

*History and Presence*. By Robert A. Orsi. Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. 367 pages. \$29.95.  
doi: 10.1017/hor.2017.29

What if the history of religion were written by scholars who presumed that peoples' claims of the gods present among them were true? In *History and Presence*, Robert Orsi contends that "the study of religion is or ought to be the study of what human beings do to, for, and against the gods really present...and what the gods really present do with, to, for, and against humans" (4). Modern religious theory, Orsi proposes, has frequently relegated supernatural beings to symbols, metaphors, or abstractions for dimensions of human experience that can then be explained away or circumscribed by those who wield power in the church, state, or academy. The author challenges his readers to imagine what might happen to their assumptions about religious experience if "the gods," who seemingly persist in engaging and disrupting humanity despite "enlightened" attempts to marginalize them, were taken more seriously as ambiguous but ever-present conversation partners in discourse about religion.

The first chapter, "The Obsolescence of the Gods," lays the theoretical foundation for the book and its provocative claims about how the dichotomy between presence and absence sparked by the eucharistic controversies of the sixteenth century shaped Christianity in modernity and the modern approach to writing religious history. This section would yield interesting discussions in an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course touching on comparative religion or theological method. The remaining chapters contain case studies, informed by decades of fieldwork and interviews, exploring aspects of the text's central claim against the backdrop of particular social, cultural, and interpersonal experiences. Focusing primarily on twentieth-century American Catholicism, Orsi addresses apparitions of the Virgin Mary and associated devotional practices; encounters with the supernatural that guide peoples' responses to personal crises; the potency of presence in printed materials such as holy cards, comic books, and catechetical resources; the ongoing presence of the dead among the living; the permeability of the veil between heaven and earth, especially at life's margins; and the clerical sexual-abuse crisis as a profound violation of bodily, social, and theological boundaries. These fascinating chapters will help students and scholars deepen their appreciation of the untidy but lively encounters between the holy and the human that anchor Catholic worship, devotion, and prayer within the lived experience of Christian faith.

As an explanatory model, Orsi's thesis cogently highlights unifying strands underlying a diverse array of data from popular religious experience. He

reflects critically on some aspects of his approach, such as his relative neglect of absence as a religious category and his selection of the “Catholic imaginary” (20) as his primary vantage point. However, despite Orsi’s repeated acknowledgment that equating Catholics with presence and Protestants with absence is a caricature that may be “unsubtle or even incorrect...as theology or ecclesiology” (249), the pervasiveness of binary distinctions, such as the “divide between presence and absence, the literal and the metaphorical, the real and the symbolic, the natural and supernatural” (37), raises some serious questions that remain unaddressed. The semantic range of terms like “symbol” and “literal presence” is largely left to the reader’s interpretation and potentially conflicts at times with the official Catholic theological understanding of eucharistic real presence. Although the confluence of materiality, embodiment, and presence is celebrated in this volume, the related concepts of sacramentality and mediation would benefit from fuller treatment as potential ways to reflect on Catholic approaches to real presence across the continuum of official and popular manifestations. Finally, would Protestant Christians characterize their own religious experience in terms of absence?

*History and Presence* is engagingly written, thoughtfully researched, and represents another fine contribution by Orsi to the understanding of American Catholic popular religiosity. The extensive endnotes engage both classic and very recent sources and point out some surprising lacunae that could inspire future studies, such as the lack of a comprehensive history of American Catholic cemeteries (305 n. 33) or the reactions of American priests to their shifting status in light of Vatican II’s ecclesiology (310 n. 11). Orsi presents a compelling case for scholars and historians of religions to reenvision the parameters of their craft in order to take the faith claims of real people more seriously.

ANNE MCGOWAN

*Catholic Theological Union*

*Called to Be Saints: John Hugo, the Catholic Worker, and a Theology of Radical Christianity.* By Benjamin T. Peters. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016. 586 pages. \$25.00.

doi: 10.1017/hor.2017.30

These undeniably turbulent times seem to have spawned a renewed interest in Dorothy Day and the radical Christianity that she has come to symbolize in the thirty-six years since her death. Day received an affirmative nod from Pope Francis during his 2015 address to the US Congress, and has been recently invoked in a cornucopia of presidential election memes and posts circulating on social media. Benjamin Peters offers us a deep and illuminating