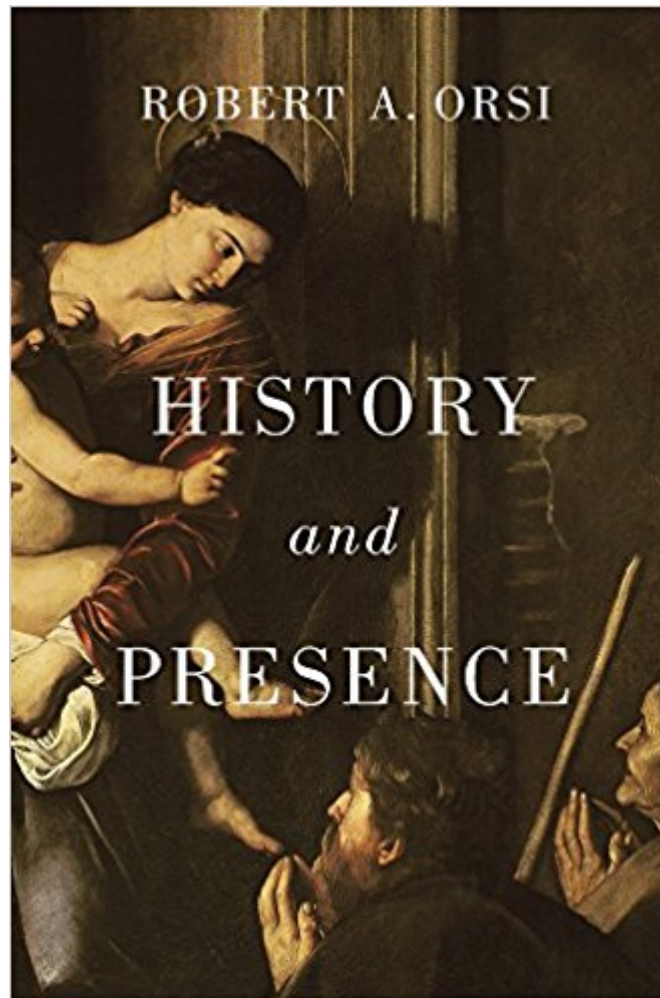




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# History And Presence



## Synopsis

Beginning with metaphysical debates in the sixteenth century over the nature of Christ's presence in the host, the distinguished historian and scholar of religion Robert Orsi imagines an alternative to the future of religion that early moderns proclaimed was inevitable. The question of a "real presence" – the Catholic doctrine of the literal, physical, embodied presence of Christ in the host – coincided with early modern global conquest and commerce and shaped how Europeans encountered the religions of others. The gods really present, in the Catholic sense, were translated into metaphors and symptoms, and into functions of the social and political. Presence became evidence of superstition, of magical thinking, of the infantile and irrational, the primitive and the savage. *History and Presence* radically confronts this intellectual heritage, proposing instead a model for the study of religion that begins with humans and gods present to each other in the circumstances of everyday life. Orsi then asks what it would mean to write history with the real presence of special beings restored. With reference to Marian apparitions, the cult of the saints, relations with the dead, and other Catholic instances of encounters with the gods really present, Orsi elaborates a theory of presence for the study of both contemporary religion and history. The unseeing of the gods was a foundational requirement of Western modernity. Orsi urges us to withhold from absence the intellectual and spiritual prestige modernity encourages us to give it, and instead to approach history with the gods fully present.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A fiercely inquisitive book on the heart of Roman Catholicism [The bulk of *History and Presence*

concentrates on the perception phenomenon at the back of worldwide cults of saints' relics, holy shrines, saints' cults, apparitions of Mary, and the like. Through very nimble and wide-ranging research, Orsi lays bare the complex intermingling of faith and psychology that has been a key element of Catholicism for five hundred years. One of the persistent strengths of the book is its keen awareness of the day-to-day meaning of its mysteries for the ordinary people involved. (Steve Donoghue Open Letters Monthly 2016-04-01) With reference to Marian apparitions, the cult of the saints and other divine "human encounters, Orsi constructs a theory of presence for the study of contemporary religion and history. Many interviews with individuals devoted to particular saints and relics are included in this fascinating study of how people process what they believe. (Catholic Herald 2016-03-04) This book is classic Orsi: careful, layered, humane, and subtle. | If reformed theology has led to the gods' ostensible absence in modern religion, *History and Presence* is a sort of counter-reformation literature that revels in the excesses of divine materiality: the contradictions, the redundancies, the scrambling of borders between the sacred and profane, the dead and the living, the past and the present, the original and the imitator. | *History and Presence* is a thought-provoking, expertly arranged tour of precisely those abundant, excessive phenomena which scholars have historically found so difficult to think. (Sonja Anderson Reading Religion 2016-10-28) [A] brilliant, theologically sophisticated exploration of the Catholic experience of God's presence through the material world. | On every level, from its sympathetic, honest, and sometimes moving ethnography to its astute analytical observations, this book is a scholarly masterpiece. (A. W. Klink Choice 2016-08-01) Orsi recaptures God's breaking into the world through stories that range from tales of saints, such as Bernadette, to common people who directly experienced divine intervention. | The book does an excellent job of explaining both the difficulties and values inherent in recognizing God in the world. (Publishers Weekly 2016-02-08) This is a meticulously researched, humane, and deeply challenging book. It concerns the people and the groups for whom heaven and earth, life and death are not separated by absolute boundaries. Gods (to use Orsi's term) cross these boundaries. Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, and the beloved dead remain real presences to many, in a modern world that finds no place for them. The story is set against the background of postwar American Catholicism. It has searing moments of desperate hope and unexpected comfort. It also has moments of sheer horror, as when Orsi explores what sexual harassment by priests means to those who saw in priests human gateways to heaven. The men and women studied in this book do not belong to a world we have lost. They belong to a world we have lost sight of. (Peter Brown, Princeton University)

Robert A. Orsi is Professor of Religious Studies and History and Grace Craddock Nagle Chair in Catholic Studies at Northwestern University.

This book is something Catholics - and anyone - who wants to reflect on the Presence, from the Eucharist into remarkable devotionals, really ought to read. The topic is unique; I have never seen something like this range of ideas covered - much less connected to Presence, but also the writing is simply exquisite. Great read. Great gift for the Catholic you know.

Following his work in such classics as "The Madonna of 115th Street" and "Between Heaven and Earth," Orsi returns with another valuable contribution to the field of religious studies which still manages to be of interest (entertaining even!) to a wide readership. Orsi writes in a conversational style, using his considerable skill as a storyteller to distill three decades of fieldwork into an intelligent argument about the place of Presence in scholarship. Whether you carry around memories of your Italian Catholic grandmother, or you're unfamiliar with the term transubstantiation, there is something here for everyone; Richly detailed footnotes which tune into ongoing conversations, as well as moving and humorous anecdotes about Catholic life in the 20th century and in the present. Orsi's work is indispensable for those interested in religious studies, history, or theology, and "History and Presence" is a fine addition to the list.

This is a splendid book.

A great read

One of the most important books written on American religion in some time. Orsi has brilliant insights, well-documented claims through ethnography, and has the best academic writing voice I have ever encountered.

Wonderful historical accounting with fascinating stories about the author's experience and others. Highly recommend if you have an interest in religion, practice, experience, history, Catholicism, or how scholars study these things.

Robert Orsi has spent a lifetime of ethnographic investigation collecting oral evidence of twentieth century American Catholic religious experience, together with its art and devotional objects; holy

pictures, crucifixes, talismans, fetishes, icons and shrine merchandising. Orsi paints his portrait engagingly, through telling the live experiences of people such as; Natalie, the sexually abused child, solaced by the beautiful eyes of the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; Lizzie's attachment to the bag of holy dirt from the shrine of El Santuario de Chimayo that helped her through her trial with blood cancer; the Detroit woman whose anxiety about her soldier sons was calmed by the assistance of the Blessed Mother. It is a wealth of material that, since the Platonist inspired 'science' of religion founded by Max Müller, has been designated myth and superstition, in contrast to religion. That is a distinctive variety of Protestant superciliousness epitomised by James Frazer's singling out of Catholicism in particular for the withering suppositions of science. The reason that Orsi's approach can be marketed by a publisher in 2016 is that it heads a sequence in the current sociology of religion. To recap that sequence; with the frustrating dead end of the secularisation thesis, attention turned to expanding the boundaries of religion outside its institutions. Beginning with Sarah Williams' investigations in Southwark, we have been treated to popular religion, folk religion, everyday religion and implicit religion. But with Peter Berger's re-sacralisation, the return of religion, and the ensuing re-enchantment of the world, in the sociological imagination, that line of investigation seems peripheral. Meredith McGuire's *Lived Religion* set a new direction by re-instating myth and superstition back in to the core of religion. Orsi progresses this by placing his material as the very stuff of Catholicism. So, Orsi's ethnography is consciously staged as a countermove in social theory. What we are presented with is the same class of supernatural magic gathered by Frazer, but stamped this time with the reverse thesis: the supernatural is a permanent, objectively obtained fixture of religion, 'modernity' notwithstanding. Orsi asks scholars to 'stand in the place of these men and women.' I felt inexplicably uneasy about the work from the outset. Why does Orsi fixate narrowly on the Luther/Zwingli altercation on the real/symbolic presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and thus oppose Protestant 'modern religion' to Catholicism? The hourly presence of God is common to all Christians through the religion's distinctive conversational companionship of the living Jesus. I could find no use in the central thesis, the equation 'Catholic = presence, Protestant = absence.' This hype of real presence increased my perturbed feelings when I learned that the 300 English Catholic martyrs all died because of 'the question of what Jesus meant when he said 'this is my body.' 'The sense of exaggeration de-railing the issue was completed when I was informed that 'the destiny of Catholicism in the modern world. . . turns on the meaning of what Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper.' I felt discomposed too, by my failure to discover any bearing that

connected to my own Catholic experience in an English Franciscan boarding school. Like Orsi, I did collect those evocative holy pictures, with my weekly pocket money, one at a time, along with the sweets. But I don't see in them the printed media of presence. Nor did I know anything of the host that might spurt blood if bitten; statues that weep tears of salt; the seventy proven levitations of Saint Joseph, the patron saint of pilots; the efficacious healing by wax models of limbs placed at the Virgin's feet; or Mary's many bodily appearances on earth. Suddenly, the resolution to my unease came, on waking, after three days of puzzled reading. As a work of ethnography, presented without comment, Orsi's magnificent material has the makings of a classic. That presentation would have assisted us, as Orsi wishes, to get in the place of these subjects. But the burden of an overarching polemical theory, together with the catalogue of social theorists which accompanies the frequent digressionary musings, has sunk the ethnography in a pond of theorising goo. Inadvertently, the author has told us more about the current worldview of the sociology of religion than he has about the presence of God.

My daughter pleased with her gift.

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