"Abundant History": A Forum*

A FEW YEARS AGO, WE RAN A FORUM IN THESE PAGES ON Constantin Fasolt's Limits of History. *And in the July/August 2008 issue we published a series of reviews of* Manifestos for History. *Although very different in detail, both of these explored the limits of critical historical method and its epistemological underpinnings. We return again to this important topic, this time from the perspective of religious history. Robert Orsi, a past president of the American Academy of Religion, is widely recognized as one of the leading scholars of American religious history. In this forum, Orsi uses Marian apparitions to explore how historians often tame religious experience into "safe" explanatory categories. In the process, he highlights the tension between absence and presence in contemporary religious historiography. Four historians respond, followed by Orsi's rejoinder.*

Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity

Robert A. Orsi

> "I believe, indeed, that there is no tenet in all paganism, which would give so fair a scope to ridicule as this of the *real presence.*"
> –David Hume

Praying Near Shrine of Knock, Ireland, 1995. © Michael St. Maur Sheil/CORBIS

The historical and cultural study of Marian apparitions and pilgrimages immediately draws us into the deepest contradictions of experience and imagination in the modern world. This was made eloquently clear to me many years ago, in 1976, when I stopped by chance in the town of Knock, in County Mayo, Ireland, to fuel my car. I asked the gas station attendant how it was that Knock boasted such an enormous church with a plaza built for vast crowds, as well as its own airport. Do you not know what happened here, he asked me? I did not. Are you Catholic, he asked? I am, I said. Not a very good one then, he said. He condescended to explain that in August 1879 the Virgin Mary along with several other holy figures appeared near the church wall in Knock to a number of villagers that grew as the evening wore on to around fifteen. "Here," the gas station attendant ended his story, "the transcendent broke into time."

Here, the transcendent broke into time. The conjuncture of transcendence and temporality, the particularity of *here* with the no-place or beyond-all-places of transcendence, exemplifies the unexpected conflations within Marian devotions of categories normally (meaning normal within the languages of the modern world) held distinct. People journey to Lourdes to bathe in water from the spring that bubbled up miraculously from the spot at Bernadette's feet where the Lady told the girl to dig during the ninth apparition. It is *this* water, coming unexpectedly from dry earth, that people want to drink and to pour on their wounds. But then what do we make of the fact that Catholic pilgrims around the world journey to human-made replicas of the Lourdes grotto far from the European site to drink and bathe in the (ordinary) waters flowing from plumbing hidden in (more or less) artfully arranged rocks? Pilgrims almost always know that the waters at these other Lourdes flow from local reservoirs, but still they insist that these waters have healing powers.

Conflations and erasures abound. In the places where Mary is encountered, where the transcendent not only breaks into time, but also gets involved in the nitty-gritty of people's affairs, the boundary between private and public experience is blurred. Pilgrims speak their fears and their most deeply held needs and desires aloud in the presence of others to images of Mary. The carefully maintained distances among bodies are erased as volunteers and family members offer the most intimate support for pilgrims who cannot walk, feed, or bathe themselves, or take care of their bodily needs, carrying them the final yards toward the healing water. A heightened sense of intimacy exists among people, even among strangers, a sharpened awareness of vulnerability, exposure, and dependence. The boundaries of single subjectivities dissolve in these potent environments of desire and need, conscious and unconscious. On another level, while Marian shrines have served as pivots of nationalist sentiment, the same shrines become international centers, where nationalist sentiments are eclipsed, at least momentarily, in the shared experience and expression of common need before the Virgin. The shrines create alternative publics of men and women in need and distress. These sites, in other words, are characterized by their multiple instabilities.

There is always an excess of expression and experience at Marian shrines—too many candles, too many statues and images, too many rosaries, too much desire and need, and too many souvenir stores hawking too many things. At Lourdes in the weeks after the apparitions the townspeople and visitors began setting candles at the site, as many as fifty-eight in the small space by Easter Sunday of that year. Plaster images of Mary also started to appear there, four of them by April 26, to the chagrin of local authorities, and over the weeks the statues were ever more elaborately decorated.[1] The density of shops overflowing with many things to buy, the throngs of people pressing close together, the seem-

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ingly endless repetition of rosaries—these may offend visitors unprepared for excess at Lourdes.

What words or categories of interpretation are there for phenomena such as these? How do we talk about what happened, first at Lourdes (and at other sites where the transcendent breaks into time and comes face to face with humans in the circumstances of their everyday lives), and then afterward, as the result of what happened at Lourdes, there and at all the other Lourdes? How do we account for the excess?

The reality created at Lourdes, the reality that then moves out from Lourdes along pilgrimage routes, moves out in the circulation of holy water and other souvenirs, and in the reproductions of the shrine itself, this reality is at fundamental odds with modern ways of knowing and interpreting the world. The boundaries that Mary's presence disrupts are the very ones modernity holds dearest. How is the event at Lourdes even approachable from outside the metaphysical assumptions underlying the phase "the transcendent broke into time," a metaphysics the denial of which is fundamental to modern reason? The anomalousness of Marian apparitions and pilgrimages to modern historiography might have provoked a confrontation with the limits of modern knowing. Instead, Marian apparitions and pilgrimages have been effectively and safely positioned in the last several decades within the framework of modern historiography. Earlier historians largely ignored such phenomena, so this new inclusion is a step forward; and we have learned a great deal about how shrines such as Lourdes contributed to local and national histories. But the categories and boundaries of modern historiography retain their authority.[2]

Historians tell us that Marian apparitions and pilgrimages served the Vatican in its campaigns against liberalizing states in Europe, contributing to the development of the modern centralized papacy. Modern popes have been avid supporters of Marian devotions, shrines, and apparitions. Marian devotions (paradoxically) also worked to deepen emergent modern national loyalties by establishing experiential bonds between the local and the national. (Lourdes has functioned this way in particular, just as it has contributed to the primacy of the papacy in Catholic emotions.) Marian shrines complemented developments in the history of modern medicine by supplementing what little physicians were able to do to heal people and by offering an alternative to the ever-greater authority of increasingly professionalized doctors, especially for women and for poor people. Pilgrimages contributed to and benefited from advances in national transportation lines. Marian healing sites countered the authority of science and offered spaces and occasions for dissent. After the Second Vatican Council, Marian apparitions and piety challenged the modernization of the church and authorized the resistance of Catholics who objected to the changes. This has all been well established now for various Marian apparitions around the world. There does not seem to be much more to add to these narratives theoretically, only more case studies to add to the list.

But this all remains resolutely within the interpretive field of modernity. Subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies what he considers to be the two key assumptions of modern historiography: "The first is that the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time . . . . The second assumption running through modern European political thought and the social sciences is that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end 'social facts,' that the social somehow exists prior to them." Marian devotions and apparitions are likewise translated into social facts, fitted into modernity's ontological singular. The poles of interpretive possibility are functionalist, on the one hand, antimodernist, on the other—Marian devotions either contribute to the making of the modern world or obstruct it.[3]

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The alternative to this narrowed historical vision, Chakrabarty suggests, is to allow other realities to break into theory.[4] Likewise, philosopher of history F.R. Ankersmit argues for the liberation "of the history of historical experience from the heavy and oppressive weight of (the historian's) language and to unearth experience from the thick sedimentary strata of language covering it."[5] How do we break into this space, not to destroy it but to enlarge it? The whole orbit of Marian devotionalism—apparitions, shrines, pilgrimages, the relationships that develop at and around shrines and on pilgrimages, the proliferation of the original site of presence to other sites of presence, the things taken away from these sites and the circulation of these things, and so on—is a good place within which to begin to imagine a new historiography.

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Before the advent of modern epistemology and before the arrival of "religion" within the boundaries of Enlightenment reason, the woods, homes, and forests of Europe, its churches, statues, relics, holy oils and waters, and its shrines, were filled with the presence of spirits, pre-Catholic and Catholic (or some hybrid). Catholic sacramental theology maintained that Jesus Christ was really present in the elements of the Mass. Max Weber famously referred to all this as "enchantment" before naming the modern "disenchanted." To take sacramental bread out into the streets in a great golden monstrance—as Catholic rioters did, for example, on the first morning of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre—was to bring Christ himself out into the streets. The saints and the Virgin Mary were present in representations of them and their presence suffused their relics and the places where they had been, too, and things touched to their relics and to these places. Catholic Europe was a culture of presence. These beings that were present to humans could be encountered, engaged, bargained with, excoriated, and brought to witness events in the lives of people and communities, for better and for worse. "[T]here was a time when the gods were not just a literary cliché," writes literary critic Roberto Calasso, "but an event, a sudden apparition."[6]

But Western modernity exists under the sign of absence. Time and space are emptied of presence. Absence is strictly enforced by language, by reigning aesthetics, and by a normative sensorium (to borrow one of theorist Walter Ong's key words) to which the gods are not available by touch, taste, sound, or sight. Drained of presence, religious experience is remade in conformity with modern liberal notions of what "religion" is: autonomous, a distinct domain apart from other areas of life, private, in conformity with the causal laws of nature, reasonable, interior—all the things that Marian apparitions and what follows from them are not. Historiography follows suit. Historians have inherited an ontology in which all events derive their meaning from the social and which is aligned with the modern privileging of absence. If this were not so, then we would find a place for the gods in our histories of the modern world. We would not reframe those occasions when humans and the gods come face to face with each other (as they did at Lourdes) in the registers of either function or resistance.

This is not to say that presence disappeared immediately in the modern world. Charles Taylor identifies an early modern sensibility of divine presence in the cosmos and in society, in which "God is present as the designer of the way we live." Isaac Newton imagined a universe not only set in motion by its creator but requiring the creator's ongoing watchful presence for its proper maintenance and for its energy. But what this correction from early modernity suggests is that we need a richer vocabulary for "presence." Taylor distinguishes "presence" in the Newtonian sense just described from what he calls "the old model of presence," noting that this persisted longer in Catholic societies. It is this old presence (and presences) I am talking about, but in the modern, supposedly disenchanted, world.[7]

Presence (in the old sense of the word) does not disappear from the experience of modern humans. Obviously not, because Lourdes occurred in the modern world, as did many other such events. People outside Europe also continued to come face to face with their gods, in Asia and Africa, as European

missionaries discovered. Protestant missionaries labeled these practices of presence popish; Catholic missionaries, unable to disassociate themselves completely from the logic of presence, identified other people's face-to-face encounters with their gods as demonic. Catholics also fretted about the obvious similarity between their own practices and pagan worship. One result of the period of European missionary expansion was hybrid Catholic/indigenous expressions and experiences of presence, for example the world of African Caribbean spirits, in which the Virgin Mary has been directly involved. One could say that the parallel history of modernity, from one perspective, is the history of the ongoing eruption of presence into the spaces of its denial, to the transformation both of religious practice and imagination and the social world.

I am not saying, in other words, that experiences of presence are atavistic. I am especially not locating them as premodern phenomena in a linear narrative of modernity. Presences have been marginalized and disciplined since the 16th century, in Europe and everywhere that Europeans touched, but the presence of the gods has persisted, abundantly so, and now they appear to be thriving again throughout the contemporary postmodern world.

The problem is that we have no idea what to make of the bonds between humans and the spirits really present to them within the limits of our critical theories. In modernist arrangements of knowledge, this is the domain of theology (itself a marginal discipline within modernist arrangements of knowledge). But in order for us to enlarge our critical theoretical vocabulary, the presence of the gods and humans to each other in the varied spaces of their interactions with all the practices and things such encounters generated has to become the domain of critical theory, too, and of history. We can talk of the spaces and times of shrines and pilgrimages, of the circulation of ritual objects, and so on, but we have probably talked enough about all this now. Further theorizing along these lines is simply deflecting attention from the challenge of understanding how people meet their gods and how their gods meet them, how humans and their gods make their ways together through the challenges and excitements of life, how the gods become dwellers in this same modern history, independently of their human counterparts, and what they get up to, and what all this means for the social, political, and psychological life of the contemporary world.

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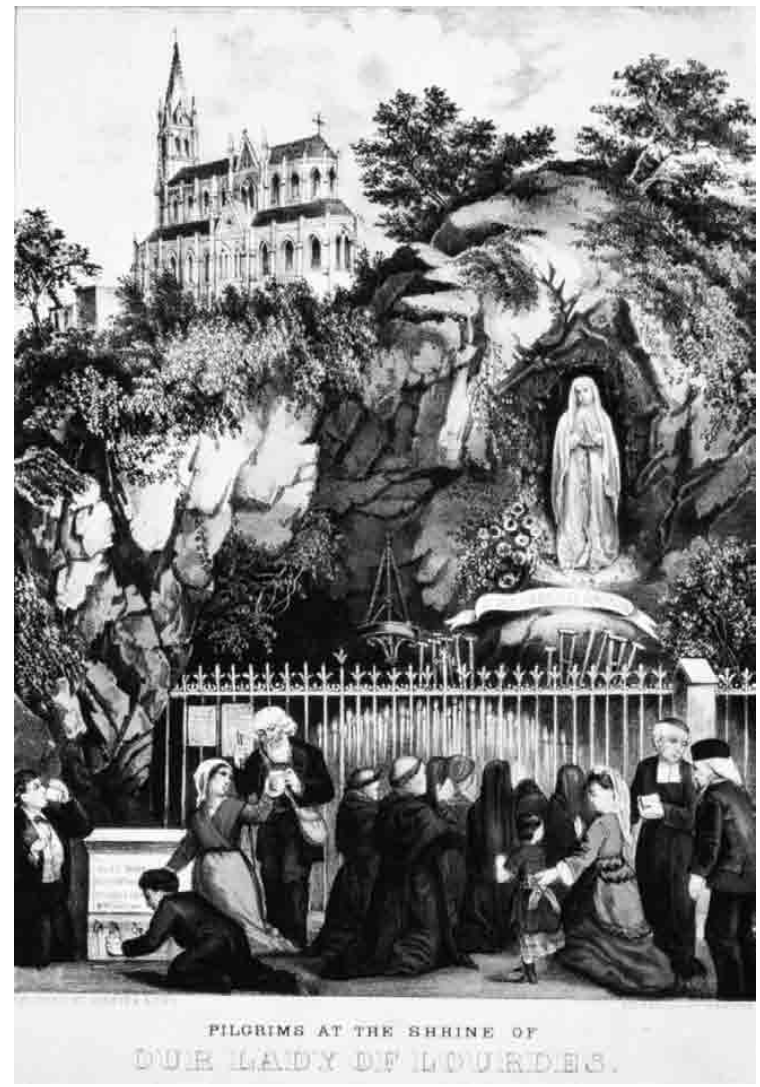
These experiences of radical presence or realness I call *abundant events*. The question I want to pursue is how it is possible to study abundant events without translating them immediately into the safe categories of modernist historiography and without yielding to the understandable frustration and despair that there is no way to think outside the modernist historical



A 19th-century Currier & Ives print, "Pilgrims at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes." Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZC2-291].

categories. The point here is to see how far the limits of our critical historical knowledge can be pushed, but not to abandon them all together. My enterprise is not theological, in other words, but theoretical. What is required is an abundant historiography. So what is an abundant event, which we already know to be characterized by excess, by the conflation of categories, by too much intimacy, exposure, and vulnerability—by too much?

Before the apparition at Lourdes became the subject of local controversy, before politicians, clergy, and scientists had staked out their positions, and before historians came along to remind us that similar events had occurred in the region before, that there was a local folkloric tradition of little people to which the women in white belongs; before the trains started running on improved nationalized railroad track; before the souvenir shops opened; and before the water was shipped out in little bottles all over the world, there was the event of the face-to-face meeting of Bernadette and the woman in white who came to be identified as the Immaculate Conception. Before everything else there was the event of the presence of the human and the divine to each other. All the other things happened and continue to happen because of what happened to Bernadette and then to gradually expanding circles of kin and neighbors, circles that finally came to include millions of Catholics around the world. All this happened, in other words, because of the abundant event of presence, and all this is evidence of the event's abundance.

What identifies an abundant event in history and culture? One way to begin thinking about this is to examine apparitions of the Virgin Mary as fundamentally part of Marian devotional culture generally, pilgrimage and shrine culture in particular. Apparitions capture attention because of their dramatic nature, but as almost all historians who study them point out, in the culture within which apparitions take place there is nothing out of the ordinary about them (although this does not mean that when they occur, they do not take people by surprise). They are anticipated, longed for, and even expected. Seeing this allows us to look at apparitions alongside more prosaic examples of Marian devotion, including the simplest prayers and rosaries, as well as pilgrimages and shrine practices. What these phenomena share—from the water in Lourdes to the cheapest trinket sold in a souvenir shop—is that they are instances of the relationship between human beings going about the course of their days and the powerful supernatural figure of the Blessed Mother who is present to them. This is what draws people to pilgrimage: relationships and the promise of relationships.

Relationships were at the core of the Lourdes event. The young girl who stood before the apparitional figure brought to that moment her own history of difficulties with significant women in her life, including her mother and the woman who had been a surrogate mother but who later turned cruel and abusive toward Bernadette. Complex and long-standing relational histories connected the first cohort of spectators at the grotto, those who had the powerful emotional experience (in their own accounting) of watching Bernadette in ecstasy. Bernadette, the seer, was also their daughter, niece, cousin, neighbor, and servant, and now she was in intimate communication with a figure with whom they, too, had been in intimate communication over the years, whom they knew from their own lives, and who bore the stories of their relationships to her as well. To say this is not to "psychoanalyze" the moment, in the old psychohistory sense. It is rather to begin to establish the appropriate relational density within which the event arose. These relationships ultimately gave way, as they always do in devotional Catholicism, to things: devotions focus the relationship on things (rosaries, prayer cards, and so on); the things take on their meaning from the relationship. But the key here is the density of relationships, real and imaginary. So one of the first things to say about an abundant

event is that it serves as a focusing lens for the intricacies of relationships in a particular area at a particular time, meaning for all the hopes, desires, and fears circulating among a group of people as these were taking shape at a certain place and a certain time.

This relationship between Mary and her devout is like other intimacies, but it is not exhaustively analogous to them. The difference is ontological: in Mary's company the devout enter into a relationship with a supernatural figure of great power and compassion, who bends to them and attends to their needs and fears, but who also chastises them and warns them of dire consequences should they not attend to her wishes in return. This element of danger is hidden behind Mary's love, but it is always there. The risk of Marian devotions comes from Mary's power and from the realness of Mary's presence to her devout. What is really real about the Marian event—at Lourdes and at its replicas—is the presence of the supernatural in relationship with humans and the power of the needs, fears, desires, and imaginings, conscious and unconscious, that this exchange unlocks. Danger is also the result of the very action of the imagination that occurs in devotional culture. The Blessed Mother comes alive in her connection to her devout; their lives enliven her, but she is also a figure independent of them, as other to them as she is connected to them.

In the unlocked environment of the devotional relationship much becomes possible that otherwise is not. Place and time become fluid; representations and souvenirs of the relationship of presence bear its immediacy and efficacy; things come alive; and the ordinary levels and domains of experience are dissolved into each other. There is more. People's imaginations become larger and more efficacious in their actions on the world and on other persons. To borrow a phrase from psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, writing about moments of unusual psychic intensity in the course of a day, in the really real of the devotional relationship there develops "a separate sense that reaches through the barriers exercised by the limits of consciousness."[8] This accounts for the dreamlike quality of intense devotional moments and for the new combinations of reality, new experiences and perceptions that become possible in the devotional world. Anthropologist Paolo Apolito has written powerfully of this dimension of the Marian apparition site at Oliveto Citra. "It was as if," he says, "the obviousness of everyday perception underwent a drastic overhaul and the world appeared composed of new presences in old forms . . . . All was left suspended between ordinary perception and the possibility that all of a sudden something might emerge from the depths of the unspoken, breaking out of the accustomed surface of things, creating an opening that might suck the everyday order into metahistorical reality."[9] Here, the transcendent broke into time.

Relationships of presence, the being face-to-face with each other, that arise in the devotional context—either between persons on Earth or between heaven and Earth, among the living or among the living and the dead, among persons as they are or with persons as they desire to be or are desired to be—likewise come under the power of the unlocked imagination. People are more accessible to each other (for good and for ill) in devotional culture, the boundaries of their bodies, minds, and souls less secure. People may become more understanding of the needs and sufferings of others, more compassionate, but also more intrusive, experiencing the intimacy of devotionalism as the occasion for asserting their own demands on others, as anyone who has been "prayed for" knows.

The abundant event, moreover, is not exhausted at its source. Presence radiates out from the event along a network of routes, a kind of capillary of presence, filling water, relics, images, things, and memories. "Routes" are not to be understood here simply as pathways of commerce or as networks of church affiliation and connection. The routes are formed and shaped by the abundant event: they develop through successive transactions among people wanting to share their experience of presence, and in this way the routes themselves become media of abundance. The routes of the really real, the conduits of presence out beyond the place where the transcendent broke into time, include the many images of Lourdes in people's homes and the water the devout carry away from the site (or acquire by mail or from friends), the small plastic bottles shaped like the Immaculate Conception, capped by a blue crown, and the water people carry away from the replicas in various sorts of less representational containers. The routes include the pathways that pilgrims follow, too, pulling them toward Lourdes and its copies.

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What all this suggests is that there are people everywhere in the modern world who live in ways beyond the conceptual range of modernist epistemology and historiography, and at an angle askew to normative modernity (while at the same time they function quite well amid the ordinary challenges of life, let it be added). Modern theory has intermittently paid attention to such persons, for the most part to record their passing, enrolling them as further evidence of the inevitability of modernity's pervasive disenchantment. Western intellectuals have now and then searched for people of presence in other lands, but this has been anything but an innocent enterprise. It has been undertaken in justification of colonialism (for its work in elevating people from the superstition of presence) and sometimes to appropriate presence as an anti-modern resource for moderns themselves. (This need not have been an insincere quest, nor did it fail to have some positive outcomes, among them the rise of the science of comparative religion.) But what distinguishes the being-in-the-world of these figures, namely their experience of presence, is denied, disciplined, and occluded. Even when modern seekers set out to appropriate presence for spiritual and psychological ends of their own, presence is lost or distorted. Again, I do not mean presence in the laws of nature here or in the workings of the polity; I mean face-to-face presence of humans and gods to each other and what happens in such contexts.

That there are such people who live in a reality not completely encompassed by modern critical knowledge is a realization that eventually comes to anyone who has spent any time in shrines or who has observed people in relationship to their gods. So anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, whose fieldwork was in Sri Lanka, speaks of cultures "where other forms of the reality principle operate," establishing "a pathway . . . whereby fantasy can come out into open consciousness" and where it is tolerated in the light of everyday reason. Stanley Tambiah, also an anthropologist working in South Asia, argues for "two coexisting mentalities in mankind everywhere," one under the sign of "causation," the other what Tambiah calls "participation." "Participation can be represented as occurring," writes Tambiah, when persons, groups, animals, places, and natural phenomena are in a relation of contiguity, and translate that relation into one of existential immediacy and contact and shared affinities."[10]

We need to take caution here, however: both Tambiah and Obeyesekere remain fixed on the binary established by modernity, although they give it other names. As a result they wind up endorsing modernity's normative boundaries. Obeyesekere juxtaposes a reality-fixated West to a mystic East; Tambiah divides understanding from imagination. Chakrabarty's model of a kind of historical helix in which modernity and what I am calling presence twine around each other is better. But as my discussion of the event at Lourdes is meant to show, the event of presence has nothing fundamentally to do with modernity. Abundant events are not the story of modernity's dissent, or not only and always this. Presence requires a history of its own, and experiences and practices of presence suggest the lineaments of that history. Marian devotions show us that a vocabulary of practice, understanding, and experience is required that is neither identical to nor derived from modern historiography.

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Among the issues that remain open in the development of the notion of an abundant historiography is whether or not such an approach to events in the past requires a particular kind of historical sensibil-

ity on the part of historians. Ankersmit thinks so. "Historical experience," he writes in a discussion of Huizinga, "is the historian's response to 'the call' of the past," and "there is in the case of historical experience a 'communication' between the historian and the past excluding all that is not part of this most private and intimate communication." It is striking in this regard that on the very first page of the preface to her history of Lourdes, Ruth Harris alludes briefly to her own physical distress, noting that "my work on Lourdes became part of a personal voyage, an act of sympathy with nineteenth-century pilgrims." Visiting Lourdes, Harris describes how her sense of being an alien at the shrine is slowly eclipsed as she gets caught up in the work of helping other pilgrims who cannot help themselves. She tells of "being directed to help a mother care for her adult son who was incontinent, paralyzed, blind and deaf." In the end, Harris says, she was not "converted"—although why is this even an issue?—but "the experience" of being there "completely changed my approach to the topic."[11]

In a very preliminary way we may conclude from this that abundant events that are not exhausted at the source and are characterized by the face-to-face experience of presence may very well draw the historian, too, into an unexpectedly immediate and intimate encounter with the past. I read Harris's relief at not being converted as an expression of the anxiety this possibility provokes among us, understandably so, given our training. But it may be that this is what abundant historiography is: the effort to write abundantly about events that are not safely cordoned off in the past but whose routes extend into the present, into the writing of history itself.

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[1] Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (Viking, 1999), 87.

[2] Among the excellent historical accounts of Marian apparitions and pilgrimages that have appeared in recent years, I want to mention: David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Knopf, 1994); William A. Christian, Jr., *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton University Press, 1981) and (with a somewhat different focus, but related) *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (University of California Press, 1996); Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton University Press, 1991); Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton University Press, 1986) and *Madonnas That Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy Since the Fifteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University 1992).

[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

[4] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 20.

[5] F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 14.

[6] Robert Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, trans. Tim Parks (Vintage International, 2001), 6. The detail about Christ in the streets of Paris comes from Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[7] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 66-67. On Newton see Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40, *et passim.*

[8] Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience* (Routledge, 2002), 47.

[9] Paolo Apolito, *The Apparitions at Oliveto Citra: Local Visions and Cosmic Drama*, trans. William A. Christian, Jr. (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 107-108.

[10] Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 167; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 107.

[11] Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience,* 125; Harris, *Lourdes*, xiiii, xv.

Abundant History: Protestantism and Alternative Modernities

Jane Shaw

In his provocative and innovative essay, Robert Orsi challenges historians of religion to write histories and theories of (religious) "presence," which he describes as "the breaking through into time of the transcendent." This challenges modern historiographies, which, he argues, either write out religion in the modern period or reduce its contribution to social and political features of modernity. Orsi's appeal for a history of presence "that is neither identical to nor derived from modern historiography" is based in a particular context—Marian apparitions in modern Europe—and is therefore confined to Roman Catholicism. As an historian of modern Protestantism, my questions are these: Has Orsi selected a moment in modernity when there happened to be a revival of religious experience and appeals to the experience of "presence" were especially strong? Is Orsi's model distinctly Roman Catholic in its time frame? Or does it require, rather, the reframing of modernity in terms of a quest for religious experience that goes beyond denomination? To put it another way, would such a history transcend time but essentially be a Roman Catholic history precisely because it ignores the particularity of the Protestant experience that is and was so profoundly tied to the emergence of modernity from a medieval worldview? Or can such a history of presence transcend denomination and at the same time speak to the particularity of presence in modernity?

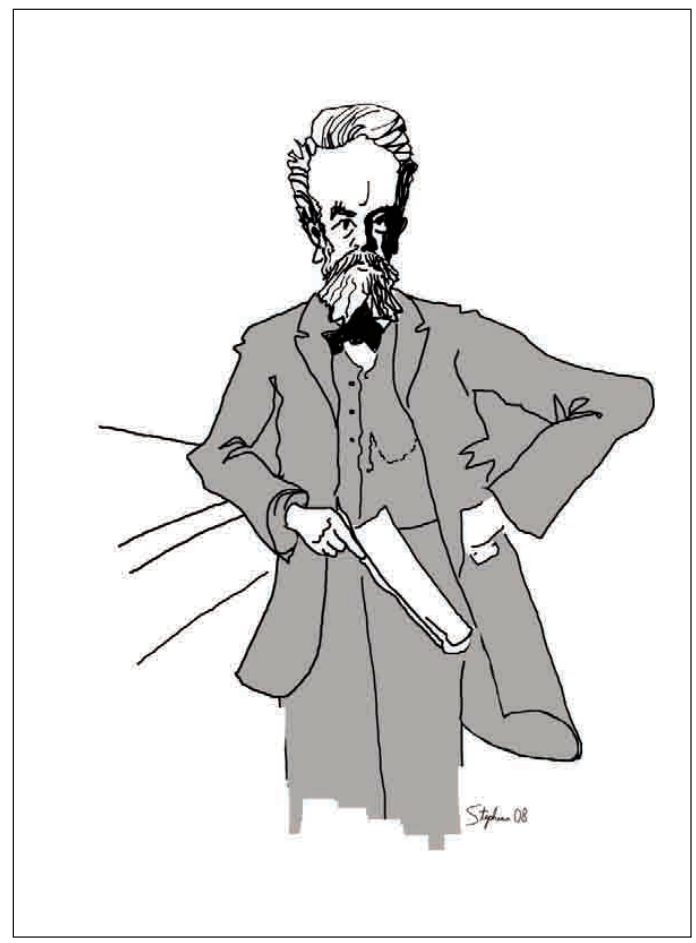
Is Orsi's model distinctly Roman Catholic in its time frame? Or does it require, rather, the reframing of modernity in terms of a quest for religious experience that goes beyond denomination?

Orsi writes that "the parallel history of modernity, from one perspective, is the history of the ongoing eruption of presence into the spaces of its denial, to the transformation both of religious practice and imagination and the social world." My argument is that there is an alternative modernity—perhaps alternative modernities. Ongoing research on the history of Protestantism, especially heterodox Protestant

groups, is increasingly suggesting the ways in which religious experience (encounters with "presence") was a vital part of many people's everyday experiences in 19th- and 20th-century Anglo-American culture. While Roman Catholics experienced a host of Marian apparitions in late 19th-century Europe, Protestants found themselves turning to Spiritualism, Theosophy, Higher Thought, as well as Pentecostalism, Mormonism, and numerous utopian and millenarian groups. In the last decade or so, a wealth of scholarship has identified this burst of heterodox and sometimes more orthodox religious activity; the quest for religious experience at the heart of so much of it; and the ways in which people defined themselves as religious subjects. Historians of Protestantism, then, are writing a new modernity—maybe multiple alternative modernities.[1]

No one identified this phenomenon better at the time than William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, given as the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in 1902. James began from the premise that human beings have a religious propensity; the human capacity to apprehend the divine is therefore, says James, fundamental. The primary agent for James is the human being who apprehends the divine, whereas for Orsi it is the "ongoing eruption of presence" (the divine) into the spaces of its denial. But Orsi and James are reaching at the same thing: raw religion. For James, this original experience, rather than institutional religion, was always the "real thing," while at the same time *necessarily* being the foundation of institutional religion. "Personal religion," wrote James, "should still seem to be the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete."[2] Orsi hints at the same line of argument in his article when he writes that "before everything else"—before the apparition at Lourdes became the subject of local controversy and everything snowballed from there so that it became an international pilgrimage site—"there was the event of the presence of the human and the divine to each other." W.R. Inge, who gave his influential Bampton Lectures in Oxford in 1899 on the subject of mysticism, three years before James gave his Gifford Lectures on religious experience, put it this way: "Mysticism has its origins in that which is the raw material of all religion . . . namely, that dim consciousness of the beyond, which is part of our nature as human beings." He defined mysticism as "the attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the importance of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal."[3] In other words, it is the transcendent breaking into time. We might see Orsi, in this article at least, as a descendant of that group of late 19th- and early 20th-century scholars (which included Evelyn Underhill and Rufus Jones as well as James and Inge—though they neither necessarily agreed with each other nor thought of themselves as a group), who wished to find and define that raw experience of religion in modernity.

Or is Orsi's proposal only applicable to Roman Catholicism? Is his model distinctly Roman Catholic with regard to its timeframe, its category of abundance, and its emphasis on the density of relationships that emerge from incidents of religious presence? For, after all, the history of modernity is utterly bound up with the history of Protestantism. The foundation of Protestant churches marks the emergence of what historians now call the early modern period. And the early modern to modern story is usually told in terms of the rise of the individual: as Protestantism allowed individuals to have a personal relationship with God, so, too, did privatization follow—not just of religion itself, but of numerous other cultural practices, such as reading, as witnessed by the rise of the novel. Is Orsi really referring to Protestantism when he writes: "Drained of presence, religious experience is remade in conformity with modern liberal notions of what 'religion' is: autonomous, a distinct domain apart from other areas of life, private, in conformity with the causal laws of nature, reasonable, interior"? When he writes that there are "people who live in a reality not completely encompassed by modern critical knowledge," is he suggesting that they have bypassed modernity, somehow avoided the traps of modernity, including the potentially sterile individualism of Protestantism? Does the rise of Protestantism mark a sort of "Fall," an end to the bountiful innocence and abundance of religious-experience-in-community that *was* medieval Roman Catholicism? Is his desire to break out of modernist historiographical structures therefore a desire to avoid what Protestantism "did" and return to a paradisiacal "pre-Fall" narrative of religious experience? Are the abundant events and the routes of relationships he talks of, in his scheme, only Roman Catholic? That's a genuine question to Orsi.



William James

My answer to that question is no. Abundance is a hallmark of many distinctly modern, Protestant religious phenomena. Think of the Methodists and other evangelicals swooning in tent revivals, and the way such swooning caught on: one down, all down. Recall the spiritualist mediums who produced voices of all tenors and timbres; brought into Victorian parlors the wildest of spirits who knocked tables over and scandalized, titillated, and comforted middle-class séance goers; and, in their extraordinary production of ectoplasm, made their very bodies midwives of "presence." Abundant events of this character went on to produce more abundance and networks of routes, as Orsi puts it, as séance goers themselves practiced automatic writing and sought spiritual healing. Likewise, communities and relationships were at the heart of many modern Protestant movements. We should not be too swayed by William James's emphasis on the individual nature of religious experience, for which he has been rightly criticized. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Shakers, Mormons, and lesser known utopian groups such as the Oneida Perfectionists, the Floridian Koreshan Unity Community, and the Christian Israelites all relied on community as the mainstay of their religious experience and, far from making religion an autonomous and distinct domain, apart from everyday life, fused the two absolutely. In such communities, relationships were key and often cemented by abundant events of "presence." Likewise, as in devotional Roman Catholicism, relationships gave way to things, whether the distinctive furniture of the Shakers, the Book of Mormon, or, as in the case of the House of David in Benton Harbor, Michigan, a popular tourist resort and amusement park run along the lines of the group's religious principles.

Does it matter, though, that I am mixing the orthodox and the heterodox here? Can we really liken the events at Lourdes to the revelations of Mother Ann Lee that produced the Shaker Communities? Can Bernadette's visions of the Virgin Mary be looked at alongside the wild activities of a spiritualist séance? If we are to write a history of abundant events, then I think the answer must be yes. William James happily mixed orthodox with heterodox experience in his *Varieties*, and he was right to do so, for that moment when he was writing marked a desire for "presence." Such a desire, counter-institutional as it was and so often is, took no account of predefined notions of orthodoxy.

The late 19th- and early 20th-century writers who identified a new sense of "presence" have since been criticized for being ahistorical in their treatment of religion and appealing to a core experience that transcends time and place. This criticism is often levelled at anyone who tried or tries to write

about religious experience outside the dominant paradigms of modernity, precisely because such writing necessarily questions one of the predominant intellectual assumptions of modernity: namely, that "the transcendent" does not exist, for nothing can be beyond time. But the criticism itself falls into the old paradigms of modernity and repeats a pattern that Orsi wishes, rightly, to avoid. In short, Orsi is onto something vital here, and his article sets an important agenda for historians of religion. The first test of his model of abundant history is whether it can accommodate Protestantism as well as Roman Catholicism, heterodoxy as well as orthodoxy. The second test is whether it can avoid the charge of ahistoricism and simultaneously account for encounters with presence across time while speaking of their particular manifestations in modernity.

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[1] See, for example, Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Virago, 1989); Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Future Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 2008); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Harper Collins, 2005); and Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (Yale University Press, 2007).

[2] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* [1902] (Longmans, Green and Co., 1952) 31.

[3] W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (Methuen, 1899), 3, 5.