

# COVID-19 AND THE DIGITALIZATION OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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## **ABSTRACT: Covid-19 and the Digitalization of Theological Education.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies across various sectors, including higher education. Theological education, traditionally rooted in physical spaces and face-to-face interactions, has also witnessed a profound transformation in response to the pandemic. This article explores the impact of COVID-19 on the digitalization of theological education, analyzing the challenges, opportunities, and implications for students, faculty, and institutions. By examining the shift to online and blended learning formats, the paper assesses how theological education has adapted to the digital age and considers the long-term implications of this transformation.

**Keywords:** *Theological education, COVID-19, digitalization, online education, higher education.*

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## **Introduction**

Within the realm of higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic disruptive force has been particularly profound, prompting institutions to reevaluate their traditional paradigms and embrace digital technologies as a means of survival. Theological education, a discipline deeply rooted in physical spaces, interpersonal interactions, and spiritual communities, was not immune to this transformation. In this context, theological institutions, faculty, and students have found themselves thrust into a new educational landscape characterized by online and blended learning formats.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Eastern European context also brings a mixture of other challenges to the table. On these, see Marcel V. Măcelaru, "The Context of Theological Education in Eastern Europe. Past, Present, Future", in Marcel V. Măcelaru / Corneliu Constantineanu / Romulus Vasile Ganea (eds.), *Re-Imagining Theological Education*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint / București, Plērōma, 2016, pp. 35-54.

This article addresses the profound impact of COVID-19 on the digitalization of theological education. It explores the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by theological institutions and their stakeholders as they adapt to the exigencies of the digital age. With a keen focus on understanding the shifts towards online and blended learning, this paper investigates the pedagogical and technological changes that have transpired, examining how theological education has met the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic and the ensuing digital transformation.<sup>2</sup>

While exploring this subject matter, the article seeks to illuminate the experiences of students, the adaptations of faculty, and the strategies adopted by theological institutions, while also considering the long-term implications of this digital metamorphosis. By doing so, it offers valuable insights into the evolving landscape of theological education and its significance in a world where digital technologies and virtual connectivity have become integral components of our daily lives.<sup>3</sup>

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Theological Education

The global landscape of theological education underwent a seismic shift with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Traditional norms and established practices were upended, challenging theological institutions to navigate uncharted territories and reimagine educational delivery.<sup>5</sup> In this section of the paper we discuss the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on

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2 On the definition of digital theology, see Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg, "Defining Digital Theology. Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network", in *Open Theology* 5/2019, pp. 29-43.

3 On the managerial and organizational challenges implied in the move from offline to online education, see Eric Ligouri and Christoph Winkler, "From Offline to Online. Challenges and Opportunities for Entrepreneurship Education Following the COVID-19 Pandemic", in *Entrepreneurship Education and Pedagogy* 3-4/2020, pp. 346-351.

4 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Spiritual lessons observed through the Coronavirus Crisis", in *Dialogo. Issue of Modern Man* 6-2/2020, pp. 71-82.

5 See Matthew N.O. Sadiku, Uwakwe C. Chukwu, Abayomi Ajayi-Majebi and Sarhan M. Musa, "Digital Theology. An Overview", in *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development* 6-6/2022, pp. 2068-2071. See also Jones H. Mawerenga and Johannes. Knoetze, "Theological Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. A Malawian Perspective", in *In Skriflig* 56-1/2022, article 2792, pp. 1-10.

theological education, addressing the rapid transition to online and blended learning, the challenges faced by institutions and faculty, the opportunities presented by digitalization, and the profound effects on students and their learning experiences.

The pandemic's urgency prompted theological institutions to swiftly adopt alternative modes of instructional delivery, primarily through online and blended learning models. This abrupt shift posed immediate challenges, given the deeply relational and communal nature of theological education.<sup>6</sup> Virtual classrooms replaced physical ones, and synchronous and asynchronous learning became the new norm. Many institutions, however, faced hurdles in adapting to digital tools and platforms. Faculty, accustomed to traditional teaching methods, had to quickly familiarize themselves with online pedagogies and technology-mediated communication. Also, students and faculty encountered issues related to internet connectivity, access to digital devices, and varying levels of technological literacy, while institutions grappled with providing equitable access to learning resources. Moreover, theological educators had to reconsider teaching methodologies to maintain the transformative aspects of theological education. Adapting spiritual formation, communal worship, and experiential learning to virtual settings posed unique challenges.

Besides the above, the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic brought forth a myriad of challenges for theological institutions and their faculty members. Firstly, came financial strain – the economic fallout of the pandemic impacted institutional finances. Many theological schools, reliant on tuition and donations, faced budgetary constraints, affecting resources for faculty support and technology infrastructure. Secondly, soon after institutions faced problems caused by faculty adaptation and burnout. The sudden transition to online teaching demanded rapid adap-

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6 On theological/Christian education, its nature and purpose, see the articles in Corneliu Constantineanu, Marcel V. Măcelaru and Ciprian-Flavius Terinte (eds.), *On the Idea of a Christian University*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint / București, Plērōma, 2016; Marcel V. Măcelaru, Corneliu Constantineanu and Romulus Vasile Ganea (eds.), *Re-Imagining Theological Education*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint / București, Plērōma, 2016. See also Marcel V. Măcelaru, and Corneliu Constantineanu, "Re-Imagining the Seminary. A Conference Report", in Corneliu Constantineanu / Marcel V. Măcelaru / Anne-Marie Kool and Mihai Himcinschi (eds.), *Mission in Central and Eastern Europe. Realities, Perspectives, Trends*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 34, Oxford, Regnum, 2016, pp. 657–669.

tation from faculty. The increased workload, technical challenges, and the emotional toll of the pandemic led to burnout and stress among educators. Thirdly came isolation and the subsequent loss of community. Theological education traditionally thrives on communal living and face-to-face interactions. The isolation imposed by online learning diminished the sense of community, affecting spiritual and emotional well-being.

However, amidst these challenges, the digital transformation prompted by COVID-19 also unearthed opportunities for innovation and improvement. It offered institutions the means for wider reach and diversity. Online platforms enabled theological institutions to reach a truly global audience, fostering diversity and cross-cultural dialogue among students and faculty. It also brought about much needed technological integration. The pandemic catalyzed the development of advanced technologies in theological education. Virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and digital libraries enriched the educational experience and expanded resource access. Moreover, it also asked for more flexibility in learning modalities. The adoption of online and blended learning allowed for increased elasticity, accommodating diverse student needs and preferences. Recorded lectures and asynchronous discussions provided students with greater control over their learning pace.

All these have evidently impacted theological students and their learning experience. Placed at the heart of theological education, students experienced significant shifts in their educational journey. They first had to adapt to virtual learning. This included navigating the challenges of virtual classrooms, learning to engage with course material, interact with peers, and participate in theological discussions through digital platforms. Secondly students also had to understand anew such notions as spiritual formation. In the absence of physical gatherings and communal worship, the spiritual formation component, which is integral to theological education, had to be addressed creatively, so that a sense of spiritual community in virtual spaces could be fostered. And lastly, institutions faced disparities in technology access and digital literacy, which created a digital divide among students. Institutions grappled with ensuring equitable access to resources and support.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, it is time to also ponder about the long-term implications. Among these, we have the replacement of old with new hybrid educational models. The experience of online and blended learning has prompted discussions about the viability of hybrid models that combine the best elements of in-person and digital education. Of

course, such redirecting raises immediately questions of access and digital equity. Institutions are compelled to address issues of digital equity, investing in infrastructure and support mechanisms to ensure that all students have equal access to theological education.

To summarize, there seems to be a role theological education plays in a changing world, but also an influence the changing world has on theological education.<sup>7</sup> The pandemic has prompted theological institutions to reconsider questions about the relevance and impact of theological education in a digital age in any future planning. This shows that the impact of COVID-19 on theological education is profound and multifaceted. While the challenges are undeniable, the pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of theological education, presenting opportunities for growth, innovation, and increased accessibility. The long-term implications remain an evolving narrative as theological institutions continue to navigate the complex intersection of tradition, technology, and transformative learning in the post-pandemic era.

## Digital Technologies and Theological Pedagogy

The infusion of digital technologies into theological education has ushered in a new era, redefining the landscape of pedagogy within this traditionally rooted discipline.<sup>8</sup> This section presents tools and platforms employed in theological education, the adaptation of teaching methodologies to digital formats, and the integration of digital resources into the theological pedagogical framework.<sup>9</sup>

The adoption of digital technologies in theological education is marked by a diverse array of tools and platforms designed to enhance the

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7 On the role of theological education, see Marcel V. Măcelaru, "Cardinal Tenets of a Christian University. A Proposal", in Corneliu Constantineanu / Marcel V. Măcelaru / Ciprian-Flavius Terinte (eds.), *On the Idea of a Christian University*, Cluj-Napoca, Riso-print / București, Plērōma, 2016, pp. 63-74.

8 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "The use of digital information sources to composition and teaching the course of history and philosophy of religions in the 'Timotheus' Brethren Theological Institute of Bucharest, Romania", in *Religions, laïcités et sociétés au tournant des humanités numériques*, Stefan Bratosin, Mihaela Alexandra Tudor (eds.), Les Arsc, France, Editions IARSIC et ESSACHESS, 2016, pp. 326-334.

9 On the digitalization of theological education, see Jan Viktora, "Not Just One More Good Idea. A Reflection on the Integration of Digital Technology in Theological Education", in *Theological Education* 41-1/2005, pp. 33-44.

teaching and learning experience. Firstly, new and diverse Learning Management Systems (LMS) – platforms such as Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas became indispensable as centralized hubs for course materials, assignments, and communication. LMSs facilitate the organization and delivery of content in online and blended learning environments. Secondly, the move to video conferencing and virtual classrooms employed tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet – all these have become integral for synchronous interactions. Virtual classrooms enable real-time engagement between faculty and students, fostering dynamic discussions and collaborative learning. Thirdly, digital platforms offer opportunities for the creation and utilization of interactive multimedia resources, including video lectures, podcasts, and interactive simulations. These resources cater to diverse learning styles, enhancing engagement and comprehension. Also here, we need to mention collaboration tools such as Google Workspace and Microsoft 365, which facilitate collaborative work among students and faculty. Shared documents, collaborative editing, and virtual group projects promote teamwork and knowledge sharing. Lastly, online assessment and feedback systems provide efficient means of evaluating student progress. Online quizzes, discussion forums, and automated feedback mechanisms contribute to a streamlined and timely assessment process.

Needless to say, this transition to digital theological education necessitates a rethinking of traditional teaching methodologies to align with the capabilities and constraints of digital platforms. In this regard, recognizing the flexibility afforded by digital formats, asynchronous learning allows students to engage with course materials at their own pace. Recorded lectures, discussion forums, and pre-recorded content cater to diverse schedules and time zones. In addition to this, live virtual sessions were used to bring a sense of immediacy to theological education. Faculty can conduct real-time lectures, facilitate discussions, and engage in Q&A sessions, fostering a dynamic and responsive learning environment. More courageously, the blend of synchronous and asynchronous elements create hybrid pedagogies. This approach combines the benefits of real-time interaction with the flexibility of self-paced learning, accommodating diverse student needs. Digital platforms were developed that enable the simulation of real-world experiences, such as virtual field trips, simulated case studies, and online practicum experiences. These virtual environments contribute to experiential learning in the digital realm. Furthermore, the

incorporation of social media and online communities by making use of platforms like Facebook groups, Twitter, and discussion forums, gives theological educators can foster online communities that extend beyond the virtual classroom. These spaces facilitate ongoing discussions, networking, and community building.

In addition to these facilities for enhanced communication, it is necessary to observe that digitalization brings more access to theological research and resources. The integration of digital technologies extends easily beyond instructional delivery to encompass theological research and access to digital resources. The digitization of theological texts and historical documents enhances accessibility for students and researchers. Digital libraries and archives provide a wealth of resources for scholarly exploration. Also, the availability of theological journals, articles, and databases online expands the scope of research. Electronic access to scholarly publications facilitates comprehensive literature reviews and current research exploration. In addition to these is the support for collaborative research projects that enable scholars to work together across geographical boundaries. Online tools for collaborative writing, data analysis, and project management enhance the research process. Theological educators can leverage Open Educational Resources to access freely available teaching materials, textbooks, and multimedia resources. This democratization of educational content contributes to greater inclusivity and affordability. The use of digital tools for biblical exegesis and theological reflection enhances the depth and breadth of scholarship. Software for linguistic analysis, historical research, and theological reflection supports a robust and nuanced approach to theological inquiry. As theological education embraces the digital age, the thoughtful integration of technology into pedagogical practices holds the potential to enrich the learning experience, foster collaborative scholarship, and extend the reach of theological education to a global audience. The ongoing exploration of innovative tools and methodologies continues to shape the evolving landscape of digital theological pedagogy.

### **Long-Term Implications of Digitalization**

The seismic shift brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the realm of theological education has far-reaching implications that extend well beyond the immediate crisis. As institutions, faculty, and students grapple

with the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital transformation, several key long-term implications emerge that are poised to shape the future landscape of theological education. Firstly, the experiences of online and blended learning have laid the foundation for the exploration of hybrid educational models.<sup>10</sup> The integration of in-person and virtual elements may become a defining characteristic of theological education in the post-pandemic era. This hybridity offers flexibility, accommodating diverse learning preferences and addressing the need for accessibility. Secondly, the pandemic has accelerated the recognition of diverse learning pathways. Institutions may increasingly adopt flexible learning structures, allowing students to engage with theological education in a manner that aligns with their individual needs, schedules, and life circumstances. This flexibility enhances the accessibility and inclusivity of theological education.

Beyond these, though, there are challenges brought to light by the digital divide, which underscore the urgency of addressing digital equity in theological education. Institutions may prioritize initiatives to ensure equitable access to technology, reliable internet, and digital resources. Efforts may include providing financial assistance, technology support, and targeted programs for students facing disparities. Also, long-term implications may manifest in the adoption of more inclusive pedagogical practices. Institutions may implement strategies to cater to diverse learning styles, technological proficiencies, and cultural backgrounds. A commitment to inclusivity may influence course design, assessment methods, and support services.<sup>11</sup>

All these lead to the question of the role theological education is to play in the post-pandemic world. The digital transformation has enabled theological education to transcend geographical boundaries. Institutions may increasingly embrace globalization, fostering collaboration with international partners, and providing students with opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. This interconnectedness may contribute to a more globally informed and diverse theological education. Also, the pandemic has

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10 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Current Values of Education and Culture", in *Proceedings of the 24th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 87-92.

11 See Marcel V. Măcelaru, "Jednakost u obrazovanju – relacijska perspektiva", in Marcel V. Măcelaru / Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija (eds.), *Obrazovanje za rodnu jednakost*, Tenja, Ženska udruga 'Izvor', 2011, pp. 18-21.



accelerated the integration of technology into theological research. Digital tools for biblical exegesis, theological reflection, and collaborative research projects may become standard components of theological scholarship. This integration enhances the depth and efficiency of theological inquiry.

Furthermore, the experiences of digital learning have spurred ongoing innovation in teaching methodologies. Faculty may continue to explore and refine online and blended learning approaches, incorporating emerging technologies and pedagogical best practices. This evolution contributes to a more dynamic and responsive theological pedagogy. The adaptability required during the pandemic underscores the importance of lifelong learning for both faculty and students. Institutions may invest in robust professional development programs, ensuring that faculty stay abreast of technological advancements, pedagogical trends, and theological developments.

Given all these, theological institutions ought to consider strategic technology investments. The ongoing integration of advanced technologies, improvements in digital infrastructure, and the development of custom educational platforms may become central to institutional strategies. And a related consideration would be crisis preparedness and resilience. The experiences of the pandemic highlight the need for such preparedness and resilience in the face of unforeseen challenges. Institutions may develop comprehensive crisis response plans, ensuring the continuity of theological education in diverse scenarios. Finally, long-term implications also may involve a continued focus on research to assess the efficacy of online and blended learning in theological education. Ongoing studies may explore the impact on student outcomes, spiritual formation, and the overall effectiveness of digital pedagogies. Within this context, ethical and theological reflection on technology becomes necessary. Deliberations on the ethical use of technology, its theological implications, and considerations of digital spirituality may become integral components of theological discourse.

In conclusion, the long-term implications of the digital transformation in theological education are multifaceted, influencing educational models, pedagogical approaches, and the overall landscape of theological scholarship. As institutions navigate these implications, a commitment to inclusivity, innovation, and adaptability will be pivotal in shaping the future of theological education in a rapidly changing world.<sup>12</sup>

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12 On the future of theological education, see Marcel V. Măcelaru, "A little child shall lead them. On Re-Imagining the Seminary", in Marcel V. Măcelaru / Corneliu Constan-

## Conclusion

The digital transformation of theological education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic marks a pivotal moment in the history of academic pedagogy. As theological institutions, faculty, and students grappled with the challenges and opportunities presented by online and blended learning, a landscape emerged that is both reshaped and redefined. The multifaceted exploration across various dimensions of this transformation yields profound insights and raises critical considerations for the future.

The pandemic acted as a catalyst, propelling theological education into an era of innovation, adaptability, and inclusivity. The experiences outlined in this research paper shed light on the remarkable resilience of theological institutions in the face of unprecedented challenges. Faculty members exhibited a commendable capacity for rapid adaptation, embracing new pedagogical approaches and leveraging digital tools to enrich the learning experience. Students, the heartbeat of theological education<sup>13</sup>, demonstrated remarkable flexibility in navigating the complexities of virtual learning while reflecting on the profound implications of this shift.

The digital divide emerged as a focal point, emphasizing the urgency of addressing disparities in technology access and digital literacy. Institutions and educators have a collective responsibility to bridge these gaps, ensuring that all students, irrespective of their geographical location or socio-economic status, can fully participate in the digital theological landscape.<sup>14</sup>

Best practices and recommendations outlined in this paper serve as guideposts for shaping the future of theological education. Clear communication, faculty development, inclusive course design, and strategies for equitable access are not just reactive measures to current challenges but

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tineanu / Romulus Vasile Ganea (eds.), *Re-Imagining Theological Education*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint / București, Plëröma, 2016, pp. 131-146. See also Marcel V. Măcelaru, "The Bible as a Document of the University", in Corneliu Constantineanu / Marcel V. Măcelaru / Ciprian-Flavius Terinte (eds.), *On the Idea of a Christian University*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint / București, Plëröma, 2016, pp. 187-194.

13 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Valences of Education", in *Proceedings of the 24th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 190-196.

14 On the equity needed in education, see the articles in Marcel V. Măcelaru, and Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija (eds.), *Obrazovanje za rodnu jednakost*, Tenja, Croatia, Ženska udruga „Izvor”, 2011.

proactive steps toward building a more resilient and inclusive educational ecosystem.

The long-term implications are extensive and transformative. The rise of hybrid educational models, the emphasis on flexible learning pathways, and the heightened focus on globalization<sup>15</sup> and collaboration signal a future where theological education transcends physical boundaries. The theological discourse itself is evolving, with an increased integration of technology into research and a growing awareness of the ethical and theological considerations inherent in the digital age.

In conclusion, the digital transformation of theological education is an ongoing narrative. It is a story of challenges met with innovation, of disruptions met with adaptability, and of a timeless pursuit of knowledge navigating the contours of a rapidly changing world. As theological institutions continue this journey, guided by best practices, inclusivity, and a commitment to transformative learning, the future holds the promise of a more accessible, connected, and resilient theological education for generations to come.

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<sup>15</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Globalization and its effect on religion", in *Journal for Freedom of Conscience (Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință)* 1-1/2014, pp.532-541.

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