A FEW YEARS AGO, WE RAN A FORUM IN THESE PAGES ON Constantin Fustel’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

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 inconsistencies.

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 even more elaborately decorated. The density of shops overflowing with many things to buy, the throngs of people pressing close together, the scen-
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.”

Historians tell us that 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.

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 modern professionalized doctors, especially for women and for 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.”

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missionaries discovered. Protestant missionaries labeled these practices of presence popish; Catholic missionaries, unable to dissociate 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 deferring 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 excitement 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

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.” 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 metaphysical reality.” 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 intensity 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 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.

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...
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.”

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.


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


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

4 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 20.


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


11 Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 125; Harris, Lourdes, xiii, xv.

HOW ABUNDANT IS “ABUNDANT HISTORY”? Thomas Kselman

Not very long ago a historian of modern Europe who chose to study Marian apparitions would have been committing professional suicide. As Robert Orsi suggests in his essay, this is no longer the case, for over the past generation a number of scholars, including several at distinguished institutions, have written well-received books on apparitions at Lourdes, Marpingen, Ezkioga, and other places as well. Orsi admires the work of Ruth Harris, David Blackbourn, and William Christian, Jr., but he is also dissatisfied with it. Historians have, in his view, worked too much within “the interpretive field of modernity.” Rather than open themselves to a presence that would disrupt their assumptions, historians translate apparitions into social facts, a narrowed vision that fails to capture the richness of the religious experiences of visionaries and devotees.

Orsi’s criticism needs to be taken seriously, for he has a well-deserved reputation as one of the most important interpreters of modern religion. In his work on devotions to Mary and St. Jude he has explored out determining the prayers and rituals of the people he studies. In his most recent book, and in this essay, Orsi moves beyond his work as a historian/ethnographer in order to challenge scholars to rethink the categories that define their approach to religion. Marian apparitions, and presumably other religious experiences, should be conceptualized as “abundant events,” a category that will allow scholars to break out of the constraints that limit their ability to grasp the rich, powerful, and elusive relationships that bring together the transcendental and the temporal, heaven and earth, saint and devotee.

While I accept Orsi’s general view that scholars struggle to make sense of Marian apparitions and similar “abundant events,” I am not as critical as he is of the results of their work, and not persuaded that his new category offers any effective guidance.

While I accept Orsi’s general view that scholars struggle to make sense of Marian apparitions and similar “abundant events,” I am not as critical as he is of the results of their work, and not persuaded that his new category offers any effective guidance. Orsi’s criticism of the limiting assumptions that operate in historiography resembles the argument made by Brad Gregory...
nity” that traces “the ongoing eruption of presence into the spaces of its denial….” This “parallel history” can be traced at Lourdes and at other sites of Marian apparitions, and through other “abundant events.” Where then do we find the “absence” imposed by “modernity”? I presume it is in the academy, but even there the recent work on Marian apparitions and Orsi’s own career suggest that the policing is less strict than in the past. If this is so, it is in part because the “abundant historiography” of Marian apparitions that Orsi calls for, perhaps not as fully articulated as he would hope or as influential as it should be, nonetheless already exists.

In thinking about Orsi’s essay I recalled a passage from Marc Bloch’s classic work on healing miracles, The Royal Touch, which lays out two contrasting approaches to religious events and then seeks to reconcile them. Bloch’s categories of “romantic” and “Voltairian” do not match up perfectly with Orsi’s “modernity” and “abundance,” for both would probably be subsets of a modernist historiography. But I cite the passage nonetheless because of its call for inclusion and its generous tone, traits that I believe are implicit but not fully developed in Orsi’s concept of “abundant event.”

For all religious phenomena, there are two traditional explanations. One—call it Voltairian, if you like—prefers to see the fact under study as the conscious work of an individual thought very sure of what it is doing. The other, on the contrary, looks rather for the expression of social forces of an obscure and profound nature; this might be called the romantic approach. For has not one of the great services of Romanticism been its vigorous accentuation of the spontaneous in human affairs? These two kinds of interpretations are only apparently in contradiction. If an institution marked out for particular ends chosen by an individual will is to take hold upon an entire nation, it must also be borne along by the deeper currents of collective consciousness. The reverse is perhaps also true: for a rather vague belief to become crystallized in a regular rite, it is of some importance that clearly expressed personal wills should help it to take shape.

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4 Brad Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” History and Theory 45 (2006): 132-149, quote from 137. Michel de Certeau made a similar point in The Writing of History, which first appeared in French in 1975. According to de Certeau, for historians, “comprehending religious phenomena is tantamount to repeatedly asking something else of them than what they are meant to say; to questioning them about what they teach us concerning a social status through personal or collective forms of spiritual life; to taking as a representation of the society what, from their point of view, founded that society….” Between their time and ours, the signifier and the signified have cast aside: we postulate a coding which inversely that of the time we are studying,” Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (Columbia University Press, 1988), 138.


7 Ruth Harris, Laundr: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age (New York: Viking, 1999).


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14 Brad Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” History and Theory 45 (2006): 132-149, quote from 137. Michel de Certeau made a similar point in The Writing of History, which first appeared in French in 1975. According to de Certeau, for historians, “comprehending religious phenomena is tantamount to repeatedly asking something else of them than what they are meant to say; to questioning them about what they teach us concerning a social status through personal or collective forms of spiritual life; to taking as a representation of the society what, from their point of view, founded that society….” Between their time and ours, the signifier and the signified have cast aside: we postulate a coding which inversely that of the time we are studying,” Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (Columbia University Press, 1988), 138.


17 Ruth Harris, Laundr: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age (New York: Viking, 1999).

18 Stafford Poole, Our Lady of Gaudalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797 (University of Arizona Press, 1993); idem, The Gaudalupe Controversy in Mexico (Stanford University Press, 2006).


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?

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?

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.

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.” 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.” 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 religious 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 experiences? 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.

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
Robert Orsi shows that modern metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions prevent scholars from grasping phenomena such as alleged Marian apparitions and other modern instances of the “face-to-face presence of humans and gods to each other.” I agree with Orsi that this is a serious problem. But his proposed solution—the categories of “abundant events” and “abundant history”—is unnecessary and too vague to be of much use. It grants too much to the secular presuppositions that he seeks to eschew. It remains too enmeshed in models derived from the “science of comparative religion” to address the particularities of specific religious traditions; and, to whatever extent it acknowledges the possibility of supernaturally real beyond human constructions, it implies the need for some recourse to philosophy of religion or theology, which Orsi says he wants to avoid in favor of a “critical theory.” Orsi seems confused at times in this essay. It is not entirely clear whether the “imaginary” relationships of Bernadette Soubirous include the one between her and the Virgin Mary, but if this is what Orsi means, it seems to contradict the “really real” presence of the supernatural in their relationship, to which he also refers. Or again, with abundant events it is the “power of the unlocked imagination” that affects ordinary human relationships, yet what “radiates out” from the events are “routes of the really real.” One might argue that as historians we cannot determine whether such alleged experiences are no more than inventions of the human imagination or are initiated by the supernatural reality of the Mother of God. But certainly these are radically different things, as far apart as Feuerbach and Newman. Grounded by modernist metaphysical naturalism but confronted by purportedly supernatural phenomena, Orsi seeks to split the difference with “abundant events.” He rightly senses the problem, but a more fundamental critique of its sources makes the invention of new interpretative categories unnecessary. A deeper analysis of modern, secular assumptions yields a stronger and simpler solution.

We need to be more radical in our questioning of assumptions that Orsi, like nearly all scholars (“understandably so, given our training”), seems to take for granted. We need to be more critical of critical theory. We need to critique the dogmatic—indeed, confessional—metaphysical presuppositions that pervade the secular academy, in which “there is no way to think outside the modernist historical categories.” We need to understand what the natural sciences can and cannot disclose about putatively miraculous events. In short, we need paradoxically to extend our “critical historical knowledge” by questioning certain aspects of the way in which it is normally construed. Only then might more robust prospects for the study of religion open up. We might start with a simple recognition of the fact that modern Catholicism has never ceased to be “a culture of presence.” This applies not only to unusual events such as alleged Marian apparitions, but to every validly celebrated Mass. As Orsi well knows, not only before the Enlightenment did “Catholic sacramental theology [maintain] that Jesus Christ was really present in the elements of the Mass.” It did the same throughout the modern period, and still does. It rejects as false Hume’s view of the Eucharist quoted in Orsi’s epigraph, as well as every denial of Christ’s real presence in the consecrated elements. So much for Weberian disenchantment applied to modernity as a whole.

But how can we get behind the “limits of our critical theories” within “normative modernity,” in which religion is “autonomous, a distinct domain apart from other areas of life, private, in conformity with the causal laws of nature, reasonable, interior”? A full answer would require much more space than I have here. Perhaps the most important point is that the de facto metaphysical assumptions that underlay the Scientific Revolution, and continue to prevail in the secular academy today, are not the only meta-

**Back to the Future: A Response to Robert Orsi**

Brad S. Gregory

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