Debate

God's Eye: A Reason for Hope (A Response to James Harding's *Performance, Transparency, and the Cultures of Surveillance*, University of Michigan Press, 2018)

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The idea of “God’s eye” is frequently used as a metaphor for surveillance. It speaks of a gaze that is all-seeing and, because it is God’s eye, all-powerful. For some, this implies fearful if not actually violent undertones, suggesting a God whose primary task is one of moral overseer who invisibly scrutinizes humanity for failure and transgression. After all, says one biblical writer, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”¹ At first glance, the situation appears hopeless; you cannot escape the searching gaze that exposes everything and that holds you in its thrall.

This background to contemporary understandings of surveillance is understandable, especially in contexts influenced by European thought and culture, which are shot through with Jewish and Christian motifs. In this world, many social, political, and economic ideas—think of capitalism, democracy, socialism, citizenship, for instance—have roots deep in Judeo-Christian cultures. All such ideas deserve to be disturbed, ethically probed, and queried to gauge the extent to which in practice they truly contribute to the common good, to human flourishing. And the same goes for surveillance imaginaries and practices, influenced for better or worse, directly or indirectly, by the notion of the eye of God.

Personally, I feel this force field very acutely because I am not only aware of the role of Jewish and Christian motifs in contemporary concepts, theories, and instantiations of surveillance, but I also argue that these may positively aid our understanding and assessment of surveillance. As the worth of my work on surveillance has recently been questioned precisely because of this sympathetic take on God’s eye (Harding 2018: 31–73), I take the opportunity to try to explain more clearly and explicitly why I believe that a careful and contextual analysis of the biblical backdrop to modern understandings of surveillance is valuable today. Further, I propose that it is a help not a hindrance to a proper political and ethical assessment of and approach to surveillance. And more than that, it gives reason for hope that currently negative and egregious forms of surveillance could be dismantled or at least have those deplorable effects severely mitigated.

In what follows, I engage in a preliminary fashion with James Harding’s critique. However, my comments are bracketed by two things. First, despite the fact that Harding rejects my starting point, I find myself in much sympathy with the overall thesis of his book. Second, he inaccurately assumes that a single piece,

¹ Hebrews 4:13 (New International Version).

written when I was a 26-year-old graduate student, expresses what I hold today.² My analysis is accordingly limited to evaluating Harding's substantive claim that one must separate "the critique of surveillance from a conscious or inadvertent affirmation of Judeo-Christian traditions" (Harding 2018: 34). In so doing, I expound my own position, which—though it has matured over time—is consistent with both my own "conscious affirmation" of Christ-following and with a thoroughgoing critical appraisal of surveillance in its many forms. I trace this briefly through reviewing some things I actually say about both state and corporate surveillance—which today may still be distinguished but not separated. Lastly, I argue that the specific belief-content of a Judeo-Christian inheritance allows one to acknowledge three things: the ambiguities and complexities of surveillance—the "care-and-control" spectrum that attracts Harding's strictures; the imperative of understanding surveillance and its effects from below, as it were; and the vital role that seeking alternatives plays in surveillance critique. These three ideas are available to all, of course; I merely explain how I myself came to them.

Affirmations and Critique: *Apologia Pro Vita Mea*³

James Harding examines theatre, performance, and the arts in relation to surveillance, seeking materials in the former for a radical critique of the latter. That we have much in common is hard to deny, especially as we each published a book on surveillance culture within a few months of the other (Harding 2018; Lyon 2018). Harding writes about performance, which concept I too argue is vital for understanding surveillance culture today. He explores how surveillance itself performs and the performances it produces before asking what performances might disrupt surveillance. His is an engaging book that received a warm reception from *Surveillance & Society* (Monahan 2018). So, what is the problem?

Harding believes I start from exactly the wrong place to be able to offer any truly critical appraisal of surveillance, because I allow my mode of life, rooted in the Christian tradition, to guide and permeate my research and writing. Harding's complaint is not so much that I do a poor job of living, and especially of writing, christianly—though I am all too aware of my inconsistencies and shortcomings here, it is that for Harding the two cannot coexist. He insists that without strictly separating my faith from my studies I can neither understand surveillance correctly nor stand against surveillance in any serious way. Why is this? Because Judaism and Christianity demand an "open critical confrontation" in respect to the "ways that Judeo-Christian traditions bestow ideological legitimacy and authority on the growth of surveillance" (Harding 2018: 34). For Harding, the Jewish and Christian traditions are part of the problem and thus to speak from within them makes no sense if the aim is accurate understanding and principled criticism.

This is indeed a clash of perspectives because, by contrast, I find no conflict between a Judeo-Christian stance and radical critique; indeed in my view the one calls for the other. I believe that it would be *mauvaise foi* not to allow my commitments to affect my research and writing. Harding acknowledges that I have not tried to hide my faith commitments and points to a number of places where this is clear. There are other, third party accounts, that make the same kind of point, but more in the vein of curiosity than critique (e.g., Keightley 2018; Riordan 2014). Because I take my faith tradition seriously, I aspire to express that tradition consistently in every respect. This is not a mere cognitive commitment, but an emotional, cultural, aesthetic, and political matter. It *is* cognitive in that believing in truth seems to require a quest for accuracy and avoiding special pleading and bias; it is also political in the sense that, for instance, the term "prophet" speaks of one who speaks out against injustice and for peaceful alternatives (e.g., Bauckham 2015). That I might fail, I accept and expect; I am finite, frail, fallible.

² I actually broke with the Inter-Varsity Press in 1983, first, to take my own advice to form a relationship with a respected academic publisher, but secondly, because I felt constricted by the expected boundary maintenance. I had asked John Eldridge, president of the British Sociological Association, to write a foreword for an IVP book, *Sociology and the Human Image*, but IVP would not publish it because Eldridge had generously compared my work with that of theologian Hans Küng. This was, apparently, unacceptable to IVP.

³ If here I offer a "defense of my life," it should be distinguished from John Henry Newman's classic essay (1864) with a similar title. He sought *more* hierarchical authority. I, emphatically, do not.

But what I say about myself is also true of the Christian community at large. What is often forgotten is that Christianity contains within itself a critique of its own practices—and the means of forgiveness and renewal—that does indeed permit criticism of the most profound kind. It is on *Christian* grounds that every appalling action done in the name of Christ—from the Crusades to placing Indigenous people in residential schools in Australia or Canada—should be denounced and measures taken to understand and to try to repair the damage done (e.g., MacDonald 2018). The Christian grounds that I have in mind are not always interpreted in the same way historically or across cultures. For instance, even two contemporary authors, John Milbank (1990) and Charles Taylor (2007), whose work I find persuasive in many respects, do not necessarily agree. But the point may be made simply that the sacred texts are intended among other things to act as a mirror by which communities of faith check their consistency with the tradition. The biblical story itself is not about some angelic paragons of virtue but about communities of faith liberated from slavery—the Exodus!—that fail repeatedly. Astonishingly, though, they also find that forgiveness and reconciliation are still available.

It is in this context that, I would argue, Christianity, when it speaks—in relation to ancient situations and cultures—of surveillance, it speaks of undesirable circumstances that prompt surveillance in the first place, of the potential damage done by surveillance practices that are not answerable to a higher authority, and of the need for surveillance to be practised carefully and with only human, social ends in view. Without question, these ancient situations have to be carefully considered contextually and reinterpreted for the present. But as I study them, I find a wisdom that transcends the particularities of time and place, a kind of shrewd and intensely practical account that speaks as loudly to the present as it did centuries ago.⁴

I am not saying that the way I see things will resonate with all who make Christian claims. I am not speaking for many Christians around the world who no doubt hold different views from mine. I am not answerable for those who, for instance, vote for politicians whose lifestyle denies diametrically most of Jesus' teachings. But I do wish to distinguish my position from that of some others with whom I find myself, sadly, out of sympathy. In particular, Harding suggests that I write from evangelical, even fundamentalist, positions. I shall leave the latter for others to judge, even though it is the case of course that fundamentalists have much in common with evangelicals (see, e.g., Marsden 2006). Forty years ago, I would have been fairly content with the evangelical label, but today I simply do not identify as such for fear that I might, for example, be seen as supporting Israeli policies in Palestine, denying climate change, voting for strong-man populist demagogues, or agreeing that gay people should be excluded from the church. However, my attitude to these matters, whether I like it or not, *is* evangelical in the sense that I think that the biblical texts may be faithfully read in ways that trenchantly question such views.

Faith at Work: Critical Commitments

One position that I did espouse early on (and this is evident only a few years after the unfortunate appearance of the juvenilia that Harding takes to be persistently and perniciously foundational for me) is post-empiricism. By this I mean very simply that theory, though constrained by facts, is always underdetermined by them and that facts, however carefully and conscientiously collected, are always theory laden (see, e.g., Hesse 1980). The upshot of this is that some kind of valuing—some means of critique—is ever present in sociology and cognate disciplines and that therefore it is incumbent on social scientists to be as reflexive and clear as possible what their guiding commitments are. Harding, exemplarily, is limp about his. As for me, I try to allow relevant aspects of the faith tradition in which I find myself to inform my research and writing (Lyon 1983, 2010). Here are some examples of what I mean. They rest primarily on biblical interpretation rather than on any of the schools of Christian thought that offer insights on surveillance and from which my work has also benefited.

⁴ To give some examples, this would be exemplified by phenomenologists like Paul Ricoeur, but it could also relate to liberation theologians such as Jose Miguel Bonino or Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino or, for that matter, to the work of the common-sense philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff.

Let me start where Harding's assessment begins, with the eye of God. This common trope troubles Harding and, again, I sympathize with what he says. I acknowledge that this idea is familiar in Christian churches and indeed within Western thought more generally, with the impression given that these piercing eyes are ominous and menacing. In his book, Harding's (2018: 63) invective is reserved primarily for the kinds of surveillance that have become prominent and accented in the twenty-first century, in policing, prisons, national security, and the like, where the "punitive watchful eye" is all too often at work. But not always. For I see the "eye of God" as being *misused* and *abused* when associated with the punitive. Harding goes further and imputes to me the notion that the ultimate punishment behind God's surveillance is "eternal damnation" (a phrase I have never used, anywhere, not least because it is not warranted by the biblical texts: see, e.g., Wright 1996: 636). To use such a phrase, so controversial even among Christians, including many evangelicals, is gratuitous, to say the least.

What I actually argue is this. The idea of the eye of God, though present from the opening of Genesis, finds its first elaboration in the story of Hagar, hapless maidservant of Sarah, the patriarch Abraham's wife. Egyptian Hagar, who was obliged by the barren Sarah to carry Abraham's child, found herself summarily ejected from service and near death in the desert. Her plight was noticed by God however, and so moved was she by this that she named the one who had observed her "the God who sees."⁵ What God had "seen" was someone whom we might describe as intersectionally vulnerable and disadvantaged: a foreign, female fugitive, victimized by patriarchy.

So far from being punitive, this surveillance offered welcome recognition and a way forward from Hagar's bleak and desperate fate. Much more might be said about this (Lyon 2014), but it is from texts like this that I find optics of hope for surveillance, clues for an ethics of surveillance, and the basis for censuring certain modes of surveillance as simply unacceptable. If such embryonic ethics valorize recognition, then this suggests that one should hesitate before acquiescing to use a system that offers no such recognition. This applies especially to surveillance as social sorting (Lyon 2003) in which people are categorized in order to be treated differently. While this discrimination often makes "rational" sense, increasingly the criteria for inclusion in one category or another have become hazy if not hidden, particularly as they are subject to algorithmic construction.⁶ The result is that injustice—from showing up on a no-fly list to being taken off an advertiser's list as unworthy of attention, or worse—is facilitated, and its perpetrators are insulated from criticism.

The eye of God is not the only way that my background understanding of surveillance is informed by my commitments. Historically, it is worth tracing the antecedents of what today is called surveillance in various contexts such as military espionage, administrative record-keeping, or the watcher charged with maintaining security at the city gates. Each of these occurs in many antique settings and these include the biblical scriptures. What sorts of Hebrew wisdom guided the way that these responsibilities were fulfilled and what sorts of best practices and rules of thumb emerged from them? And how may these be filtered and adapted for contemporary situations in which, as T. S. Eliot (1934) warned in the 1930s, wisdom may be lost in knowledge and knowledge in information? Indeed, today's situation is much more dire than ninety years ago, as obsessions with data threaten to obliterate whatever residual elements of wisdom remain.

As I reflect on the ways that these three situations mentioned are treated in the scriptures, I find that, while each activity may sometimes be necessary due to everything from undesirable behaviours such as property theft to gauging the chances of outwitting enemy attacks, they should be engaged only within strict limits. They are merely the means of achieving certain community goals or governmental ends. The watcher, for

⁵ As naming is highly significant in ancient Hebrew culture (as many others) it should be noted that, as far as I am aware, Hagar—the non-Jew—is the only woman in the Bible who names God. Quotation is from Genesis 16:13.

⁶ Though this cannot be explored here, such sorting and ranking processes may possibly be thought of as a kind of de-creation, an undoing of the self—what Simone Weil (1952: 81) called "undoing the creature in us"—that produces a false ontology in which artificial but consequential distinctions detract in practice from our common humanity.

example, should be alert, sober, and have community interests at heart for it is the community to which the watcher is accountable. If spies should have to dissemble or disguise their purpose, then again this is seen as an extraordinary circumstance and not one to be extended into peacetime. And if administrative enumeration or registration—a key starting point for surveillance—should occur, it is once again for specific purposes such as military conscription or taxation. Each circumstance is rife with obvious challenges among which is the familiar Weberian conundrum of how “instrumental” means can be treated as if they were “value” ends. Biblically put, when some token or practice is thus elevated to an “idolatrous” position, it quickly blinds participants to the realities of the situation and binds them into servitude.

To qualify as Christian, the above discussion also has to be read from a New Testament perspective in which Jesus of Nazareth takes centre stage. Moreover, while the Hebrew texts give some clues about how surveillance is experienced as well as enacted, the narratives of Jesus shift the focus decisively to the experiential. The birth of Jesus took place during the Roman registration of subject provinces. This promoted imperial organization and taxation but took Jewish shape in that the population had to return to their own birthplaces. As Jesus' popularity grew, he was regarded with increasing suspicion by both imperial and religious authorities, placing him under escalating intense observation culminating in his crucifixion. So, crucially, the eye of God was now being trained by the experience of surveillance, something Eric Stoddart observes: “As one who knew its gaze, suffered its harsh consequences, and now watches over us so that we might flourish and not wither, the crucified God reorientates our perspective” (Stoddart 2013: 171).

So, the kind of biblically informed reasoning that I advocate and try to practise acts as an orientation to surveillance in general and a source of wisdom and sometimes ethics that then requires careful translation into twenty-first-century terms. As I understand it, this is a million miles from holding dogmatically to beliefs about an arbitrarily vigilant and vengeful God that, through religious institutions, constructs “submissive subjects . . . hailed as inherently guilty . . . and in need of oversight” (Monahan 2018). Under current conditions of global networks of security surveillance and surveillance capitalism, today's surveillance practices fall far short of the pro-flourishing and surveillance-solidarity expressed in “God's eye” as I have tried to expound it. To the contrary, “God's eye” calls for radical critique of much surveillance for its alignment with grossly unfair and freedom-fettering forces, its unwillingness to be subject to legal limits and community constraints, and its susceptibility to overreach in a data-driven environment.

Ambiguities, Alterities, and Alternatives

From the biblical material and also from historical and contemporary empirical evidence, it can be argued that surveillance is fundamentally ambiguous and indeed complex. It exhibits more than one face. That this is hard to maintain in the face of its glaring, deplorable, and unacceptable characteristics in the present day I do not doubt. I think this difficulty is seen most sharply in national security surveillance in the West, where in some countries highly unaccountable agencies continue to engage in practices of dragnet surveillance, creating suspects of whole populations and rendering certain minorities inexcusably vulnerable. And this is achieved in tandem with surveillance capitalist platforms that also operate opaquely, attempting to modify behaviours of huge populations enamoured of their social media and gig economy “services.” So I can fully understand why Harding wants to denounce and destroy such surveillance root and branch.

However, assuming that surveillance is the gathering and analysis of personal data for management or governing purposes, then given the complexity of current social, economic, and political formations some surveillance is necessary today. This includes surveillance in health care, social welfare, and education but also for the payment of taxes. In addition, in a democratic polity, the protection of one-person-one-vote requires surveillance to ensure against election fraud. And even migrants may assent to biometric surveillance run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, if they have evidence that it will enable them to be recognized and to make claims on the state that permits them entry. The fact that in each area just mentioned, there are blatant blemishes in the system, due to its uneven power relations—think of the “automation of inequality” (Eubanks 2018), the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica scandal (Bennett

2018), or the ways that biometric ID can under some circumstances lead to the denial rather than the protection of human rights (Thomas 2005)—illustrates their fundamental ambiguity and complexity.

In my work, I have proposed a surveillance spectrum from “care” to “control” in order to demonstrate this ambiguity and also to try to locate specific cases on the spectrum. Although it is a fairly blunt blade, the distinctions are still useful. The bluntness is in the ways that every surveillance situation is more complex than it at first appears. Thus control may dress in the clothing of care or, even more knottily, care-and-control may be in tension within the same system. But the fact that one can identify caring types of surveillance or at the very least surveillance that aims to be properly accountable and transparent means that comparisons and judgements may be made that do not require the complete rejection of surveillance—were that possible—as such. At the other end of the spectrum, surveillance as control—which is itself ambiguous: consider the difference between urban rush-hour traffic control and police control of protesters at a demonstration—is peculiarly prone to abuse and requires its own tight checks. Surveillance is unavoidably ambiguous but at no point on the spectrum is it self-justifying, still less, unequivocally underwritten by Jewish or Christian traditions.

The reason for this is simple and relates to my next point. It is imperative to understand surveillance not only from an operator perspective but also from below, from the perspective of the surveilled. Analytically, the operator viewpoint is simply inadequate on its own because again, if surveillance is about handling personal data, the persons affected must be considered. Not cynically, to work out how their activities might better be shaped—a platform marketing perspective—but sensitively, to grasp the personal and social effects of surveillance, whether at work, online, travelling, in hospital, wherever. Increasingly, I have come to the view that even the way that surveillance is defined should reflect this experiential dimension (Lyon 2017). This echoes the essential personhood that any Christian ethic would wish to affirm.

To see surveillance from below is also an important aspect of a critical approach to surveillance, for obvious reasons. Surveillance is never merely a “technical” or “rational” matter, however much such claims about it are made. It has, necessarily, social, ethical, and political dimensions. The categorizing aspects of surveillance, referred to earlier as social sorting, create Others, who are often negatively construed. Think again of the screening process at the airport. This categorizes according to concealed criteria, a process that has many effects of which I mention two. The first is that the criteria produce decisions about who may not board a particular flight for “national security” reasons. How some of these, such as young children, find themselves on a no-fly list remains a mystery. Another effect is that those who have reason to sense that they might be on such a list due to country of origin or visible minority status find that passing through security is a moment of extreme fear and stress to be prepared for with care. This screened alterity or otherness may be felt intensely on borders or at airports, which often exacerbate already existing tensions (see, e.g., Introna 2001; Lyon 2006, 2018: 68, 79-83).

Lastly, I turn to the vital role that seeking alternatives plays in surveillance critique. At any level, from the management of a surveillance system to protesters outraged at a breach of trust in handling data, it is crucial to maintain a sense that alternatives are possible. The doctrine of inevitability, propounded incessantly by some government departments and internet corporations, acts constantly to deny the possibility of other approaches to surveillance, whether radical or piecemeal. I am a strong believer in alternatives and of the need to press for such to be considered. How such alternatives might be worked out requires specificity in relation to particular kinds of systems.

However, what is really needed from a policy perspective is a way to transcend the commonplace criteria of efficiency, speed, reach, cost-effectiveness, and other technical and cost considerations. As I see it, without stringent new modes of data governance to guide the rising, rampant use of data analytics, AI, and deep learning, today's data breaches, security surveillance overreach, and the insidious influence of surveillance capitalist corporations will become permanent, destructive features of today's world (see, e.g., Public Voice 2018). One concept that bridges basic commitments such as those I hold and the testing demands of data governance is human flourishing. The British Academy and Royal Society (2017) report

on data governance argues that this overarching principle should be used to ensure that collective rights are maintained; that transparency, accountability, and inclusivity are sought; that learning, including from mistakes, is vital; and that democratic governance is enhanced.

Conclusion: A Reason for Hope

A brief response to a serious challenge is bound to be inadequate. But at the same time, perhaps I owe it to a wider range of readers to explain how my stance toward surveillance is rooted in my basic commitments. Until space opens for a fuller exposition,⁷ I trust that the attempt to explain myself will at least make it clear why I agree with much that my colleague James Harding says about surveillance but from the very position that he declares untenable. As I noted in the introduction, in the “eye of God” surveillance metaphor, that for Harding immediately compromises surveillance by associating it with hopelessness in the face of relentless, excoriating scrutiny, I find the opening for an optics of hope.

As I explained earlier, I too believe that the criticism of religion is a vital task and indeed that it should be a requisite for the criticism of surveillance. In past projects I have tried to contribute to the former (see Lyon 2000), even though of course I still undertake my critique from within a religious tradition. Thus, as Harding rightly notes, my work does not align itself against either religion or surveillance *per se*. But this is because, for all the errors and injustices perpetrated in the name of religion, religious traditions are still responsible for offering some of the noblest aspirations—and assistance in seeking them—that the world has ever seen. One, the impulse to seek human flourishing, is shared by all three Abrahamic faiths (Volf 2015), and it underpins many worthwhile and shared human endeavours, including as I have started to show the taming and transformation of surveillance.

I sincerely hope that many will learn much and benefit from Harding’s impassioned polemic that commends radical artistic activity as a key weapon in the struggle against surveillance as it expands exponentially and apparently without limit in the twenty-first century. I am with him when he indicts the “post-democratic” practice of governments outsourcing key activities to private contractors and their business models as one of the most pernicious causes of that expansion. Edward Snowden’s truth-telling about this has yet to hit home, it appears (see Lyon 2015). But I also hope that Harding will see my response to his comments about me doubling as a response to the final question of his book: “What other options remain?”

Having admitted that many artistic attacks on surveillance are “symbolic gestures” rather than “exemplary acts,” Harding commends those who have the courage to walk the walk and engage in direct (artistic) action against surveillance. I am not one of those artists and neither am I competent to assess their anti-surveillance activities. But in other arenas I do see cracks that admit light as others act wisely and with courage, demanding proper accountability in security agencies, arguing for data governance to reverse the deleterious effects of corporate control, forming groups that put pressure on government, establishing start-ups that are answerable to their users and community groups that share tactics and work with teachers, parents, and children to model alternatives to the present state of surveillance. There is much more to say. But I have sketched some reasons for my hope.

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⁷ I have planned for some time to expand my work on the eye of God and of surveillance ethics more generally and hope to be able to pursue this project in the next few years.

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