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Meeting report: “Religion and technology in an era of rapid digital and climate change”. Conference, 2023, Chennai, IN (hybrid)

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The conference “Religion and technology in an era of rapid digital and climate change”, co-organized by RWTH Aachen University and IIT Madras/Chennai, was held at IIT Madras from 21 to 23 November 2023. It was a timely interdisciplinary and intercultural exercise in making sense of religion and technology and a continuation of current debates in this field: For India, Thomas (2018, 2022) has described a future for science and religion beyond conflict and complementarity. In the West, a new quest for their interlinkage has come up (Jones et al. 2019). After the experience of finiteness and transcendence has been examined in the sciences (Gülker 2012), the latest research has shown how in both Asia and Europe, industry, biotechnology and environmental technologies are involved in the construction of self-transcendence (Siegemund 2022). Here, not only digital transformation, but also climate change adaptation can be seen as motivated through both secular and religious resources (Siegemund 2023).

Technology in religious life practice and human-nature relations

Conference participants came from a variety of humanities and social sciences backgrounds: literature and film studies, history, sociology, social anthropology, science and technology studies, history of science, religious studies and theological studies. Their presentations clustered in four major areas.

First, the transfer of engineered products and processes from the West to Asia is a quest for indigenization including the ritual-

istic specifications of environmental and digital technology. The transfer is being realized through bridging the Christian-humanistic origins of technology and the interconnectedness between secularity and multi-religiosity in India. However, the use of technical products also bears risks for the continuation of colonialism and dependencies. It should also be mentioned here that cultural nationalism often goes hand in hand with strong religious ideology and practice. Some ethnographic conference papers contributed to the causes of cultural nationalism by looking at how Indian right wing Hindutva groups appropriate technology and digital spaces. Technology in such cases helps the right wing nationalist groups to ‘scienticize’ Hinduism. Here, for example, technology is being used to create what Banu Subramaniam calls ‘archaic modernities’ (Subramaniam 2000).

The sociological and anthropological perspectives on digital technologies and religion were discussed by many young scholars at the conference displaying rich ethnographic data of how new technologies are used by the devotees for ritualistic purposes. At the same time, it was also pointed out that right wing groups use these technologies to express and promote cultural nationalism and religious pride. These investigations made clear that religion and religious rites can be understood as a cry of the poor and that technologized practices of religion or faith play an important role.

Second, participants discussed how the increasing interface between religion and technology also shows in the practice of Islamic rituals through digital devices, in the conversion of Adivasi (autochthonous Indian populations) from one to another religion under the influence of mass media, in the emergence of a secular lifestyle, or in a new awareness for Gandhian Spiritual Practices. There is no particular affinity of technologies to a specific religion or secular way of life here. Technology just reinforces the tendencies that exist already in society, thereby contradicting the prejudice of technology being merely a means for secularization.

Throughout the conference, it was emphasized that religion is not to be equated with faith. While faith can be seen as purely individual, collective institutions, places of worship, rites and customs play an essential role in religion. It was noted that religion can no longer be practiced only in an analogue way. Offerings via virtual temples or services via online video broadcast are taking religion to a digital level where the use of technology and a connection to technology are indispensable. Covid-19 has strongly encouraged the use of technology in practices of faith and religion and has strongly emancipated individualized approaches to faith from collective religion. This poses a challenge for all religions and religious institutions, since online religion is interdenominational and interreligious. Since Covid-19 religions have to adapt and respond to individualized believers in a new way, often through digital technology. This changing field of religion and faith is an excellent example of how religion can no longer be understood as the opposite of technology, even in practice. Religion and faith utilize technology and co-evolve with it.

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Third, conference papers showed how the representation of subaltern groups in Indian society and their practices of selfhood vary through the acceptance of technologies. For example, their role changes significantly through access to the digital allowing them to explore secularism as well as Islam, Hinduism, or Christian faith. Media become a means of creating new options and changes the self-understanding.

Fourth, conference papers emphasized that there is a mutually dependent and strong interrelation between religion, nature, and humans. There is an interreligious understanding of nature as creation and of a human-nature relation to be respected and

itself, (2) to construct narratives of human becoming through the coexistence with (invisible) machinery processes, and (3) to open up new ways of creating meaning. This can be helped by the use of audio-video recording and broadcasting, platform technology for climate mitigation, or other emergent technologies still to be designed. In this way, the era of rapid digital transformation and climate change is grounded in transcendent ideas that switch between secular and religious spheres. We need to be sensitive to the intrinsic and unavoidable effect that this era of transformation and change is exercising on worldviews as well as to the influences of faith and religions in TA.

The era of rapid digital transformation and climate change is grounded in transcendent ideas.

protected. Religions in particular can criticize and question the role of technological development in this relation and contribute to environmental protection by opening up a fundamentally critical perspective on the human role. Technology assessment (TA) looks at technological development's impacts on freedom, life chances, but also at threats. The value of emergent technologies is regularly examined by asking in how far they transcend already existing options. Visions of future technological worlds provide an insight into the possible effects on humanity of technological development paths. On the basis of ties between religion and technology, religion was discussed as a source for climate action, such as implementing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in companies as well as creating environmental awareness through religious dignitaries and grassroots work.

Religious-technological transcendence

Contributions to the conference agreed that traditional sociological understanding of technology as the cause of the world's disenchantment does not hold true any longer, rather technology itself has become part of the religious worlds (Srinivas 2018; Geraci 2018). However, from an engineering perspective the most important finding is that neither religion nor technology can exist without a transcendent meaning. The acceptance of any technology is realized through imagining, boundary work, and constructions of unavailable spaces. If cyberspace in the West, for example, can be said to have been modeled on the trans-temporal and trans-spatial communion in the Lord's Supper, in Hinduism it can be said to develop along the lines of the temple community. When emerging technologies address societal hopes of the West, such as the discovery of new worlds (space technology), or realizing justice outside the boundaries of one's own life (intergenerational climate protection), they also play a role in India by modernizing mythology such as Ramayana or the rituals in Varanasi.

Potential future impacts of religious-technological transcendence are (1) to produce ideas of how the world could sacrifice

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Further information

Conference program: <https://hss.iitm.ac.in/conferences-workshops/#ratirdacc2023>