

SCREEN CHRISTIANITY: VIDEO SERMONS IN THE CREATION OF TRANSNATIONAL KOREAN CHURCHES

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This article attends to the central role of video and projection screens in transnational multisite churches based in South Korea. Drawing on field research in Seoul and in Los Angeles, this article illustrates how the relationship between congregants and the screens themselves is a condition for the emergence of a particular configuration of Christian community, which I will peirastically call “screen Christianity.” The place of screens and their related practices undergird theological conceptions of contact and community, such that screens are said to transmit healing touches and pastors are understood to be present through the proliferation of their screened image. Considering these Christian churches as engaging in screen Christianity highlights how particular material configurations animate these church bodies and ultimately make such transnational communities imaginable.¹

Keywords: South Korea, Christianity, media, technology, diaspora

“When I watch Pastor Cho’s sermon through the screen I receive God’s grace [Sŭk’ŭrin ŭro Cho moksanim ũi sŏlgyo rŭl pomyŏn Hananim ũi ũnhye rŭl patkŏdŭnyo].” This testimony is typical of many Korean Christians who worship at one of the satellite campuses of Yŏŭido Sunbogŭm Kyohoe (Yoido Full Gospel Church). Yoido Full Gospel Church is a multisite church—a single church that meets at multiple locations, often by recording the service at one location and broadcasting it to satellite campuses. Congregants of Yoido’s satellite campuses

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attend services like Christians of other churches do, but during some services they watch pre-recorded sermons by founding Pastor Cho Yong-gi on large screens on the sanctuary walls, in communities from Kangnam in Seoul, to Central Los Angeles.²

Analyses of video sermons and televangelism often focus on the production and consumption of the religious content. The screens upon which sermons appear can fade into the analytic background, mirroring the way in which people acclimate as screens become pervasive in homes, urban centers, and countless other social settings. But these media objects can have significant communal and, in the context of multisite churches, even theological import. Moreover, when media technologies occupy significant roles in communal life, these objects themselves can be read as repositories of social values. As anthropologist Brian Larkin explains:

Technologies are unstable things. We think we know what a radio is, or what a cinema is used for, but these phenomena, which we take for granted, have often surprising histories. What media are needs to be interrogated and not presumed. The meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence but something worked out over time in the context of considerable cultural debate (Larkin 2008: 3).

This article will focus on the central role of video and projection screens in Korean multisite churches that operate both in South Korea and the Korean diaspora in order to interrogate the relationship between this particular media object and the transnational Christian community it helps to sustain.

² Sermon broadcasting is not unique to Yoido Full Gospel Church. Since the 2000s, the majority of megachurches throughout the world have become “multisite churches.” The origin of the multisite church trend is most commonly attributed to Australia’s Hillsong Church or America’s Willow Creek Church, and there is no generic term for “multisite church” in Korean; but in fact, Korean megachurches are the pioneers of the multisite organizational structure, even though scholars and Christians alike have rarely recognized this role. The first multisite churches developed in Seoul in the 1970s—far before their Western counterparts—not as a deliberately distinct type of church, but simply as way of addressing particular exigencies. Notably, when Willow Creek Church became famous for “inventing” the multisite model in the 2000s, it was perhaps no coincidence that their lead pastor Bill Hybels had visited Seoul’s Onnuri Kyohoe (Onnuri Church) several times and had a long-standing relationship with Onnuri’s founding pastor Ha Yong-jo. In an age when multisite churches are becoming ubiquitous in evangelical Christianity worldwide, the history of Korean multisite churches can greatly inform our understanding of what is being called the “new normal” for Protestant churches (Surratt 2006, 2009; McConnell 2009).



Congregants watch a Sunday service on video and projection screens in an overflow space of Onnuri Church, a Korean multisite church operating across over forty campuses in multiple countries. (Photo by author).

A significant source of the contemporary interest in the relationship between media and social form is found in the work of Benedict Anderson. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson famously argued that nationalism and the concept of “the nation” itself was supported by particular media practices. Print capitalism, he reasons, “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson 2006: 36). This work brought greater attention to the point that social collectivities are not based exclusively, or even primarily, on face-to-face interactions. Media technologies enabled people to imagine themselves as being together despite spatial distance, cementing the notion of the nation and national belonging within individuals who have no “direct” relationship to one another.

Following Anderson, scholars of media have begun to problematize the relationship between media technologies and social organization in a variety of ways. For example, anthropologist Birgit Meyer pushes Anderson’s analytic in stressing that imagining community is not strictly a cognitive process, unmoored from sensations and embodiment. Instead, she examines how material configurations and embodied practices allow us to imagine community in certain ways. She writes:

Imaginations are required to become tangible outside the realm of the mind, by creating a social environment that materializes through the structuring of space, architecture, ritual performance, and by introducing

bodily sensations. In brief, in order to become experienced as real, imagined communities need to materialize in the concrete lived environment and be felt in the bones (Meyer 2009: 5).

Without denying that communities are imagined, Meyer insists that images of community are informed by the material conditions of their imagining. How social groups materialize through media practices has similarly become a significant theme in contemporary media studies, where it is widely acknowledged that implicit definitions of “community” vary according to the mode of engagement. Thus, with the emergence of numerous online communities, there is increasing interest in what it means to belong, participate, or communicate under such conditions (Turkle 1995, 2011, 2015; Boellstorff 2008; Gershon 2010; Miller 2011; Kelty 2012; Horst and Miller 2012).

Drawing on field research in Seoul and in Los Angeles, this article adopts such a materialist approach in order to illustrate how the relationship between congregants and the screens themselves is a condition for the emergence of a particular configuration of Christian community, which I will peirastically call “screen Christianity.” Seeing these Christian churches as engaging in screen Christianity highlights how particular material configurations animate these church bodies and ultimately make such transnational communities imaginable. This article explores Korean multisite church screens and their accompanying video sermon practices in three main sections. First, I discuss how church leaders understand their use of video sermons. To many pastors, the sermon broadcasts are a “practical means” to create a church that is centralized and hierarchical despite the challenges presented by its transnationality. Presenting video sermons as “practical” normalizes their presence, such that they receive little attention from congregants as a matter of religious concern. Nevertheless, screens are deployed toward particular purposes, ones that make certain modes of authority available to the church’s main pastors. Media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan (1964), Jean Baudrillard (1984), Walter Ong (1982), and Friedrich Kittler (1999) have opened up useful lines of inquiry here, offering that studying communication extends beyond the study of the apparent “content” to include the ways in which particular media encourage and foreclose social relations. Following these theorists, I explore how the projection of the head pastor on screens (placed prominently in sanctuaries) evokes the spiritual co-presence—even omnipresence—of the head pastor.

Of course, social understandings of media technologies—what they are and what they do—are not given, but emerge and stabilize through their use over time. In the case of church screens, the apparent capacity for screened sermons to extend pastors’ “control” or presence over congregations is informed by their

liturgical use within this Korean Christian context. In the process of displaying sermons and other liturgical elements, the screens themselves take on theological significance, such that they become a “holy infrastructure” [*körukban imp’üra*] through which powerful experiences of God result from mediated contact with celebrity pastors. In the second section, I discuss how screens came to occupy central locations within their church spaces and religious practices. Church leaders incorporated screens in both the material and theological order of the church, such that today, congregants engage ritually with screens within aesthetically similar worship spaces across the globe. The resulting media design both illustrates and reinforces certain ideas of how Christian communities can, and should, relate to each other and relate to God vis à vis the screens and the screened media content.

In the third and final section, I discuss the role of screens in creating communities—both within a church site and across campuses—through congregants’ sensory experiences. The ways that congregants discuss video sermons and the screens that display them provides greater detail to the mutual configuration of technological and theological models within Korean multisite churches. I give particular attention to congregants in Los Angeles, who attend “satellite campuses” in which services with Pastor Cho are qualified as “broadcast.” Such qualifications may suggest imagined divisions within the multisite church, but to the contrary, the screens allow for a ritual co-presence that spiritually overcomes apparent geographic and physical barriers, demonstrating the screens’ operation as a “holy infrastructure” that can channel Cho Yong-gi, the Holy Spirit, and enable the multisite church to be imagined and embodied as one.

VIDEO SERMONS, ECCLESIAL HIERARCHY, AND “CONTROL”

Multisite churches have developed into their own subculture within much of North American Christianity. There is now an entire cottage industry of “how-to” books, conferences, and consulting firms to teach pastors to “go multisite.” But contrary to the highly strategic “Multisite Church Revolution” in America, in the first Korean multisite churches the decision to extend across multiple campuses was considered simply “practical” [*siryongjöke*] rather than ideological.³ Yoido Full Gospel Church became multisite in the early 1970s because Pastor Cho Yong-gi’s

³ This quality of the multisite church development is in keeping with what historian Timothy Lee has described as a broader “practical bent” in Korean evangelicalism. See Timothy S. Lee. 2010. *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press), 115–138.

popularity led smaller churches to offer their buildings to Yoido in exchange for becoming satellite campuses. Another of the first multisite churches, Onnuri Church, became multisite in a similar way. Pastor Ha Yong-jo founded Onnuri Church across four campuses in the mid-1980s because a few wealthy supporters had, independent of one another, donated multiple properties to the church and Ha saw multiple campuses to be the best use of those resources. For these churches, the donation of campus spaces preceded deliberate efforts to create a franchise-like organizational structure.

In this way, the advent of multisite churches was somewhat improvisational; however, once multiple campuses were established, church leadership wasted little time in exploring how media technologies might facilitate communication and a sense of unity among the varied congregations. Celebrity pastors like Cho Yong-gi saw media use as a priority, to which he devoted “a considerable portion” of the church budget (Cho 1984: 55). Cho used media as a primary means to provide leadership to the entirety of the congregation—which, by the 1980s, already numbered in the hundreds of thousands—within the constraints of his busy schedule. Cho delegated tasks to other pastors, elders, and cell group leaders, but he believed strong, hierarchical relationships to be critical to the success of the church, much in keeping with broader South Korean organizational norms (Janelli and Janelli 1978, 1993; McNamara 1999). Thus, the use of uni-directional media to distribute Cho’s messages and directives to his subordinate leaders became a means of both coordinating leadership and reinforcing his supremacy (Cho 1997: 123). Prior to the wide availability of video projection, many churches relied upon weekly newspapers and audio tapes. However, video broadcasting was understood to be ideally suited for a multisite church; in Pastor Cho’s view, “If television was not the best medium of communication, then the financial and commercial world would not spend such large sums of money trying to influence people through television” (Cho 1984: 57). Since video technologies became more easily affordable in the 1990s, video sermons have been the central mode of communication to the dispersed campuses.

Most satellite campuses have their own, local pastor, but how much that pastor will preach varies by location. Many Korean multisite churches do not have firm video broadcast protocols, preferring to cater flexibly to the needs of local congregations. Sermon broadcasting may be used *ad hoc*, shown selectively on special occasions and weekday sunrise prayer services [*saebiyök kidohoe*]. During these services, the founding pastor and/or most senior pastor will broadcast his message to all campuses. This is even the case in Onnuri Church today, several years after the sudden passing of its founding Pastor Ha Yong-jo; recorded sermons by late Pastor Ha may be screened several times throughout the year in

both South Korea and the United States. Yoido Full Gospel Church offers one of the most regimented approaches to sermon broadcasting. At nearly all of Yoido Full Gospel Church's satellite campuses, the first afternoon service on Sundays is reserved for a broadcast of Pastor Cho's service from Seoul, South Korea. Where time zones allow, this service is simulcast; in North America, Europe, and other distant locations, congregations watch a recording of the service, which is accessible on the church's website.

As with many deployments of technology, the use of media in multisite churches is presented as merely "practical," but the judgment of their practicality and efficacy are, of course, embedded within a larger set of values. Claims that the use of screens is merely "practical" imply that screens facilitate a set of ends that are generally agreed to be desirable. The screens can be said to offer a "practical" means to make a single pastor visible to larger congregations and communities around the world, for example. If those ends are contested or deemed undesirable, however, then the use of media technologies suddenly comes to be understood less as a purely pragmatic decision (and hence, value-neutral) and more as a strategic one.⁴ Anthropologist Birgit Meyer has ably stated that "Technology... never comes in a 'purely' instrumental or material form—as sheer technological possibility at the service of the religious imagination, but is to be embedded in the latter through an often-complicated negotiation process in which established authority structures may be challenged and transformed" (Meyer 2009: 14). As the above comments from Pastor Cho suggest, the use of video sermons is often a deliberate attempt to reinforce the head pastor's centrality to the church. This is true not only of Yoido Full Gospel Church but of others as well. In any multisite church where sermons from the head pastor are projected at satellite congregations, this use of media privileges the voice of the senior pastor while muting the campus pastor, if only for the duration of the message.

Mediated pastoring was rarely considered ideal, but it was welcomed by the rapidly-growing congregations. For congregants, it was a means to access their celebrity pastor's unique vision and voice; for the pastors, it was both a means to

⁴ Screens offer a seemingly "practical" means to build larger and larger congregations, but if that desire to expand is suspect, then the use of screens toward those ends is not "practical," but highly political and can be called into question. Throughout my field research, such criticisms were regularly expressed by Koreans and Korean Americans outside of the churches I studied. I was surprised initially that the first (and sometimes only) criticism that people offered is that those churches are, simply, "too big" ["*nömu k'öyo*"]. For a long time, I puzzled over why the first thing that came to mind about these churches was a critique of their size, especially since many of them regularly face scrutiny in the news over allegations of financial misconduct, sexual abuse, and political corruption. It became clear over time, however, that many of these more specific "misdeeds" were viewed as outgrowths of a misplaced prioritization of size.

accommodate larger congregations and a means to reinforce a centralized, hierarchical ecclesiology within an increasingly dispersed congregation. According to Cho Yong-gi, any church—but particularly a megachurch—must recognize that success is dependent upon a strong leader providing a single vision for the church. Given that Cho believed television and radio to be “powerful” media, he was even critical of multiple leaders within a church using them.

At this time the airwaves are full of evangelists who are preaching the gospel. Yet, in my opinion the evangelist needs to work with the church, not outside of it.... I believe that the person who should be using the media to a greater extent than anyone else should be the pastor (Cho 1984: 69).

If video sermons had a directive force on the congregation, which Cho believed that they did, the head pastor alone should use this medium because “without the pastor, the system will not hold together. It *is* a system, and a system must have a control point” (Cho 1981: 93). It is not clear whether Cho means to suggest he occupies the control point of his church or that he *is* the control point.

Supporting pastors and congregants, however, offer the impression that Pastor Cho is more than the temporary occupant of the church’s “control point.” Cho is technically retired, having stepped down as the head pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church in 2008. Nevertheless, he remains an important figure in the church and still preaches once a week at the main campus in Seoul. It is this sermon which is broadcast weekly to many satellite campuses, and these video sermons are said to be critical in that they reinforce that Cho himself is indispensable to the church. This became clear in conversations I had, for example, with Pastor Yi Tae-gün.⁵ Yi spent much of his career as the head pastor of Full Gospel Churches in Chicago and Los Angeles in the United States, and he has recently served as the associate pastor to Yoido Full Gospel Church, the co-chairman of the Christian Council of Korea (CCK), and he is currently the main pastor at Full Gospel’s third largest Korean campus at Pundang. In his current roles, Yi describes much of his work as an overseer of subordinate pastors’ activities, investigating “like the FBI.” On behalf of Pastor Cho, he “hunt[s] these things out and find out what’s legitimate and what’s illegitimate,” and then he makes recommendations about how pastors should be assigned among the campuses. He watches every pastor of the twenty main satellite churches and evaluates them. “Oh, this pastor is not doing well. OUT! [I moksanim i chal mot hae—aut’ū!]” he demonstrated

⁵ This following interview was conducted in a combination of Korean and English. When Yi spoke in Korean words or phrases, I have included both my translation and the original Korean.

colorfully, jerking his right hand backward with his thumb extended like a baseball umpire.

Pastors are regularly moved between campuses for various reasons. Assignments are determined in order to ensure fit with the congregation and high-quality preaching. Reassigning campus pastors also deters them from trying to fix their position at a single campus, or even trying to extricate their campus from the Yoido organization altogether. In some cases, church campuses established such strong bonds with their campus pastor that it was seen as a challenge to Cho's authority; regularly circulating the subordinate pastors reinforces the permanency of Pastor Cho and current head Pastor Yi Yŏng-hun in their top positions. The most important thing for the church, in Yi's eyes, is that Pastor Cho remain the focus and sole leader. After the church's unity (and the hierarchy upon which the unity is seen to depend) was challenged on a few occasions, Cho and other high-ranking pastors began to reassign pastors every five years; today, that term has been limited further, to around two years.

In addition to alternating local leaders, the consistency of Cho's appearance through the media and screened sermons are reminders of his singular leadership. "For example, in Europe [Yerŭl tŭlmyŏn Yurŏp esŏnŭn]," Yi explained, switching to English:

some pastors see the Bible and they think, 'Oh, it is edited.' [scoffing] Of course it is not edited! It is the Holy Spirit! But last year, we had one of our pastors from Europe come speak at our university—Hansei University [Hanse Taehakkyo]—he spoke like that. He said the Bible is edited. We removed him. But a lot of people in Europe think of the Bible this way, but they are wrong. This is why it is important to have Dr. Cho preaching at each campus through the video. So he can correct their thinking. Of course, at satellite churches, we accept the culture. But we keep our heritage—our traditions.

"What traditions?" I asked. "When you say, 'Full Gospel traditions,' what does that mean to you? What is the meaning, or why do you think they are so important? [Ŭimi ka mwŏyeyo? Wae irŏk'e chungyohandago saenggakhaseyo?]"

"Prayer [*kido*]," he answered immediately. "And Dr. Cho's spirit and theology. Many places in Europe, in North America, the churches are in decline. That is not the Pentecost. That is not the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit, there is growth. This is why Dr. Cho's preaching is so important. He leads with the Spirit, and without it, these churches cannot compete with the culture."⁶

⁶ It seemed to me that "the culture" to which he refers here is secularity, given his attention to the

He continued, explaining that Cho is the key to the continuing global success of Yoido Full Gospel Church. “In Europe, in North America, even though there are campus pastors, it is all because of Dr. Cho. The campus pastors’ faith and their theology come from Dr. Cho. Even though they don’t live here—it is no problem! Every pastor goes out, but it’s no problem. Because Dr. Cho stays the center, it is not a problem.”

I asked, “But what about when Dr. Cho passes away?”

“Dr. Cho is now retired. But even when he’s not here, it is Dr. Cho’s spirit. That is still here. Even when he passes away, still I respect Dr. Cho’s spirit, his sermon, his theology, everything. His control will remain. Control not by money. Control is not governing! Control by his faith and his Holy Spirit movement. . . . But Dr. Cho is different from Bill Hybels [the pastor of Willow Creek Church].⁷ Bill Hybels sends people. Some satellites are dying or alive because of the pastor. Sometimes the pastor seeks power. But we, in our branches, every Sunday receive Dr. Cho’s preaching. Still. So he is still visiting our churches everyday. . . .so at Bundang Full Gospel Church, [they are] not *my* members; [they are] Dr. Cho’s member (*sic*). Even when Dr. Cho’s physical body is gone, we are left with his spirit, and so he will still control each satellite church.”

Notably, the statements of both Pastor Cho and Pastor Yi about media and their relationship to Cho’s leadership indicate the intersection of technological and theological models. When Cho says, “without the pastor, the system will not hold together. It *is* a system, and a system must have a control point,” he presents the church community through a technological model in which a pastor can exercise “control” throughout the “system” by means of corresponding technological apparatus. In this case, it is the projection of his moving image on screens around the globe that lend him the “power” to be known “personally” to his congregants—both those within the stadium-sized sanctuary in Yoido and in the satellite campuses.

As Pastor Cho’s and Pastor Yi’s comments suggest, the “power” of the screens is their capacity to materialize Cho’s image which, according to Pastor Yi, also materializes Cho’s spirit, making him present in time and space to his congregants. This stands in contrast to the theorization of mass media in Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which he discusses how the authority of a work of art dissipates through the

historical critical method of Biblical scholarship in the preceding comment.

⁷ Willow Creek Church is a multisite church based in the greater Chicago area. The church is largely credited with creating the multisite church system in the late 1990s, although as I mention, this type of church had been in operation in South Korea for decades prior to Willow Creek opening its second campus.

proliferation of reproduced copies. Benjamin argued that the technical reproduction of art cannot access the “aura” and “authenticity” of the original because it lacks “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1986: 220). The unicity of the work of art is “inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (223), but reproduction “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (221). Interestingly, in the case of screen Christianity, the Christian theological tradition in which the technical reproduction of Cho’s image is embedded contradicts the presumptions of “original” and “copy.” Cho is understood to lead the church through the very multiplicity of his broadly disseminated video sermons. The absence of Cho’s body at satellite campuses does not diminish his authority. Rather, when Cho’s image is understood to be an authentic “original” in a spiritual sense, the presence of that image on the screens is an enabling condition for his spiritual “control” over all the church. Just as the screens are understood to allow his image to overcome material barriers, they also make possible an imaginary in which his spirit transcends physical limitations such as geographic distance and, perhaps, even bodily death. The multiple ways in which Christian theologies of spiritual omnipresence inform how Cho’s image operates on the church’s screens is evinced further by congregants’ testimonies recounted in the final section of this article.

“HOLY INFRASTRUCTURE” [KÖRUKHAN INP’ŪRA]

The remainder of this article will attend to how screens take on particular characteristics in the context of Korean multisite churches, presenting an analysis of video screens that “follows the thing,” in anthropologist George Marcus’ words (1995). Screens are a standard fixture of multisite churches today, but it was not long ago that the religious use of such new media technologies was controversial to Christians and non-Christians alike. Opponents considered the novelty of screened sermons to be dangerous or inappropriate to religious practice. Proponents saw the novelty of new media as a blessing and/or a means of revival. Both views exoticize video sermon practices by emphasizing the medium’s novelty and perceived rupture with traditional practices; however, it is also important to recognize that debates over such new media can be incorporated into a much longer history of Christian theology.

The materiality of religious practice has long been considered pivotal to Christian liturgy. Well-known historical examples include conflicts over

iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire, or Reformation debates between Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli over whether the Eucharist *is* Christ's body or just a symbolic representation of it. Themselves educated in these historical debates, pastors at Korean multisite churches are cognizant of the social and theological import of church design. As a consequence, whenever a new campus is founded, the main pastor will send a team to oversee the implementation of a design that is understood to be in keeping with the broader church. These designers stress that "it is important that the environment/atmosphere of the campus matches [the main campus and larger church]." If a campus church has a beautiful sanctuary, but it is not recognizable as a site of that particular multisite church, then church leaders expect that the congregants will feel as if they only belong to their local congregation. Thus, these designers understand themselves to be building the church-as-campus and the church-as-religious-community at the same time.

From the church architects' and designers' perspectives, media technologies such as screens contribute to the relative success of large, multisite churches' over smaller churches. As mentioned above, debates about new media in religious practice have often erred on the side of overemphasizing apparent ruptures caused by their introduction. Large screens, in these accounts, are characterized as profane contagion that threaten traditions purportedly incompatible with material change. But according to Korean church designers, screen media in church make congregants feel *more* comfortable because screened sermons are congruent with their everyday practices outside of the church. The centrality of screen-viewing weaves their work, leisure, and worship into a seamless, continuous experience.



A recorded sermon plays on a television screen mounted near a bank of elevators at a multisite church in Seoul. It is common for Christian services to be projected continuously onto screens throughout church spaces, similar to the ways that screens constantly display television shows and advertisements to residents of Seoul on city streets, restaurants, and public transportation. (Photo by author).

Congregants also admit that they enjoy the “modern” [*hyöndaejök*] qualities that are said to accompany the widescale use of audiovisual technologies. Within Korean studies, there is a vast literature attending to the relationship between the growth of Christianity in Korea and the concomitant processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, the association of Protestantism with what it means to be modern has been shown to be critical to understanding South Korean religion and social change (Cox 1997; Kim 2001; Baker 2007; Kim 2007). Much less has been said, however, about *how* this association was secured. Government actions certainly played a role. Scholars note that a disproportionate number of political leaders of

the new nation were Christian, due to the cooperation of the U.S. military and paramilitary forces and the Syngman Rhee administration. Despite constituting less than ten percent of the South Korean population, according to historian Chung-shin Park, Christians occupied up to 40 percent of the first political leadership positions in the late 1950s (Park 2003: 174).⁸ The way that these leaders articulated and encouraged a particular image of “modernity”—often associated with American Protestantism—cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, “modernity” and “the modern” are phenomena that are far from encapsulated in expressed statements and definitions. These concepts are also greatly informed by embodied experience. As anthropologist Brian Larkin explains, “Infrastructures create a sensing of modernity, a process by which the body, as much as the mind, apprehends what it is to be modern, mutable, and progressive” (Larkin 2013: 336-337). More discussions are needed to account for *how* Korean Christianity’s “modern-ness” figures into Korean life. Recently, anthropologist Nicholas Harkness’ (2011, 2014) work on the voice in Korean Christianity has made a significant contribution to this conversation by illustrating how the materiality of the voice—its qualities and embodied expressions—can signal the vocalist’s place in a Korean Christian modernity while simultaneously aiding in the formation of the modern Christian subject.

Media technologies and technological aesthetics, by their own associations with novelty and social change, help to cement the relationship between Christianity and Korean modernity as well. As I have written elsewhere, the shift from more “traditional” brick or stone church architecture to “modern” and almost corporate designs has been a means through which churches have aligned themselves with a type of technological progressivism. Placing technology use at the center of many of their churches’ activities is meant to communicate their ability to optimize their religious practice. For example, in the case of Sarang ūi Kyohoe (Sarang Church), the controversial building completed in 2013 is marketed with the tag line “holy infrastructure” [*kōrukhan inp’ūra*]. With an estimated expense of up to 300 million U.S. dollars, this building project faced regular criticism. The most public controversies over the church building include a lawsuit [*minwōn*] filed by neighboring property owners, its featured role in the critical 2014 documentary

⁸ Historian Chung-shin Park notes that the National History Compilation Committee claims the disproportionate appointment of Christians to South Korea’s first political offices was due in part to the strong presence of the U.S. government and the U.S. officials’ relative comfort with Christian leadership (Park 2003: 175). However, according to historian Bruce Cumings, Americans first sought out support from collaborators with the Japanese and other upper-class, moderate nationalists, and thus claims to an overwhelming American support of Christians must be tempered relative to other selection characteristics.

“Quo Vadis,” and ongoing internal conflict with a group of congregants known as “the reformers” [*kaengsin winŏnhoe*]. In response, the church published its own 500+-page book, outlining each aspect of the “holy infrastructure” (including the large screens throughout the campus) and explaining how these material arrangements enhance the sense of community, the communication of the pastor’s message, and, ultimately, the experience of God (see G’Story 2015).

The prominent role of screens is both reflected in and reinforced by their placement within spaces of worship. Where screens occupy the privileged space within religious spaces, what religion scholar Mircea Eliade (1957) famously termed the “axis mundi,” the centrality of the screens can come at the expense of other possible modes of social and religious experience. When I volunteered on the media and technology teams within multisite churches, the sound technicians often lamented that it is nearly impossible to create their ideal aural *and* visual experience simultaneously. To create the best sound quality, they explain that they would need to place the sound booth in the middle of the sanctuary. From there, they could mix microphones and balance sound qualities in real time. Some churches do this, but it is not a popular choice because it is seen as a disruption to the congregants’ visual experience. “Pastors don’t like the idea that people are looking at the back of our heads or at our computers during the service. They think it’s distracting,” one sound engineer explained. So instead, churches often place the sound board at the very back and top of a sanctuary, where the fewest eyes will be upon them. “When we do the mic checks, I can walk around the sanctuary, and I can go back-and-forth to the board to try to balance [the sound]. But it’s not ideal, and you can’t fix everything in this way.”

Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has written extensively on the senses in religious practice, and his work clarifies the social import of embodied practices and the sensory attunement that they enculturate in the practitioner. Privileging the visual over the aural, as is done in multisite churches for example, informs how one comes to perceive one’s relation to others, to one’s environment, and to the divine. In his words, “Disagreements about the role of listening do not simply reflect different ideologies of eye and ear, speech and writing, but also concern the range of institutions that embed these practices, the goals they promote, and the forms of sociability they sustain or are indifferent toward” (Hirschkind 2006: 63). The widespread adoption of screen media within Korean multisite churches suggests analogous shifts in religious formations and liturgical understandings. Instead of sound or touch, vision is the sense that is privileged by sanctuary design and liturgical practice. Most Korean megachurches today design sanctuaries in “thrust” stage formation—sanctuaries tend to be rounded and wrap the congregation around the altar on three sides. Pillars and other visual barriers are

minimized, and sanctuaries with open fields of vision are said to enable the “unobstructed communication of grace” [makhim ömnün ünhye üi sot’ong].⁹ If there are visual obstructions like pillars inside a sanctuary, screens help to overcome these visual barriers as well. Churches typically mount flat-screen televisions on visual obstructions so that they may maintain the visual participation of congregants who sit where one of the main screens cannot be seen.

Across the churches in which I conducted field work, the attention congregants gave to the screens was remarkably similar.¹⁰ When I attended services as part of my ethnographic research, I varied where I sat within the sanctuary so that I might observe the congregation from different vantage points. Congregants sitting with obstructed views of the stage or in the distant recesses of the balcony would, universally, direct their attention toward the screens throughout the service, which is perhaps unsurprising. But no matter how small the sanctuary or how close congregants were to the pulpit, in churches with large video screens, few congregants will look directly at the stage or pastor. The first few rows of a sanctuary may be exceptional, as congregants there are more likely to look at their leaders rather than crane their necks toward the large screens above. Yet in a few churches, the first few rows are provided with their own screens, mounted to the base of the stage—consequently, every person is provided a convenient opportunity to watch the sermon on a screen.

From an autoethnographic perspective, I noted over time how my own embodied participation and attention shifted as I became more attuned to the services. At first, it appeared strange and a bit disconcerting that congregants oriented their sight away from the pastor himself and toward the reproduced images of the pastor on the video screens; but I soon took on the same habit. Even in close proximity to the preaching pastor, I found my eyes drawn back to the screens repeatedly, despite some effort to do otherwise.

⁹ “Pondang ün makhim ömnün ünhye üi sot’ong ül wihayö oebu e poinün kidung i ömnün mujiju konggan üro...,” in *G’Story: Sarang üi Kyohoe köñch’uk iyagi*. Seoul: Sarang Church, 2014, 48.

¹⁰ Primarily Yoido Full Gospel Church, Onnuri Church, and Sarang Church.



Even congregants with unobstructed views of the sanctuary stage are often provided the opportunity to watch on a screen. This photograph was taken from the first row of one of Onnuri Church's main campuses in Söbinggo, Seoul. (Photo by author).

The typical megachurch sanctuary may have a single screen behind and above the central pulpit, but it is more common for there to be at least two screens at the sides of the stage, mounted at an angle toward one another and toward the congregation. The new Sarang Church's sanctuary features this design. The sanctuary walls are curved in an oval, and two enormous screens flank the main stage. As the architects (The Beck Group of the U.S.) and designers at Sarang attest, the rounded design is intended to create a sense of intimacy despite the expansive space of the 6,500-seat sanctuary. Within the space, two 24-meter by 4-meter screens bend toward the congregation in embrace, as if, I was once told, "the screens are the hands of God [sük'ürin ün Hananim üi son ida]." Church leaders regularly describe the curved arrangement of the screens as symbolic of the embrace of God and/or God's love. In head pastor Oh Jung-Hyun's words, "In this place, here and there you can feel the love of God who embraces us. The whole building forms the embracing image of God as well [Konggan yögijögi esö uri rül p'umöjusigo anajusinün Hananim üi Sarang ül nükkil su issümnida. Könmul üi chönc'h'e imiji tohan anajusim ül hyöngsanghwa hayössümnida]" (G'Story 2014: 47). If two screens angled toward the congregation are meant to symbolize God's hands, arms, and an embrace, this anthropomorphized image of God's open arms is mirrored by the outstretched hands of a pastor giving a benediction at the end of each service.



Two large, projection screens flank the altar of Yoido Full Gospel Church, angled toward the center of the congregation. Pictured on the screen, Senior Pastor Yi Yŏng-hun extends his hands at his sides in a blessing of the congregation, mirroring the placement of the screens. (Photo by author)

In the context of screen Christianity, the anthropomorphism of screens as hands signals the particular attributes and capacities that screens accumulate within multisite churches. In theological traditions in which hands and the sense of touch figure prominently in spiritual transmission and healing, the technologies that mediate religious practices come to mimic or take on the qualities also attributed to human hands. At these churches, it is common for people to “lay hands” upon each other in prayer, and similar postures are mimicked in the way pastors extend their hands toward the eye of the camera during prayer. Many charismatic Korean pastors became famous for their ability to heal through laying hands on the sick. This is true of no one more than Cho Yong-gi, one of the most famous Pentecostal healers in the world. Now that screens mediate several religious rituals, these charismatic pastors are perceived as “touching hearts” through the medium of the screens [*maüm kamdong sik’ida*]. In some cases, the division between the Christian leaders’ hands, the screens, and the hands of God is elided, as in the words of the head pastor Kwak Chu-hwan of Bethany Church: “God will serve the coming world with Korean technology, and we should want to become the hands of God [Hanim ūn IT Han’guk i on sesang ūl sŏmginŭn Hananim ūi soni toegirŭl wŏnhasimnida].”

“I WANT TO BE A PART OF THAT. SO I ATTEND”

“A problem that most preachers have with television is that they don’t understand the medium. Television is primarily a personal medium.... When I look into the eye of the camera lens, I think of just one person. I speak to him from my heart, just as if I were in his living room talking to him heart to heart.” Pastor Cho Yong-gi (Cho 1984: 61).

After my time in Seoul, I conducted field research at one of Yoido Full Gospel Church’s North American satellite churches. Nasöng Sunboküm Kyohoe [Los Angeles Full Gospel Church] is considered the flagship Full Gospel Church site in North America. It is one of the oldest and largest Full Gospel Churches outside South Korea, located just north of L.A.’s Koreatown where over two million Koreans and Korean Americans live.

L.A. Full Gospel Church is significant to the larger Full Gospel network of churches, but its relationship to Yoido has been tested over time. L.A. Full Gospel Church was founded by Cho Yong-gi’s mother-in-law, Ch’oe Cha-sil, in 1974. Due to its size, the campus has functioned as a sort of “farm team” for up-and-coming pastors within the broader church. For example, in 2001 Cho Yong-gi sent Pastor Yi Tae-gün to the congregation after Chicago Full Gospel Church had grown exponentially under Pastor Yi’s leadership. The Los Angeles congregation, however, was unreceptive to Yi’s leadership, and his tenure was characterized by frequent conflicts between Pastor Yi and the site’s elders and deacons. After just a few years, Lee was replaced by a pastor named Yi Yöng-hun and Yi Tae-gün was reassigned to Pundang Full Gospel Church, the third largest Full Gospel Church in greater Seoul.

Soon after Yi Yöng-hun’s assignment to L.A., he was selected to be Cho’s first successor as head pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church. However, his selection was not because his tenure in L.A. was an unmitigated success. He, too, was far from popular among the Los Angeles congregation. When I first arrived at L.A. Full Gospel Church after a year of research at Yoido Full Gospel Church, many congregants mentioned this connection to me, asking, “Do you know that Pastor Yi Yöng-hun was our last pastor here?” When I responded with eager recognition and approval, I expected there would be some enthusiasm over the success of their former pastor. But to my surprise, my interlocutors never wanted to continue discussing Pastor Yi—it became clear that they mentioned this as a matter of fact rather than as a statement of kinship with the church in Seoul. After Yi Yöng-hun was recalled to Seoul to lead Yoido Full Gospel Church, the elders of the L.A. congregation requested that they be allowed to select their next

pastor, an exception that was granted and seems to help to maintain their relationship between L.A. and Yoido.

In addition to this concession, the strongest bond that remains between Yoido and L.A. is the continued significance of Cho Yong-gi to much of the L.A. campus' founding members. Some of these older members attended Yoido Full Gospel Church's main campus before moving to the U.S., but for other congregants, their relationship to Pastor Cho developed exclusively through their interaction with his screened image. These relationships, though mediated, are significant to congregations in the diaspora. This is precisely the type of "power" that Pastor Cho himself attributed to the materiality of broadcast media. In Cho's words:

With the use of television and radio comes a special type of power. The medium of television especially causes people to view you differently than anyone else. They all feel as if they know you personally.... They feel as if they have been with you personally, that is, if you have done a good job. This kind of power in the wrong person's hands can have a corrupting effect (Cho 1984: 71).

Congregants understand that they are watching pre-recorded services, but through images on the screens Cho is, nevertheless, understood to be present with them in the ritual space.

As in most Full Gospel campuses globally, each Sunday there is a broadcast service [*yoŋsang yebae*] in the early afternoon. At L.A. Full Gospel Church, this service is nominally directed by a young, male deacon, who consistently attends the video service with his wife. He presides over the offering and communion; however, in attending the service over many weeks, it became clear that the *de facto* leader of the service is an older, female deaconess [*kwōnsa*], who sits at the back of the room and intercedes when she perceives the younger leaders to be lapsing in their duties.

An enthusiastic worshipper, it is hard to differentiate her participation at the broadcast service from that of a deaconess at any other Full Gospel service. She claps and sings loudly along with the hymns. On some Sundays, the video buffers and the praise music proceeds only in awkward fits and starts, but she and many of the other women continue to sing and clap along, undeterred by the technological static. She interjects an audible "amen" with her head bowed in prayer along with the Seoul-based prayer leader. She listens intently to Pastor Cho and repeats key phrases aloud as we are prompted.

When I spoke with her about her faithful attendance at the broadcast service, she answered my questions without any hint that there might be a meaningful

difference between this service and any other. Now in her eighties, she had attended Yoido Full Gospel Church for decades before emigrating to the U.S. with her daughter thirty years ago. She participates in a morning service led by the local campus pastor, but she attends the broadcast service as well “because of Pastor Cho Yong-gi.” She continued, “I miss Yoido Full Gospel Church, but the Holy Spirit still flows through the screen.”

Toward the end of each service, Cho leads a healing prayer, directing congregants to place their hands on ailing parts of their bodies. If the affliction is emotional, spiritual, or if they have no immediate request, he tells them to place a hand on their chest. He then leads them in prayer, and afterward, lists a series of healings that he has discerned from the Holy Spirit. “A person with stomach cancer has been healed.” The congregation responds, “Amen.” “A person with back pain has been healed...” and so forth. Cho is known for his ability to bring physical healing through the Holy Spirit, and so I asked her if she thinks healing can occur through prayer at this service, even though the broadcasted prayer was recorded hours ago and in another place. When Pastor Cho announces successful healings, I asked, did she think he could be referring to healings at campuses like L.A. Full Gospel Church?

“Of course” was her immediate answer. With unshakable confidence, she continued, “There’s power in Pastor Cho’s words, right? No matter where, Pastor Cho can heal with prayer.”

“Since you came to L.A., do you think you have experienced healing from Pastor Cho?” I asked her. “Yes. Many times. Not just for me, but for my family and friends, too. It’s the Holy Spirit. By way of the screens, the Holy Spirit flows from his hands to us and healing occurs [Sŭk’ŭrin ŭl t’onghae, sŏngnyŏng ŭn Cho Yong-gi moksanim ŭi son esŏ uri ege ro hŭrŭgo ch’i-yu toegŏdŭnyo].”

As anthropologist Mayfair Yang has noted, transnational media can enable the mobilization of a subjectivity detached from state boundaries, allowing one to “link up with alternative...subjectivities far away” (Yang 2002: 205). Transnational video sermons allow for this subjective reorganization as well. Korean Christian screen culture presents alternative sensibilities about participation and presence. For the congregants of what I am calling screen Christianity, this means a theology in which the Holy Spirit flows through apparent fractures in time and space, due in part to the continuity of religious media—including both the mediation of the screens and the mediation of the pastor the screens display in common.

Another consistent attendee of L.A. Full Gospel Church’s broadcast services is a single woman in her late thirties. She always arrived to the service late, but her tardiness never seemed to bother the other congregants. Carrying a violin case in

one hand, she would greet others with a smile and a bow as she made her way to her regular pew in the center-left of the room. I had long assumed she was a musician for L.A. Full Gospel Church, delayed by orchestra practice. She corrected me one Sunday—she is a member of a small, nearby church where her brother-in-law is the pastor. “I come to this service because of Cho Yong-gi,” she explained. “When I lived in Seoul I used to go to Yoido Full Gospel Church, and I love Pastor Cho’s sermons.”

The broadcast services are played from Yoido Full Gospel Church’s website and displayed on the screen in the chapel. The service is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, and so I asked her why she comes to this service even though she is not a member of the church. “Why don’t you watch the service at home?” I asked.

I could. Sometimes I do. But it’s different. When I see Pastor Cho on the screen, I really feel God’s presence. Sometimes at home I will watch devotional videos from the church, but the service is different. It’s a special, spiritual experience to watch it in the church. Also, it makes me feel like I am in Korea. His voice is the same. [On the screen] I see people I know; people I used to sing with in the choir. We clap to the same songs. It even smells a bit like the [Yoido] sanctuary in here. [pause] So when I watch it here with other members, I realize that we, too, in L.A. are the church. If I just watched at home, that wouldn’t be good for the sake of the church. I receive so much grace from Dr. Cho, and I want to be a part of that. So I attend.

While this multisited community is certainly imagined, the practices and statements of its members indicate how this imagination takes form and is enacted in their participation. Screen media practices not only unite Korean Christians in shared content, but also through the shared practice of aesthetic attunement to what is important and in how one sees, hears, or feels the Holy Spirit or one’s community. The imagined community is configured through the “matching environment,” the experience of physical healing, the synchronized singing and clapping, and even the common smell.

CONCLUSION

As Michael Warner writes, there is no such thing as a “mere technology, a medium itself unmediated” (Warner 1990: 5). In this case, the screens of screen Christianity are always already mediated by the Christian tradition in which they

are embedded, such that the unique capacities of these screens reflect the situation of their use. Evident in the anthropomorphism of screens as human hands, what the screens themselves “are” and “do” emerge in their situated deployment; a screen within the church is different from just any screen.

In screen Christianity, the screens themselves are implicated in the configuration of the religious subject and religious communities. The place of screens and their related practices undergird corresponding theological conceptions of contact and community, such that screens are said to transmit healing touches, and religious community becomes increasingly defined in terms of seeing and being seen. The attributed ability of screens to “touch” or “embrace” gives material form to the relationship satellite congregants form with their head pastor. This contact is perceived not just cognitively, but also through corporeal sensations of spiritual comfort and physical healing they experience through religious participation with the screens. It is through shared, embodied practice that one comes to see, hear, feel, or—in a word—imagine community, which has consequences for how we understand social worlds—both diasporic and otherwise—to be animated by everyday screen use. With the Holy Spirit “flowing through the screens,” it is each congregant’s participation in the sermon-viewing and its “spiritual touch” that cultivates the Korean multisite church. In this way, screens can be understood as central and constitutive of Korean multisite churches and its unique modes of religious authority, conceptions of what it means to belong to a congregation, and a particularly screen-based spirituality.

By virtue of the screens’ technological capacity to surmount barriers of time and geographic distance, the projection of the pastor’s image and sermons upon the screens visually and metaphorically enlarges the main pastor and extends his “control” to the limits of the medium’s technological reach. Considering Cho Yong-gi’s advanced age, one might wonder whether the screens’ technological reach may transcend his corporeal death. It is impossible to predict exactly what will happen to the broadcast services of Yoido Full Gospel Church after Cho passes away. Despite Pastor Yi Tae-gŭn’s assurances, it is difficult to imagine that a congregation like L.A. Full Gospel Church—which was indisposed to Cho’s successor Yi Yŏng-hun when he led their congregation—would continue to devote one service each Sunday to broadcast his sermon from Yoido. Yet if Onnuri Church’s relationship to late Pastor Ha Yong-jo is any indication, founding pastors like Cho Yong-gi may well remain essential to the church, healing people and sharing a life eternal through the screens long after death.

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