From the invention of cylinder seals to the digital age, the development of novel media has been integrally bound to key shifts and debates in a wide range of historical and religious contexts. To foreground “religious” media, however, is also to position mediation as a central modality of religious praxis. Engaging religion as mediation evokes hotly contested paradigms in the study of religion—for example, by asking whether religious life is best understood by appeal to its material bases, or whether religious formation is fundamentally a hermeneutic project.

Religion transforms by adopting media, and media transforms by collecting ideas from religious repositories of practices and representations. Shifting from a more narrow view of media as encompassing technological means of the distribution of ideas and values, this conference aimed to explore media understood in a larger sense, as including bodies and material objects. Rather than acting as passive conductors through which information is relayed to individuals and communities unchanged, each particular media shapes and gives new contour to the message. The fact that the processes of mediation are not passive conduits through which two parties communicate a singular idea points toward an element of historicity implicit in the process of mediation. Conceived of in terms of religious imagination, mediation is inherent to the processes of disclosure of religious realities. As such, they can be traced and given another mediated view in terms of the longue durée of a set of mediated practices.

The idea that media, construed broadly across a set of varied and diverse contexts and sources, is intrinsic to religious life, produces the idea that its relevance to the study of religion is itself multiply apt. Since religion and its meaning and application are so varied and multiple, so too its interpretations through the concept of media and mediation will express this underlying and intrinsic plenitude. In this sense the study of media and mediation and the study of religion are perfect bedfellows; the diverse and multiple contexts related to the study of religion and its methods, aims and expectations in relationship to the study of media and mediation and its broad range of applications is reflected in the following roundtable transcript.

The Department for the Study of Religion’s Graduate Student Symposium “Media Fever” was held at the University of Toronto on April 11th and 12th, 2013. The “Media Fever” conference heard papers that addressed the proposition that media, broadly conceived, are intrinsic to religious life. The roundtable participants were also asked to reflect on the potential benefits and areas for further development of approaches that prioritize media and mediation in the study of religion, especially with regards to each participant’s particular research and field. The idea was that by asking each participant to reflect on media and mediation specifically in light of their own research, new light could be shed on what is seen as a recent scholarly turn to mediation. Combined with this participant-specific reflection on the question of mediation, the roundtable collectively focused on two related questions. First, what does it mean to see media, broadly construed, as inherent to religious formation? Second, what issues might such a privileging respond, and what limitations might it yield?
The following is a transcript from that conference’s concluding roundtable discussion, entitled “Mediation’s Promise: Probing the Limits of a Scholarly Turn.” The roundtable participants (in order of appearance): Pamela Klassen, Professor in the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; Matt King, PhD Candidate in the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; Jairan Gahan, PhD Student in the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; Maria Dasios, PhD Candidate in the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; conference keynote speaker, Annalisa Buttici, Marie Curie Fellow at Harvard Divinity School and Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

Pamela Klassen:
Thank you very much, Matt [King] and Maria [Dasios] and anyone else who decided to invite me. It’s very nice to be on the round table at the end of the day. It’s quite an honor to be asked, so thank you very much. I should say Matt, Maria and Amy Fischer, and I, were just at a symposium in Germany on the weekend called “Mediating Religion: Material, Emotional and Ideological practices.” Every one of those words, just in the subtitle, deserves a whole paper, including the “and,” but I’m not even going to go there today. So, in keeping with that idea, if you were only to count the number of conferences of conferences, symposia, workshops, edited volumes on religion and media and mediation in the past few years, it would be enough to convince a disinterested observer that yes, media fever is a real and diagnosable condition. But as we all we know, fevers are not necessarily pathological, fevers can burn with an intensity that clarifies and cures you. But fever can also burn you up, and it can leave you disoriented, delusional, or even dead.

In my short remarks here, I want to argue that the concept of mediation can be an especially helpful one for the study of religion, and, in fact, I think mediation can provide a point of theoretical engagement across a whole range of different approaches to the study of religion. Mediation can helpfully foster critical conversation across the multiple divisions and distinctions that constitute, orient, and sometimes divide our field. All of our sources, both ancient, and modern and in-between, are mediated, somehow. We need to develop methodological and theoretical lenses that allow us see why it matters and for whom that we read papyri, turn the pages of a book, watch a dance, listen to a prayer, or browse a website in the process of doing our research. But, I caution, if mediation is used without sufficient precision, and even without sufficient specificity, in terms of what we might call our “data,” the concept of mediation can produce more disorientation and even delusion than clarity or critique. So, unlike the study of religion for some of us, I would say that in the study of mediation we are all fully participants, and we are all fully observers, and we can’t escape it.

It’s this necessity of mediation for communication that makes it so theoretically and methodologically rich for us, but it’s also its ubiquity that makes it potentially vacant or even numbing. So as Marshall McLuhan so lyrically put it, almost fifty years ago, “Any medium has the power of imposing its assumption on the unwary.” For McLuhan the task of the scholar of media is to resist being “numbed” by the medium, by remembering, “that the spell can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of a melody.” There is a long history in the study of media and mediums and the corresponding concept of communication in both ancient and modern contexts. The study of rhetoric, epistles, epigraphy, even before the digital age mediation was thought about by scholars in philosophy, in art history, in literary studies, in medieval studies, and so on. One of the most interesting historians of communication, the idea of communication, is John Durham Peters. I think we would be particularly disoriented or even delusional, however, if we were to talk about media fever in Toronto without spending some time considering Marshall McLuhan, and his contribution to both stoking and critiquing this fever. I want to explore these two concerns: first, the significance of mediation for the construction of
our data, for how mediation mediates our sources to us and gives us access to our data, and second, mediation’s theoretical uses and both how it can orient us and disorient us at the same time.

So, I am going to look at two approaches very briefly, Canadian made media theory, and then, what I call, the colonial map-story complex. So, Marshall McLuhan was for a long time Professor of English and then founded the Centre for Culture and Technology here at the University of Toronto, and of course he’s most well known for his aphoristic phrase, “The medium is the message,” from 1964. He considered media to be what he called “extensions of man.” So your senses were actually “out there” in the medium, whichever was under consideration. He focused on the importance of what in media theory has been called “medium specificity.” I’m not going to say anything about the gendered complexities of the idea of the “extensions” of man, but one could use both a feminist, Lacanian approach to think about what that means. But, I do think we should talk about the significance of feminist and queer theory for “Media Fever.” Medium specificity insists that it matters what the medium is made of. Media are not simply vehicles for content; instead their very materiality may transforms bodies, social, economic and even geo-physical or environmental relations. This also ties into the idea of “affordances,” that even the materiality of a particular kind of medium, like a book, or a computer screen, the physicality of that medium can only allow you to do so much, but it also shapes your bodily interactions. So, we are sedentary because we sit and read books, and we sit at the computer screen. If we had other lines of work, the tools with which we work would have different affordances for our physicality and our embodiment. I used to be a tree-planter. It’s very different. I am no longer a tree-planter.

McLuhan was clearly able to see that this move toward what he calls an “electric age,” not a digital age, was at once an emotional, social, spiritual, economic and political transformation. So much so that he described technological media as “staples” or “natural resources.” He thought about media as things that transform one’s environment, one’s emotional life, but at an intimate levels, and also structural levels. So media are staples or natural resources exactly as are coal, cotton and oil. So, medium specificity helps us see, especially when we translate into a Marxist’s use of mediation, the medium becomes a commodity in which both human labor and physicality, materiality coincide. Interestingly, more than a decade before McLuhan was coming up with his media theories in Toronto, another individual, Harold Innis was doing a similar thing. They say that McLuhan would have never come up with his theories if it weren’t for Harold Innis, who was also at the University of Toronto, in political economy. In 1950, he writes a book called Empire and Communications and he develops this very sweepingly historical account of how changes in forms of mediation or in medium specificity had political and economic effects, especially as shaped and constrained by monopolies of knowledge. Combine this with Harold Innis’ “staples thesis,” which he is most famous for, that Canada’s political economy was developed on very specific kinds of extractions of resources, like fur, timber, et cetera, his thinking about media really does focus on what we might call medium specificity. He thought that there were time-based media, and there were space-based media. For Innis, the time-based media were ones that were heavier: stones, clay, parchment, which harder to move around, thus leading to different kinds of social structures where you had more hierarchy, but, more decentralization. Whereas space-based media were lighter: paper, papyrus, it could travel faster, and be dispersed more easily, and also led to different kinds of social and governmental effects, including a centralized authority and less-hierarchically structured. All of this is underwritten by their concern for oral versus written cultures, as an aside, as well as notions of “primitive” and “advanced” societies.

In my book, each chapter looks at a very different kind of medium specificity. The third chapter is on maps, a missionary’s map of settlers who come to this land in the Nass
Valley. It’s printed on a printing press that a missionary brought to this territory, Nisga’a territory in British Columbia, he gets there in the late nineteenth century. All kinds of things get printed on this printing press, both maps that reimagine native space, indigenous space, into Christian colonial space. But at the same time the people who are the objects of his missionary labors print on the same printing press this Indian protest against white settlers. There’s a growing body of work on colonial mapping that shows that maps are really interesting kinds of media that at once transform the territory they are describing, so not quite the Jonathan Z. Smith approach, but also are filtered through stories. This is where Marshall McLuhan becomes helpful again because he says you always have to look at one media in relation to other media at the same time. There is never transparent message that a medium is giving you. While problematic in some ways, McLuhan is helpful in other ways for thinking about this thing called medium specificity. Maps are both, what some geographers call, “performative” and they are imbedded with histories and stories.

Media Fever is perhaps akin to malaria: a fever that at times lies dormant, at times burns hot. Perhaps we can step back from this feverish moment to consider two particular ways that mediation constructs our work. First, as a staple in the study of religion that constructs our data and our access to it, enables our “extraction” of meaning. Without books, websites, et cetera, we would be lost. Mediation offers a necessary set of practices shapes by changing modes of technological production, economic structures that shape these modes and education capital or practices that give particular people access to specific modes of mediation. Considering the colonial map, it’s not sufficient to consider it in itself as a transparent medium. We need what I call the map-story complex. We cannot access any medium transparently, or without considering it in what McLuhan called, “constant interplay with other media,” and what Hans Belting calls, “intermediality.” Our work as scholars is to read particular sources making them “medium-ness” visible in light of other media and in light of contrapuntal stories. So the Nisga’a protest was on the same printing press as the settler map. And, second, we need to think about mediation as a theoretical response that we can make use of that periodically attempts to break the spell of what McLuhan called and considered to be the “somnambulism of a media age.” Hot and cold media may not be quite the universal categories that McLuhan clearly hoped, but I would say that in returning to some early media theories, we can see how even mediation can be framed quite differently, depending on one’s theoretical and methodological commitments, whether those be political economy, literary studies, or the study of religion itself.

Matt King:
I am working out the question of materiality and Mongolian Buddhist revival. My own doctoral work actually has nothing to do with contemporary Mongolia but I have spent quite a bit of time there and at one Gobi monastery in particular. This past summer when I was there I just started really thinking about, what would a materialist biography of this place look like as opposed to for instance a story of post-socialist cultural and ethnic revivalism that begins and ends with the subject, with the person, with the individual. What would it look like to begin and end with the material, just as an experiment? I wanted to quickly introduce the site and come to some of the questions that linger for me and hopefully come to them in the conversation.

In the Gobi desert in Mongolia, 350 kilometers south of what is now Ulan Bator, there was a monastery of 800 monks, at least, that in 1937, 14 years into the socialist period of Mongolia, was destroyed. Many of the monks were executed, imprisoned or forcefully returned to lay life. In 2001 and 2002, there are only a few remnants of the old structures in this moonscape of the Gobi. So this is really the start of the materialist biography that I am interested in thinking about recently. The building I visited is not an old monastic building, but rather it is old monastic building materials that were collected and reassembled...
into agricultural co-ops during the socialist period. The biography starts from turning the remnants of this agro-commune back into a monastic space. I am interested in looking not only at the process but how the materiality of that process positions this particular Buddhist revivalist movement in a particular way, one that is staunchly nationalist, very contrarian, and so on.

Throughout this disillusion of monastic space and reassemblage of commune space during the socialist period, one remnant that endured was a hermitage high up in the mountains. In some ways it has acted in the revivalist narrative today as a patient marker of the proper monastic claim on this space itself. While it is not in any way used today, it and an old gravesite associated with Genghis Khan act as in some ways the placeholder of the monastic communities rather controversial claim on the space today.

I want to focus in on one biographical scene, which was the first thing the monks did when they returned to the monastery in 2003. So, the monks returned around a charismatic abbot who returned to claim the site in 2003. Their arrival to the ruins of this monastery was marked by first setting up some tents on the site, repairing some of the old buildings so that they could function as a kitchen, and then, very interestingly, and I believe tellingly, one of the first material interventions into the site was the construction of a circumambulatory path, which is one of the main devotional practices of inner-Asian Buddhism. The laity circumambulates monastic space and holy objects and so on. This is the first thing they turned their attention to. It was marked out with pebbles and rocks around the perimeter of the monastery. The work of the anthropologist Charlene Mackley at Labrang monastery at Xiahe, which is a Tibetan cultural region in the PRC, has shown just how important the often overlooked circumambulatory path can be in contemporary inner Asian Buddhism. The laity circumambulates monastic space and holy objects and so on. This is the first thing they turned their attention to. It was marked out with pebbles and rocks around the perimeter of the monastery. The work of the anthropologist Charlene Mackley at Labrang monastery at Xiahe, which is a Tibetan cultural region in the PRC, has shown just how important the often overlooked circumambulatory path can be in contemporary inner Asian Buddhism. The laity circumambulates monastic space and holy objects and so on. This is the first thing they turned their attention to. It was marked out with pebbles and rocks around the perimeter of the monastery. The work of the anthropologist Charlene Mackley at Labrang monastery at Xiahe, which is a Tibetan cultural region in the PRC, has shown just how important the often overlooked circumambulatory path can be in contemporary inner Asian Buddhism.

In addition, once this space, new points of access, and boundaries were created, new gazes toward centers and peripheries of power various temples started emerging. In the larger paper I spend some time looking at just the tiles themselves, which seem innocuous enough, but these Qing era tiles reference an imperial era that seventy years of socialist propaganda against the long Manchu subjugation of Mongolia really focused on. So, these tiles and their choice to import them at great cost from China, to redecorate and re-adorn the temple begins to create and mark the contrarian position of this monastic community. One other thing that is quite interesting is when the socialist forces came and began violently de-assembling the monastery in a pattern that was repeated across Mongolia, the monks buried a lot of material affects. They buried statues, important clothing, relics and so on below the sands, and when the monks came back in 2003, this woman was a little girl as a nun in 1937, she remembered the monks had buried all of these objects. These were unearthed and in the first five years of the monastic reestablishment, the objects, including religious ones but also objects like teakettles and spoons that had belonged to the previous community, were positioned in the most privileged position in the new monastery. They became the markers that organized and in some ways acted to create the monastic claim on this space again. Soon enough in reaction to strong missionizing in Mongolia, this monastery started organizing the equivalent of a “Bible camp,” a Buddhist summer camp where the urban kids were brought down to the monastery and interestingly they didn’t really learn how to pray, or studying theology or philosophy, they were being re-
acquainted with the materiality of what was being positioned as the materiality of the pre-existing monastic community. They were introduced to the objects, to the spaces, to the way of moving through the topography, and that was enough to inscribe into them, the ones that I spoke to, new divisions between the laity and the monastics, their place as patrons of a monastic community, for a generation that has absolutely no association with those sorts of social forms just until the last few years.

The arch of what I am interested in thinking about goes from the first five years where the affects of the previous monastery are essentially put on display to make a claim on this space, to the last five years, where a very different mediation of the materiality of this space has been undertaken. There is this new temple complex that they began building just three years ago and it was built at great cost, several million dollars and in effect what this has been doing is referencing sort of a way of organizing space, of access, of control to the material effects of this monastic space that are based more around the model of a museum, than a monastery. What this means is it reorganizes the divisions between the laity and the monastics in very different ways than when they first arrived and carved that circumambulatory path around the monastery. There are lots of individual details, for instance where the stones come from, they are from this contested sacred space nearby, but the narrative arch of this material biography of this big complex is now near completion when I was here last summer is that all of the sacred objects that in the first five years were put onto display as the prime sacred objects and the center of the ritual spaces are now, I’ve learned, going into the basement of this monastery. What that means is that they’re going into a place that has no public access. It’s centered completely around the authority of the abbot and it essentially ruptures profoundly the sorts of monastic-lay relations that earlier had been the proposition of this monastery. Because of this, half the monastic population has left in the middle of the night, running off to cars of brothers and cousins that are parked on the hill. The laity hardly shows up for big ceremonies any more, and the monks that are left are essentially being turned into ticket sellers and so on. So this effectively marks this interesting material biography of things emerging from the earth, of organizing particular points of access around a monastic space, and are now being put back into the earth to interesting effect.

So all of this brings me to think about the main question, foregrounding material culture in the case of Mongolian Buddhist revival is of course not to deny Mongol’s their agency, but rather it is to develop an analytical framework where the multiplicity of that agency can be better understood. As we know, this leads us more productively to performance, ritual, discourse, authority and in the end, the manifold subjects formed by the perilous participation frameworks that people in this area of study gloss very unproblematically as the “post-socialist Mongolian cultural revival.” I am interested in asking as this project develops, how are objects a necessary part of the agency being promoted in the post-socialist period. How do objects expand or even bring into existence the post-socialist Mongolian subjects that we’ve been talking about? Even more radically, and asking along with Webb Keane, how can we think of the objects which mediate the cultural revival in Mongolia today independently of human agency? In that round-about way, come to better understand the multiple, contested ways, that agency, subjectivity and meaning is being constructed in this complex dialectic with essentially a bunch of new stuff on the landscape in the post-socialist period. How far in this conversation around media and mediation are we willing to extend it a particular sort of agency independent of the human, of the subject, in this dialectic that we seem to be so interested in?

**Jairan Gahan:**

When I was asked to participate in this panel by my dear friend Maria [Dasios], I told her that I work on the relation between religion, urban space, and morality. I also told her that I have never thought about the relation between the three in terms of mediation. However, she was
too kind and suggested that I take this challenge and try to rethink the relation between urban space and religion in a methodological approach, which addresses mediation. Hence what follows is an attempt to think about mediation in urban space.

During these two years that I have lived here, I noticed streets in Toronto are named after important people and places in the history of Canada. Tehran’s somewhat similarly are named after ideals, be it places, people, or abstract ideas. Driving a car in Tehran one can shift from Inghilab street (revolution) to Jumhoori (republic), then turn to Khomeini street and gear the car all the way towards Azadi square (freedom). At nights however, the map of the city changes. It is suddenly not so safe anymore to walk on Inghilab (revolution) street. And Freedom square is jammed with wanderers from smaller cities finding a place to sleep on the green area around the statue of freedom. During the Ramadan, the map of the city transforms to radiating points of Baraka (blessing). Close to Iftar time, the inhabitants of the city get ready to line up before the food stands in their favorite mosques, not only to have a free meal, but also to receive the blessing of that meal. It seems then that the urban site of Tehran emblematic of moral, political, and religious concerns, mediates political, and religious imaginary. My project specifically puts prostitution as a site, and a moral category at the center of historical enquiry to engage with the shifts in the relation between public space, state, and Islam from before to after the revolution.

In January 31, 1979, twelve days before the grand return of Khomeini to Tehran, anonymous revolutionaries raged to the streets and burned down the red light district in Tehran, first constructed in 1920s during the Pahlavi period. The message was clear: in Khomeini’s Islamic Iran, there will be no place for prostitution. In the following six months, as the Islamic Republic regime was consolidating, the red light district was evacuated, its inhabitants scattered on the surface of Tehran.

In what follows, just to give you a sense of how differently public space becomes articulable, I will briefly trace the construction of the prostitute in two discursive moments: in early 20th century, when the secular regime of Pahlavi erected walls around the red light district in Tehran, regulating prostitution, and in late 20th century, in the early stages of the Islamic Republic, when the red light district was bulldozed. In doing so I look at the ways in which a particular form of Islam is situated and understood in relation to these two different spatially informed modes of power: the regulating and the eliminating, the productive and the reductive. The regulating force is understood to work from within (subjects, bodies, spaces) whereas the eliminating force works from outside, one cleans whereas the other wipes out. That is not to say one is less violent, or more violent.

Before Pahlavi’s reign following the emergence of over-populated places such as military camps, where contagious diseases spread out and became epidemic, the government started to plan for public health programs, through the establishment of tight places such as quarantine, and control of the traffic at the borders. Such measures enabled the government to ensure the hygiene of the city. This new spatial arrangement of the public, however allowed for micro-surveillance techniques, which allowed for imposition of particular conduct on particular individuals. Unifying the dress code of Iranians in 1934 during the first Pahlavi is among examples of the way in which such micro-techniques functioned. This newly ordered public space was articulated in terms of germs, microbes, and Cholera. The will to clean, and compartmentalize, the will to reform and plan congenital to the ethos of modernity in Iran, produced a disciplined public. Morality in this scenario became particularly forceful in moving, arranging, and making certain visibilities in the cityscape. Prostitution in this medico-moral discourse was made visible as the ultimate ill of the society, as that which the clean, healthy citizen was defined against. Prostitution, in other words became “the plague of modernity.” In 1920s the nascent Pahlavi government, established a red light district to confine and maintain prostitutes. It then
established a special police force to prevent prostitutes from leaking back into the city. In 1953 it erected walls around the area and new regulations were put in place for prostitutes to be registered and carrying cards indicating their medical condition. Microbes of the society were then defined, identified, and dumped at one area to be cured and cleansed properly.

This medico-moral discourse however did not merely move people and bodies. Rather, it rearranged a particular Islam as an internal reformist mechanism. Islamic forces treated bodies and spaces as empty vessels, which had to be filled with religion in order to be cured. Further they constantly posited Islam as an internal force against the exteriority of the state. For instance the Society of Islamic Education in Isfahan in reaction to the negligence of the state towards religious practices stated:

The heads of the government regulates the body of people whereas the Ulama are in charge of the soul. Be wary of disjointing the soul from the body resulting in the death of the nation.” The Islamic soul then was understood as vaccinating Muslims against the plague of modernity, i.e., prostitution.

After the revolution, as I tried to show in the beginning of this presentation, the cityscape came to be articulated through a revolutionary discourse. This discourse gives no place of articulation to prostitution. Bulldozing red light districts, hanging prostitutes, eliminating the place of “immorality” has at once forced and enabled the Islamic regime to deny prostitution altogether. This revolutionary discourse refuses to recognize what it associates with “immorality.” As and unintended consequence, sex workers proliferating on the surface of the city, today are hyper-visible without entering the realm of articulation.

There is no time to discuss the situation after the revolution. However, let me just say that the very visible presence of sex workers leaves proliferating traces in the state discourse. This situation might be significant for this panel because it has forced me to think about the relation between the register of concrete, discursive, and transcendent. It made me think of the possibility of one register mediating between the other two. So, for example, is it discourse which mediates the cityscape, is it the cityscape which mediates revolutionary discourse, is it religion which mediates a medico-moral discourse, or is it the medico-moral discourse that mediates the materiality of plague or of disease? Or is it the formation of these tight spaces, which were mediated through a medico-moral discourse?

I find the turn from technology mediation to social mediation a helpful one. Because it allows us to ground these registers, the concrete, discursive, and transcendent, in their very specific historical complexity where they constantly spill over and reshape one another. Further thinking about mediation as an ongoing multidirectional process where these registers are constantly being redefined is a helpful practice for my project.

Maria Dasios:

I have to thank all of my fellow panelists and everyone for being here today. By way of introduction, when we started putting the conference together at the beginning of the year, I had the idea that I wanted it to be on mediation, because this interest was bred in me by another conference years back that Pamela [Klassen] also took me along to in Germany where we heard Birgit Meyers speak on aesthetic formation. I was struck by it because I thought she was essentially talking about Byzantine icons but just in a more contemporary context. It seemed to me so full of promise that contemporary theorists would be treating in very similar terms issues that I thought connected to the studies of religion in Antiquity and Late Antiquity that I was doing. I have to admit that after a certain point I started to worry what the effect of then staging a conference to explore your own interests would be, if it would be to create a sort of feedback loop. I have to say I don’t think that’s what’s happened, I think we have look at a lot of different contexts, as well as technological media and that has been good, because that is
what I’ve been steering away from in my own work.

I think what has become really clear to me in hearing all of us talk about mediation and especially heeding Pamela [Klassen]’s warning recently about using mediation imprecisely it’s become really clear that it’s not a category that is obviously intrinsic. It has been posed in this turn as something that is intrinsic to religion or religiosity, but in itself it needs to be construed. It strikes me that the way we are all deploying mediation is giving due attention to the specificity of our various contexts and I think that this has reminded me of *Symposia*, the Journal for the Department for the Study of Religion here at the University of Toronto. This year’s topic was “Stories We Tell,” [*Symposia* Vol 5 (2013)] and it’s clear how that’s related to mediation. The two hinge on this topic of construal. It’s been really interesting to hear yesterday when we had Dr. [Simon] Coleman and Dr. [Annalisa] Buttici give a history of use of intellectual history or history of scholarship that has resulted in this kind of turn to mediation, part of the material turn. Every time someone rehearses one of these histories it’s slightly different, there is always a different figure that people are responded to. So when Birgit Meyer tells the story she is rehabilitating an Aristotelian understanding of aesthetics counter to a Kantian sort of ideal that doesn’t have anything to do with the embodied self or the senses, and so Kant is her pivot that she positions herself against. Monique Scheer when we were in Tübingen placed Hegel in the same position. Yesterday we heard Dr. Buttici talk about Weber and she gave him due acknowledgment for seeing the importance of mediation and media in the construction of religious selves but thought he got his hierarchies wrong.

When we are deploying the term and the concept, mediation, in our own work, the story we tell why we’ve come to that deployment is very important. If we are keeping anything visible, we should keep this visible as scholars. For myself, I have been interested in the question of how these contemporary theories of mediation especially understood, as Jairan [Gahan] articulated it, not understanding mediation more narrowly as we tend to do in the twentieth century to relate to technology overall, but how we can understand it as processes of social formation. Especially this idea of forms, sensational forms that grow in a social, cultural, physical, and embodied context, which then transform over time and are contested, leading to a kind of battle then ensues over the construction of the right kind of forms of producing a religious subjectivity. I think it’s particularly fruitful to apply this to the context I am looking at which is Christianity in Late Antiquity, where you have Christianity developing alongside “pagan” traditions, alongside Jews, as well as other cultural and social influences being worked out and negotiated. It’s also particularly useful to look at this in relation to the material turn that scholars have found in Late Antiquity around the fourth century. Usually the story goes, with Constantine’s conversion, you have the growth of the Christian church and authority bestowed upon it. It is no longer this sort of marginalized religion, obviously this is very broad strokes and doesn’t happen over night, but you have this proliferation of material practices and worldly things that Christians are now using to access the divine and are becoming viable means of accessing the divine. This extends from pilgrimage practices, to the veneration of martyr’s relics, to the localization of power in holy men and women, and ascetics, to then the localization of icons and the debates about these as authoritative forms or not.

In terms of looking at processes of aesthetic formation, I think Late Antiquity spilling into Byzantium is a great place to do it. You have very clearly these forms that you can trace in different cultural contexts and then you have discernable clashes over them. So this is one way that I see this move from contemporary theories to the study of Antiquity working. I do have some reservations: I wonder about using a sort of rehabilitation of Aristotle to look at ancient works who are working much closer to the Aristotelian stuff that is in the water. What are the valences of this? I also have reservation about the tendency of materiality now that it’s
become the focus of so much attention to become this counter to something like “belief” or other concepts that we have attempted to exorcise from our vocabulary of religion. I wonder about this professed transparency of material media or objects, if it’s insisted upon too much.

We can close about thinking of our particular construal of media and not only how we are deploying them as scholars, but how they are being deployed, in many different ways, in each of the specific contexts that we are looking at that can help counter some of the dangers of imprecision that we spoke about.

Annalisa Buttici:
I would like to share some thoughts and the questions that will I take with me. Today we talked about media in different forms: media and transubstantiation, media and communication, and media and manipulation, as well. In many of the papers today I heard a certain word resonating more and more like domination and power, and I thought that many of us are relying on these terms. We met Foucault so many times today, and I’m wondering why? Why are we so concerned about power, and why, at the end, we ended up being so disappointed by what we found. None of the paper could really state, we found in the media a sort of redemption of the margin. So, I’m wondering, what we are really looking at when we study media and when we are so attracted by Foucault. Even the life trajectory of Foucault, Foucault himself was kind of disappointed by what he was saying and what he was seeing in what happened in France for instance after the social revolution of 1968. Even Foucault got a very interesting book from one of his friends, Baudrillard when he said Forget Foucault. Now, I don’t want to forget Foucault, I want to use Foucault, and I’m really interested in focusing on what has been found extremely fascinating what Foucault called “counter-conduct,” or what de Certeau called “the tactics of the weak” or even what Gramsci was saying about the “religions of the subaltern.” As I was saying yesterday night, I am very interested in finding how media and mediation can be incorporated into strategies of resistance or into strategies of counteracting power. I want to hope to really solidify this understanding of the power and the counter-power. However, as Maria [Dasios] was saying and as Pamela [Klassen] was warning us, I don’t think that we can read everything through media and mediation. There are certain things, as Maria [Dasios] was saying, that we still have to come to terms with the beliefs, with the faith. How can you relate media with faith, with the interior, with the immaterial, the ineffable, the religious self, for instance? I think that here [Dr.] Ruth Marshall can say much more about it. How do you think media and mediation can help us to look at the religious self? Is this really possible?

Further, fascination with space, cyber space, symbolic space, the map as the strategy of strategizing the power, as well as space as the land, the monastery, the square, the street. I think it is very important to consider the space, because religion is mediated, is embodied, but it is also emplaced. Many times, the place is important, because it is a political matter. In Jairan [Gahan]’s case, I see the space as a place of negotiation of power at work and it’s interesting to see how the space can be incorporated in the creative move of the people. For Matt [King]’s topic to consider object as agency, and the question, can we really consider this to be the case, I think this is the question we have been calling and calling on Foucault: can the materiality of religion be considered an agency? Can the space be considered an agent; can the media be considered an agent? Further, do we have any impossible mediation? Can we really see impossible mediation or is it possible to mediate everything? I will stop here, and I hope that we will find some of the answers and that we will go home with some interesting idea of reaching, revising, revitalizing our work with the discussion we have had today and yesterday.