

Internet, Culture and the Church

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SUMMARY

The relationship between the culture of Internet and the Church is at the centre of an increased scholarly interest. This article reviews four recent books that deal with the topic from different angles. Quentin Shultze provides a Biblically sapiential antidote to the many traps of the Information age. From a French perspective, Cottin and

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Bazin reflects on the unnecessary polarization between pessimists and optimists, while commending a self-critical approach to the Internet. The last two books come from a Catholic background. The first is a collection of papers given at a conference on ethics and the Internet. The last book comes from a Jesuit scholar who writes for *Civiltà cattolica*. He intelligently deals with many aspects of the issue.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Beziehung zwischen der Kultur des Internets und der Kirche steht im Zentrum eines wachsenden gelehrten Interesses. Dieser Artikel rezensiert vier neue Bücher, die das Thema aus unterschiedlichen Blickwinkeln betrachten. Quentin Shultze bietet ein biblisch-weisheitliches Gegenmittel gegen die zahlreichen Fallen des Informationszeitalters. Aus französischer Perspektive reflektieren

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Cottin und Bazin über die unnötige Polarisierung zwischen Pessimisten und Optimisten; sie empfehlen einen selbstkritischen Umgang mit dem Internet. Die beiden letzten Bücher haben einen katholischen Hintergrund. Das erste ist eine Artikelsammlung von einer Konferenz über Ethik und das Internet. Das letzte Buch stammt von einem jesuitischen Gelehrten, der für *Civiltà cattolica* schreibt. Er behandelt viele Aspekte der Frage sehr intelligent.

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RÉSUMÉ

Le rapport entre la culture de l'Internet et l'Église fait l'objet d'un intérêt grandissant de la part du monde académique. Cet article présente quatre livres différents qui abordent ce sujet sous divers angles. Quentin Schulze apporte un antidote sapientiel biblique aux nombreux pièges de l'ère de l'information. Les Français Cottin et

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Bazin invitent à se garder d'une polarisation entre pessimistes et optimistes, en recommandant une approche critique de l'Internet. Les deux autres ouvrages viennent de penseurs catholiques. L'un reprend les exposés donnés lors d'une conférence sur l'éthique et l'Internet. L'autre vient d'un penseur jésuite qui écrit pour la communauté catholique. Il traite avec intelligence de nombreux aspects de ce sujet.

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In view of the many sources available on the triangular relationship linking the internet, culture and the church, this selection, although undoubtedly reductive, is sufficiently representative of the ongoing debate. Publications to be considered are:

QUENTIN J. SCHULTZE, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart. Living Virtuously in the Information Age*, Grand Rapids, Baker 2002, pp. 256.

JÉRÔME COTTIN – JEAN-NICHOLAS BAZIN, *Vers un christianisme virtuel? Enjeux et*

défis d'Internet, [Towards virtual Christianity? Issues and challenges of the internet] Geneva, Labor et Fides 2003, pp. 146.

ROMANO ALTOBELLI e SALVINO LEONE (eds.), *La morale riflessa sul monitor. Internet ed etica*, [Morals reflected on the monitor: The internet and ethics] Rome, Città Nuova 2006, pp. 207.

ANTONIO SPADARO, *Connessioni. Nuove forme della cultura al tempo di internet*, [Connec-

tions: New forms of culture in the age of the internet] Bologna, Pardes 2006, pp. 178.

The seemingly sparkling, attractive world of the internet conceals a heavy deficit in terms of moral coherence and spiritual purposefulness. Recalling Jacques Ellul's teaching – denouncing the modern degeneration brought about by an inordinate trust in technology – the first author (Q. J. Schultze, professor of Communication at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, USA) maintains that, in the age of cyberculture, such virtues as moderation, discernment and humility have been lost.

“Informationism” has become a religious faith: exchanging information is viewed as the automatic and guaranteed route to social progress and personal felicity. Voyeur-like observation has replaced the quest for intimate relations while measurability (“How big is your broadband?”) is prized above meaningful rapports. Emphasis on exchange quantification, coupled with individualistic internet fruition, lessens the importance of shared memory, charitable practices and accountability to others. Even the sense of belonging to a tangible, organic community is weakened because of the preference assigned to superficial and disembodied relationships.

Schultze's analysis closely shadows J. Ellul's but is also influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville's reflection on democracy in America (which jointly considers individual interests and religious sensitivity in light of the common good) and Vaclav Havel's contention that moral responsibility is necessary for a democratic coexistence to materialise. While his tone may sound defeatist, nevertheless a cultural proposal is outlined towards a more rewarding application of the internet.

The final chapter, in fact, suggests six areas of study for those wishing to cultivate the virtues on the brink of extinction in the internet age: 1) recognition of the “levity” of the digital mode of being – without excessively expanding its importance; 2) mistrust of a growing techno-magic which is unable to deliver on our expectations; 3) severing religious traditions from technology, lest they become indiscriminately dependant on it; 4) responsible services to be provided to God and our neighbours in return for having been granted life on earth; 5) nurturing friendship as the main avenue to form relationships which can be enhanced by technology and not replaced by it; 6) behaving as residents of the real world who would utilise the internet conscientiously and within bounds, as one

would attempt to do with all other aspects of one's life.

The second publication, edited by Cottin and Bazin, originates from a research project – supported by the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Reformed Church of France – on the relationship between the internet and the church. It is an excellent introduction to our topic also because it critically summarises a large number of works published within the Christian sphere and therefore thoroughly presents the state of the question being posed. The internet has burst into the church as well and (as in the wake of all irruptions) spread embarrassment, curiosity and perplexity. As occurred elsewhere, Christian circles likewise witnessed a polarisation of admirers pitted against defeatists. The former focused on the beneficial possibilities which the internet could contribute to the church's missionary mandate; the latter depicted unsettling scenarios rife with danger. Both editors believe that either view may be substantiated: on the one hand, the internet opens up new communicative forms which enable a multitude of people to participate in virtual interaction. On the other hand, however, although retrospective assessments may be premature at this early stage, there are also risks when bypassing the “real” community dimension and loosening the social bonds among “neighbours”.

In spite of the internet's ambivalence, of its potential for both extraordinary progress and malefic side effects, the authors opt for a stance of self-critical optimism. Their position rests on empirical evidence which suggests that Christians expect a progressive humanising of the internet which will prove beneficial to the church's mission. The internet favours communion within the church, particularly where church members constitute a minority of the overall population or are scattered across a diaspora. Furthermore, the internet may be used as a tool for theological training, which accesses – in an evangelistic sense – the demand for spirituality existing throughout the net while favouring the formulation and development of partnership projects aimed at social and missionary objectives. In conclusion, the authors hold that the “virtual” Christianity dreaded in their compendium should not deter a massive use of the internet, on condition that due attention is paid to the need for critique and corrective action.

What then are the main risks? The trends which mirror those manifest in society must be seen as central. There is no doubt that the internet is con-

ducive to “net individualism” or “linked states of solitude”, thus adding to modern individualism a new, technology-wise postmodern twist. Christianity, being a religion centred on “incarnation”, does not imply, according to the authors being discussed, that internet “virtuality” should be dismissed off-hand, but rather that it should be experienced with a view towards the fruitful contributions it could offer.

An annotated review of religious web sites (mainly located in Francophone areas) is found at the end of this book. Some of the comments betray unease as regards a number of evangelical sites and their evangelistic contents. The rest provide a good starting point for a reasoned reflection on the subject matter.

The book edited by Altobelli and Leone draws its origin from a seminar sponsored by ATISM on the relation existing between the internet and ethics. According to the editors, the publication paves the way to a reflection aimed at evaluating the implications of such complex and new issues as those raised by the internet (p. 8). The essays gathered therein – representative of a budding debate ongoing among Catholics, chiefly in Italy – voice growing interest in the challenge and opportunities that the internet introduces with respect to the mission of the church. Some of the twelve contributions may be of interest to non-Catholics as well. For example, X. Debanne offers a précis of the cultural and technological developments which have led to the digitalizing of society and to the birth of the internet. Religions have eventually resolved to make up for both lost time and opportunities and to announce their presence (through web shop-windows, transnational and interactive sites etc.). G. Coccolini examines the stand taken by (Catholic) hierarchies which resulted from working papers as well as declarations expressed by various institutions. D. Grohmann delves into the complex juridical and legislative aspects associated with digital communication media, paying particular attention to the safeguard of privacy, electronic commerce and paedophilia on line. R. Altobelli focuses on more theological issues, such as the relationship between the internet’s space/time dimension and that of Christological categories, in which space and time have been both appropriated and reconciled. Altobelli raises questions as to the capability of the internet to convey “incarnated communication” forms along lines similar to the channelling of biblical revelation. Finally, J. Scianchi wonders whether the internet signals “new poverty”

or “new development” worldwide, arguing that both outcomes might occur simultaneously and advocating, as a remedy, the emergence of a “new humanism”.

Italian Catholics seem to have explored the same issue, with their pro-active standpoint possibly replacing an earlier wait-and-see attitude (centred on making use of the internet whenever needed while passively witnessing its impressive expansion). Although ethical reflection is just now beginning, it is today viewed as an undertaking which can no longer be deferred.

Lastly, our attention turns to Spadaro’s publication. The author, a member of the editorial staff of *La Civiltà Cattolica* – a magazine owned in Italy by the Jesuit order – and an acute observer of cultural trends as well as a literary critic, has here gathered eight essays earlier published by the Jesuit review. The book is divided into two subheadings, with the first being mainly descriptive of phenomena linked to the internet’s impact on culture, and the second focusing in particular on the observable impingement of the internet upon the religious sphere. Spadaro deftly arranges data and tendencies, organising sources, identifying problems as well as assessing potential and prospective digital technologies. Short but well documented chapters are assigned to complex and fascinating themes such as digital publishing, libraries, virtual book-stores, web-zines (magazines available online), the blog phenomenon – a blending of journal-keeping and news writing – podcasting, and the remarkable success story of Wikipedia. Subjects are cursorily dealt with by one who is clearly acquainted with them, with a view to helping the reader to form detailed, critical appraisals of the topics being discussed. In general, the author is guarded but fundamentally open towards new cultural forms, both highlighting promising potentialities while not attempting to hide the grey areas nor the potential for deviant practices.

The second part of the book, where theological and pastoral analyses are emphasised, is very interesting. It is not by coincidence that its two chapters are titled “God in the Net” and “The Church and the Internet”. In the former, the author investigates the need for God in today’s society and the cyber-spirituality on offer across the net, the amount of content the internet assigns to broad spiritual debates and, more specifically, to theological dialogue. Among the many innovations brought forth by the internet, one worth considering regards a shift in the localisation of authorities which regu-

late theological debates: “knowledge is no longer based on a unique radiating centre, but, rather, any point (on the net) may become a centre while all points can be accessed from anywhere. Learning is non-hierarchical and fragmented and there exists no difference between within and without. What effects will this have upon knowledge and theological communication?” (p. 121). “Theo-blog-y” (i.e. internet theological blogging) raises new questions and leads to the opening of new forums for the exchange of views (the “Christian blog-sphere”). It is worth noting that the author sees the examples of blogs associated with North American evangelical magazines (*Christianity Today*, *World*, etc.) as a sign that new technologies are now utilised across the full spectrum of Christian denominations, with the jagged mosaic of evangelical communities seen at the forefront of the trend experimenting with new languages and media (one such medium is Theopedia, the theological encyclopaedia reflecting the reformed vision; p. 126). Another specimen of this new communicative trend is the so-called

“godcasting” (i.e. the growing popularity of podcasting with religious content added). The internet also accommodates the potential for theology to be an “open source” fed by countless inputs and stirred by various fluctuations. The *open source theology* is a community form of theologising, with no centre of authority and bent on fostering participation more than pursuing creative fidelity. In the last chapter (“The Church and the Internet”), the author reflects on two documents issued in 2002 by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. From among the many ideas presented, Spadaro notably insists on limiting the scope of the *log-in/log-off* procedure which, being triggered at the initiative of the concerned individual, bypasses the “incarnated mediation” (p. 145) of sacraments, liturgy, catechesis and ecclesiastical institutions. Even those who do not readily accept the notion of ecclesiastic mediation, as laid out in Catholic theology, might agree that the misguided use of the internet is likely to dilute one’s personal commitment and identification with the local church.

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