Abstract:

Many faiths practice “testimony”, a narrative form which both asserts individual religious identity and links the individual to the group by publicly committing the individual to the terms of membership in the ritual community. By analyzing testimony narratives, the field of Communication studies (however contested or ill-defined its terrain) is uniquely situated to address pressing questions about the processes underlying religious identity formation: indeed, perhaps one of the most compelling ways to understand religion is as an identity construct derived through the very act of communicating the self. In this paper, I recount my own experience as audience for a highly ritualized form of Mormon testimony: the missionary discussions. I contend that missionary narratives, formalized in these discussions, function as boundary markers for the organization while simultaneously committing individual missionaries to the group’s formative myths. As the missionaries communicate their testimonies, they give body to the Joseph Smith experience.