

## Session 5.2: Redeeming Religious Technology

2<sup>nd</sup> June 2018

**Title:** Technology, Religiosity and the Changing Face of Humanity

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Yam Chi-Keung (任志強), PhD (Edinburgh University), is an experienced media practitioner as well as an interdisciplinary scholar in Christian theology and contemporary media cultures. He is publisher of *Christian Times*, a major Chinese-language Christian weekly newspaper in Hong Kong. He is a Research Associate at the Centre for Christian Studies and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, both at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is also the champion of the Diploma Programme in Christian Faith and Contemporary Culture, and an Associated Fellow at the Centre of the Study of Asian Religion and Culture, Groningen University (the Netherlands).

### **Abstract:**

The relationship between technology and its development on the one hand, and religion and civilisation on the other, is often covert but elemental. Technological developments, and the adoption thereof, often shape the course of human cultures and civilisations, including religion, without the conscious awareness on the part of individuals and communities involved. While adoption of newly developed technologies by religious communities is often marked by a lack of critical reflection on any possible long-term consequences, forms of religious lives and the essential nature of religious experience could be reformatted deep down into the bone.

For instance, when the written text began to become common approximately two millennia ago due to new developments in writing technologies, the written form of the Hebrew Bible became stable and the Christian New Testament emerged during the same broad time frame. Ever since, the written text gradually took the place of the oral tradition as the primary means by which Jewish and Christian communities articulate their understanding the Divine. Similarly, the Protestant Reformation inaugurated five hundred years ago could not have occurred without the material foundation provided by the unprecedented breakthrough in media technology of its days, namely the invention of moveable types in Guttenberg. Consequentially, the Reformation altered fundamentally not only the course of Christianity but also the subsequent developments in European society, politics and culture for centuries to come.

Since the end of the twentieth century, we are experiencing the foretaste of another wave of technological developments in a revolutionary scale. Singing hymns from PowerPoint on screen, reading the Scriptures from mobile phones, or deciding on church matters through WhatsApp are but tips of icebergs which point toward massive shaking of foundations. My contention is that the technologies many of us take for granted in recent years are, again, to transform our understanding of religious faith, and thus by necessity alter the human perception of the Divine, the world, and ourselves as a species.

**Reading:**

- “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” Donna Haraway  
Article #51 in Scharff and Dusek.
- “The Social Impact of Technological Change” Emmanuel G. Mesthene  
Article #56 in Scharff and Dusek.
- “Three Ways of Being-With Technology” Carl Mitcham  
Article #45 in Scharff and Dusek.

**Further reading:**

- “Thinking about Melville, Religion, and Machines that Think” John Lardas Modern, in *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow (2012) New York, NY: Fordham University Press, pp. 183-211.