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RDM & Data Science in (Systematic) Theology

Theology has a long history of working with (primarily text-based) artifacts. Until recently, digitization was used for digitizing those artifacts rather than considering the "new" digital world itself as holding significance for theological research. Consequently, questions related to research data management (RDM) infrastructure and the application of data scientific methodologies are still in their infancy.

The rise in mass data analysis in particular presents theological research with new opportunities. However, due to the religious nature of the communication analyzed, the resulting datasets can hold uniquely sensitive data. The most concerning RDM issue is thus the discussion around data security. Approaches such as anonymization and aggregation hold great potential while still presenting special challenges for reusability and transferability of results.

The main challenges theology faces in the application of data science approaches are theoretical and practical in nature. On the theoretical side, epistemological questions about theological inquiry interfere with the need to operationalize concepts. On the practical side, a lack of technical training and expertise in data scientific research prevents those skills from being part of current curricula. The interdependent nature of these issues makes them challenging to address. Thankfully, small clusters for Digital Theology are developing, tackling the main issues necessary for this topic to receive broader attention. However, better access to no-code and low-code applications for data science is needed to support the process beyond those clusters and help theology's advancement as a modern science.

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