



online

HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET



Volume 09 (2015)

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

Table of Contents

- 01 **Crowdfunding a New Church - A Multimodal Analysis of Faith-Related Giving Rhetoric on Indiegogo**
Adam J. Copeland
- 19 **Renegotiating Shari'a-Based Normative Guidelines in Cyberspace - The Case of Women's 'awrah**
Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf & Leslie Tramontini
- 45 **The Ahmadiyya in Germany - An Online-Platform as a Multi-Functional Tool**
Lauren Drover
- 63 **Discovering the Digital Authority - Twitter as Reporting Tool for Papal Activities**
Damian Guzek
- 81 **Internet and Kyais in Indonesia - Negotiation of Authority in a Mediatized Environment**
Fazlul Rahman
- 107 **Attitudes Towards Women's Participation in Public Prayer Among Jewish and Muslim Websites**
Oren Steinitz
- 125 **Review: Cybertheology - Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet**
Frank Bosman



Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet

Review

Frank Bosman

The Roman Catholic Church has always been famous for its ability to adopt her core message to consecutive waves of new technological discoveries, finding its way into almost all corners of the earth. Unfortunately, the Vatican seems to have lost some of its flexibility since the shock wave of the Second Vatican Council (1960-1965) ebbed away in the following decade. Although the Vatican was one of the first international operating churches to launch a full grown website and popes like Benedict XVI and Francis have started to use Twitter to share their message, not much thought has been given to a more systematic theological reflection on the new media.

The task every theologian who studies contemporary culture in the light of a two thousand year old faith, believed to be relevant and ever so true as ever, is to differentiate between two approaches. In the first approach, the theologian admits that the new technology has not only changed the dominant world view outside ecclesiastical thinking, but also has severe repercussions on the discipline of theology itself. Faith changes because people change. The other option is to uphold the unchangeable content of the ecclesiastical doctrine, by which all technological discoveries have to be judged, and – if necessary – corrected or even rejected. In the first instance, culture influences faith, in the second instance faith criticizes technology.

In his book *Cybertheology*, the famous Italian theologian Antonio Spadaro tries to overcome the limitations of these two more extreme possibilities. The Jesuit Spadaro was already a well-known and respected theologian in Italy, teaching at the Pontifical Gregorian University, but gained a much broader audience by publishing the first full-blown interview with his fellow-Jesuit and freshly chosen pope Francis in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the catholic news magazine associated with his order, and of which he was (and is still) the editor-in-chief. The interview was simultaneously published in numerous languages in a number of European countries.

In his book *Cybertheology* with its sub title ‘Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet’, Spadaro ventures into the world of the internet and the social media. Being written in 2012 (in Italian) the book inevitably is somewhat dated already. Spadaro starts his theological inquiry in contemplating on several words, very common in our digital era, but also with a theological history

of their own. We frequently ‘save’ our documents locally or in the cloud. We ‘convert’ information between several formats and platforms. We ‘justify’ our texts in Word or another word processor. And we like to ‘share’ our photos, videos and thoughts through several social media. All words between quotation marks are also well known in an Christian context. In Christianity, it is Jesus who saves the lives of the faithful. The missionaries are responsible for converting the world to Christendom. The question if man is justified by grace alone or (also) by his own good deeds has led to a more than one schism within Christendom. And so on and so forth.

Spadaro chooses not to rethink the old Christian doctrines of salvation and justification, but to think about these double contextualized words as opportunities to bring the Christian message to the world. Paradoxically, Spadaro is at his best when he links hyper modern discussions with Christian existential experience. ‘Digital saving cancels oblivion,’ Spadaro states, which is both a good and a bad think. At the one hand, saving prevents we can forget something or someone. But at the other hand, the cancelling of oblivion can haunt a person for the rest of his life. Think about all the requests *Google* gets every day from people who want to be ‘forgotten’, who what to break the link between their name and some stupid or criminal activity in their past. ‘Is forgiveness possible in the digital era,’ Spadaro asks rightfully. Truly a ethical problem we still have to figure out.

Sometimes Spadaro gets carried away a little with his own thoughts. At the end of the second chapter, when he reflects about *Google* and the ‘search for meaning’, he differentiates between syntactic and semantic search engines. The first, like *Google*, ‘just’ looks for the actual words in any given texts, while the second one, like *Alpha|Wolfram* tries to ‘understand’ the relation between the words in the search query given. Spadaro is delighted to when *Alpha|Wolfram* returns his question ‘Does God exist?’ with ‘I’m sorry, but a poor computational knowledge engine, no matter how powerful, is not capable of providing a simple answer to that question.’ Like a semantic search engines, Spadaro states, ‘the search for God is always semantic’. I am really afraid that the clever answer of the *Alpha|Wolfram* search engine is not the result of a more or less self-conscious artificial intelligence giving credit to his reflection on his own limitations, but is more likely the result of a philosophical inclined programmer foreseeing people like Spadaro trying their luck.

In the next chapters, on ‘The mystical and the connective body’ and ‘The ethical hacker’, Spadaro tries to overcome one of his main problems with his appraisal of the cyberworld. At the one hand, Spadaro praises the ethical hacker who creates only because he wants to create, thus mimicking God who created the universe out of His free will. Perhaps it would be better to link hackers with the image of a demiurge instead of a true creational God, because the hackers of our cyberspace make use of what is given to them as raw materials – code, machines, computers -, while the God of Christianity creates *ex nihilo*, ‘out of nothing’. But then again, sometimes Spadaro gets carried away with his own enthusiasm.

At the other hand, next to his appraisal for the ethical hackers and their anarchistic behaviour and horizontal world view, Spadaro has to give room to the concept of hierarchy, so very deeply rooted in Roman-Catholicism. Hierarchy and authority do not easily match the hackers' ethic. Spadaro signals this problem, but gives no other 'solution' than to state that the Church cannot embrace the logic that truth is ultimately decided by the one or the ones who control the public the most. Again, Spadaro does has a point: the internet is a powerful weapon against dictators and censorship, but at the same time information can be manipulated by those in power.

Does Spadaro succeed in his task, to really rethink theology in the light of the 'cyber world', that is, the internet, and – at the same time – rethink the cyberworld in theological terms? To my humble opinion, yes and no. Spadaro enters new territory in his *Cybertheology*, to – paraphrase *Star Trek* - boldly go where no or very few fellow-theologians has gone before. The author does not, however, provide his readers with the tools necessary to link these two domains, theology and information technology. Yes, saving a file and saving a soul from eternal damnation do have something in common, but is it enough to say they are *profoundly* linked? Secondly, Spadaro does state that the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic church does not comply with the democratic and anarchistic nature of the internet, but gives no solution to this problem.

Cybertheology is a great book for theologians trying to reflect on our internet information technology, but in the end cannot cope with its own expectations.

Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the era of the Internet

Antonio Spadaro, 2014

New York: Fordham University Press

160 pp., US\$ 20,- / €85,- (hb), US\$ 23,- / €25,- (pb).