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The Body and Blood: What Was and Is at Stake in the Protestant Reformation

Anna L. Biesecker-Mast
University of Dayton

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Writing Process

This paper is an explanation of Robert A. Orsi's concept of presence from the introduction and first chapter of his book titled, *History and Presence*. Before writing any paper for a class, I thoroughly review the syllabus for the assignment. Based on the requirements listed in the syllabus, and on the discussion we had in seminar about the Orsi text and Dr. Smith's lecture on the religious origins of modernity, I drafted an outline of my paper. Throughout the process of creating my outline, I considered various organizations for my explanation as well as a few different arguments I could make in my paper about Orsi's solution to the problem of modern religion. The strongest organization and arguments, I found, highlighted and emphasized my personal experiences with presence and absence in my own religious upbringing. As a result, my first paper draft included these personal experiences. I brought this first draft to a conference with my ASI 110 professor, Dr. Mackay, and she helped me strengthen and unify my paper. Then, I edited my paper with her comments in mind before I went to a Core Write Place Consultant, Ethan, who helped me fine-tune my paper. After the consult, I edited the paper again before showing it to Dr. Mackay one last time before submitting it just to make sure I was really on the right track.

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Anna Biesecker-Mast

The Roman Catholic Church was corrupt and took advantage of its naïve believers, most obscenely by its practice of selling indulgences. And behold—in marched Martin Luther to nail the ninety-five corrections on the church door, a noble and courageous questioner of blindly accepted Catholic doxa. He liberated the oppressed; he allowed for a genesis of new thought and interpretation.

That is the origin story I was fed, brought up in the Anabaptist, Mennonite faith tradition. However, this and other widely accepted narratives of modern religion's origin story are disavowed in Robert A. Orsi's book *History and Presence*.

Orsi is a professor at Northwestern University who specializes in American Catholicism with both historical and ethnographic perspectives (history.northwestern.edu). In *History and Presence*, Orsi characterizes the sixteenth-century Reformation as a time of debate and controversy over the nature of the Eucharist, which Orsi argues is essentially a debate about presence and absence (2-3). By presence, Orsi means “real” presence, which he qualifies in the introduction as the belief that the divine is “really real” and physically present with people on earth. For many in the sixteenth century, this meant understanding the Eucharist as a ritual in which the body and blood of Jesus Christ was actually ingested in the physical human body (8-9). By contrast, absence is an authoritatively imposed idea that God is not “really real” and physically present among humans (6-7). Specifically, in regard to the Eucharist, absence is the idea that the bread and wine are symbolic of Jesus' presence. The development of this

fundamental distinction between presence and absence in the Eucharist, according to Orsi, is a (if not the) defining plot point in the origin story of modern religion—a plot point that is overlooked and rejected in the modern study of religion (4,8). This rejection, for Orsi, is problematic because it reinforces false dichotomies and stigma. To correct this problem, Orsi argues for a reemphasis on the concept of presence in the study of religion—specifically because it is so significant to modern religion’s origin story. Additionally, applying this corrective to “The Trial of Michael Sattler,” specifically by analyzing this text with Orsi’s lens of presence, helps break down the false dichotomies and thus reevaluate modern religion’s origin story.

At the most fundamental level, Orsi qualifies “presence” as the general idea that a higher power exists in the universe (8). However, for Orsi, the more important concept is “real presence,” or the idea that God is “really real” and physically present among humans—not just in heaven. The most recognized example of real presence is the idea that Jesus Christ is actually being ingested during the ritual of the Eucharist (8-9). The reason this particular understanding of presence is so important is that, according to Orsi, it is crucial for understanding the history of religion and the origins of modern religion. For Orsi, grasping this real and intimate relationship people have with the divine helps explain why people are so willing to die and kill for it (18). The more personal and real the relationship, the higher the stakes.

However, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not the only example of real presence in Christian belief systems. Orsi discusses real presence in saints, spirits, shrines, altars, tombs, church architecture, and the bodies of men and women who die for their faith—also known as martyrs (21). These conceptions of real presence all indicate a divine presence among humans—in a variety of manifestations. For Protestants, presence came to mean Christ being present in the congregation, in the scripture, and in faithfulness; Christ’s presence in the Eucharist became symbolic, or absent (23). However, for Luther, the mascot for the Protestant Reformation, the body and blood of Christ was still present in the Eucharist, and he was outraged to find Protestants deviating from that tenet of Christian practice (19). Despite Luther’s protests, the trajectory of modernity became to welcome the concept of absence and reject real presence—this being one of the problems with modern religion.

As Orsi articulates these different ideas of presence and what real presence is, he comes to identify problems with the modern study of religion and argues for

presence as an adequate corrective for these problems. For instance, one of the main issues Orsi identifies is the development of caricatures and stigmatization as results of the divide between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century over the meaning of Jesus's words at the Last Supper. Orsi argues that this polarization is the reason for the modern trajectory: to become modern means to embrace absence (30). Furthermore, Orsi argues that this mutual exclusion and deep-seated hostility between Catholicism and Protestantism directly contributed to the development of modernity as a move toward absence and the striking polarity of presence and absence (24). Orsi argues that the exaggerated caricatures of each faith tradition become origin stories of modern religion. Because Catholics were equated with presence, and Catholics were so intimately associated with the image of chewing the flesh of Jesus Christ, the emergence of new scientific knowledge and modern epistemologies consequently dismissed presence as a modern conviction (31-32). In Orsi's words: "sacred presence was so fiercely stigmatized because of its [...] association with Catholicism" (32). Catholicism and presence become rejected and scorned as "savage, uncivilized, primitive, and demonic" (33). Thus, the trajectory of modern religion is established: Presence can only be equated with the scientifically inconsistent Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist; therefore, absence can only be equated with non-Catholicism—Protestantism. In other words, modernization comes to mean embracing absence and adopting a religious tradition consistent with that notion. Explicitly put, this is problematic because the trajectory is based on a false dichotomy—on stigmatization (32).

As a corrective, Orsi offers presence. At the root of the problem is a widespread ignorance of presence as a key player in the origin story of modern religion; thus, it is missing from the modern study of religion. In modern religious studies, presence is still assumed an anti-modern conviction and an indication of incivility—whereas absence and Protestantism are assumed the religion of scholarship and higher education (38). To be modern has come to mean the process of freeing oneself from superstitions and presence and embracing the enlightened ideal of absence (41). In this process, gods become obsolete both on earth and in the history or origin story of modern religion (42). For Orsi, this means the only corrective for this problem is the reintroduction and reconsideration of presence in the origin story because presence matters for history and the modern trajectory of religion (46).

This corrective—this revival of presence in the study of modern religion—can be applied to religious texts to help derive a deeper meaning. For example, to consider presence when analyzing “The Trial of Michael Sattler” illuminates an aspect of the Anabaptist origin story that could not be realized otherwise. To return to my childhood experience of hearing these origin stories is to showcase how revolutionized these stories can be through the reintroduction of presence. Growing up in the Mennonite church, I came to understand the Protestant Reformation as a beacon of light in the darkness of corrupt Catholicism—a time of new thought and reinvention. Martin Luther made religion accessible to everyone and bravely challenged the corrupt Catholic church. As a result, I came to understand Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist as another corrupt and outdated Catholic belief to be reinvented in modern times. The Anabaptists that were willing to die for this cause—this religious tradition of absence—became childhood heroes, among them Michael Sattler. In “The Trial of Michael Sattler,” Sattler confesses his Anabaptist doctrine in response to nine charges listed by the Catholic church. One of these responses includes Sattler’s Anabaptist belief that the real body of Christ is absent in the sacrament. Looking at this alone might reinforce the stigma that equates Protestants with absence. However, there is more to consider—like the fact that Michael Sattler died for his Anabaptist faith, specifically because of the death sentence given in this trial. The stories of martyrs like Sattler are showcased in a written collection called *Martyrs Mirror*—a book that glorifies the act of dying for one’s faith. I can actually recollect multiple times I was asked as a Mennonite peacemaker if I would be willing to die for my faith. In Orsi’s *History and Presence*, he points out the inherent presence in the act of martyrdom—an act of presence that has roots in the martyrs from the three centuries after Jesus’ death: “Jesus was said to be present in the flayed and scorched bodies of the martyrs” (21). These deaths were revered and recalled as saints in the Catholic faith. Is this similar to revering Anabaptist martyrs in *Martyrs Mirror*? In other words, in using Orsi’s lens to look back at Anabaptist history, I am able to recognize presence in places I had only seen absence before. I can more clearly see false dichotomies—of Catholics and Protestants; of presence and absence; of presence and modernity—and how they have become the false origin stories of modern religion, including my Mennonite origin story.

Orsi’s *History and Presence* identifies a major flaw in the modern study of religion: the ignorance and rejection of presence in modern religion’s origin story.

Orsi argues that the origin story we assume now is plagued by false dichotomies that do not compensate for other truths. Simply put, Orsi's corrective is a reconsideration and new understanding of presence as significant to modern religion's origin story. By looking back at these origin stories through Orsi's lens of presence, it becomes clear that the history of modern religion cannot depend on dichotomies; rather, they need to complicate such distinctions—like the distinction between presence and absence. Being able to recognize these false dichotomies allows us to rethink and reimagine our origin stories and as a result reimagine the stories we are writing in the present.