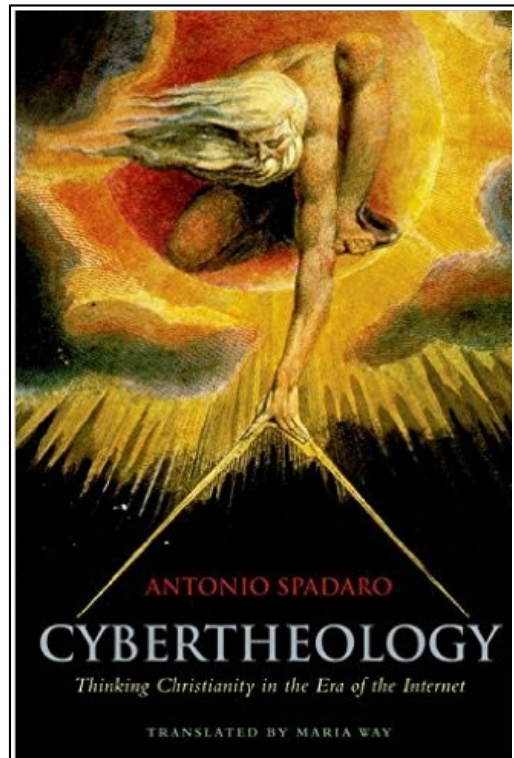# Reviews

Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet, by Antonio Spadaro, translated from Italian by Maria Way. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, pp. 160, $24, Paperback; ISBN: 9780823257003. Language: English.

Roman Catholic priest, theologian and Jesuit monk Antonio Spadaro became famous worldwide after his interview with Pope Francis, which took place in the Pope's room at the Domus Sanctae Marthae in the Vatican. The final text has been published in Italian in the Jesuit-run journal 'La Civiltà Cattolica' (2014, vol. 1, p. 3-17). The English version was entitled 'Wake Up The World!' and this appeal corresponds very much to the main subject of the activity of Antonio Spadaro as a media researcher as well.

Pope Francis' words 'The Church, must be attractive', and his mentioning of 'symbolic frontiers' to be overcome with the missionary message, encourage Catholic theologians to comprehend the whole concept of cyberspace and cyber media - examining their impact on the core of the message.

Therefore, the book *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet,* originally published in Italian (2012),[1] and then translated by well-known media researcher Maria Way into English, attracted the attention of scholars focused on the mediatization of religion. Spadaro continues his reflections on the impact of new information technologies that began in his two previous books, published in Italian, *Connections: New Forms of Culture*[2] and *Web 2.0: Webs of relationships.*[3] Spadaro tries to address the relationship between the internet and theology, which to him is underexposed in theological discourse.

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[1] Spadaro, A. (2012). *Cyberteologia. Pensare il cristianesimo al tempo della rete.* Milan: Vita e Pensiero.
[2] Spadaro, A. (2006). *Connessioni: Nuove forme della cultura.* Bologna: Pardes.
[3] Spadaro, A. (2010). *Web 2.0: Reti di relazione.* Milan: Paoline.

According to Spadaro, the intersection of theology and communication is enriching for theologians in two main perspectives: (1) communication as a context for theology and (2) communication structures as a modulation of theological reflection. Consequently, the translator of his last book, Maria Way, emphasizes two questions important for Spadaro from a systematic theology viewpoint: (1) What impact has the internet had on the way Catholics understand the Church and the ecclesial communion? (2) What impact has it had on the ways in which Catholics think about Revelation, grace, liturgy, the sacraments and classical theological themes?[4]

To clarify the term 'theology', Spadaro quotes Pope Benedict XVI and calls it 'the intelligence of faith'. It means that the book is written from the ecclesial standpoint, and so all of the statements are convincing mostly to Catholics, but not to all Christians. He adds then, that he is 'neither a sociologist nor a computer scientist'. Therefore, we should take this book not as a scientific treatise, but as a compilation of thoughts about the modern world and the role of 'cyber theology' in it. At the same time, Spadaro underlines the role of intelligence in a broader context: 'We know well how intelligence, understood as critical and reflexive knowledge, is not extraneous to cultural changes that are underway.'

The book has a specific structure: it consists of six chapters, each of which includes 5-6 sections - obviously all of them are connected by a mutual idea, but the vast majority can be taken as small completed essays. The other feature of the book is also described by Spadaro himself: 'The pages that follow should be considered as an introduction to a work that is, and will always be, in progress'. It means that the author rarely makes any conclusions, but most of the time asks questions and offers some ideas to discuss.

One of the main points of the work in its entirety is that the internet is not a new world – it's an extension of ours. The handheld devices that permit us to be connected at all times are becoming even lighter and smaller, making life's digital dimensions almost transparent. They are open doors that are rarely closed. Who turns off an iPhone anymore? There are some who do not even know how to turn one off. Spadaro puts the internet at the same level as other significant human achievements, such as the alphabet, printing press and mechanical transport. He refers to Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*, comparing the internet as a new space to the railway station (when it was a new thing). The station has become an environment that is also symbolic and not just a simple deport for a means of transport. If this is true of the railway station, it is even more so of the internet today. Thus, he highlights the need to integrate the Christian message into this new culture that has been created by modern communication. The internet is a new area in which the Church has to express herself properly in order to remain an institution which can understand how modern humanity works.

Beyond this first question (what impact has the internet had on the Church), there is another one: how has the theological conscience influenced the system of the internet? As a great example of such an effect, Spadaro comes up with some linguistic thinking. When using a computer and files of various types, we use words like save and convert, but also justify. This gives us an understanding that communication between the Church and the internet is a deeply mutual process. That's probably the main reason why the book has such a title. In the very first chapter the author presents us almost ten definitions of the term 'cybertheol-

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[4] Way, Maria (2012). 'Cybertheology: Thinking about Christianity in the Era of the Net'. *Communication Research Trends*, 31 (3): 37–41.

ogy' according to three different classifications. It shows how still unclear the subject is, but at the same time how it is complex and important. Also talking about the cyberworld, Spadaro pays attention to other technologies besides the internet. For example, he writes about the impact of a new way of mentally isolating yourself brought about by an iPod, and the possibility of preserving content you are interested in for a very long time. He really wants to understand if our perception of reality (and therefore of the religious world) has been changed completely or not. However, this question, being truly philosophical, remains unanswered.

In the context of the internet, Spadaro reminds us of the concept of the gift, taking into consideration not only content but also free software or freeware - file sharing, free software, open source, user-generated content, creative commons, social networks etc. 'The Web is the place of the gift [...] Gratia gratis data, as it is theologically understood, means that one does not take but receives, and one always enters into a relationship beyond which we have no understanding', writes Spadaro, recalling the well-known notion of solidarity, developed in Catholic social teaching.

In his book the author firmly underlines the point of the Catholic Church: it is impossible to consider virtual reality as a substitute for the real experience of the Christian community. Spadaro refers to the document 'The Church and the Internet' (2002), published by the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, which was very clear: virtual reality cannot substitute for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments and worship (no. 9). 'There are no sacraments on the Internet. Even the religious experiences that are possible through the grace of God are insufficient if separated from interaction with the real world and with the other faithful', reminds Spadaro. He considers the concept of the virtual sacraments to be rooted in the fact that it would be an 'avatar' that would receive God's grace - Pathos takes the place of Logos.

Referring to the widely debated social networks, the author says that the Church cannot be reduced to the 'ultimate social network', because it is much wider than just a web of relationships. 'The sense of participation - as taking part in a celebration that is absolutely not reducible to its psychological components or to the stimulation', underlines Spadaro. He sees the fundamental risk in the experience of the liturgy on the internet, giving an impression of a flow of 'magic' that is able to fade away unless the sense of community and ecclesial mediation is cancelled – the role of the technology that makes the event possible becomes a primary factor. 'What is the difference between a live concert followed online thanks to technology - which allows us an immersive experience (fast connections, good domestic audio equipment and so on) - and a liturgical celebration? Here, it is clear that the broadest questions in regard to sacred liturgies and profane liturgies (which are those that are celebrated in stadia, big shows, or concerts) begin to emerge', clarifies Spadaro. He calls to extend the level of reflection on the internet and the role of the technology that makes the virtual presence possible in a sacred context. 'Underneath, the 'magic' functions of the internet actually consist of the negation of spatial distance, of allowing us to 'grab' what is far away, to establish direct and efficacious contact with what is beyond our control, which is distant in many ways', the author writes.

Analyzing the modern trend - 'what is theological, becomes technological' – he refers to Teilhard de Chardin's[5] theories on the notion of the technological, planetary nervous system. According to de Chardin, technologies also enable a sort of interconnected intelligence. Comparing his concept to the reflections of Pierre Levy[6], Spadaro calls to verify thinking about today's technological innovation in a frame of the theological mindset. 'To think about the Web and the impact of new technologies on humans, we need categories that only theological thought seems able to furnish. However, distorting theology overturns it, as Levy has done', writes Spadaro. Instead, he considers Teilhard de Chardin's approach to be a rich and complex vision 'with prophetic impulses'.

In his final chapter, Spadaro quotes McLuhan's T*he Light is the Medium: Reflections on Religion[7],* while also mentioning theological and media scholars - not just Catholic or Christian, but Islamic thinkers too.

All in all the book tries to explain that recently, in our reality, a so-called third place has appeared, which lies between the public (or social) and the private (or personal). The main task of the Church is to manage how to deal with it and how to adjust her structure to it in order to maintain a constructive dialogue. 'The Internet becomes a stage in humanity's journey, humanity that is moved, urged on, and guided by God' - with these words the Jesuit priest concludes his book.

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[5] Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (2008). *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: Harper Perennial.
[6] Levy, Pierre (1999). *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.
[7] McLuhan, Marshall (2002). *La luce e il mezzo: Riflessioni sulla religione.* Rome: Armando.