# HOLDING SWAY: TECHNOLOGICAL THEORY AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN DIGITAL RELIGION

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Because of time constraints, I need to sprint over terrain that deserves the pace of a Sunday afternoon stroll. My intention here is to illustrate how the technoscientific theories put forward by Martin Heidegger and the Canadian moral philosopher George Grant clearly manifest in digital religion's praxis, theology, and self-understanding. Quite often in digital religion, technology is assumed as instrumental and neutral. However, I will contend that modern technology actively reinterprets the theological, ecclesial, and politico-geographical aspects of digital religion and is far from being a neutral endeavor. In this sense, I intended to err on the side of description in order to best describe these manifestations.

Let us turn first to Heidegger. In his essay, "The Question Concerning Technology", Heidegger argues that we are delivered over to our modern technologies in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral and fail to examine its essence[1]. The essence of modern technology, according to Heidegger, is nothing inherently technological: it is a peculiar type of revealing that we can neither rationally control nor stand outside of. It is an "uncovering" in the sense that *poiesis* uncovers that which is concealed (think of Michelangelo, who "uncovered" what was hidden within a block of marble). However, it is an uncovering that brings forth in a very peculiar way: it challenges nature in order to set things apart as "standing reserve" for our future use. But are not modern technologies merely instruments? Instrumentality is the causal relation between means and ends, and in this sense, Heidegger takes a silver chalice as an example of an instrument that is the product of certain causes. He notes something

[1] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, Harper Perennial Modern Thought (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 4.

important is missing, however: the one who is doing the making is not represented in the making. Is the silversmith an efficient cause within the process? Does he or she not bring something of himself or herself in the making? The silversmith, who brings forth the chalice, has occasioned its presence. He has brought something into being or into presence. However, modern technology is a *type* of revealing that brings into presence. Heidegger writes:

> "Bringing-forth, indeed, gathers within itself the four modes of occasioning…and rules them throughout. Within its domain belong ends and means, belongs instrumentality...Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth[2]."

This is, in fact, what makes modern technology modern: it is the setting upon and challenging forth of nature for the revealing of truth. It transforms nature into resources to be used at will. This unlocking and transforming and storing and distributing are ways of revealing that is relentless and restless and never seems to arrive at security and regulation. Furthermore, it recontextualizes an environment in terms of our usage: it is a mentality that sees a forest not as nature nor as wilderness but as "board feet". Heidegger calls this essence of modern technology "enframing". It is a peculiar mindset that makes up the essence of the modern sciences, of scientific knowing, and of technological making and gives rise to a particular type of being, knowing, and making.

Heidegger is concerned with this mindset creating the real danger of not being able to appreciate alternative ways of knowing and being. It is to see nature – including human nature – disappear as anything distinct or having integrity apart from us. It is, in other words, to experience a profound alienation. It is to stand so "decisively" in attendance to

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[2] Ibid., 12.

enframing as to fail to apprehend it as a claim, which simultaneously is a failure of humanity to hear in what respect we exist, and thus to encounter only ourselves[3]. Enframing, then, is a way of bringing forth, but perhaps most importantly it conceals other ways of revealing, especially in the way things come into presence. Heidegger concludes that "the threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already affected man in his essence. Enframing puts us within a dynamic context that makes other ways of knowing and being extremely difficult to see.

I will turn now to the Canadian philosopher George Grant, who shares Heidegger's concerns regarding technology's so-called neutral instrumentality and its ability to conceal other ways of thinking, being, and knowing. Because we live in a technological society, Grant argues that we are blind to particular foibles about technology. We tend to pare down the novelty of our milieu because we see it as the modern embodiment of the dialectic of socio-cultural and scientific progress – it is merely a step forward in our collective abilities to apply systematic reason to the invention of instruments for our use. Technology is thought of as "the whole apparatus of instruments made by man and placed at the disposal of man for his choice and purposes[4]." This technological epistemology seems so obviously true as to be beyond argument. Grant calls this a "civilizational destiny", by which he means the constellation of fundamental presuppositions that the vast majority of a people inherit in a given civilization. These presuppositions are given the absolute status of 'the ways things are';

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[3] Ibid., 27.
[4] George Grant, "Thinking About Technology" from *Technology and Justice* (Concord, Ont.: Anansi, 1986), 19.

they are seemingly beyond reproach.

Thus we assume machines like the personal computer are instruments in that their capacities have been programmed in to them by human beings, and it is human beings "who operate those machines for purposes they have determined[5]." Grant offers a version of this argument, put forth by a computer scientist in his day, who argues, "The computer does not impose on us the ways it should be used." Grant argues it is a mistake to abstract the computer from the paradigm of knowledge in which it was created. In our case, the computer arose from the paradigm of knowledge consisting of the methodologies and assumptions carved out through the new science and its abstract mathematics. Computers are thus an invention conceived within a civilizational destiny. The computer scientist, then, is incorrect in assuming that "the computer does not impose": on the contrary, the computer imposes itself upon us because it is an invention engendered within an imposing destiny.

Not only can our modern technologies not be abstracted from the paradigm of knowledge in which they were created, Grant argues the "ways that computers have been and will be used cannot be detached from modern conceptions of justice, and that these conceptions of justice come forth from the very account of reasoning which led to the building of computers[6]." Modern technological instruments and modern standards of justice are indissociable – they are "bound together" and belong to "the same identity of modern reason[7]." Grant notes the following:

> "[W]hen we seek to elucidate the standards of human good (or in contemporary language 'the values') by which particular techniques can

[5] Ibid., 20.
[6] Ibid., 27.
[7] Ibid., 28.

> be judged, we do so within modern ways of thought and belief. But from the very beginnings of modern thought the new natural science and the new moral science developed together in mutual interdependence so that the fundamental assumptions of each were formulated in light of the other. Modern thought is in that sense a unified fate for us[8]."

All of us are working within the same sets of assumptions about the nature of the world and our place in it. Yet, Grant notes, "the very substance of our existing which has made us the leaders in technique, stands as a barrier to any thinking which might be able to comprehend technique from beyond its own dynamic[9]." The North American ethos is technological, and it's become a fate we can't think outside of.

Both Grant and Heidegger argue that modern technology, far from being a neutral endeavor, has enabled a pervasive and dynamic way of thinking and seeing the world that conceals alternative modes of knowing and being. We want modern technology to be a neutral edifice whose use is dictated by us for good or ill. However, once illuminated, it is better to see it, Grant's words, as "a destiny which enfolds us in its own conceptions of instrumentality, neutrality, and purposiveness. It is in this sense that it has been truthfully said: technology is the ontology of the age[10]."

To conclude I want to identify ways in which this technoscientific ontology manifests in digital religion. I will lean primarily on Heidi Campbell, an associate professor of Communications at Texas A&M, who studies religion, new media, and the influence of digital and mobile technologies on religious communities. The paper's purposes, again, are not to judge the findings but merely to illuminate the technological theory that is driving it.

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[8] George Grant, "In Defense of North America" in *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Concord, Ont.: Anansi, 1969), 38.
[9] Ibid., 40.
[10] Grant, "Thinking Through Technology", 32.

First, let us consider a project undertaken by Anglicans and Episcopalians in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the United States to construct the generic Anglican Cathedral located on Epiphany Island in the virtual world of Second Life. The ACSL holds multiple services a week for over 400 participants, and according to a key member and former leader of the online ecclesia, the cathedral was constructed in Second Life in order to "speak a powerful message in the virtual world by providing 'a symbol of faith' that people would visually recognize[11]." Most notably for our purposes, however, the ACSL has reconfigured the accepted practices and notions of church for Anglican communities in the offline world by "reinvigorating religious communities through the integration of new technologies that draw new people in, while also forcing religious authorities and members to re-examine the established tradition[12]." Note how these supposedly neutral technologies were integrated for this congregation, and subsequently how its mere online presence called for the re-examination of ecclesial understandings of church polity, the geographical authority of bishops, and the cadences of the offline communities. As of yet, there is no Anglican Bishop of Second Life.

Related to but differing from the ACSL, consider the cross-denominational movement known as the Emergent Church and their Suddenly Seminary project. Suddenly Seminary was a technological experiment that provided "the ability for individuals from around the world to share expertise, experience, and resources...in a safe, neutral online space for people in closed countries or those hostile to Christianity[13]." Again, note the assumed neutrality of the internet space. While some in the Emergent

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[11] Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010), 123.
[12] Ibid., 127.
[13] Ibid, 153.

Church stressed that they were not wholly dependent on the internet for its platform, Campbell writes "it is arguable that (the internet) played in the very formation of its social network, style of ministry, and even theology...in this respect their conversation about the Internet created a validation discourse, where technology is intertwined with the characterization of the movement as an emerging network of ideas and connections seeking to extend previous theologies and forms of ministry praxis[14]." Not only did the Emergent Church use platform technologies like the internet but, in their persistent incorporation of the technological, they were shaped by the technology as well. In Heidegger's words, the medium influenced the movement's bringing-forth; it shifted their horizon of intelligibility.

Finally, Campbell has examined the technological practices of Northland Church in Longwood, Florida, a church of over 15,000 attendees each week, 4,000 of whom are online. In fact, according to Northland's website, "the fastest growing segment of Northland's congregation has never set foot inside its facilities[15]." Keeping in mind technology's so-called neutrality, consider the differences between Northland's online and offline experiences. To begin with, while offline church membership or affiliation processes at Northland involve the proclamation of an ideological or theological commitment, the online congregation requires only informational commitment in the chat room community[16]. Online attendees are also encouraged to "personalize their worship experience" by choosing whether to engage with fellow online worshipers via the online

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[14] Ibid., 156.
[15] www.northlandchurch.net, accessed Thursday, March 19, 2015 at 5:38 pm.
[16] Heidi Campbell and Michael DeLashmutt, "Technology and Ecclesiology in Online Multi-site Worship" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (May, 2014), 267-285, accessed October 21, 2014, 274.

chatroom or by focusing exclusively on the webcast service. The online worship experience, Campbell notes, is "framed as both a communal and private experience[17]", a choice that is nearly impossible in the offline congregation. Also, efforts are made to ensure "a standardized experience in all locations, so that the experience of online worshippers is not dissimilar from the experience of those at other sides and at house church locations[18]." In describing what drove his church's shift to tele-mediatization, Northland pastor Joel Hunter describes a so-called paradigm shift from "the conception of church that is synonymous with a particular building to an understanding of church as a diverse group of people that are united by their faith in Christ[19]." Hunter's ecclesiology is informed by an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12 wherein St. Paul employs a metaphoric use of the body to describe the diversity-in-unity of the Christian church. However, according to Hunter, because of our modern technological capacities, physical proximity of church members is no longer relevant to membership within a distributed church: what matters most is faith "lived out within the context of one's daily life[20]." This is certainly an ecclesiological self-understanding that interprets a church community as a universalized abstraction worshipping in a disincarnated and delocalized techno-space.

In conclusion, the technological theory put forward by Heidegger and Grant help illuminate the presumptions of the technological practices manifesting in digital religion. Far from being neutral, modern technology seems to hold sway over certain aspects of digital religion and actively reinterprets its praxis, theology, and self-understanding.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 276.
[19] Ibid., 278.
[20] Ibid.

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