CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND THE QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY

Gerald C. Liu

In The Question Concerning Technology, German philosopher Martin Heidegger writes that “[e]verywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it.”¹ For Heidegger, technology encompasses more than machinery like a jet providing transport or gadgetry like a computer making possible unprecedented access to information. Instead, technology operates ubiquitously as an inescapable reality that binds us everywhere.²

Heidegger’s claim far exceeds debates about how or whether congregations should use technological interfaces. Although his anti-Semitism warrants theological protest,³ if he has identified and articulated a permanent cultural change, perhaps we can find and retrieve something in his line of argumentation that helps clarify the “question concerning technology” for Christian worship.

I want to suggest that Heidegger’s lines of sight provide vanishing points for seeing how cultural curiosity and resignation become vital for worship leaders who want to move into new futures of relevance and meaning for Christian worship in a technological age. Christian worship here entails ritual, artistic, and social practices that express love of God and neighbor as found in the biblical witness and the gatherings of merciful people across the world today.

The introductory quotation above grows out of work begun in 1949, when Heidegger first explores the essence of modern technology. In the first lecture of that series, “The Thing,” Heidegger contemplates the utility of a premodern technology: a jug. A jug is a type of equipment, a kind of technological advance, a vessel in which liquid can be stored, held, and poured. Yet the jug is also much more. It consecrates. It gives. For Heidegger, a jug in use becomes a kind of northern light that draws near heaven and earth, as well as divinity and mortals. This is less a theological turn when Heidegger speaks of mortals and divinities unifying (though the sacramental resonances are hard to ignore) and more an appeal to the history of using a jug in religious rituals, like libations poured to venerate Greek and Roman gods. The jug unconceals visible and invisible realities.⁴ By illuminating the unification of heaven and earth, divinities and mortals (what Heidegger calls a fourfold), the jug becomes more than a technological object. The jug shows
what is hidden as present, blessing humanity with the gift of profound disclosure. The jug provides an opening to recognize life or Being in its entirety, what can be perceived and what can only be intimated.

By contrast, modern technology does not disclose. In the second lecture, "Positionality," Heidegger suggests that the essential nature of modern technology differs from the premodern technology of a jug in that modern technology does not bring forth or make present hidden truths about the world and the sacred. Instead, modern technology hides those truths through calculation and commodification. It speculates about gold, oil, particles, energy, and minerals in order to convert them into commodities. Humans become categorized as reserve stock standing by—as labor or another natural resource. Modern technology masks truth by requisitioning or calling every phenomenon in the world to become what they were never intended to be: measurable and stockpile-able wares for unending exchange and sale rather than touch points for experiencing the ultimately human and sacred, the true. Even "god" cannot escape because theological discourse and practices become conscripted in the enterprise of modern technology.6 We can see this in the advent of radio, its effect upon preaching, and radio’s direct connection to widespread surveillance, which perverts a principle aspiration of worship: to find and express what is true.

Radio History

Let us begin then by touching upon key points in radiophonic history. Beginning in 1836, Samuel F. B. Morse demonstrated how code could transmit over telegraph wires. By the 1890s, Morse code came into frequent usage. In 1906, Reginald Fessenden showed that more powerful alternators could transmit waves. The sending and receiving of voiced audio soon became a widespread reality. In 1915, Edwin S. Pridham and Peter L. Jensen increased wattage to a rudimentary phonographic recording and playback device that Edison developed in 1877 to invent what would ostensibly become the first loudspeaker. The increased amplification made phonography more popular than ever as a means of hearing music and recorded speech. Soon the wireless telegraphy of Fessenden and others enabled communication between the most "inconsequential" and remote of regions.6

Radio was initially seen not only as an opportunity to broadcast programming, but also to educate the masses. U.S. pioneers in radio originally thought that broadcasting European art music would reinforce democratic values, help educate, and bring culture to the working classes. In May of 1920, Clayton B. Wells chided his parishioner, Charles A. Stanley, president of the Cosradio Company and operator of an amateur radio station in Kansas, that if he was going to air on Sundays he ought to at least talk about church. Stanley appeased his pastor by featuring Wells’ sermons during his show. This anecdote illustrates a catechetical use of technology, as worship and ubiquitous technology quickly intersected in radio broadcasts of Christian preaching.

African-American preachers like A. W. Nix, J. C. Burnett, and J. M. Gates, along with Pentecostals such as D. C. Rice and F. W. McGee, diversified homiletic broadcasts. The debut of gospel and blues music from artists such
as Thomas Dorsey and Ma Rainey not only transformed popular music, but
gave Christian witness sonic contrast and color, even though the African-
American artists themselves remained invisible over the airwaves. Religious
radio and radio in general blossomed. By 1922, approximately ten thousand
families possessed a radio in the United States. By 1939, twenty-seven million
out of a total of thirty-two million families in the United States owned
a radio — 85 percent of the population. Radio empowered Christian worship
with unprecedented reach. Yet Christian worship also slipped into the grip
of a new era. The conditions for hearing, seeing, and imagining the love
of God and neighbor had radically changed.

Radiophonic innovation inspired inventions leading to the motion-
picture industry. In 1894, William K. L. Dickson introduced the coin-
operated Kinetoscope on Broadway. It first linked phonograph and camera. In
1898 Colonel Henry Hadley mesmerized audiences of his evangelism
campaigns with Passion Play photodramas. Around the same time,
Salvation Army legend Herbert Booth used Hadley’s ingenuity to seduce
the impoverished to hear his preaching about Jesus with limited-production
films. In 1926, Western Electric and Warner Brothers made the loudspeaker
by Pridham and Jensen sing and mystify by using the device to introduce
sound to movies. Technological sight and sound created new visual and
aural culture and further technologized Christian witness in the United States.

The marvel of audiences, however, often overlooked glaring social biases
communicated in the cinematic advances. Films like The Birth of a Nation
(1915) attacked African-American citizenship. Meanwhile, Al Jolson’s The Jazz
Singer (1927), for all of its dazzling combination of picture and sound, silenced black voices, adding further insult to an already disabled black film
industry then known as the race picture market. African-American life has
suffered and shined on film ever since. Cinema and other technological
images continue to define social biases related especially to race, ethnicity,
human sexuality, and class, as can be seen, for example, in the widely
tolerated emasculation of Asian Americans, as exemplified by the laughable
hug between Aaliyah and Jet Li in Romeo Must Die.

The rise of radio and related developments like sound films also
coincided with the invention of technologies that would link audio and video
in unprecedented ways. In 1884, Herman Hollerith filed a patent for compiling
statistics that would lead to a business called International Business
Machines (IBM). Another related and key turning point occurred in 1928,
when Fritz Pflaumer invented magnetic tape by using his own peculiar
professional skill of gilding cigarette paper with decorative bronze
to advance the nineteenth-century phonographic recording discoveries of
Edison. Magnetic tape led to the production of recording machines like the
Magnetophone. In the 1930s, German state radio became the largest customer
of the device, which allowed for the recording and reproducing of radio
programming to enable censorship. With the outbreak of World War II,
demand for magnetic tape recording surged in Germany and the United
States as a surveillance tool utilized in new recording machines such as the
Magnetophone. In short, the successes of radio and of Pflaumer’s patent
ignited an entirely new horizon of archiving, monitoring, and examining
sounds around the world.
Surveillance Today

One direct and disturbing descendent of the Magnetophone and an example of requisitioning technology is the Utah Data Center, a $1.5 billion, 1.2 million-square-foot sprawling series of twenty rectangular compounds on 247 acres of land in a town ironically called Bluffdale. Also code-named “Bumblehive,” the Utah Data Center is “the first Intelligence Community Comprehensive National Cyber-Security Initiative (IC CNCI).”

On the center’s website, a photograph of the building’s front lawn displays a welcome sign, resembling signage one might find in a churchyard. Its capitalized acrylic letters gleam with the message, “If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.” Passive compliance to surveillance that clearly flouts the fourth amendment’s ruling against unlawful search and seizure should not, however, be a requirement for civic calm.

The Utah Data Center consumes approximately sixty-five megawatts of electrical power and anywhere from two to four million gallons of water per month in order to archive at safe temperatures untold exabytes of data. Still, it boasts LEED silver certification, a health and environmental designation awarded by the U.S. Green Building Council. In New Jersey, the state where I currently teach, an average home uses just short of nine megawatts annually. A single exabyte equals 100,000 times all the printed material of the Library of Congress. Some reports claim that the facility could store zetta-bytes—100,000,000 times all the printed material of the Library of Congress. The exponential amount of information collected by the U.S. government includes surveillance of e-mails, phone calls, chats, texts, posts, and other Internet communicative activities shared by American citizens and people around the world.

Those people around the world include Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, and as many as thirty-five international leaders from France and Italy to Saudi Arabia. The National Security Agency (or NSA) defends its domestic and international eavesdropping as a necessary form of counterterrorism security. The “Who’s Who” list of world leaders, however, also suggests that economic interests and foreign policy motivate the pervasive governmental espionage. Assuredly, other nations employ similar tactics. The picture therefore of who’s watching whom, how, and why becomes incredibly puzzling and complex.

Civic subversion undertaken by “rogue” informants like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning further complicates the picture of the operations and purposes of ubiquitous technological surveillance. In response, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yahoo, and others have reinforced encryption measures and have begun to refuse “quiet cooperation” with government requests and interceptions of private user habits and information. What kind of oversight, however, exists for the corporate giants who control and shape Internet behavior? One can see without knowing the details and without stepping any further into the maze of Bumblehive and the Orwellian reality it represents that technology comprehensively infiltrates, redefines, and captures our lives.

Green Bank, West Virginia is, ironically, a government-sanctioned U.S. national radio quiet zone where cell phones receive no signal and radios
never stop on a station. There’s no such thing as wifi there. But even in Green Bank, surveillance persists. Municipalities enforce silence in order to keep the airwaves open for the celestial listening of the world’s largest steerable radio telescope. No matter where we are, we live and worship in a technological age.

Heidegger’s third lecture, “The Danger,” stresses that this universal situation threatens to make humans completely forget “the truth of Being,” that we are profoundly mortal, not instrumental. Modern technology threatens and incarcerates humanity and the world. Yet in the fourth and final lecture, “The Turn,” Heidegger insists that truth still flashes through the influence of technology without warning and without boundary. Quoting Friedrich Hölderlin, Heidegger writes, “But where danger is, grows/The saving power also.” Even in an age ravaged by modern technology, the light of truth still shines. Heidegger never defines truth beyond describing it as an unpredictable unconcealing of what is. His reticence presents a theological opportunity. We can now maneuver out from under his framework and the material histories presented thus far and explore horizons for worship in a technological age.

Worship in a Technological Age

Christians have together historically believed in a God who saves out of treacherous danger (Mark 15:34). This God became revealed distinctly but not strictly by a first-century Jesus who still lives as the Christ and gives humanity the Holy Spirit. The same God is understood to have engaged in self-disclosure by declaring a name without limit (Ex 3:14), showing only a fleeting backside (Ex 33:23), shining like a bright morning star, and waving us hither like an expectant bride (Rev 22:16–17). This God moves within and beyond Greek concepts like truth and metaphysical arguments that follow it. This God remains encrypted, so to speak, and is disclosed only in part until a time in which the age of modern technology and the very existence of the universe as we perceive it ceases.

Neither the biblical witness nor any particular religious tradition can contain the revelation of God. Taking the example of the biblical passages above at face value, they witness to action preceding the documentation of sacred text. They say nothing about the many ways in which God may have entered into perception before, during, and since such holy writ. People of faith do not, however, suffer theological obscurity as a result. Rather, Christian worship in its entirety can and must, as a result of such mystery, celebrate a truth clearly imparted by God: God enters into the world like an open secret, a mystery that might appear captive to the imprisonment of the technological age. Yet God continues to manifest in the world and human lives as God always has: freely.

Neither does modern technology restrain divine presence and movement in the world. Departing from Heidegger, or perhaps exploiting the opening of salvation he poses, not all technological advances threaten what God has given. I am grateful for any clinical discoveries that could slow the effects
of my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s. I celebrate with my friend’s family when a surgery corrects a problem found in their infant son. Elements of the technological age like those, in fact, participate in divine charity. A task then for Christian worship is to discover where and how God appears. Christian worship must continue to assert its foundational hopes to display the truths of God. Although the work of identifying public “appearances” of God at work in the world demands a fair amount of liturgical speculation, it does not amount to religious hocus-pocus.

The current essay offers two concrete but inconclusive practices, one more palpable than the other, for creating and fostering conditions that seek and welcome unpredictable and unexpected announcements of God in our technologized world. The first regards liturgical pedagogy and wide inclusivity. How can the training of worship leaders involve the grooming of liturgical scouts, who look for other voices and rituals of defiance and divine will and invite them into wider glorification of God? If every human being bears the image of God, how do worship leaders attune their perception of the technological age to see God as widely as possible in the face of others and learn from them? Here I am imagining seeking what African Americanist Richard Iton, with respect to African American culture, named the Black Fantastic: something I would describe as socially and theologically pregnant truths displayed by the people of God. If every human being bears the image of God, then surely some of our peers engaging the devices and forms of communication that symbolize the technological age are sharing divine wisdom and perhaps even revelation.

Artists like Ai Weiwei and Liu Xiaobo have plenty to say about the deleterious effects of censorship, surveillance, and incarceration in a technological age. The 3-D computer animated voguing of Jacolby Satterwhite explores themes of virtual reality, human sexuality, family, and mental illness with vibrancy, playfulness, and strangeness worth exploring to see how distant current ritual practices are from “secular” expressions on these matters. The very unsubtle “A Subtlety” by Kara Walker reflects the venomous history of modern technology conscripting vulnerable people and exploiting the land for commercial gain. What would it look like for leaders of worship to learn from such poignant creativity and insight and then implement those lessons into actual liturgical practice?

It does not matter if the aforementioned artists identify themselves or their work as religious. The history of worship has from its inception been multilinear. Practices have developed over time via wide cross-fertilization of ritual and public practices from across civic and private domains and often from origins that remain unclear. For example, marriage was a state rite before churches solemnized it. Even recent worship practices like those of the United States grew out of Christian pluralism. In other words, the story of worship is not one of consensus to diversity and convergence again but rather one of learning from and engaging cultural variety from the beginning.

This is not to say that worship practices have appeared out of thin air. For example, the Bible provides foundations for sacraments such as the Eucharist and baptism. Yet even the biblical canon was formed over time as a result of varied cultural influences and translation. Even an account of early churches like Acts does not provide significant detail with respect to the actual content.
of rites of worship. We know, for example, that baptisms, healings, miracles, proclamations, raising of the dead, breaking bread, and other signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit occurred, but not exactly how. We also know that such worship took place in homes, a domain where women would have had a significant role of leadership. Yet we hear little about them, and the biblical accounts of figures like Sapphira, Tabitha (Dorcas), Rhoda, Lydia, Damaris, and Priscilla give little detail. Scholars like Teresa Berger have shown the importance of revising the historical record of Christian worship with respect to the roles of women. Her scholarship has implications for how we consider the important contributions, not only with respect to gender, but other aspects of human diversity as well. The story of worship is a historical one but it is a living history as worship continues to evolve with respect to culture.

Today’s Christian worship leaders have an opportunity to engage multiple forms of culture in another register—one defined by an age of technology—in order to further understandings of love and mercy and sacred connections between the living, the dead, the world, and God. Refusal to do so risks irrelevance as well as forgetfulness with regard to the multiple fibers of DNA that have evolved into the many practices that we now collectively call worship.

Second, the technological age requires a kind of painful resignation to its inevitable influence on us. The predicament of our current age results from our own ingenuity as well as sins and behaviors that cannot be categorized neatly or undone and can only be judged by God. In other words, some of this is self-inflicted. Heidegger’s das Ge-Stell, or positionality, is not an abstraction. We have made it concrete and palpable through complicit technological fixations, addictions, and relations.

Even if we gather in a field for silent prayer, the air itself has become porous with the all-encompassing buzz of today’s technological cultural turn. Radio demonstrated that long ago. Today satellite observation continuously monitors the earth. Therefore we cannot outwit today’s digital culture by becoming luddites or deploying tactics like “clicktivism” (online activism), viral videos, or other screen-time stunts like missionary online dating. Yet we don’t have to throw up our hands, either.

Rather we must clasp them again and again in prayer and get them dirty in the name of liturgical reform. Resigning to a technological age could just as well involve a delightful release to the capriciousness of life that ultimately finds its bearings in the promises of God. Again, the claim here has nothing to do with liturgically giving up in a technological age. Instead, I recommend relinquishing any confidence that we can develop suitable practices for Christian worship in a technological age. We must absolutely place our trust in God as ultimate guide and judge of our attempts to evolve in our liturgical thoughts and actions. On the one hand, worship leaders must remain vigilant in designing and redesigning praises, laments, and meditations embodied, sung, said, and held in silence that thoughtfully reckon with technological culture. On the other hand, every liturgical preparation and act must recognize its limit. Any occasion of worship will need more than what humans can provide in order to communicate what is holy, merciful, and true in a technological age.

Leaders of worship in a technological age must also open themselves to hearing, learning, and even speaking from “divided tongues” (Acts 2:3–4
NRSV). Measures like these will vary in their technological engagement. What they will hold in common is refusal to interfere with the unpredictability of God. No matter how faint, swift, unexpected, unrecognizable, or seemingly embroidered by technology, a revelation we could not have anticipated may yet touch us at any moment and in any era.

Gerald C. Liu, an ordained United Methodist Elder, is a minister-in-residence at Church of the Village, New York City, and assistant professor of homiletics and worship arts, Drew Theological School, New Jersey.

Notes

5. Heidegger, Bremen and Freiburg Lectures, 31: “To this end it is worth noting, that we observe how the ordering in advance infests all that is: nature and history, human and divine; then if today a poorly advised theology authorizes the achievements of nuclear physics, with the help of its divine evidence, then God will be placed in the domain of the orderable” (my translation).
11. Ibid.
12. Kraft, Stage to Studio, 2.
16. “LEED, or Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design, is a green building certificate program” that recognizes buildings with positive impact upon the health of occupants and that promote renewable energy. Four certifications exist as listed in ascending order: (1) certified, (2) silver, (3) gold, (4) platinum; see http://www.usgbc.org/leed.
18. For the universality of das Ge-Stell, see Heidegger, Bremen and Freiburg Lectures, 40. For the threat of complete forgetfulness of the truth of Being, see page 53.
22. For Jacolby Satterwhite, see http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2014Biennial/JacolbySatterwhite.
24. Though not an example of liturgical practice influenced by contemporary art, see the Rev. Vicki Flippin’s theological reflection entitled “Taking My Baby to Kara Walker’s Sugar Baby,” Huffington Post (August 27, 2014), as an example of how contemporary art can shape pastoral thinking.
26. Phillip Lyndon Reynolds, Marriage in the Western Church: The Christianization of Marriage During the Patristic and Medieval Period (Boston: Brill, 2001).