

NEW RELEASE

## Saints: Their Immanence and Poetics

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Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 256 pp.

**B***etween Heaven and Earth* is an ethnographic and historical investigation of lives forged in relation to sacred figures in twentieth century America. In Robert Orsi's beautiful book, saints connect bodies, pain, and history—lands migrated from and generations living together and now no more. Relationships between persons and saints shape social ties and make it possible for ordinary Catholic men and women to assess the problems of the day and to anticipate life to come.

As Orsi diligently and respectfully addresses the uncanniness of the ordinary (Cavell 1994), he introduces a hesitancy in the ways we habitually dwell in our concepts of culture, everyday life, religious idioms and inner worlds. He challenges the human sciences to return to religion the uncertainty and angst it holds when it is actually lived rather than merely studied and theorized.

While going deep into the biographies of his relatives and revisiting places that gave him the sense of belonging and doubt, Orsi illuminates the religious craft that integrates social destiny and contingency into life. Through saints the world can be apprehended and personalized. The thrust of the book is that devotion to saints is grounded in crucial intersubjective events and that this matrix makes intelligible major social dramas of immigrant and working class

communities. It is only amid religious and social enactments, argues Orsi, that particular domains of affect and agency can be understood. There is also an economics to these human-sacred relationships. Saints make a difference in the ways people navigate institutions of welfare and health care, put medical technologies to use, and sur-vive.

The text is marked by the contradictory presence of a child moving among his elders and who must divine speech for himself. Here the child learns language and world simultaneously. On the one hand, like Augustine cited by Wittgenstein in the opening scene of *Philosophical Investigations*, the child witnesses words repeatedly used by adults and understands which objects they might signify or not: "And after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires" (Wittgenstein 1958:2)

But that is not all there is. Rules are not just blindly followed and repetition actually demands the new. So the child in Orsi's religious investigations has, on the other hand, a language of a different kind with which to carve out his future: those untested idioms and practices of sainthood establish a frame within which genuine empirical questions cannot just be raised and answered but also morally transformed (Das 1998).

A skepticism emerges as the child witnesses people styling themselves as men and women and enduring what would seem unbearable without the saints and, at the same, saints scripting lives in such a way that pain and lived reality drain away. As children, crippled and suffering, are sacralized, they also become psychic zones for others, says Orsi, the material and means through which "desires and needs may be chased and found" (79).

A realm of inquiry and care is opened up when the scholar reencounters the child's sense of not understanding the devotion of Uncle Sal who, physically disabled and at the margin of other people's experiences, found in religion a way of living beyond his time. "Meaning-making is not the best way to think about religion," writes Orsi, and the devotional interior is not the only place to look for understanding. As Sal refers to the crippled and blessed Margaret of Castello: "She has a little bit of all things we have." In Margaret, Sal's bodily needs, desire and voice made a difference and found a place. One could thus say that the devotee becomes a physician of himself and of his world.

And so it goes that "the pain of heaven and earth" meet in an intersubjective matrix in which "a kind of religious tragedy" unfolds and life continues (145). As Orsi powerfully writes, reconnecting the fates of his grandmother Julia and of Saint Gemma Galgani. "There was something of herself she recognized in Gemma's story and something of Gemma in hers" (139).

Orsi's craftsmanship shows the work of a fourth element that reorganizes the triad child-parent-the sacred: "Death acquires a particular shape in the meeting of these lives." He writes: "This is how she remained faithful to her dead husband, forcing her sons to compete with a ghost. The two of them chose different ways of fighting their dead father" (128).

So it is the work of the scholar of religion to create a text in which these lives are brought together and open to history, as it was the son's work to bury the father next to the mother and the other son's ongoing work to care for the dying poor standing in for the mother who passed away asking where he was. The network expands. Other lives are reached. And the scholar finds a poetic perspective, as voiced by the late Czeslav Milosz:

"When will that shore appear from which we last see  
How all this came to pass and for what reason?" (2004:72).

Indeed, a growing consensus within anthropology suggests that it is hazardous to conceive culture as a *sui generis* symbolic domain, and culture has been rethought as emerging out of intersubjectivity and institutional interactions and remade through social encounters, ethical deliberations and political processes. But this formulation also suggests the need for ethnographic practices and theories that link investigations of symbolic forms with studies of the lives of individuals (Good and DelVecchio Good 2004). Who is the agent of this remaking of culture?

It is the saint in Orsi's account—and that is what is so brilliant about this work—that forces us to rethink older formulations and problematics associated with human nature, social control, agency, and culture: saints embody the productive dynamism of ordinary life. Orsi gives us a map, as it were, of the subjectivity of those who travel through such a sacred space, and more importantly, of the subjectivity of the space itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it.

By attending to such sacred intersubjectivity ethnographically, we are faced with the constellations in which forms of life are forged or foreclosed around what is most at stake for people. Examination of the ways in which inner states reflect lived experience within the everyday and its temporary spaces and transitions—moments of crisis and grounds for becomings—recasts totalizing assumptions about persons, collectivities and institutions. It also disturbs and enlarges presumed understandings of what is socially possible and desirable and what psychological processes are indeed about.

Thoughtful and a pleasure to read, *Between Heaven and Earth* is a major contribution to religious studies and to the anthropology of religion, and will be of great interest to scholars concerned with subjectivity in the contemporary world.

#### REFERENCES

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