

Robert A. Orsi. *History and Presence*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 384 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04789-1.

Reviewed by Kristy Nabhan-Warren, Adam Park (), Michael Pasquier ()

Published on H-AmRel (November, 2016)

Commissioned by Michael Graziano (University of Northern Iowa)

Review Editor's Note: *Modern ideas about religion, Robert A. Orsi argues in History and Presence, developed alongside sixteenth-century theological debates concerning the real presence of the gods. Sifting through three decades of research on American religion, Orsi asks readers to consider what a theory of "presence" might contribute to our understanding of history and religion in the modern world. As Michael Pasquier observes in his review, History and Presence is written with the assumption that "there must be a better way to respect the reality of the supernatural for those who believe in the supernatural." The resulting exploration of theoretical and historiographical alternatives takes readers through a series of beautifully written and emotionally charged case studies. There are, as Adam Park notes in his review, "no opiates here." For Kristy Nabhan-Warren, History and Presence is "at once a beautiful and brutal book."*

While Orsi is rightly known for his work on American Catholicism (The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 [1985] and Thank You, St. Jude Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes [1998]), his newest book is a reminder that his scholarship extends to the study of religion in America (Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape [1999]), as well as to issues

of theory and method in the study of religion more generally (Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them [2006]). As our reviewers note, scholars of each will find much to appreciate in History and Presence.

Orsi is the first holder of the Grace Craddock Nagle Chair in Catholic Studies at Northwestern University. History and Presence is reviewed here by Kristy Nabhan-Warren (University of Iowa), Michael Pasquier (Louisiana State University), and Adam Park (Florida State University).

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## **Release the Gods! — by Adam Park**

Readers of Robert A. Orsi's previous work will recognize *History and Presence* as the culmination of over three decades of deep reflection on the place of the religion scholar and the complexities of religious subjects. This book should not be taken lightly. Readers of Orsi's previous work will also recognize the equal parts of personal reflection, historical contextualization, and theoretical incitation. This book should have broad appeal.

Extra, additional, further, and beyond are key notions as the subject of this work is the "more" of Catholic piety. Orsi takes us through several deeply thoughtful and beautifully detailed vignettes. Ziploc bags of sacred dirt, eBay holy

cards, the living dead, profane comic book burnings, inexplicable apparitions of Casey Kasem, and “abundant evils” of clerical sexual abuse—the “excesses” of Catholic devotionism, Orsi argues—are everywhere. Opposite Protestantism, there is something uniquely *else* to Catholicism that he highlights. Catholics, so it goes, find enchanted “presence” within (and contrary to) a conceptual environment defined and dominated by a Protestant-informed sense of disenchanting “absence.” Catholics, to borrow a phrase from Bruno Latour, “have never been modern.” Contrary Enlightenment and empiricism, theirs is a world resplendent with extra-human agencies.

Here is the gist of this tale of ongoing Catholic “presence” to spite modern Protestant “absence.” Orsi conceptually frames this assertion around sixteenth-century European discussions of the Eucharist. Here, he claims, is the beginning of it all. He then historically situates this point in mid-twentieth through early twenty-first-century America through a series of well-written case studies. The larger focus, however, is a theoretical one, a historiographical puzzle of sorts. This gulf between Catholic presence and Protestant absence operates as one of the “normative categories of modernity,” Orsi reports, one that “runs through the center of Western culture and through all the modern world” (pp. 9, 45). For Orsi, this is a problem. This is *the* problem.

As scholars, as humans, this disenchanting way of viewing the world has eclipsed our capacity to understand, and even limited our experiences. It is ideological colonialism wreaking havoc, so it goes. Furthermore, insofar as absence is a Protestant-made and Protestant-informed postulate, it is a religious position. Worst of all, this religious position—Protestant absence/modernity—is wrong. “I am inclined to believe,” he says, that “presence is the norm of human existence” and “absence is an authoritative imposition” (p. 6). For correction, Orsi takes us to the “outer limit of comprehension and communication” and propos-

es that we “let the gods out of their assigned places” so that we might “approach history and religion through a matrix of presence” (pp. 102, 251). *History and Presence* reads as a kind of liberation theology, one that seeks to rid the world of modern Protestant shackles. What we need is “an empiricism of the visible and the invisible real” (p. 65). He states: “whether everyone sees them or not, the gods are there” (p. 250).

So, what are the benefits of jettisoning our classical notions of logic, our *a priori* categories of space and time, our trust in the reductive, our conventional science? For Orsi, we get to better behold the “abundant events” that so intimately mark the lives of our religious subjects. But while Orsi takes great care to convey the intimacies of religious life (as he always has), this is not a happy book. Religion “is less about the making of meaning than about the creation of scar tissue,” he writes (p. 108). No opiates here. Human pain, exploitation, doubt, struggle, abandonment, suffering, gore, and death define the religion therein. In this, Orsi stands beside his religious subjects, scared, ambivalent, sad. No joyous numinous. No ecstasy. There is something strikingly mundane about religion in “everyday lives” for Orsi. But there is also something strikingly *more* when “the transcendent breaks into time” (p. 51). Lizzie’s Ziploc bag of sacred dirt that she carries to the hospital to aid in her bone marrow transplant serves as a striking juxtaposition. So quotidian. But so rich with social and otherworldly implication. It was certainly out of place in the hospital, in the “medically purified space” (p. 93). It was certainly a reminder of a different kind of empiricism at work—“devotional materiality,” in Orsi’s words (p. 197). Though the bag of dirt wasn’t just a bag of dirt, it wasn’t a lifesaver either. This is not a book about religious people getting what they want. Nor is it a book about religious people getting relief from their all-too-human circumstances. But perhaps therein lies the strange beauty of this work.

*History and Presence* should provoke some fine discussion around graduate seminar tables. It is worth a read. However, here is the methodological catch. For Orsi, we must see the sacred in order to analyze it. We, as scholars, must first accept the reality of the sacred in order to fathom the depths of our religious subjects. We must begin from a “postulate of presence” (p. 65). That is the historiographical and theoretical push, anyway. To this, perhaps, it is best said: “I believe; help thou my unbelief.” But then again, doubt is part of the religion, the scar tissue that Orsi recognizes.

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Beautiful, Breathtaking, and Brutal: *History and Presence* — by Kristy Nabhan-Warren

Robert A. Orsi has long established himself as a thought leader in religious studies and the related disciplines of anthropology, American studies, and history. His books, articles, and essays are required readings in many undergraduate and graduate classes and his ideas continue to inspire and provoke us to dig more deeply into the study of religion. Orsi’s many published works, from the iconic *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985) to the more recent *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (2005), ask us as readers and scholars to take religious people and their work seriously. We are asked to think long and hard about how people live and define religion and about what our role is as scholars of religion. Orsi’s newest book continues his commitment to investigate how people make and live religion. *History and Presence* is Orsi’s most recent installment of pushing the many boundaries that we have created and maintained within our various disciplines. *History and Presence* is a breathtaking book that draws us in to the lived religious worlds of Orsi’s interlocutors, both living and dead. It is an ambitious book that challenges us, cajoles us, and forces us to think and rethink what we thought we knew about religion and about how to study and write about religion.

History and Presence is at once a beautiful and brutal book. By beautiful I mean that it is quintessentially Orsi, a lovingly and painstakingly crafted work of scholarship that is a literary art form. From the opening story of Orsi’s late mother and her love of the Eucharist as the life-sustaining and affirming presence of Christ, we as readers are drawn into the study of religion that takes people seriously: people as creators of knowledge, as capable of constructing theory, and as not dependent on us as scholars to make meaning for them. This is a book that is meant to be savored and read as a meditation on life and the reality that many, many people live with and among sacred/holy/special beings in the temporal realm. The study of religion, as Orsi asserts, “is or ought to be the study of what human beings do, for, and against the gods really present—using ‘gods’ as a synecdoche for all the special suprahuman beings with whom humans have been in relationship in different times and places—and what the gods really present do with, to, for, and against humans” (p. 4).

History and Presence is genre bending as it uses a blend of history and ethnography to tell a story of how religion is lived by people and how scholars can be blinded by the theoretical and historical optics of the academy. This is a book that is not either history or anthropology; it is both. It is a new, hybrid way of studying and writing about religion. If indeed art imitates life, aren’t most human beings hybrids in what we believe, think, do? So too should our theories and approaches to writing be hybridized, syncretic in style and form. Orsi exposes the multiple ways the modern academic study of religion, crafted by Protestant scholars who were inheritors of Reformation as well as Enlightenment-infused thought, has misrepresented religion and the people who make it. Modern theories of religion, according to Orsi, “were written over accounts of the gods really present, submerging them in a theoretical underworld, while on the surface the gods were reborn as symbols, signs, metaphors, functions, and ab-

stractions" (p. 4). In other words, modern critical theory has stripped much of the life out of religion and it is the task of scholars of religion today to make this right. Orsi takes Protestantism and its discontents with Catholic corporeality, sensuality, and teleology to task and forces today's scholars of religion to examine how Catholics and other "others" were and are viewed with an intensive hermeneutic of suspicion by scholars who viewed their "abundant events" within a gaze of a "taxonomic swirl of identification" that perpetuated the othering of non-Protestants (p. 37). And we are told that "scholars in many different fields may be just as intolerant of whatever is in excess of the social as religious reformers are" (p. 59).

Orsi demonstrates just how ethnography and ethnographic thinking complements history as much as history complements ethnography. We are able to see, to be witnesses to the benefits of a cross-disciplinary, mixed methodological approach to researching and writing about religion. In *History and Presence* we are introduced to a way of thinking about the past and the present in a way that refuses to separate time, space, and experience, for today's believers are recent tellers of ancient stories about old gods and spirits. Words flow off the pages as the reader encounters the "abundant history" of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marian visionaries and apparition sites, World War II-era housewives, and modern cancer victims and survivors. We are shown how these women and men experienced the transcendent breaking into time, over and over again. We turn to them as makers of meaning and reality.

By brutal I mean that this book has the effect of making the reader feel the pain, agony, and violation of those who have had their bodies and souls violated by pedophile priests (see chapter 7, "Events of Abundant Evil"). Midway through chapter 7, I had to put the book down as I wept, reading about the sexual abuse and violence inflicted on the bodies of children by pedophile priests. The anguish and tears of Anna, Monica,

Natalie, and Frank, all survivors, leap out at us from the page, forcing us to encounter their real pain. Real anguish, real violence. Their pain and suffering is not symbolic, it is real and it is horrific. By forcing us to wrestle with the violence and aftereffects on Catholic children's bodies, minds, and souls, Orsi is asking us to rethink the study of religion and how we go about theorizing religion. We must delve into the grittiness of pain and suffering as much as we do the beautiful and transcendent in order to grasp people's lived religio-spiritualities.

History and Presence is a genre-defying, heartbreaking, beautiful book. I recommend it for any graduate seminar taught in the humanities today and will be assigning it in my spring graduate seminar Writing Religion, Writing Culture.

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#### **Un-writing the History of Catholicism in America** — by Michael Pasquier

The American Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor believed in the "real presence" of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. When the ex-Catholic writer Mary McCarthy challenged her belief by calling the transubstantiated host a mere symbol, O'Connor responded, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." This was the only defense she could muster in the moment. But upon further reflection, O'Connor "realize[d] now that this is all I ever will be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence to me" (p. 45). For O'Connor, sound and reasoned arguments about the Eucharist fell short of the power of storytelling to reveal the reality of Jesus's supernatural presence in a piece of bread. "I share O'Connor's intuition," Orsi writes in *History and Presence*, arguing that modern theories of religion do not include a "theoretical language for real presences" (pp. 46, 47). Sometimes, according to Orsi, it is better to show the reality of the supernatural through stories.

*History and Presence* is a continuation, and in some ways a culmination, of Orsi's lifelong rela-

tionship with the Catholicism of his childhood and the academic profession of his adulthood. Part history, part theory, part memory, *History and Presence* calls for an acknowledgment of the presence of supernatural figures in the realities of human life. Key to this argument is Orsi's take on the history of the "real presence" of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. According to Orsi, the theological and political revolution of the Protestant Reformation produced an "absolute division between Catholics and Protestants" over the Eucharist and in "the way Catholics lived with the supernatural" (pp. 9, 15). The resulting equation "Catholics = presence, Protestants = absence" extended to the creation of other "normative categories of modernity," to include modern definitions of religion that deal in symbols and discount the "supernatural really real" (pp. 30, 9, 93). For Orsi, religious experiences of the supernatural are not merely historical and cultural constructions to be explained away. Rather, they are real encounters with the sacred that require "a kind of un-writing, to allow what is denied to break through" (p. 65).

*History and Presence* is Orsi's attempt at un-writing the history of American Catholicism. It is a model for how to replace the functionalism of "modern intellectual orthodoxy" with "a messier, less predictable, and perhaps less recognizable past" that accounts for "a matrix of presence" (pp. 58, 251). Orsi focuses on what he calls "abundant events" for insight into "the real presence of the supernatural relationship with humans" (p. 66). Abundant events represent moments when the transcendent breaks into time, such as the intersubjectivity surrounding cults of the Virgin Mary. Orsi insists that historians do not (or should not) stand outside the experiences of the "believers" (p. 71), because encounters with the past can be akin to those of devotees to a saint or any other supernatural figure.

After making the case for writing "abundant history," Orsi offers five case studies that explore the convergences of humans, gods, and historians

in the course of everyday life. He begins with several accounts of Catholic women in times of personal crisis who encounter the presence of the supernatural at the site of El Santuario de Chimayo and in the images of Our Lady of Pompeii and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The pain and suffering of these women will remind readers of Orsi's argument in *Thank You, Saint Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (1996). Next is a discussion of the Catholic consumption (sometimes literally) of presence found in print media, such as comic books, holy cards, coloring books, popular magazines, and other devotional literature. The Catholic imaginary's antimodern impulse to invest presence in printed material extends to Catholic conceptions of the living and the dead in heaven and on earth. Catholic children are front and center in most of these cases, with special consideration given to adult memories of childhood in times of trauma. Most traumatic of all were experiences of sexual abuse by priests, which produced what Orsi calls "events of abundant evil" (p. 215). "The holy," Orsi writes, "proved to be the best hiding place for evil" (p. 219).

I had to stop reading Orsi's chapter on the sexual abuse of children several times. He made it hurt to read. The pain of Catholicism is felt throughout the book. There's Lizzie, a woman dying from leukemia who clings to a Ziploc bag of holy dirt for consolation. And Natalie, sexually abused by her stepfather (she called him "the ugly gorilla"), who remembers telling a priest in confession about the crime, but "there was nothing even he could do" (p. 89). And Lydia, who recalls her mother eating a paper piece of holy card, the head of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to be exact, as she lay dying after giving birth to her tenth child. There's a mother who invites Orsi and some friends to visit the bedroom of her deceased son, where they peer into a miraculous picture that allows visitors to see those who are dead, loved, but not gone. There's a scene from Orsi's childhood, the playground of a Catholic school in the Bronx, "a vicious place" (p. 201), where a group of bullies

throw a boy to the ground and piss all over him. And then there are the “predator priests,” the men who stood just “one degree of separation from God” as they hurt the children of God (pp. 217, 216).

In a 1987 review of Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem* (1985), the historian Jay Dolan made the following compliment and critique: “As an ethnographer and interpreter of Italian culture, Orsi is outstanding; as a historian he needs to acquire more of a feel for change and the context in which it takes place.”[1] Most historians would say the same about *History and Presence*. Orsi makes chronological leaps from the sixteenth century to today with confidence and ease. He does so because of his certainty that “presence/absence is the pivot around which” Catholics and Protestants have differentiated themselves in the modern world (p. 30). Orsi’s ethnographic portrayals of Catholic experiences of presence are deeply evocative and intimate. His characterizations of intersubjective relationships between humans and gods read like creative nonfiction, with Orsi playing a personal role in the production, interpretation, and dissemination of presence. No wonder Orsi describes *History and Presence* as “a work of history as theory and theory as history” (p. 250).

Those who are familiar with Orsi’s scholarship will not be surprised by much of what they read in *History and Presence*. Orsi prioritizes devotional forms of Catholicism practiced by lay children and women, especially when those practices involve painful and traumatic moments in life. Catholic men receive almost no attention, except in cases where priests brutalize children or Orsi is talking about himself. Orsi’s basic argument for “presence” appeared in his previous book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (2005) and in an article in *The American Scholar*, while his take on “abundant history” was

profiled in an issue of *Historically Speaking*. [2] With his critique of modern theories of religion—that they do not account for the real presence of the supernatural, that they have been “Protestantized”—Orsi demands that scholars put the gods back into history, that they “Catholicize” the way they do history. It will be interesting to see how scholars put Orsi’s proclamation into practice. If Protestantism is a religion of absence, then the study of Protestantism seems off limits to a presence-oriented theory of religion. And if presence-oriented Catholicism is the only authentic form of Catholicism, then modern Catholics, with their aversion to experiences of presence, fall outside the parameters of Orsi’s narrow understanding of Catholicism and normative definition of religion. Nonetheless, there is something convincing about Orsi’s intuition, which he shares with O’Connor, that there must be a better way to respect the reality of the supernatural for those who believe in the supernatural. Good storytelling is Orsi’s answer, the kind of storytelling that punches at the gut and messes with the head. Robert Orsi is the Flannery O’Connor of the field of religious studies.

#### Notes

[1]. Jay Dolan, “Review: The New Religious History,” *Reviews in American History* 15, no. 3 (1987): 449–454.

[2]. Robert Orsi, “When 2+2=5,” *The American Scholar* (Spring 2007): 34–43; and Robert Orsi, “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity,” *Historically Speaking* (September/October 2008): 12–16.

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**Citation:** Kristy Nabhan-Warren, Adam Park, Michael Pasquier. Review of Orsi, Robert A. *History and Presence*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48316>



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