

PROGRAM OF TEYLERS THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY IN HAARLEM FOR THE YEAR 2022

THE DIRECTORS OF TEYLERS STICHTING (TEYLERS FOUNDATION) AND THE MEMBERS OF TEYLERS GODGELEERD GENOOTSCHAP (TEYLERS THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY) invite submissions for their essay competition. Deadline: May 1, 2025.

Subject: **Requested is a theological reflection on the now all-pervading digital technology.**

Further explanation

The Teylers Museum's collection includes a thunder house¹ and a thunder boat², while the Museum Boerhaave in Leiden has a small thunder church³. John Cuthbertson, commissioned by the first museum director Van Marum, built the large electrostatic generator at Teylers Museum two years after its construction, as well as the little thunder church in 1782. The houses and the church served to function in an experiment that accompanied lectures on electricity—especially lightning. Electrostatic generators produced a current that struck the lightning rod on the miniature structures; nothing spectacular happened. The test was then repeated, but this time without lightning rods. There was a bang and a fire started and the windows and doors of the house flung out of the frames, the ship's mast broke in two, and the little church collapsed completely. (A bit of gunpowder was used in the explosions for the dramatic effect of the lightning strike.)⁴

The church's collapse suggests that both church and theology can fail if they both ignore the realities of science. The theological discussion includes the question of whether the lightning rod is a presumption against God. The Swiss physician and researcher Johann Jacob Scheuchzer (1672-1733) wanted to reconcile natural sciences on the one hand with God and the Bible on the other. In his famous *Physica Sacra*, of which Teylers has a Dutch edition⁵, Scheuchzer shows that thunder and lightning are seen in the Bible as voices of God, but he explains them physically.⁶

Teylers Museum is one of the five Dutch science museums that have jointly created an online center for the material heritage of science and technology in the Netherlands.⁷ Teylers is unique in this consortium in the sense that two societies have been associated with the Teylers family since the eighteenth century, one of which is the Theological Society.

¹ <https://www.teylersmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/instruments/fk-0517-thuder-house>

² <https://www.teylersmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/instrumenten/fk-0516-thunder-ship>

³ <https://boerhaave.adlibhosting.com/Details/collect/17614>

⁴ See also Jan Wim Buisman, *Onweer. Een kleine cultuurgeschiedenis. 1752-1830*, Nijmegen: Vantilt 2019, esp. 35-53.

⁵ J.J.Scheuchzer, *Geestelyke Natuurkunde*, Amsterdam: Petrus Schenk, 1735-1738.

⁶ 'Klaar is het, dat door spreekwyzen, van de Luchthevelingen genomen, het alderzwaarste onweder met Hagel en Blixem omzet word beschreeven, waar door (...) zeer vele zolpher en zalpeterachtige uytwaassemingen door ontsteeking sterk worden bewoogen en tot de aldersnelste bewegingen tot *blixemen* worden gedrongen, welke [namelijk in de Bijbel – MB] vuurige ballen, *vuurige koolen* worden genaamd, of *brandende koolen*', Scheuchzer, *Geestelyke Natuurkunde*, Vol.5, 650-655, Printblad CCCCXIII, 654.

⁷ The other museums are the University Museum Utrecht, NEMO Science Museum, University Museum Groningen, and Rijksmuseum Boerhaave.

Whereas in the eighteenth century the conversation between theology and science was limited to physico-theology, in the present era, the conversation has virtually ceased. However, e-technology is now all-pervasive. Does this e-technology still contribute to human flourishing and progress, as in the Enlightenment? It partly does, but not in the immediate sense. Again, theological reflection is desirable.

This essay competition challenges entrants to conduct a contemporary debate between science and theology. More specifically, it asks for a theological reflection on the now all-pervasive digital technology and its consequences for humans and our thinking about God. Needless to say, the power positions of science and theology relative to each other have completely changed since the Enlightenment.

A “world wide web” of electronic connections is woven around the globe. It even has connections to the planetary system through advanced telescopes and other space-discovering technology. This is the web of threads that enables the transportation of information (“data”) around the globe. In addition, there is a web of aviation technology and other transportation means that allows the transportation of people even into space.

Humans seem to be standing on the threshold of a change, in which technology is no longer at the service of humans; rather, humans will be increasingly controlled by technology. Moreover, this all-pervasive and increasingly all-powerful technology has a profound influence on ecosystems, flora and fauna, and cultural (anthropological and social) and psychological structures and constellations, as well as the way knowledge is acquired. It has already been proposed that we should speak of our era as the “technocene,” in which algorithmic processes reign. In every case, nature, humans, and technology can no longer be regarded as distinct entities. It is unlikely that religion would remain outside of the entanglement.

Do these developments mean a radicalization or the end of the humanist project that started with the Renaissance and continued into the Enlightenment and until now? Philosophers speak in this context of “posthumanism.” This is a critical notion that goes in two apparently different directions. On the one hand, the notion aims to create space for what has been suppressed and marginalized in the anthropocentrism that followed the humanism of the Enlightenment: nature, flora and fauna, and the ecosystems in which they are kept together, but also people who were colonized and enslaved; posthumanism is a plea for a radicalization of the humanist project. On the other hand, the notion of posthumanism describes how digital techniques, such as artificial intelligence, are ending the “human” project. This form of posthumanism was announced by Heidegger in his famous essay *The Question Concerning Technique*, in which he explains that technology puts humans in a position where they become resources that have to deliver and can be managed (“human resource management”).⁸

No matter the theory, people, the natural environment, and technology are becoming more and more intertwined and can no longer be seen as separate from each other. Medical technology can increasingly replace parts of the human body and even of the human mind; “artificial intelligence” is increasingly reaching for autonomy and has as-yet unknown

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, New York etc.: Harper Perennial Modern Thought 2013, 18.

possibilities. People often gather knowledge online, which is controlled by algorithms and appears to be fueling polarization. “Deep fakes” pretend to be real. In short, humans are becoming more and more extensions of technology and increasingly losing autonomy. Thanks to this technology, with divine potential, we stand, as Harari says, on the threshold of eternal life as *homo deus*. Or do we just stand at the end of the human era and at the beginning of the reign of a *deus algoritmus*?

In short, although in the project of the Enlightenment—think of the little thunder church—technology served humanity and led to a better life, contemporary e-technologies seem to announce the end of the human project. What does this mean theologically? More specifically, the question is, what is this interconnection of humans, nature, and e-technology in light of God, the canonical Scriptures and their interpretation histories? And who is the supposed *deus algoritmus* in relation to the God of those traditions? What is at stake if the *deus algoritmus* as the God of the “technocene” supplants that God?

Authors are free to set up entries as they wish, subject to the following conditions: Entries must be emphatically theological in nature, and they must be based on one or more e-technological practices. The Teylers Foundation and Teylers Theological Society appreciate including reflections in an entry on the exhibitions “Surreal Science” (summer of 2023) and “Virtual Realities” (spring 2024) in Teylers Museum.

Entries should consist of either one extended study, in the form of a text prepared for publication, or of several publications, most of which should have appeared in the three years prior to May 1, 2025. In the latter case, entrants should also submit a hitherto unpublished text, written especially for the competition, in which the earlier publications are placed in a broader academic context.

General Information

Pieter Teyler van der Hulst (Haarlem, 1702-1778) was a Dutch merchant. In his will, he stipulated the founding of Teylers Stichting (Teyler’s Foundation). Part of this Foundation are two learned societies, each of which presents a yearly essay competition. Teylers Godgeleerd Genootschap (Teyler’s Theological Society) is one of these societies. It organizes essay competitions in the field of theology, philosophy of religion, and religious studies.

Procedures

- In order to qualify for the competition, candidates should submit four copies of their entry to the Directors of Teylers Stichting, Spaarne 16, 2011 CH Haarlem, The Netherlands, before May 1, 2025. Entries received after that date will not be taken into consideration.
- The essays must be in English, French, German, or Dutch. Because of the stipulations of Pieter Teyler’s will, the essays may not mention the author’s name but should be identified only by a motto. The entry should be accompanied by a sealed envelope containing the author’s name and address, with the motto on the outside.
- To avoid a long wait before hearing the result of the evaluation, in case an award has not been made, authors are requested to send together with the sealed envelope an open envelope containing the name and full address of a person with whom the Directors of Teylers Stichting may enter into correspondence confidentially.

Evaluation

- The evaluation will be carried out by the members of Teylers Godgeleerd Genootschap (Professor M. Barnard, Professor H.L. Beck, Professor E. Jorink, Professor A.B. Merz, Professor M. Popović, Dr. E.P. Schaafsma, Professor E.G.E. van der Wall).
- The evaluation will be communicated within seven months from the final date of submission in the form of a recommendation to the Directors of Teylers Stichting, who will decide within one month whether or not to give an award.
- This decision is final.
- All candidates will be notified by the directors as soon as a decision has been made.

Award

- The award consists of a gold medal struck from the seal of the Godgeleerd Genootschap.
- In addition, the Doopsgezind Predikfonds in Haarlem will grant the sum of €4,500 to the author or authors of the winning entries to use as they see fit.
- The medal will be awarded to the winner(s) at a special ceremony in the Teylers Museum in Haarlem.
- Representatives of professional journals, members of the press, and other interested persons and institutions will be informed of the award ceremony well in advance.

Publication

The authors themselves will arrange for publication of their work, mentioning that it has received an award from Teylers Stichting. If desired, Teylers Stichting and its theological society may consider lending assistance.

Editors of websites, scientific journals, and other bodies wishing to draw the attention of their readers to the essay competition are urged to advise interested candidates to consult the program for full details.

The program of Teylers Godgeleerd Genootschap is available free of charge on request from the Directors of Teylers Stichting, Spaarne 16, 2011 CH Haarlem, The Netherlands, or can be accessed at www.teylersmuseum.nl/en en www.teylersstichting.nl