While the idea of founding a Center for Religion and Media at NYU was conceived before September 11, that event and its aftermath have dramatized the need for understanding the spread of religious ideas and practices through a variety of media. In its first year, the Center has allowed us to begin to investigate how people use media in their religious lives, how “the media” treat religion and how media forms themselves can function as religion. This first newsletter will introduce you to some of the people, issues and events that filled our inaugural year.

The year’s theme, Confession, Testimony, and Witnessing, focused our thinking across boundaries of disciplines, religious traditions, and media forms, and gave us chances to encounter new scholarly work. At the heart of the community of scholars that filled the Center with so much energy and enthusiasm were our three working groups. These groups met on their own, while gathering several times each semester for a “Bridging Seminar” where they could discuss the work of our distinguished lecturers, invited guests and one another. Interdisciplinary and synergistic by design, the working groups produced books, articles, edited volumes, journal issues, Internet sites, and curricula.

We thank the creative, fabulous people who embarked upon this opening year with us and look forward to new themes and new scholars among us who will further their insights, providing fresh perspectives upon the nexus of religious life and media practice.

Co-directors Faye Ginsburg and Angela Zito

2003-2004
Confession, Testimony, and Witnessing

In our inaugural year we examined the central importance of media of all sorts in the practices of confession, testimony, and witnessing that are part of so many religious traditions. These range from the Crucifix and the Passover Seder, to the self-immolation of protesting Buddhist monks for television cameras, and the testimonial videos made by Islamic martyrs. Such rites and images are inhabited by powerful idioms of confession, testimony, and witnessing that create solidarity, mobilize protest, and mediate promises of salvation in culturally meaningful ways. It is hardly surprising that notions of witnessing and testimony are increasingly deployed in human rights activism, as well as in darker efforts to promote religious violence.

working groups:
Islamic Public Spheres
Convener: Michael Gilsenan, Chair, Middle Eastern Studies

Media, Religion, and Human Rights
Convener: Margaret McLagan, Anthropology

Jews, Media, and Religion
Convener: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Performance Studies & Hebrew/Judaic Studies; Jeff Shandler, Jewish Studies (Rutgers University)

2004-2005
Religious Experience: memory, media, marketing

How are different kinds of media—from rosaries and prayer wheels to audiocassettes and the Internet—implicated in creating embodied religious subjects? How do various spiritual traditions, emphasizing different sensory capacities, mediate the everyday as an expression of the divine, valorizing some and excluding other avenues of experience? How does material culture facilitate the transportation of religious experience across time, anchoring memory?

These classic concerns underlie the modern commodification of religious material culture and its circulation across cultural boundaries. In the coming year we will build upon the first year’s work, asking anew how media transform the overlapping domains of secular and religious practice through the lens of material culture.

working groups:
Mediating Asian Religions
Angela Zito, Director, Religious Studies

Christianity in New and Old Media
Bambi Schieffelin, Anthropology

Indigenous Cosmologies
Fred Myers, Chair, Anthropology
Faye Ginsburg, Anthropology

This newsletter includes an insert that highlights two programs sponsored by the Center - Lights! Revere! Action!: Picturing Faith and Faith on Film. We invite you to find out more about these engaging and informative programs by checking out their websites.

During her residency, Castelli also completed two books: Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making (Columbia University Press, September 2004), and an edited volume, Interventions: Activists and Academics Respond to Violence (Palgrave, November 2004). She guest-edited a volume of The Scholar and Feminist Online, the electronic journal of the Center for Research on Women at Barnard (www.barnard.edu/sfonline/reverb). She also inaugurated a new journal, Postscripts: Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds, which she will edit with Equinox Publishers (UK); the first issue is scheduled to appear in Spring 2005. Several CRM scholars will serve on the journal’s editorial board, and a special issue of the journal will feature work developed from discussions in the Religion, Human Rights, and Media working group.

Castelli lectured on Christian martyrdom and the politics of persecution at Ohio State University, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, University of Texas, and Brown University. She also gave public presentations on Mel Gibson’s film, The Passion of the Christ, in both academic and community settings. In September 2004, Castelli returns to the Religion Department at Barnard College, where she is an associate professor.

Post-doctoral fellow Mazyar Lotfalian’s research on Iranian artists and Islam focuses on “visual artistic representation of war, martyrdom, and the reconstruction of post-trauma society.” During his fellowship year, Lotfalian helped curate the Arteast Middle East film festival and made presentations on Ta’ziyeh (an Islamic passion play) and Iranian media at the Visual Anthropology Workshop of the German Association for Anthropology, and the Center for Religion and Media workshop on “War, Religion, & Spectacles of Suffering.” He organized a panel, “A New Landscape for Iranian Cultural Studies: Material Culture, Technologies, Discourses, Figures, and Poetics of Utopia,” for the conference for Iranian Studies in Bethesda, Maryland.

Lotfalian’s book, Islam, Technoscientific Identities, and the Culture of Curiosity (University Press of America) will be published this year. In 2004-2005, he will be a visiting lecturer at Yale University.

Stolow has begun work on relationships between the invention of the telegraph and the rise of the modern Spiritualist movement. In connection with this project, he and Mazyar Lotfalian are co-editing an anthology on religion and technology. For the interactive curriculum website developed by the working group on Jews, Religion, and Media (see p. 7), Stolow is creating a module on Jewish Texts and Reading Practices.

In September 2004, Stolow returns to Canada as assistant professor of sociology and communication studies at McMaster University. In the summer of 2005, he will take up a fellowship in Amsterdam to participate in a project entitled “Modern Mass Media, Religion, and the Imagination of Communities,” directed by Birgit Meyer.

Somewhere along the way, Jeremy discovered that he will be a new parent. He and his partner, Danielle Filion, are adopting a baby girl from Armenia!

Announcing
the Fellows for 2004-2005

Senior research scholar Heather Hendershot (Associate Professor, Media Studies, Queens College), is author of the recent book, Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture (University of Chicago, 2004). She will be joining us to work on her new research project: God’s Angriest Man: Carl McIntire and the Rise and Fall of the Fairness Doctrine.

Post-doctoral fellows:

Jane Iwamura (Assistant Professor, School of Religion, University of Southern California) will be working on: The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture: Race, Religion and Representation in the Age of Virtual Orientalism.

Gregory Grieve (Assistant Professor, Dept of Religion, University of North Carolina, Greensboro) will be working on: Making Mandalas: The Practice of Everyday Religion in Bhaktapur.
Distinguished Lectures

October 2, 2003
Geoffrey Hartman, Yale University
Founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies
“Like Niobe All Tears: Reflections on Memorials and 9/11”

October 20, 2003
Bruno Latour, Centre de sociologie de l’innovation, Ecole des Mines, Paris
“If Gods Are at War, What Are the Peace Conditions?”

February 12, 2004
Ann Pellegrini, New York University, Performance Studies/Religious Studies
“Secular Childhood (and other religious subjects)”

March 25, 2004
Hent deVries, Johns Hopkins University
“Of Miracles and Special Effects”

Screenings/Discussions

September 18, 2003
Matters of Race:
The Changing Face of America
Roja Productions, 2003
A 4-part documentary series that challenges audiences to reconsider the architecture of race, its role in our democracy, and its relationship to power in America. For more information: www.pbs.org/mattersofrace or www.roja.tv

October 17, 2003
Resisting Paradise
Barbara Hammer, 2003
The resistance of a small group of women in Provençe who assisted Jews is contrasted with Matisse and other artists who continued to paint landscapes during the Vichy period and Nazi occupation. For more information: www.barbarahammerfilms.com

October 20, 2003
Bruno Latour, Centre de sociologie de l’innovation, Ecole des Mines, Paris
“If Gods Are at War, What Are the Peace Conditions?”

November 21, 2003
Another Road Home
Danae Elion, 2003
The filmmaker’s search for a former Palestinian employee of her family takes her from the Middle East to the U.S. For more information: www.hartleyfoundation.org/Another_Road_Home.htm

December 4, 2003
How to Behave:
The Films of Tran Van Thuy
The reflective, self-critical fiction and documentary films of Tran Van Thuy comprise a running commentary on post-1975 Vietnam society.

December 5, 2003
Morning Sun
An inner history of the Cultural Revolution that charts the psychological and emotional landscape of high-Maoist China, featuring personal stories of families caught up in this tumultuous period, as well as propaganda films never before seen in the West. For more information: www.morningsun.org

January 30, 2004
Human Weapon
Ilan Ziv, 2002
An exploration of the 20th century roots of suicide bombing, from kamikaze pilots in World War II to present-day practices of Al-Qaeda and other militant groups. For more information: www.frif.com

February 27, 2004
Forget Baghdad
Samir, 2002
Stereotypes of “the Jew” and “the Arab” through 100 years of film are linked with the biographies of five Iraqi Jews. For more information: www.forgetbaghdad.com

CRM’s web magazine, The Revealer: A Daily Review of Religion and the Press (www.therevealer.org), provides a thoughtful review of religion in the news and the news about religion. It points out where the media misses the religion story, when the dominant press narratives get the religion story wrong, and also how they get it right. The Revealer builds on the premise that religion matters, but that the press too often fails to acknowledge this, only covering religion as either innocuous spirituality or dangerous fanaticism.

The Revealer is published by NYU Journalism chair and PressThink author Jay Rosen, through CRM. It is edited by Jeff Sharlet, a journalist who has written about religion, culture, and politics for Harper’s, The Washington Post, Forward, The Baffler and Salon and worked as a senior writer covering religion and theology for The Chronicle of Higher Education and as editor-in-chief of Pakn Treger, a journal of Jewish writing and history. In 2000 he co-founded Killing the Buddha.com, and he is co-author of Killing the Buddha: A Heretic’s Bible. Kathryn Joyce, a graduate student in NYU’s Department of Journalism, is the managing editor.

The Revealer provides a meeting ground for journalists and academics. Our recently added “Talking Heads” section allows journalists to better inform their stories by drawing on the expertise of CRM faculty and associates. In addition, several CRM scholars have written for The Revealer.

The Revealer has been referenced by several hundred online sites and our daily readership includes thousands of working media professionals, academics, pundits, politicians and interested lay people.

Kathryn Joyce
Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, released on Ash Wednesday 2004 and earning close to $400-million at the box office, was a top media story of the year, providing a vivid example of the mediation of religion in popular culture.

*Who Owns The Passion?* (co-sponsored by The Interfaith Center of New York) brought together religion scholars and cultural critics to situate the film in its current and historical contexts. We engaged the contentious questions about the ownership and circulation of sacred narratives in secular public spaces that the film brings up.

A panel chaired by Adam Becker included Elizabeth Castelli, who spoke about the historicity of the gospels, and Heather Hendershot (Queens), who discussed the uses of popular media by contemporary evangelical Christians, suggesting that the positive reception of *The Passion* among evangelicals (despite its overt Catholicism) represents a breakthrough for the Christian media industry. James Shapiro (Columbia), who has written about the Oberammergau passion plays, argued that the particular imagery of the suffering of Christ now so familiar as to seem timeless only came into being from the eleventh century onward, adding that “The Jesus of faith always trumps the Jesus of history.”

The Revealer’s Jeff Sharlet moderated a second panel that looked at the story of the Passion and Mel Gibson as modern cultural and religious phenomena. Film critic Stuart Klawans of *The Nation* compared Gibson’s Christian poetics with those of other modern Christian artists and writers. Toby Miller (NYU) considered Mel Gibson as a mass mediated “social sign” whose elemental characteristics – heroism, suffering, resilience, defiance of authority, etc. – are evident in his movie roles. Tony Rossi (The Christophers) made a plea for deeper shared understandings among polarizing debates.

Our own Elizabeth Castelli was invited by the *New York Post* to a private pre-screening of *The Passion*, along with a rabbi, a priest, a film critic, and a randomly chosen *Post* reader (there’s a joke in here somewhere…). The panel of sacrificial lambs shared their reactions, which the *Post* printed in an article on November 17, 2003.

Castelli described the film as “disturbing,” and Mel Gibson’s account of the passion as “distorted.” An expert on New Testament history and theology, and Christian notions of suffering and martyrdom, Castelli said Gibson “had an opportunity to reflect on the long history of the theology of suffering, and he missed that opportunity by producing just a picture of brutality.” Castelli also felt that Gibson’s portrayal of Jews was unfair — “based on medieval stereotypes” — and that the militancy of the final resurrection scene is inconsistent with mainstream Catholic theology.

Despite her deep misgivings about the film, Castelli nonetheless made the sacrifice of viewing it again on the film’s opening day, as a guest speaker at a screening and discussion sponsored by the Downtown Synagogue in New York.
"Witnessing" undergirds many religious traditions. It involves textual and visual media, as well as modalities such as sound and physical space geared to produce "special affects" that generate religious sensibilities in different social arenas and transport them through time. With the proliferation of media technologies such as video, film, audiocassettes, and the Internet, the power of religious witnessing is amplified, and often transformed. Religious Witness explored the power of religious witnessing across cultures and media forms on topics ranging from life-cycle rituals, to sacred sound, to human rights activism.

The conference featured two keynote speakers. Stewart M. Hoover (Colorado), a pioneer in the study of religion and media, spoke on “Media, Meaning, and Religion: Research on Identities of Daily Life.” Patricia Spyer (Leiden) gave a talk entitled “Orphaning the Nation: Violence, Sentimentality, and Media in the Wake of Ambon’s War.”

The program began with a look at The Holy Land Experience, a “living, biblical history museum” in Orlando, FL, which art historian Joan Branham (Providence) contextualized within a history of Christian representations of the Holy Land as a sacred landscape. Moderator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (NYU) led a panel discussion with Adam Becker (NYU), Elizabeth Castelli (CRM), Judah Cohen (NYU), Miriam Peskowitz (Temple), and Jeremy Stolow (CRM), who offered insights into the cultural aesthetics and social historical issues. Cross-cultural commentary was offered by Barry Flood (NYU), who discussed early modern Western representations of Islam, and CRM co-director Angela Zito, who talked about miniaturized Buddhist shrines at sites in China and the U.S.

Mediating Rituals looked at the use of new technologies in visual media to document and reinvent life-cycle rituals, particularly in contemporary Judaism. In a program moderated by CRM associate director Barbara Abrash, Jeffrey Shandler (Rutgers) talked about home movies as a mode of witness in American Jewish life, especially in rituals such as bar/bat mitzvahs. Michael Renov (USC) and CRM co-director Faye Ginsburg responded to Shandler. Ginsburg showed a video about how Australian aboriginals make use of video technology to document their ritual practices.

Experimental filmmaker Alan Berliner spoke about the uses (and abuses) of home movies in his family, first by his father and now himself as he enters fatherhood. Media artist Melissa Shiff and scholar Louis Kaplan (Toronto) described the process of creating their own "avant-garde" Jewish wedding.

In Circulating Islams, moderated by Ella Shohat (NYU), panellists Brian Larkin (Barnard), Flagg Miller (Wisconsin-Madison), and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (SOAS), examined the impact of new media such as video technology, audiocassettes, and popular cinema, on Islamic practices and worldviews in Nigeria, Yemen, and Iran. Michael Fischer (MIT) made summary observations.

The Sound of Islamic Worlds, a session moderated by Michael Gilsenan (NYU), focused on mediated soundscapes and musical performances in the Islamic world. Magnus Marsden (Cambridge) and Martin Stokes (Chicago) discussed the evolving roles of Muslim musicians in local and regional public spheres in, respectively, North Pakistan and Turkey. Anne Rasmussen (William and Mary) and Benjamin Zimmer (Kenyon) shifted attention to the Islamic world beyond the Middle East with discussions of new and old musical aesthetics in the popular culture of Indonesia. The discussant was Birgit Meyer (Amsterdam).

Witnessing and testimony in human rights discourse and activism was the topic of the final sessions. Technologies of Witnessing, moderated by Meg McLagan (NYU), featured papers by Anne Cubilie, who called for academics and practitioners to be more directly engaged with one another in order to overcome the institutional and epistemological gaps that divide them, and Leshu Torchin (NYU) who analyzed early film activism in response to the Armenian genocide. Scholar-activists Sam Gregory (WITNESS), Thomas Keenan (Bard), and Minno Moallem (San Francisco State) were respondents.

Circuits of Suffering was moderated by Ann Pellegrini (NYU). Papers were presented by Allen Feldman (NYU), who offered a historical and theoretical analysis of how the body becomes a medium of authentication, and Ann Cvetkovich (Texas-Austin), who discussed her involvement with the 9/11 Oral History Archive. Elizabeth Castelli, Musa Dube (Scripps), and Renata Salecl (London School of Economics) were the discussants.
### Proselytizing Media

We are currently developing a web publication examining how conservative Christian media practices construct a wider Christian encounter with the world. Edited by professor Tanya Erzen (Ohio State) with the design assistance of Tal Halpern (ITP, NYU), the site forms part of the Center for Media, Culture and History’s Virtual Casebook Project, which brings new media forms of cultural activism into the classroom.

Currently in its testing phase, Proselytizing Media allows teachers and scholars to explore the intersections of Christian evangelism and popular media. Visitors to the site will be able to view samples of Christian media, including film, video, web sites, music, CD-Roms, comic books, and novels (such as the best-selling *Left Behind* series), along with scholarly articles, reference links, and diagrams. For further information, contact Barbara Abrash (barbara.abrash@nyu.edu).

### New Courses

In 2004-2005, I will teach two undergraduate courses at Sarah Lawrence College informed by my participation in CRM’s “Confession, Testimony, and Witnessing” project last year. The seminars “Living Islam” and “Islam in Europe and the United States” will contextualize religious texts within a broader range of media forms and practices used by both Muslims and non-Muslims. These range from processions such as the those staged in Spain to commemorate the Christian defeat of the Moors to Sufi rock and Muslim rap music to English language videos with puppets teaching children how to be good Muslims.

We will focus not only on content but also on media form itself. For example, the vast visual, sound, and textual resources on the Internet demonstrate both the variety of Muslim thought and cultures and the ways in which new technologies change notions of religious authority and community. These courses will develop critical awareness of how Muslim beliefs, experiences and practices are mediated. Assignments will include experiential, visual, sound, computer and literary projects besides more traditional papers.

### Jews, Media, and Religion

**Online Curriculum: Pilot Project**

An online curriculum—developed by the working group on Jews, Media, and Religion and spearheaded by co-chairs Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler—will provide teachers and scholars with resources and model approaches for analyzing some of the many ways that Jews engage with media in religious life. The curriculum will consist of a series of open-source modules, each organized around a different topic. These include particular genres of media (such as the Internet or museums), selected subjects (such as the Holocaust, Kabbalah, religious travel), and specific communities (such as Lubavitcher Hasidim or young “hipster” Jews).

In addition to mass media (newspapers, radio and television, films, sound recordings), the curriculum considers other forms of mediation ranging from manuscripts to modern analog and digital technologies, including amateur photographic documentaries of community and life-cycle events, as well as mediating practices encountered in live performances, philanthropy, museums, and tourism.

The first of the curriculum modules, which are designed to evolve as new resources, ideas, and questions arise, will be launched in late 2004. The site will provide pedagogical models that teachers can adapt to their needs as well as resources for students and individual researchers.

### Fall 2003 Workshop

**War, Religion, & Spectacles of Suffering.**

“The Pornography of Suffering: A Correspondent’s Tale” was the subject of *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges keynote speech. On the panel “Islam, Media, Society: Mobilizing for War and Martyrdom,” Peter Chelkowski (NYU), Mazyar Lotfalian (CRM), and Roxanne Varzi (NYU), and Elizabeth Castelli explored the transformation of traditional Shi’ite tropes of mourning and martyrdom into public media events in a discussion moderated by Angela Zito.

“Suffering and the Journalist’s Camera” was the subject of a panel including journalist Ron Haviv, Susie Linfield (NYU), and Barbie Zelizer (Penn), and Allen Feldman, with Fred Ritchin (NYU) as moderator.

---

*A snapshot violated by Serbs who occupied the house of a Bosnian Muslim family after the reunification of Sarajevo —Winter 1996.

Kristen Sands* (ksands@slc.edu)
Mission Statement
The Center for Religion and Media seeks to develop interdisciplinary, cross-cultural knowledge of how religious ideas and practices are shaped and spread through a variety of media. The Center, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, is a collaborative project of the Religious Studies Program; the Center for Media, Culture and History; and the Department of Journalism, providing a space for scholarly endeavor, a stage for public educational events, and an electronic interface with media specialists and the public through its innovative web magazine, The Revealer: A Daily Review of Religion and the Press (www.therevealer.org).

Staff
Faye Ginsburg, Co-Director
Angela Zito, Co-Director
Barbara Abrash, Associate Director
Kristen Meinzer, Program Coordinator
Omri Elisha, Graduate Assistant
Jay Rosen, Publisher, The Revealer
Jeff Sharlet, Editor, The Revealer
Kathryn Joyce, Managing Editor, The Revealer

Advisory Board
Lila Abu-Lughod, Columbia University
Arjun Appadurai, New School University
Orlando Bagwell, Ford Foundation
Stewart M. Hoover, University of Colorado/Boulder
Janet R. Jakobsen, Barnard College
Purnima Mankekar, Stanford University
Birgit Meyer, Free University, Amsterdam; University of Amsterdam
Daniel Miller, University College, London
Michael Renov, University of Southern California
Patricia Spyer, Leiden University
Vincent L. Wimbush, Claremont Graduate University
Robert Wuthnow, Princeton University

Nam June Paik, TV Buddha, 1974, collection of Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam