Cybertheology and Digital Theology: the development of theological reflection on the digital in brazilian Catholic Theology

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In the Catholic scenario, the trigger of the theological debate about the digital phenomenon occurred in 2012 with the publication of the work "Cybertheology: thinking Christianity in the times of the network" and the conferences of Antonio Spadaro. Especially in Brazil, there was a great repercussion of Spadaro's ideas, inspiring the development of research groups and academic works, from small articles to doctoral theses, not only in theology, but also in the areas of communication, philosophy, sociology, education and even in computer science. In Protestant theology, although there were already works of theological reflection on faith and digital culture, Digital Theology is officially created in 2014 with the inauguration of CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology at the University of Durham, England. Thus, in Brazil, the approach of Cybertheology is popularized, while the expression Digital Theology starts to be used only from 2020. What used to be an interesting and instigating study has now become essential due to the intensification of society's digitalization process caused by the pandemic. Through bibliographic and ethnographic research, we will tell facts that mark the beginning of the history of digital theological culture in Brazil, as well as identify similarities and differences between the concepts of Cybertheology and Digital Theology, in order to form a solid base that will propel the growth of theological reflection on the digital. We will have as theoretical references the writings of Antonio Spadaro, the work of Pete Phillips, Jonas Kurlberg from the Centre for Digital Theology, as well as Brazilian studies on Cybertheology and Digital Theology.

Keywords: Cybertheology. Digital Theology. Interdisciplinarity. Brazilian theology. Catholic Theology.

Introduction

In order to develop a theological reflection on and from the digital, we need to know the path traveled so far. The sense and religious experience of the Internet is perceptible since its foundation. Right at the beginning there were studies exploring the religious dimension of the web. Although more scarce and with slow steps, the theological field has also been developing its understanding about the digital anthropological phenomenon. One of the first theologically oriented books that we have published on the subject is Jennifer Cobb's 1998 work "Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World".[1] This theme in theology is still considered a novelty, but the interest and seriousness of theological studies on digital culture have increased significantly in recent years. With the acceleration of the digitalization process of social life caused by the pandemic, digital theological reflection has gone from fashion

to a priority measure for a theology and pastoral that corresponds to today's challenges.

In Brazilian Catholic Theology, the theological study on the digital has a historical landmark, the publication of the work "Cybertheology" in Portuguese, followed by conferences given by the author, Father Antonio Spadaro, in the country in 2012. From this impulse, Brazilian researchers in the fields of communication and theology became interested in producing works according to this approach.

The present article seeks to briefly narrate the history of digital theological reflection in Brazil, as well as its understanding of this new theological approach that is still under construction. We will divide it into four parts: prehistory, ground zero, repercussions, and the current moment of transition from Cybertheology to Digital Theology. Thinking of Digital Theology as a global collaborative conversation, we want to contribute to this dialogue, sharing our Brazilian perspective and experience with the theological doing in networks.

1. Prehistory: The Brazilian tradition of media and religion studies

The digital culture is born from the technological revolution, which enabled the development of the internet, bringing a new way of existing in the world. From this observation, research has begun in various areas of knowledge to study the impact of this new culture on institutions, learning, and the life of human beings.

The Catholic Church has always paid attention and adapted to the changes in communication throughout its history. Since the invention of Gutenberg's press, it has followed the development of the various media. Its understanding and position in front of this technological revolution has matured over the years. Little by little, it has gone from an attitude of fear, mistrust and, sometimes, condemnation, to an attitude of welcoming the new communication and information technologies, considering them a gift from God. Catholicism was forming a positive mentality with regard to the media, although it maintained a critical and foresighted look, warning of the risks in the misconduct and misuse of the media.

The *Inter Mirifica* Decree on the media, prepared during the Second Vatican Council, inaugurated a new way for the Church to reflect, dialogue and relate to social communication.[2] From it come the papal messages for World Communications Day that each year bring a reflection on a current aspect of communication in the church and society. Until 2001, the messages concentrated on thinking about mass media

culture. From 2002 onwards, the popes began to address the theme of the Internet and digital communication, a reflection mainly of a pastoral and moral nature.[3] The documents of the magisterium on communication are worth an in-depth study, but this is not the objective of this article.

The Church in Brazil has also produced documents to support and guide the practice of the Pastoral of Communication in parishes and dioceses. Among these, the Directory of Communication stands out.[4] This attention of the Catholic Church to the communication phenomena, in a more intense way in the last decades, has led several Brazilian researchers to study this relationship between media and religion.

In Brazilian academia we have a significant bibliographic production on the subject, especially regarding the process of mediatization. The concept of mediatization presents the media as an agent of social and cultural transformation. "We live an intensive mediatization of culture and society that is not limited to the formation of public opinion, but crosses almost all social and cultural institutions".[5] If social institutions are becoming mediatized, then religions are too. This process has become even more evident and accelerated with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

About the mediatization of religion, we can remember in the Brazilian scenario communication scientists like Pedro Gilberto Gomes[6], Antonio Fausto Neto[7], Luis Mauro Sá Martino[8], Magda do Nascimento Cunha[9], Walter Avellar[10]. Specifically about communication and mediatization of the Catholic Church, we have names like Joana T. Puntel[11], Moisés Sbardelotto[12] and Helena Corazza[13]. We find theses on Catholic mediatization such as the one by Paulo Roque Gasparetto[14], but practically all from the point of view of the area of social communication. In Brazilian Catholic Theology, before 2012, there are few academic works that study this theme, only a few articles and master's dissertations.[15] With this, we want to point out that the studies on media and religion, although developed in the field of communication, were preparing the ground for the idea of Cybertheology that arrived in Brazil in 2012, arousing the curiosity of the ecclesial and theological community.

2. Cybertheology's Milestone in Brazil: 2012

2012 was a decisive year for the emergence of Cybertheology in Brazil, the year the book "Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in Network Times" was released. Spadaro[16] to Brazilian lands, such as the I National Seminar of Young Communicators, promoted by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) on May 18-20, 2012; and the

conference "The semantics of the Mystery of Church in the context of the grammar(s) of media coverage", during the XIII International Symposium IHU Church, Culture and Society, on October 3, 2012.

But this story begins at least two years earlier. Cybertheological thinking was born from a demand of the Italian Bishops' Conference for its congress in 2010. The Italian bishops asked Spadaro to do a reflection on the impact of digital culture on systematic theology, which resulted in the conference "Digital Testimonies".[17] In January 2011, he created the blog "Cybertheology.it" in order to extend the dialogue on this developing reflection. The book that marks the beginning of this new theological approach, "Cyberteologia: Pensare il cristianesimo al tempo della rete", is published in early 2012.

Soon this work draws the attention of Brazilian Catholics who ask for the work to be published in Portuguese, as shown by the e-book that Spadaro published on May 19, 2012, gathering 20 articles and interviews in Portuguese on the theme.[18] In September 2012, the Brazilian edition of the book "Cybertheology" is released by Paulinas Publishing House.[19] The reception of this work that officially initiates academic research in the areas of theology and communication about the impact of network culture on the thinking and practice of Christian faith in Brazil.

In the first chapter of the work "Cybertheology", Spadaro presents the internet as an ecclesiological place, when he affirms that the Church is present in any space where the human person exercises his ability to know and relate. This shows that the web is not just a device to be enjoyed, but an environment in which human beings inhabit and live together. In other writings published in Brazil in 2012, Spadaro discusses the anthropological dimension of the web:

> The recent digital technologies are no longer just tools, that is, instruments completely external to our body and mind. The Net is not a tool, but an environment in which we live. Maybe even more, being a truly interconnected fabric of our experience of reality.[20]

Vatican Council II had already stated, in 1965, in the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes, that technology changes our way of thinking;[21] a fact that we can easily verify by observing the behavior of young people and children of the net generations. The guiding question that motivates the cybertheological investigation is: If the experience of the net has changed our lives so much, transforming our language and consequently the way we think, wouldn't the internet also have changed the way we think about

faith, that is, the way we do theology today? This is how Antonio Spadaro's concept of Cybertheology is formed: To think about Christian faith in the light of the logic, dynamics and language of the web.

Cybertheology is born out of theological and pastoral concerns: How to live the faith and have a balanced life in digital times, and how the connection proper to the web can be transformed into communion? "How this can shape listening to and reading the Bible, the way of understanding the Church and ecclesial communion, Revelation, the liturgy, the sacraments: the classic themes of theology"? [22]

Cybertheological reflection conceived as the intelligence of faith in times of the Internet is based on two pillars: the experience of faith and the experience of the network. Therefore, it is a knowledge that is born out of faith, corresponding to the expression "*fides quarens intellectum*," the faith that seeks to rationally understand itself, as well as the reality and culture in which it is inserted. In this way, Cybertheology is not a sociological approach to religiosity on the Internet, but should be considered a theological current: "the result of faith that releases from itself a cognitive impulse in a time when the logic of the network marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, living".[23] Known the starting point of the theological conception about digital culture in 2012, let's move on to the reception of the idea of Cybertheology in Brazilian academia, especially in Catholic Theology.

3. Repercussion and Development of Cybertheology in Brazil

Analyzing the academic production after the release of Cybertheology in Brazil, in 2012, we notice that the reflection about the relationship of Christian faith with digital culture is still a field of study little explored by Brazilian theology. A search in academic databases shows that when there are studies on the subject in theology, it is mostly focused either on the Theology of Communication or on the instrumental use of media, but few specifically address the issue of Cybertheology or Digital Theology.

To understand the state of the question, we searched the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (bdtd.ibict.br) for the following expressions that represent the theme of our investigative interest: "Cybertheology"; "Digital Theology"; and "Christian Faith and Digital Culture". We used as a filter the years 2007 to 2020. The research was carried out on June 29 and 30, 2021.

The search for the topics Cybertheology and Digital Theology found no results between the years 2007 and 2012, five years prior to the publication of the book Cybertheology.

After its publication, in the period from 2015 to 2020, we found one result for searching for the term in the title (master's dissertation) and six results for the presence of the term in the abstracts (all in master's dissertations. No results found in doctoral dissertations). We chose to research theses and dissertations from 2015, because we consider that the period of 2013 and 2014 was a period of reception, study, and deepening of Antonio Spadaro's work.

This does not mean, however, that there was no research inspired by Cybertheology. On the bdtd.ibict.br platform, a search was conducted with the expression "Christian Faith and Digital Culture", in this case for the period from 2010 to 2020. For this expression together we found no results in the areas of Theology and Religion Sciences. Broadening the search to all terms, we found 68 results, three of them in Theology. Refining the search to the term "Digital Culture" we found 190 records, but not exclusive to theological themes.

This quick search of digital databases of theses and dissertations in Brazil gives us the dimension of how this field of research is still under development in the country, not having yet, in theology, a significant academic corpus that is specifically dedicated to it. Even so, there are researchers who have taken on the task of developing cybertheological thought through scientific articles and master's dissertations, such as those of the authors of this article: "Cibergraça: fé, evangelização e comunhão nos tempos da rede", by Aline Amaro da Silva, defended in 2015, at PUCRS; and "A Igreja diante da cultura midiática digital: Desafios, caminhos e perspectivas", by Andréia Durval Gripp Souza, defended in 2017 at PUC-Rio.

Cybertheology is being constituted in Brazilian Catholic Theology as the theological field that provides the basis for reflection on the impact of the Internet on our way of living, teaching and communicating the faith, that is, it gives us the foundation to think about an evangelization that dialogues, inculturates and builds relationships with a society immersed in the digital culture. The new technologies, especially mobile Internet, have transformed the entire environment around us (home, bus, college, business), as well as our relationships at all levels (family, friends, study and work colleagues), including the religious, influencing, for better or worse, our way of experiencing faith and pastoral care, as well as our relationships within the ecclesial communities.

For all the human and social transformation that digital technologies provoke, the Internet must be considered as a "sign of the times", a basic concept in the theology of

the Second Vatican Council that designates the events that characterize an epoch and serve as a hermeneutic key to interpret God's action in history.

From this understanding, we can perceive the internet and mobile devices no longer as mere instruments, but as a social environment where we can inhabit, and also as a theological place, the starting point for a reflection on Christian living in the digital age. Therefore, Cybertheology finds in the internet the place from where it positions itself to see reality, to judge it, and to produce its theological knowledge, making reference to the see-judge-act method, widely used in Latin American theology. A similar proposal to see-judge-act is exposed by Spadaro when he said that, in order to do Cybertheology, it is necessary to go through four methodological steps: experience, reflection, action and evaluation.[24]

The dynamics of the cybertheological approach is not a "top-down" or "bottom-up" theology. Its theological movement follows the non-linear pattern of digital culture, the "peer-to-peer": from node to node, person to person, from a God who is close, who makes himself present, a "God with us." "Reflecting on hyper-communicative life, Cybertheology becomes fundamental to the dialogue of faith with human beings, culture, and the world today."[25]

4. Now: from Cybertheology to Digital Theology

The concept of Cybertheology that we adopt in this article is the definition formulated by Fr. Antonio Spadaro - Thinking Christian Faith in Network Times - as explained above.[26] The definition with which the author works is much broader than, for example, a theological content published on, from, or for the web, or even a theology of digital communication, because it does not reflect on communication itself, but approaches the experience of faith from the hypercommunicative life we experience daily.

The expression Digital Theology is still unknown in the Brazilian theological scenario. If we google this term in Portuguese, there is absolutely nothing that comes close to the theme. In English, a brief definition appears on Wikipedia that equates the term Cybertheology with the expression Digital Theology, differentiating only that the denomination Cybertheology became known in the Catholic tradition and Digital Theology in the Protestant tradition to designate the type of study that reflects on the transformations in the human being and in the world caused by the digital revolution still underway. In Portuguese language academic works, for now, Digital Theology is mentioned only in one article[27] and in the doctoral thesis [28] by Aline Amaro da Silva.

Despite their proximity and the fact that they are often considered equivalent expressions, it is necessary to identify the similarities and differences between Cybertheology and Digital Theology. Cybertheology is marked by the relationship between theology and the Internet, and can develop a re-reading of the key themes of systematic, moral, and pastoral theology from the experience of the network. Other terminologies that could be used to express the concept of Cybertheology - thinking about faith in the time of the web - would be Network Theology and Internet Theology that appear in the works of Tim Hutchings[29], Stephen Garner and Heidi Campbell.[30]

The prefix cyber is short for cybernetics. This prefix widely used in the period of popularization of computing and the beginning of the internet, created several neologisms related to the new culture, space and reality that were, such as cyberculture, cyberspace, cyber-religion. In Greek *Kybernetikes* means helmsman or one who rules. In French *cybernétique* means the art of governing.[31] The term cybernetics designates the science that studies comparatively the systems and mechanisms of automatic control, regulation and communication in living beings and in machines.[32] The word digital comes from the Latin *digitalis*, *digitus* meaning "fingers" or numerals because the numerals below ten were counted on the fingers, a term currently used in computer language and to qualify the culture brought by new technologies.[33]

With a wider range of meanings and actions, Digital Theology refers to the theological study of digital phenomena: computer science, artificial and automata intelligence, internet, digital technologies and products such as games and apps. Digital Theology, which is part of the so-called Digital Humanities, officially came into existence as a theological stream in 2014 with the creation CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology, Durham University, England. This English theological center launched the world's first Master of Arts in Digital Theology, with three main lines of research: biblical instruction, digital culture and contemporary preaching.[34]

So far, four fields of development of digital theological reflection have been classified: First, the use of digital technology for theological academic teaching, thus a pedagogical-methodological stream; Second, theological research carried out through digital resources; Third, digital culture as a theological context that influences and modifies the way we do theology today; Fourth, a moral theological study of digital culture and reality.[35]

The first and second approach understand Digital Theology as a study of the opportunities that new technologies bring to theology, innovating its linguistic resources and symbols. The concept of Cybertheology as the intelligence of faith in the light of the logic of the network, proposed by Antonio Spadaro, fits into the third wave of Digital Theology. However, considering not only the concept, but also Spadaro's discourses on Cybertheology, we can understand that the relationship between theology and digital culture is reciprocal, that is, just as digital language and experience affect the construction of theological thought, theology also influences the digital revolution in motion. With this, we can rediscover one of the roles of theology in the contemporary digitalizing society: helping humanity to better understand and live the challenges of digital times.

In the last few years, several groups and collaborative networks of researchers on social media have been emerging in Brazil with the aim of sharing, dialoguing, and debating current themes about the Church, theology, religiosity, communication, and digital culture. I would like to highlight a group of researchers in the areas of religious sciences, theology, and mostly communication, who communicate frequently via WhatsApp. In 2021, this group, which used to be called Cybertheology, changed its name to Ecclesia Digitalis, due to the book collection that bears this name, recently published by Paulus, written by members of the group. This is an initiative that arose from the interaction and engagement of the group, aimed at deepening theological reflection and improving pastoral practice. The first three books have as themes: digital catechesis, panorama of the Church's thought about communication, and the mission and spirituality of the pastoral communication agent. This change of the name of the group from Cybertheology to Ecclesia Digitallis is a clear sign of change in mentality and theological language, understanding the epistemological necessity of the passage from the use of the term Cybertheology to Digital Theology, in order to express the Brazilian theological reflection on the digital anthropological experience.

Conclusion

Digital theological reflection is still under construction in Brazil and in the world, without a totally clear, finalized, well-structured definition. However, it is a promising field of theological renewal that seeks to respond to the questions and dilemmas of contemporary life, recovering the role, contribution, and relevance of theology in society. With the migration of the face-to-face faith experience to the online modality during the pandemic, what was once seen as a fashionable theological approach, an ephemeral curiosity

and novelty, has come to be understood as a fundamental theological and pastoral reflection for churches and the faithful to face the challenges and changes of these times.

This research registers the curious fact that Cybertheology in Brazil has aroused more interest from communication scholars than from theology itself. The paper finds that there is still a lack of a more representative research corpus in Catholic Theology for Cybertheology to be recognized as a new theological approach in the Brazilian scenario. We focused our attention on Catholic Theology because it is our field of action and knowledge. However, it is essential for the construction of digital theological studies in Brazil to expand the research to the Protestant theology, understanding how the several Christian traditions received and produced their own reflections about the digital phenomena.

In summary, we can conceive Digital Theology as the interdisciplinary study that covers the possible relations between theology, culture and digital technology, their different uses and effects on the being, thinking and acting of human beings in society. We realize that it is a matter of language and comprehensiveness of meaning to move from the term Cybertheology to Digital Theology. Far from being an end point in this story, this bibliographical research shows that Cybertheology marks the beginning of Digital Theology in Brazil, which is broadening its local horizon to a global conversation.

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Footnotes

1. Cobb, *Cybergrace.* ↵
2. Catholic Church, *Inter Mirifica.* ↵
3. John Paul II. *Message of the Holy Father John Paul II for the 36th World Communications Day*. "Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel". ↵
4. Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil, *Diretório de Comunicação da Igreja do Brasil.* ↵
5. Hjarvard, Midiatização, *Matrizes,* 21. ↵
6. Gomes, Midiatização, *Revista Famecos.* ↵
7. Fausto Neto, "Fragmentos De Uma «analítica» Da midiatização". *Matrizes*, 89-105. ↵
8. Martino, *The mediatization of religion.* ↵
9. Cunha, "Os Processos De midiatização Das Religiões No Brasil E O Ativismo político Digital evangélico". *Revista Famecos.* ↵
10. Avellar, *Internet e espiritualidade.* ↵
11. Puntel, *Igreja e Sociedade.* ↵
12. Sbardelotto, Moisés. *Comunicar a fé.* ↵
13. Corazza, *Educomunicação.* ↵
14. Gasparetto, *Midiatização da Religião.* ↵
15. See Deffaveri, *Cristo na era digital*; Andreolla, *A Fé Cristã na era digital.* ↵
16. Antonio Spadaro, the first priest in Italy to have a Twitter profile, is a doctor in theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University and director of the magazine "La Civiltá Cattolica", as well as a consultant for the Vatican's Department for Communication. ↵

17.   Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, p. 8. ↵

18.   Spadaro, "Cyberteologia no Brasil: ebook de 20 artigos e entrevistas em português". *Cyberteologia.it*. ↵

19.   Spadaro, Apresentação do meu livro "Ciberteologia. Pensar o Cristianismo nos tempos da rede". C*yberteologia.it*. ↵

20.   Spadaro, "O Mistério da Igreja na era das mídias digitais". Cadernos Teologia Pública, p. 5. ↵

21.   *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 5. ↵

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