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## Modernity's Empty Symbols and Sequential Snobbery

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## Modernity's Empty Symbols and Sequential Snobbery

### Writing Process

We were assigned a paper in which we would reconstruct Orsi's argument of the presence and demonstrate its prevalence in one of three options we read earlier that semester. I read some of Orsi's work, focusing on breaking apart his arguments. I then made an outline for the paper, and Perpetua and Felicity's martyrdom fit the paper the best. I actually wrote the body first, adding an introduction and conclusion later in the process. I turned in one draft to Professor [William] Trollinger and met with the Core Write Place consultants twice before finishing the final draft.

### Course

ASI110

### Semester

Fall

### Instructor

William Trollinger

### Year

2020

# Modernity's Empty Symbols and Sequential Snobbery

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*Grace Pierucci*

There has been a divide in religious doxa for centuries as to whether gods are present in this world or are distantly observing from afar. Robert Orsi, a scholar of Catholic studies and American history, wrote extensively on this subject in his work titled *History and Presence*. In this piece, he outlines why it is important to take presence into serious account when studying theology. The conflict between those who have faith in presence and those who believe in the absence is an ongoing dispute with no end in sight. Today this debate continues to influence many religious communities, including those who traditionally possessed faith in the presence. An example of this is demonstrated by the growing number of Catholics who do not believe in transubstantiation, but rather see it as symbolic. Because of the prevalence this conflict still has today, it is crucial to come to an understanding of both arguments that requires modern scholars of theology to take into account the presence as a real possibility. The majority of modernity prefers to accept absence, viewing it as the logical and rational option. The concept of presence is not popular because the presence of gods on earth can be frightening and forfeits humanity's control over their everyday lives. Likewise, placing faith into things that have personally not been experienced is a difficult task. However, Orsi states that by ignoring presence, the experiences of millions of other people are ignored. In Orsi's *History and Presence*, he argues that presence is necessary for understanding religion and the experiences of many people throughout history, which is demonstrated poignantly in the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity.

Orsi's concept of presence states that God is still active on Earth. Presence is not confined to Christianity or the Eucharist, as any relationship with God taking place is within the concept of presence. Instead, it contains a focus on personal experiences and interactions with gods. Conversely, absence is the idea that God is distant from our world and not actively working in our lives. Absence is not a

denial of God, but rather the removal of Him from this world. The absence therefore places a greater emphasis on scripture or religious texts. The conflict is often associated with Catholicism and Protestantism because Catholics believe God has a presence in our lives while most Protestants view God as more detached. Additionally, Hinduism and Buddhism mirror the controversy between Catholicism and Protestantism, in that Hindus and Catholics both believe in presence and Buddhists and Protestants do not. In Hinduism, there are many gods actively present; whereas, Buddhism provides the teachings of Buddha for how to live virtuously. Scholars of Asian religions assisted in bringing about a divide in presence and absence pertaining to Hinduism and Buddhism. In this divide, absence was favored and therefore Buddhism was privileged (37-38).

The concept of presence as a category of religion is a modern construct. In the medieval world, religion was an aspect of daily life and seen in everything from architecture to scheduling harvests. Presence was widely accepted and a constant in their lives. Shrines could be found on street corners, calendars were cyclical like the church's year, and pilgrimages were extremely popular for those who could afford them. There is an ongoing shift from the medieval style of societal acceptance of presence toward a more modern exploration of understanding religion. The former Quaker Tylor claims that reason and science were not as developed in the medieval period; he argues that people were simply acting out of fear and terror in place of rational thought. Today there are growing numbers of members in the Catholic Church who are removing the presence from their faith. They see sacraments such as the Eucharist as symbolic and view priests as middlemen standing between them and God. Through modernity, religion was redefined with the concept of absence. However, the dismissal of presence was met with backlash by those who still firmly believed, and this debate caused great violence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (37-38).

The conflict of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, between those who held tight to the concept of presence and those who preferred that of absence, was sparked during the Reformation and the religious wars. When Luther split from the Catholic Church, Christianity became fragmented into the Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, the Protestant branch gave way to Lutheranism, Calvinism, the Church of England, and Anabaptism. One of the most glaring discrepancies between the different branches of Christianity was the concept of presence. At the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church addressed and clarified church doctrine, primarily in response to the protestant reformers. Reforms in the church were made pertaining to where bishops may reside, the clerical education, and the problems posed by indulgences. The council emphasized doctrinal beliefs that reformers were refuting such as the importance of the sacraments or

justification by faith and works. It was an institutional response to protestant reformers but also included efforts to mend issues within the church itself.

Within modernity, encounters with gods are dismissed and distanced. The modern person is said to free themselves from the superstitions involved with presence. The religious who still believe in the notion of presence are now portrayed as backwards, superstitious, and delusional. Moderns are reassured of this logic by anthropologists and psychologists who diagnose godly encounters as delusional, hysterical, or as simply hallucinations. Many religious who had faith in presence were discarded and forced into asylums for years. Accepting the absence of gods became a sign of mental health while belief in presence is now associated with or an indicator of mental illness. Likewise, good citizens are those who conform and accept absence; then, the highest power present in their lives is consequently their leaders or state. Immanuel Kant's *Enlightenment* praises the cosmopolitan society filled with reason and science that cannot coexist with presence (39-41).

Conversely, Orsi also argues that presence is necessary to study religion. Writing gods off as symbolic, distant, and abstract ignores the experiences of multitudes of people. Scholars need to look into the interactions between gods and man, taking the possibility of presence seriously. It is difficult for people to have faith in experiences unknown to them but reported by others. However, faith in these experiences will assist in fully comprehending religion. The removal of gods' presence takes away the aspect of having a relationship with gods. Religion becomes much less personal and more centered on religious texts and rules alone (42).

Perpetua and Felicity are examples of how presence shapes lives and history. Both women had deep enough relationships with God to die joyously for Him. In *The Passions of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, the bravery of the martyrs is highlighted by the peace they find in dying for God. Perpetua and Felicity are willing to leave everything behind, even their children, for their faith. Perpetua tells her father who pleads with her to make the sacrifice to the emperor that whatever happens is God's will. Having an open mind to presence aids in the understanding of such martyrs and the history of religions. The group Felicity and Perpetua were martyred with were joyous when told they would be fed to beasts and happily laid down their lives. They had a relationship with God so strong that they were honored to die, and Saturus, Saturninus, and Revocatus gave thanks for receiving a scourging because it imitated a part of God's passion. Perpetua guided her executioner's hand which held his sword to her throat. God's presence gave them resilience and fortitude in their captivity and until their deaths. Without understanding the concept of presence, the martyrs are fools and delusional.

Presence is crucial to studying Perpetua and Felicity, as their narrative only comes together if God is acting in them. Perpetua's visions foretell of her martyrdom and of Satorus' death paving the way for the rest of them. Felicity prays to give birth before the date of her execution in order to die with her fellow Christians and not be separated into a different group for executions. Her prayer is answered and the baby is born a month early, a couple days before the day she is scheduled to die.

Ultimately, Orsi's notion of presence is critical to understanding religion. The concept of the gods' residing and interacting in this world should not be omitted. Presence allows for more personal gods with whom deep relationships are possible. Martyrs such as Perpetua and Felicity had personal experiences with God and experienced His presence firsthand in their martyrdom. Even a man in charge of the prisons was moved by the courage of the martyrs. The modern methods of analyzing religion disregard such personal testimonies and experiences. Without presence, religion is simply reading texts and following the rules with no relationship to gods. This focus on religious text alone makes it far less personal, despite modernity's claims of focusing on the self. It is arrogant to view those who believe in presence as backwards or delusional because the value of their experience is diminished. Likewise, to explain the prevalence of presence in medieval times by describing the people as superstitious or lacking reason is nothing short of snobbery. There is great humility in accepting presence as a real possibility. Presence is pivotal in comprehending religion due to the importance of taking human experiences into account.

### **Works Cited**

Orsi, Robert A. *History and Presence*. Harvard University Press, 2016.