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Review

Antonio Spadaro (trans. Maria Way)

Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet

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Antonio Spadaro is the editor of the review *La Civiltà Cattolica* and teacher at the Pontifical Gregorian University. His book *Cybertheology* is a study that evaluates how technology is changing the way people perceive, as well as practice, their Christian beliefs. A number of modern technologies are mentioned by the author, but a great deal of this book looks primarily at how computers and the internet have changed the way in which people interact, or, in Spadaro's terminology, 'interface,' with their religious beliefs (more specifically their Catholic beliefs). He also touches on how a traditional institution like the Catholic Church may find itself unwillingly transformed in a society that exists not only in the 'real' world but also in augmented, virtual and simulated realities. Spadaro takes his readers through an entertaining journey into technological changes through the ages, evaluating how these technologies redefine perceptions of traditional institutions and asking where the Catholic Church finds itself in the advent of new technologies.

The book is separated into six chapters. Chapter 1 looks at the internet as a 'cultural environment' (p. 3). Spadaro assesses how tools and inventions have changed the way in which people interact with their environments, and how these inventions were used as a means for humans to adapt to their ever-mutable surroundings. The main purpose of this chapter, titled "The Internet: Between Theology and Technology", is to question how the internet has affected the "comprehension of faith and the Church" (p. 6), and Spadaro argues that it has integrated the Church's message into a new culture (p. 7). He asks the rather succinct question: "if technology, in particular the digital revolution, changes our way of thinking, then does this not mean that we, in some way have to reconsider the faith and how

to communicate it[?]" (p. 9). Chapter 1 sets the scene for the rest of Spadaro's book and is where Spadaro informs his readers as to the purpose of his work: to find a more precise definition for cybertheology, a discipline that he believes is difficult to define (p. 16).

Chapter 2 is an extension of the previous discussion. Here, the author argues that religious institutions should embrace positive technological changes, and he looks more in-depth at the representation of God on the internet. Spadaro argues that humans must decode God's message in a virtual space. He assesses how the Christian God 'exists' on the web and suggests that this presence is clouded by other, more popular media. To elaborate, the author uses a search engine to illustrate what happens if one searches for 'God' on the internet. Results are related to video games like *Gods of War* and films. Spadaro argues that this demonstrates that regardless of how easy search-engines have makes it harder for individuals to find answers to difficult questions, so they are still incapable of answering questions related to faith and God.

Chapter 3 moves on from an internet-based search to the idea that the internet is in effect becoming a third place, somewhere that exists between the public and the private, between the personal and the social. To demonstrate the idea of a 'third place', Spadaro uses the example of a coffee shop, a place where individuals go to be close to others but where they can also disconnect. From here, Spadaro moves on to argue that the internet is creating these 'third places' and that the Church has yet to adapt to this change. Spadaro believes this to be a mistake, because the Church should find ways to include its flock physically as well as virtually (p. 34). He believes that the Church was once the centre of the community and that, due to the invention of the internet and the creation of virtual communities, it is losing this significance (p. 38-39).

The previous chapters focus primarily on how the internet has changed the way Christians interface with their beliefs, but Chapter 4 takes a rather different turn. It explores Christian visions on the net and ethics related to a hacker mentality, showing that these ethics correlate closely with Christian ideals. Spadaro demonstrates that Christian hackers believe themselves to be participating in the creative works of God, even though society may not agree with their agenda. He goes on to argue that Christian ideals are represented in file sharing and open source projects, using examples like Perl (p. 62). The chapter also looks at the personal experiences of these hackers (not in great detail) and shows that these individuals believe the internet has provided them with the resources needed to live decent, Christian lives.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine how technology has transformed the way religious teachings are distributed, exploring ideas related to the future of the Church under the influence of new technological advances. One of the technologies Spadaro uses to demonstrate a noticeable and positive change is the microphone, a small change through which an entire congregation could hear and participate in God's Word. This reader was particularly interested in Spadaro's exploration of the idea of a second life existing within the internet (drawing on examples of the Second Life MMO) and how people are modeling their virtual lives on the real, to such an extent that they are creating virtual places of worship. Leading from this, Chapter 6 primarily explores the internet in terms of a collective consciousness as presented by Pierre Levy (p. 94) and also explores Spadaro's belief that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's visions may have prophesied the internet, especially as a 'path

to the noosphere' (p. 97).

The author makes many valid claims related to technology, how it is influencing the way people interact with their environment, and how these inventions have changed peoples' relationships with the Catholic Church. He also makes some decent observations about the need for the Church to move with the times, so to speak, and he does this in a rather entertaining fashion. Another of the major highlights of this text is how well it was translated. Maria Way does a superb job in this regard.

Despite these positives, however, there are a number of stark problems with this book. The most challenging of these is the author's rather limited Christocentric view of technology and the church. The majority of Spadaro's sources are Christian, and he offers a very subjective view in terms of cybertheology. There are also some concerns related to his assumptions regarding computer 'jargon' and semiotics. One example he uses is the concept of 'saving' a file, and he argues that this is analogous to saving one's soul in Christianity. Though one can see his point, these assumptions are rather naïve and are somewhat irrelevant, as they are widely open to interpretation, and they add nothing of value to his argument. Nor are they proof of a solid connection between computers and Christianity, as the author implies.

That said, despite its flaws, this book offers a reasonable theological narrative and would be a decent addition to a university library or as supplementary reading material for an undergraduate course on theology and media.