my doctoral thesis, I return here to the dialogue with Singler for identifying in studies on New Religious Movements a frontier analytical potential that, on the one hand, updates classic themes of religion studies (such as magic, belief and spirituality); on the other, presents new themes for religious debates (such as the creative potential of scientific and technological developments); and, in addition, allows us to meet strongly imaginative and creative collectives in which technology developers who form broad transnational techno-religious circuits participate.

If, on the one hand, this scenario seems to reinforce the idea of the contemporary potential of religion making itself, updating itself, on the other, I carefully read Singler's analysis of projects to "hack" religion, infiltrate it with modernities, causing secular mutations within its data structure, so that, at a certain moment, it may be possible to realize that religion will no longer be there, in the space that it seemed to occupy – the god-space, in Singler's terms – and that only technology will remain; and in the place of God, an AI.

RELIGIOUS AND DIGITAL: FIELDS OF POWER

I conclude this dialogue with the work of Beth Singler with an emphasis on the methodological approaches that have been applied by the author in her works on religion and technology. In addition to the indisputable conceptual performance of the relationship between the studies of religion and digitality, the methodological dimension of this approximation between the anthropology of religion and digital anthropology is undoubtedly a ground to be valued and explored. Singler states that this articulation gives visibility to the need for methodologies that lead to research on new spaces where the relationship between religion and AI happens.

Studies on digital in Brazilian anthropology have a history that goes back a few decades of collective work. In the book *Ethnographic Policies in the Field of Cyberculture*, organized by Segata and Rifiotis (2016), it is possible to identify a formative path that marks a field of relations between anthropology and research on digital in Brazil, with a strong interdisciplinary profile, and that has in methodological issues one of its main fronts. Addressing the debate from the categories of "cyberculture", and "cyberspace", and thinking about networks and techniques, the material recorded in this work results from an analysis focused on the borders of Anthropology with the knowledge produced in the field of Communication to think about the relationship between cyberculture and ethnographic policies.

Other works by researchers and researchers in the field of Brazilian Digital Anthropology have more recently accentuated the consequences of theoretical and methodological reflections that are made from the relationship between Anthropology and the fields of Technology Studies, Computer Science, Systems and Platform Development, Cybernetics, among others. I highlight here the reflections of Leticia Cesarino (2021) on the expanded possibilities of anthropological work today, given the issues of digital:

In the era of platformization, the role of an anthropology that is not restricted to ethnography involves not only opening the black boxes of algorithmic

systems and supporting the development of new regulatory forms for an industry that challenges the very foundations of legal frameworks built for a previous media environment (Cruz 2020). She can also actively participate in the new expert systems – the new forms of reintermediation (Santos 2020) – that have been emerging in her wake (Cesarino, 2021, p. 312).

Resuming the work of Gregory Bateson, Cesarino emphasizes the fact that Anthropology is the only social science with a genealogical lineage directly linked to the original movement of cybernetics (p. 308), which enhances it, as a science, not only to develop ethnographic research in digital contexts but to formulate analytical categories about digital and the world that is made from the digital, in a more systemic and structural way.

The dossier "Strategies for thinking about digital", organized by Beatriz Accioly Lins, Carolina Parreiras, and Eliane Tânia de Freitas in the journal *Cadernos de Campo* (v.29, n.2, 2020) also brings together a rich material of research thought from digital, developed by Brazilian researchers, dealing with topics such as gender, sexuality, facial recognition, digital guerrilla, among others. On these last topics, I consider it relevant to point here to the scientific and public production of Nina da Hora⁹, a Computer Scientist and Researcher in the area of Computational Thinking that has been guiding relevant debates, with close articulation with the field of Digital Anthropology, which, in addition to crucial technical relevance for the field of digital security and cyber defense, has been fundamental in the constitution of a solid criticism of the topic of algorithmic racism.

From her critical production on the future of religion and the field of AI, Beth Singler also assumes as one of her concerns the role of religion in confronting the inequalities that arise from AI and algorithms, and from this whole process of automation.

I conclude this reflection by thinking more carefully about the relationship between religion, technology and power. Here I return to the series

⁹ <https://www.ninadahora.dev/>. Access: January 30, 2023.

"*The Future of Religious Past*" with which I began this text. The first volume had the theme "Powers" (Borg and Henten, 2010). In presentation, the following discussion was put forward:

Dealing with the nexus of religion and power, the present volume radically undermines the idea that the political relevance of religion is a thing of the past. Its essays treat power as a central aspect of religion on many levels, from that of macro-politics through the links between religion and nationhood to the level of personal empowerment or its obverse, disempowerment. Power and religion are both omnipresent in human action and interaction¹⁰.

To effectively carry out a tangled discussion about religion and technology (AI and algorithms) it is critical to take on the topic of power as part of this debate. Discussing religion, technology and power, especially from digital environments, means facing a context of production of fundamental transformations in the field of labor, as in the case of the gig economy, and gig workers, addressed with Singler. In dialogue with researchers in the field of work studies, I heard a very sensitive report about evangelical app workers from the Brazilian urban peripheries who refer to the "blessing" of the app, which "fell from the sky", offering a job opportunity for people who faced periods of unemployment and shortages. The blessing of the algorithm, we know, is the very curse of the precariousness of the world of work in a neoliberal context (Andrade, Côrtes and Almeida, 2021), which affects unequals equally.

Among the recent studies that articulate religion, technology and power in Brazil, I highlight Lorena Mochel's (2023) research entitled "The fluidity of anointing: race, gender and evangelical eroticisms in the materialities of a digital ministry". Based on meticulous research on the daily lives of evangelical women, this thesis analyzes ambiguous and ambivalent political-religious processes through which evangelical women have reconfigured themselves as a collectivity through the uses of WhatsApp, and transformed

¹⁰ <https://www.fordhampress.com/9780823231577/powers/> Accessed: January 30, 2023.

rituals for the exercise of faith in their digitized coexistence. Mochel's work is part of a field of research still little explored more recently, capable of taking on the challenge of articulating the contemporary issues posed by the articulation of the fields of Digital Anthropology and Religion in Brazil, assuming the centrality of the debates on race, class and gender for the treatment of these issues.

Finally, still thinking about the Brazilian reality, we know that in the last elections (2018 and 2020) the relationship between religion, technology and power was operated in a sophisticated, ingenious way, mobilizing costly communication, technology and political companies, entangled in an international circuit clearly invested in reorganizing the world political order in even more unequal and violent directions (Cesarino, 2022). Apps, algorithms, information, prayers, blessings and curses were part of this powerful collective work of religious, political and technological content. The analytical possibilities presented in Singler's work point out ways for new research to be carried out in these and other spaces, so that, thus, we have the analytical capacity to understand the power plots, how they are made, and also how they can be undone.

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