Cybertheology: thinking the effects of digital culture in Christianity and society

Aline Amaro da Silva

Abstract:
Cybertheology is a new field of theological knowledge that wants to dialogue with the culture and the human being of his time, to think faith taking into account the dynamics of the current life. It seeks to present the main aspects that make up this new area of theological knowledge. Using the exploratory and bibliographic method, the research shows the network as a privileged global space for experiencing the faith and reflecting theologically on reality, including on the new challenges for religious education. As a theoretical reference has Manuel Castells contextualizing the network society. To understand the net generation, one brings up the considerations of Michel Serres. Cybertheological reflection is based on the works of Antonio Spadaro.

Zusammenfassung:
Cybertheologie markiert ein neues Feld theologischen Wissens, welches in einen Dialog mit der Kultur sowie dem menschlichen Sein in der Zeit treten möchte, um vor diesem Hintergrund Glauben zu denken. Neben den Hauptmerkmalen dieses neuen theologischen Feldes soll anhand explorativer sowie bibliographischer Methoden, das Netzwerk als ein privilegierter globaler Raum zur Erprobung des Glaubens sowie als theologische Reflexionsgröße vorgestellt werden, woraus nicht zuletzt auch neue Herausforderungen für religiöse Bildungsprozesse erwachsen. Konzeptualisierte hierbei bereits Manuel Castells die Netzwerk-Gesellschaft als theoretische Bezugsgröße, scheint die neue Net-Generation insbesondere unter Berücksichtigung von Michel Serres verstehbar. Cybertheologische Reflexionen basieren hierbei im Wesentlichen auf Antonio Spadaro.

Sažetak:
Cybertheologija je novo polje teološkog znanja koje želi dijalog s kulturom i ljudskim bićem svoga vremena, da razmišlja vjeru uzimajući u obzir dinamiku sadašnjeg života. Ona nastoji prikazati glavne aspekte koji čine ovo novo područje teološkog znanja. Upotrebom istraživačke i bibliografske metode, istraživanje pokazuje mrežu kao povlašteni globalni prostor za doživljavanje vjere i teološki ogleda na stvarnost, uključujući i nove izazove za vjersko obrazovanje. Kao teorijska referenca Manuel Castells kontekstualizira mrežno društvo. Da bismo razumjeli neto generaciju, došlo se do razmatranja Michel Serresa. Cybertheological refleksija temelji se na djelima Antonio Spadaro.

1. Introduction

The digital culture has arrived in everywhere for all ages, specially for digital natives, and it is here to stay. At a book about thinking the religious education, about talking of God in the 21st century, the question of digital culture becomes fundamental. Thus, we are going to reflect about this challenge.

The new universal culture, cyberculture, is a reality that affects the total human life and an opportunity to share the teachings of the Gospel with all (Cf. Mk 16:15). This research seeks to evaluate the impact of this culture on theology and society, presenting the main elements of the contemporary global scenario that led to this new way of making theology – the cybertheology.

This article is based on a master's thesis ‚Cybergrace: faith, evangelization and communion in the times of the network' and in the communication ‚Cybertheology: theology in the global contemporary scenario' held at the 28th International Congress of Soter, both in 2015, in Brazil. This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nivel Superior – Brasil (CAPES).

2. Cyberculture forming the global scenario

In the beginning, the Internet was understood as a new means of mass communication, however, this concept is not enough. Cyberspace is the space of communication and human relationship opened by the global interconnection of digital devices. However, when we talk in a network, we are not referring to the world-wide computer network, but the world-wide network of people. ANTONIO SPADARO explain this difference using the distint meaning of the words *house* and *home*.[1] *House* means the physical structure that supports and makes possible the experience of the *home*, of the environment of family relationship. If we reduce the internet to only appliances, it is as if we say that the home is not the familiar coziness, but the walls of the house. Thus, the internet is the experience that new technologies have made possible. Therefore, the internet

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[1] Verbal information of the Conferences and Seminars given by Antonio Spadaro at the 4th National Meeting of PASCOM, from July 24 to 27, 2014, in Aparecida do Norte, SP, Brazil.

can not be restricted to a medium or an instrument to be used, but must be recognized as an environment of human coexistence to be inhabited.

The global society made possible by digital networks be called the ‚network society'. For many people, network society is the society of isolation. However, CASTELLS' surveys reveal that the more Internet users interact through the web, the more face-to-face meetings and the more active they are in political and social matters. „Network society is a hyper social society."[2] What happens is that the network expands the possibilities of impact and propagation of what is already present in our lives and in ourselves. If we are people in search of more friendships and real relationships, it is possible that we make more friends in the online environment. If we are people who want to escape from reality and close ourselves, the digital environment can also provide that experience. If we want to commit crimes and reach more people, cyberspace offers thanks to the anonymity of the network various opportunities.

Thus, the network is conceived as a deeply human space, where both communication and isolation capacities are intensified. POPE FRANCIS considers cyberspace a place rich in humanity, because the network is not made up only of wires, cables, devices, but human beings.[3] In this new ambience, new subjects emerge with new ways of thinking, relating and acting in the world: the digital natives.

3. Net generation

The Net Generation lives in a much more populated, urban and multicultural world than their parents lived. This generation grew up in front of a screen and with parents away from home. Educated by the frenetic rhythm of digital media without parental control, their attention lasts only seconds, and waiting for real-time answers has made them anxious. Manipulating various information at once, his cognitive function changed. It inhabits digital and physical simultaneously. It expresses itself with a language of its own. Online and offline, they no longer have the same

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[2] CASTELLS, MANUEL; CARDOSO, GUSTAVO (Ed.): A sociedade em rede: do conhe-cimento à ação política, Lisboa 2005, 18-23.

[3] Cf. FRANCIS: Mensagem do Papa ao 4º Encontro Nacional da Pastoral da Comunicação. Link: http://www.cnbb.org.br/papa-envia-mensagem-ao-iv-encontro-nacional-da-pascom/, Access on 18.10.2018 at 18:13 o'clock.

head, the same language, the same notion of time, the same world, the same history as their ancestors.[4]

In relation to the religious experience of the digital generation, there is a great paradox and unknown. The net generation lives in a secularized, globalized and liquid world where social and religious institutions have lost their influence and the great ideals that have moved generations have failed. They live in a time when there are no absolute truths, everything can be relativized or transformed into a *fake news*. The churches are empty, however, growing the search for new and old forms of meditation and spirituality. After the crisis of collectivities, the net generation seeks new and authentic links.[5] This is a time when religious values are discredited, but it can turn into an opportunity to rediscover the true meaning of religiosity.

The digital native experiences a tension between being an individual or a person, has a need for recognition that manifests itself in individualistic acts, but also a desire to ‚be-with-the-other‘, to be a community that demonstrates its personal essence. This is the new receiver of the Gospel message, he is the student of religious education, he is a child who participates in catechesis. He is also the new ecclesial subject, he is the priest, the catechist, the father or mother of the family, because the net generation reached the adult phase.

This new protagonist of society has in cyberspace a refuge for his mind and his soul. As an environment of faith and theological reflection, the network is also a theological place. A theologian who in fact worries about reflecting on issues emerging from the current context has on the Internet his social place from which comes a privileged view to elaborate a theological knowledge that has relevance. The network can be considered a theological place as history and human culture, within the categories of Melchior Cano, and as ‚sign of the times‘, according to the Second Vatican Council. From this new horizon and the need to reflect the current historical moment, there is the field of cybertheology.

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4   Cf. SERRES, MICHEL: Polegarzinha, Rio de Janeiro 2013, 14-20, 37-38.
5   Cf. ibid., 23.

4. Theology as cybertheology

The term cybertheology has already designated several study proposals. However, the concept of cybertheology by ANTONIO SPADARO arises from the following logical reasoning. The Second Vatican Council already said that technology changes our way of thinking.[6] If the internet has changed the way of the people think, it has changed the way of the people think to the faith. If theology is understood as *intellectus fidei*, to think faith, the network has transformed the way that theology is done in contemporary civilization. Thus, cybertheology is not a social study of religion and internet, but theology.[7]

According to SPADARO, the only route of cybertheological study is experience, experience of the faith and network. SPADARO explains that communication today is no longer something that differs from life. In this way, cybertheology is not theology of communication, because it does not approach communication itself as an object of study, but reflects on the hypercommunicative life we are living. Thus, this study is only the beginning of a theological reflection inculturated in the digital dynamics that contributes in the deepening of the faith in current language.

Cybertheology is no longer a case of contextual theology, because the context of the network is not isolable as a specific local context, but is embedded in the flow of ordinary existence on a global level. Although at an early stage, SPADARO launches cybertheology as a new form of systematic theology embodied in hypercommunicative society, elevating the internet to the level of theological place. More than finding answers, the greatest contribution of cybertheology is to incite questions about life, culture and faith education that the contemporary theologian must address in order for his voice to echo in the global village.

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[6] Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: Gaudium et spes: a Igreja no mundo atual, Roma 1965, 5. Link: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_coun-cils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_po.html, Access on 25.10.2018 at 18:20 o'clock.

[7] Cf. SPADARO, ANTONIO: Ciberteologia: pensar o cristianismo nos tempos da rede, São Paulo 2012, 41.

5. Conclusion: The challenge of religion education in the digital age.

Education in general needs to reinvent itself in digital times. Religious education also faces the challenge of redefining content, language, and pedagogy that are understandable and engender the interest of the net generation. In a world where information is within reach of a click, what is important to communicate? More relevant than conveying content, religious education should seek to build critical thinking, share experiences and values. In the age of connectivity, cultivating relationships has become more essential than storing content. On the internet, paradoxically, the content that you most access is directly related to your opinion and personal tastes. So, one of the functions that the classroom must still exercise is to be this space to counter ideas, to confront people, cultures, different thoughts and to overcome prejudices.

Thinking about a new pedagogy for the digital age is not only about including activities online or in apps, but knowing the characteristics and contexts in which the net generation is inserted and realizing which experiences, activities and methods will be more enriching. Sometimes providing offline experiences that stimulate other body senses and brain zones will help to understand different times and realities of theirs, and thus build a knowledge that takes into account different experiences and points of view. For example, how can an urban boy understand that a cow is a sacred animal to Hinduism without having ever had contact with a cow in his physical environment? Or even understand the meaning of the denomination pastor for Christianity if this profession is almost nonexistent today and most of the net generation grew out of rural areas. Rethinking language in religious education is also a fundamental task, for several terms in the Christian tradition have gained new meaning in cyberculture, such as saving, converting, following, witnessing.

In a world marked by individualism, how important it is to „finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together",[8] to have this position of listening, dialogue, sharing, openness to the other, will make religious education closer to life of people. Cybertheology may be what was needed to

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[8] Cf. FRANCIS: Evangelii Gaudium, Rome 2013, 87. Link: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, Access on 25.10.2018 at 17:15 o'clock.

develop this new pedagogical process for education, evangelization, catechesis, that is, to illuminate our whole life of faith.

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