Nietzsche's *The Madman* details a divine decomposition. How does this passage resonate with the disorientation of the digital age, and to what extend can technology be understood as *replacing* God in its cultural function?

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Writing in the aftermath of the Enlightenment Nietzsche momentously declares that 'God is Dead. God Remains Dead. And We Have Killed Him;' capturing a crucial shift in western thought. Through the entire 'Madman' passage (not just the provocative soundbite) Nietzsche, as Joe Buckley states, 'points to the Enlightenment's secularizing force, which eroded the societal and individual reliance on religious doctrines to dictate moral and existential orientations.'[1] For Heidegger, the Madman passage captures a period of transition where the old order (religious domination) has died but the new (reliance upon facts and science) is yet to emerge. This 'divine decomposition' which Nietzsche details, and Heidegger later unpacks and situates in terms of what he calls 'the age of enframing' should be considered within the context of the modern digital condition.

After evaluation of Nietzsche and Heidegger this paper argues that technology is increasingly resembling a god-like role in culture. However, unlike traditional religion it functions as a symbolic substitute, rather than an organised faith. Furthermore, the modern 'divine decomposition' Nietzsche speaks of is the slow death of man's capability to live independently of his smartphone. As opposed to Nietzsche's description of a brutal murder of a guiding metaphysical God, I will argue that the 'God' in today's context is man's ability for critical thought and agency, which is facing a slow and painful death as a result of the smartphone.

I. BEYOND THE SOUNDBITE: WHAT DOES 'GOD IS DEAD' MEAN?

The Madman passage highlights the profound cultural and existential crisis of modernity. The suprasensory God who creates meaning and grounds lives has been murdered by man's developed intelligence, technologies, and individual agency, which subsequently gave rise to nihilism. To summarise, the madman declares the death of God and describes man as his murderer; he describes the consequences as a plunging of humanity into infinite nothingness and warns of nihilism, the collapse of values and the emptiness which follows. Following his outburst, he smashes his lantern

[1] Joe Buckley, 'God Is Dead and We Killed Him (Explaining Nietzsche),' *Philosophy Buzz*, 28 February 2024, <https://philosophybuzz.com/god-is-dead-and-we-killed-him-nietzsche/> [accessed 02 December 2025]. p.5

saying he has come ‘too early’ and that the realisation of God’s demise has not reached people yet. The madman in Nietzsche’s passage details the symbolic collapse of religious certainty and longstanding metaphysical grounding, proposing that humanity must reckon with the guilt of destroying its highest values. It is vital to note the absolute sense of shock in the parable, which is used as a tool to dramatize the shock felt by the western world when it realised that its metaphysical foundation had dissolved. Paul Bishop insists that today ‘we must rediscover this sense of shock.’ [2] The passage reads:

> ‘How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves?’ [3]

Nietzsche’s question highlights the moral void left after God’s murder, which is filled by tech. For Nietzsche, there is *no way* to comfort ourselves from this absolute sin. Nietzsche isn’t speaking of a specific God (Christ, Allah etc) but what God represents. Bishop continues, noting that this death must be considered in Jungian terms, it isn’t just ‘the death of God but the death of the symbol’ The symbol of a supreme being and creator or as a spirit that controls the universe.’ [4] The ‘killing’ of God is rooted in empiricism. Peter Markie describes the movement as a ‘dominant idea which came out of the Enlightenment which posits that knowledge derives from sensory experience… undermining metaphysical claims about God since these cannot be verified through experience.’ [5] Nietzsche calls man the ‘murderers of all murderers’ because we have killed the symbol western civilisation was built

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[2] Paul Bishop, ‘Introduction’, in *Nietzsche’s Writing Against Religion and the Crisis of Faith* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-63977-7_1> [accessed 03 December 2025]. p.2

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Penguin Great Ideas: God is Dead. God Remains Dead. And We Have Killed Him,* (London, Penguin Random House, 2020), pp.57-59 (p.58)

[4] Bishop, *Nietzsche’s Writing Against Religion and the Crisis of Faith*. p.3

[5] Peter Markie, ‘Rationalism vs. Empiricism,’ in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/rationalism-empiricism/> [accessed 03 December 2025].

upon. Through the rise of empiricism and other Enlightenment phenomenon, society effectively killed its own transcendent anchor, as emphasised in Nietzsche's graphic and violent language. Nietzsche also alludes to the pre-enlightenment dominant idea of God as the creator of *all* as he states there will be 'no water for us to clean ourselves' since we have killed the figure who creates it. As highlighted by Bible Hub, 'in Christianity water is a symbol of divine presence; in Isaiah 44:3, God promises to pour out His spirit like water on thirsty land, symbolising His blessings and the outpouring of his Grace.' [6] Nietzsche powerfully implies the loss of purification via. religious means, since God has 'bled to death under our knives' meaning this cleansing power is no more. Considering this, Bishop poses another perspective in the passage: 'Does the discovery of a religious message in Nietzsche's writings point to a dimension... which announces not just the death but the *rebirth* of God?' [7]

The passage continues:

> '**Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?...**
>
> At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. **This tremendous event is still on its way, still**.'[8]

This sense of a death *and* rebirth of God is apparent as Nietzsche expresses the immense responsibility man faces after God's death in that we must create new values, meaning, and purpose. The responsibility to create new values is exhibited in today's reliance on technology as a source of meaning and this rebirth, in modernity, has been achieved through digitalisation. This excerpt depicts an in between stage between this death and regeneration, which Nietzsche warns will give rise to nihilism. This sense of rebirth is seen in the scientific and later technological revolutions, which are characterised by empirical observation, not faith in a higher being to which there is no evidence of his existence.

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[6] 'The Symbolism of Water in Scripture,' *Topical Bible*, Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_symbolism_of_water_in_scripture.htm> [accessed 13 December 2025].

[7] Bishop, *Nietzsche's Writing Against Religion and the Crisis of Faith*. p.3

[8] Nietzsche, *God is Dead. God Remains Dead. And We Have Killed Him*, p. 58.

This ‘regeneration’ of God has alarming resonance with transhumanist thought, which seeks to use technology to enhance humanity and to manifest the absolute powers and capabilities of man. [9] In the passage, the motif of the lamp (which can be considered as representing enlightened thought) has been destroyed and the progression of man which occurred in the Enlightenment is no longer considered a guiding light. It is characterised as a destructive force which has left man in a state of nihilism and ‘straying through an infinite nothing’ in a ‘breath of empty space’ as he configures what it means to live without the guidance of a metaphysical almighty God. Michael Latzer describes the key difference between Nietzsche’s enlightenment and the digital revolution:

> ‘Whereas the predominantly print-based Enlightenment movement sought from the outset to replace religion as the primary source of knowledge and world explanation with rationalism and modern science, today’s digital transformation is generating a new social form of techno-religion’[10]

The printing press allowed people to seek knowledge from a non-religious source, backed by empirical evidence. However, the digital revolution which sought to replace the printing press has shifted towards a religious-like practice and its existence doesn’t just rest on knowledge seeking. Another parallel between Nietzsche’s parable and today’s technological condition, is the idea of an once hopeful and revolutionary thing (technology today, enlightenment and empiricism then) becoming a destructive force against the livelihoods of men. To modernise the madman passage, would be to swap the concept of God with the capacity to live *without* these modern technologies. We have ‘killed’ our ability to live independently of smartphones, and as a consequence we are now reliant on them for guidance and knowledge as man was of God Pre-Enlightenment.

II. HIEDEGGER: THE START OF THE ‘AGE OF ENFRAMING.’

[9] *‘Transhumanism,’ Wikipedia*, last modified 11 December 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transhumanism> [accessed 13 December 2025].

[10] Michael Latzer, ‘Digitalization, AI and the Rise of Techno-Religion: Transhumanist Promises and the Challenge to Enlightenment,’ *Telecommunications Policy*, 2025, doi:10.1016/j.telpol.2025.103115, p. 2.

Heidegger envisions the madman's cry as a dramatization of the collapse of metaphysical foundations, viewing it as the prelude to what he calls the age of enframing. In his essay, Heidegger questions the essence of technology and how man can *be* with technology. He stresses that technology fundamentally reshapes our understanding of reality, through its mode of revealing, and makes everything present subject to manipulation and control. Epoch Philosophy notes that 'our prior conception of technology was one of exterior systems, we ultimately saw technology as a mere separate entity from us. Heidegger rejects this separation of object and subject and rejects the separation of technology and us.' [11] Man, and technology should not be separated, they are intertwined and ultimately connected, as exhibited in his definition of enframing:

> '(Enframing means) the gathering together of that setting-upon which **sets upon man**, i.e., challenges him forth, **to reveal the real**, in the mode of ordering, as **standing-reserve**.' [12]

Heidegger argues that technology orders reality and reduces the world to a resource, a concept integral to understanding smartphone culture. However, enframing risks reducing users to mere robots / cult members who act without thought. Users still have agency, but the digital condition of modernity makes it increasingly challenging to neglect our devices, as they are now essential parts of reality. Hiedegger argues that tech should not be considered a separate entity from man- after all it is a *product* of man- not a so-called miraculous being imposed upon him for guidance. Heidegger reads Nietzsche's nihilism (loss of highest values) as the condition for the technological ordering of the world. On the passage, Heidegger said:

> 'That place of God can remain empty. Instead of it, another, i.e., a place corresponding metaphysically, **can loom on the horizon-a place that is identical neither with the essential**

[11] *Epoch Philosophy*, *Martin Heidegger: The Question Concerning Technology*, YouTube video, 2020, <https://youtu.be/gaVmEN-vGWk?si=KBM7eJSep9n0l--c> [accessed 13 December 2025], [02:10–02:28].

[12] Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology,' in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology*, 2nd edn, ed. by Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), pp. 305–317 (p. 311).

> **realm belonging to God nor with that of man, but with which man comes once more into a distinctive relationship**.'[13]

Technology, for Heidegger is this distant, essential realm which doesn't quite belong to a higher metaphysical world but neither to the realm of man. It's above man but itself an extension of man because man is its creator. Importantly Heidegger acknowledges the distinctive relationship which will rise between man and tech, which will resemble that of man's relationship with God. Technology is not just a tool but a metaphysical horizon, which will eventually take the place of God within culture and order man.

In Nietzsche, the madman is ridiculed because the crowd cannot grasp the consequences of God's murder. In Hiedegger's age of enframing, the consequences are just an unquestioned reality of modern life. For Heidegger, enframing is a *mode* of human existence which reveals the essence of modern technology. He interprets the madman parable as a period of transition where the old order has died but the new one has not yet emerged. The new order, as he details, will too be defined by its distinctive relationship and sense of being higher than man, and a powerful entity. The absence of God, and all which he represents, has left a vacuum, which Heidegger argues has been filled by technology- not as a new deity- but as the dominant way reality discloses itself and with which man will come to have a special relationship with, just as he did with God.

Philosopheasy modernises Hiedegger's age of enframing through the smartphone. Drawing upon Hiedegger's argument that technology isn't simply a tool, but a way of revealing which reduces the world to a resource or 'standing reserve,' the essay discusses how:

[13] Martin Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 100.

> ‘Our smartphones, in this context, are not simply devices; they are central elements of this enframing. They demand that we see the world as a series of data points, information to be accessed, consumed, and managed.’ [14]

As Heidegger said, the essence of technology is nothing technological; and with regard to the smartphone, man’s dependence isn’t about the object itself, but how we *relate* to them. Philosopheasy continues:

> ‘Consider a world where all information, all experiences, are mediated through a single, all-encompassing device – **a super-smart, perfectly integrated personal assistant**…**In this scenario, our capacity for independent thought and critical judgment would atrophy**.’ [15]

Pre-enlightenment people looked to God and religion as sources of meaning, moral orientation, and knowledge; today mobile devices have unequivocally assumed this role within culture. With a smartphone, we don’t actually need to ‘think’ critically because users are fed the knowledge they seek and confronted with other nonsense, which often leads to feelings of nihilism which Nietzsche expressed in the madman parable. They distract the mind (through their addictive nature) from engaging in activities where you do need to think critically, and we are ordered by them. Smartphones trap us into a technological mode of existence, where everything can be exploited, since they rule us. The smartphone is a prime example of how man is ordered and alienated by his technologies; it’s very distracting and all-knowing nature is destroying man’s capacity for independent though without them.

III. DIVINE DEVICES?

As Mark Blitz highlights, Heidegger argues that, ‘modern technology is characterised by its ability to enframe the world, turning everything into a resource to be exploited, leading to a loss of meaningful

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[14] *Philosopheasy*, *Enframing the Self: Heidegger and Smartphones*, *Philosopheasy*, <https://www.philosopheasy.com/p/enframing-the-self-heidegger-smartphones> [accessed 13 December 2025].

[15] *Philosopheasy*, *Enframing the Self: Heidegger and Smartphones*.

connection with the world.'[16] Today, we are still in this age of enframing; modern technology continues to order reality, and man remains a passive resource to be managed. Under these conditions of technological domination, through smartphones, social media, and more recently the rise of AI, can it be said that technology has assumed a godly status within contemporary culture?

Resonant with Heidegger is Latzer, who argues for the co-evolution of man and technology and that the two are deeply intertwined and should not be considered separate. As a result of this, Latzer argues that digitalisation and AI have gave rise to a techno-religion rooted in transhumanism, which conflicts with Enlightenment ideals of critical reason and autonomy. He states that:

> 'The transhumanist stream within digitalization exhibits **religious characteristics** …. these include **the reduction of complexity, the handling of contingencies, contributions to meaning making, providing answers to fundamental questions**, ensuring ontological security, **fostering social cohesion, explaining the unexplainable**, and offering experiences of transcendence.'[17]

As men pre-enlightenment looked to God for meaning and guidance, digitalisation has enabled the reliance on technologies for this. However, it is important to consider whether these traits truly constitute religion or simply mimic social functions, as Waters later acknowledges. Latzer goes onto discuss the 'prophets' of transhumanist digitalisation, who primarily reside in Silicon Valley. Crucially, technology now provides answer to not only the most fundamental questions but *all questions.* It explains the unexplainable, reduces complex topics into digestible content, and fosters social cohesion to the point the entire world is connected.

Prior to the rise of AI, people relied on Google for answers, however people are increasingly using AI to 'explain the unexplainable.' Ironically, now when you google something, the first thing that appears

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[16] Robert C. Scharff, 'The Technological Unconscious,' *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 6.1 (2002), 1–23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43152781> [accessed 13 December 2025] p. 6.

[17] Latzer, 'Digitalization, AI and the Rise of Techno-Religion: Transhumanist Promises and the Challenge to Enlightenment,' p. 3.

is an AI generated summary of the search results, so people who use google for answers are unintentionally confronted with AI. The idea of 'techno-religion' importantly highlights the dominance of technology within modern culture as resembling a god-like figure. The smartphone is an omnipotent, all-powerful object which controls all aspects of daily life (work, health, finances, relationships) similar to that of a metaphysical God. Man is 'ordered' by his mobile device, as Heidegger envisioned through his concept of enframing, just as man was once ordered by religious means. Neil Postman expands on the deeply religious-like connection man has with digital technologies through his concept of 'technopoly' which he defines as:

> '…a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in **the deification of technology**, which means that the **culture seeks its authorization in technology**, **finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology**."[18]

With Latzer providing a contemporary application of Heidegger's 'enframing,' Postman provides the social condition which emerge when enframing becomes the dominant cultural mindset, when societies take 'orders' from technology. Alan Jacobs summary of technopoly aligns with Hiedegger's enframing, defining it as the 'universal and virtually inescapable rule of our everyday lives by those who make and deploy technology, especially the instruments of digital communication.' [19] Essentially, as Heidegger notes, technology 'enframes' us and imposes rules, to which Postman's concept of technopoly takes further, to state that instead of simply restricting us, it has imposed itself as a new deity to provide guidance, social cohesion, and instruction; something which can answer all questions.

Man takes orders from technology and views it as an authority figure, just as God was previously viewed. Postman describes how men have begun to worship this technological mode of being, which is seen through smartphones and social media. As Postman states, technology is the primary source of meaning, echoing Hiedegger's warning that man takes orders from the technological mode of

[18] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 71.

[19] Alan Jacobs, 'After Technopoly,' *The New Atlantis*, no. 58 (2019), pp. 3–14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26609110> [accessed 9 December 2025]. p.3

revealing. Postman and Latzer confirm the position of technology as a god-like authority figure; however, Brent Waters identifies a crucial differentiation when asking if technology is a new religion. He proposes the more important question as:

> '**Is technology the predominate faith of many, if not most, late moderns?**' [20]

Waters' line of question is more appropriate than the definitive idea of technology fundamentally replacing God because the 'worship' of technology is not an official organised religion but a pervasive and subtle faith within culture. The use of 'faith' encompasses some key similarities between God and technology, without tying technology down as an organised practice. The power and influence of both figures possess have fundamentally shaped human existence, and today its cultural and spiritual impact is resonant with a pre-enlightenment suprasensory God. Latzer and Postman argue for the idolisation of technology as a God-like figure, however Waters focusses on the sense of faith and reliance man places in his device.

The more appropriate assessment is not to spend time deliberating whether our smartphone is an actual God, but to consider the faith man places in his device and the religious-*like* practices which have arisen as a result. Currently technology has not yet assumed an almighty status of a God, however it is on track to. Referring to tech, Charles Barbour notes that 'no other force on the planet attracts as much praise. No other power demands as much devotion. Nothing else has such a firm grip on the rituals and practices of our daily lives.'[21] The power that tech holds continues to grow because it dominates how man understands himself and the world he inhabits. The exponential growth of tech

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[20] Brent Waters, 'Is Technology the New Religion?', *Word & World*, 35.2 (Spring 2015), pp. 143–150 (p. 143), https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/35-2_Posthuman_Identity/Is%20Technology%20the%20New%20Religion.pdf [accessed 13 December 2025]

[21] John Gray, 'Technology Will Never Be a God – But Has It Become a Religion?' *The Conversation*, 11 December 2024, <https://theconversation.com/technology-will-never-be-a-god-but-has-it-become-a-religion-243800> [accessed 13 December 2025].

since the creation of the internet has created a religious-like sphere, where (whether consciously or not) man is ordered (enframed) by technology and seeks authorisation from it.

Waters warns of the dangers of this condition through contrasting Christianity and Tech, drawing from Luther he states, 'God is the only true or proper object of faith, and technology should therefore be a means for ordering this faith and not the object of our hope and confidence'. [22] Acknowledging the authoritarian nature of tech, Waters suggests the unmatched status of God and suggests that the two should not be likened, however suggests that they indeed have. For Waters, technology, if appropriate, should amplify religion and make it more accessible, not itself come to resemble a religion. However, as argued by Postman and Latzer, technology *has* come to resemble that of religion.

In stating that technology should serve religion, not come to resemble religion, Waters aligns with Nietzche's madman passage which shows how people seek new objects of faith when God is displaced. Waters, in a sense, is trying to resist the very dynamic Nietzsche describes; the human tendency to replace God with something else. For Nietzsche God was replaced by empirical fact and in modernity technology and digitalisation replaced the divine being.

Furthermore, Postman and Latzer's argument that technology has *already* assumed religious qualities echo Nietzsche's theory of regeneration and replacement in that humans need a grounding higher belief in *something.* Waters warns of the dangers of misplaced faith, whereas Postman and Latzer are aware that technology has become one of God's substitutes. In the context of Nietzsche, God's void has been filled, and technology now functions as not a god, but as a religion.

However just because tech has filled this vacuum, does not mean it is a God. While tech exhibits qualities of organised religion, equating it with God takes the risk of obscuring its inherently *manmade* nature. Although the metaphor is useful, it is not yet definitive. It is more fitting to understand technology as replacing God in culture due to the faith and devotion man places in his tech, not as an organised group. It is not a 'real' religion in practice since people don't go to church

[22] Waters, 'Is Technology the New Religion?' p. 150.

every Sunday to pray to Apple. Technology has merely replaced the symbol of God; it cannot yet be considered an actual worshipped God figure like Christ. Although its speculative, there are emerging tech cults which suggest the possibility, even if it isn't integrated into mainstream culture yet. [23] If technology, especially AI, continues its rapid growth, the metaphor of techno-religion will become less metaphorical and a lived reality.

[23] Diana Brown, 'Is Technology Driving a New Era of Cults?' *HowStuffWorks* (30 March 2018) <https://people.howstuffworks.com/is-technology-driving-new-era-cults.htm> [accessed 1 December 2025].

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