

Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 1

April 2023

The Onus of Absolution: Real Presence, Modern Absence, and How It All Connects to Luther

Ava G. Merriman
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>

Recommended Citation

Merriman, Ava G. (2023) "The Onus of Absolution: Real Presence, Modern Absence, and How It All Connects to Luther," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 1. Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol9/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

The Onus of Absolution: Real Presence, Modern Absence, and How It All Connects to Luther

Writing Process

I began this project by pulling quotes and phrases from my sources (Robert Orsi's *History and Presence* and Martin Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*). After creating summaries of the main points of both works, I started writing my essay. I submitted my rough draft to my professor and then had a conference with her later that same week. After the conference, I made some revisions in accordance with my professor's comments and submitted my final draft.

Course

ASI110

Semester

Fall

Instructor

Dr. Elizabeth Ann Mackay

Year

2022

The Onus of Absolution: Real Presence, Modern Absence, and How It All Connects to Luther

Ava Merriman

In his 2016 book *History and Presence*, religious scholar Robert Orsi examines the significance of gods to religion in modern-day society by dissecting what he calls their historical “real presence” and compares it to their subsequent “absence” in the modern Western world. According to Orsi, one of the problems facing society today is that our understanding of religion has been stunted and is incomplete due to the modern attitude of dismissing and even demonizing the so-called “real presence” of the gods in religion. Orsi argues that this real presence is a positive feature of religion that has progressively become more shunned and neglected over time, resulting in a world where the absence of the gods informs all aspects of society—including religious studies. How can we truly understand the motivations of those in centuries past if we fail to consider the presence of gods in their lives? The context of gods having a real presence in the world permeates the actions and ideas of martyrs, saints, political leaders, social reformers, and the everyday man of centuries past. Thus, to properly understand the significance of historical events—especially those motivated by religious conflict—one must look upon said events with eyes that can perceive the real presence of gods in the world. We can take this idea of viewing the past with the context of real presence and apply it to the Protestant Reformation, wherein religious reformer Martin Luther wrote *The Freedom of a Christian*. In this essay, I will examine Orsi’s ideas about the problem of absence in modern religion. Furthermore, I will apply the lessons of *History and Presence* to Luther’s idea of “justification of faith” to further explicate the significance of the arguments put forth within *The Freedom of a Christian*.

To begin, we must answer some fundamental questions. What is “presence”? What is “absence”? And what is it that makes the gods—for lack of a better term—present or absent? To answer these questions, we must turn to the first

chapter of *History and Presence*. According to Orsi, to experience real presence is to know and feel that the gods are tangible and directly affect the mortal world. When a religion emphasizes real presence, its practitioners experience the gods as beings that are existent, that have real power and direct influence over everyday matters. A classical example of real presence in Christianity is the Catholic belief that the consecrated Host transforms into the literal body of Christ. When the wine is blessed at Mass, that too is an example of real presence—Catholics see the wine as the actual blood of Christ. This belief stands in contrast to the ideas of many Protestant sects of Christianity, which see the bread and wine as purely symbolic items. To these groups, the bread and wine do not *literally* become the body and blood of Christ; instead, they are merely symbolic representations of Christ's body and blood. Thus, to many Protestant groups, it can be said that Christ is absent from the bread and wine as he is not bodily present. He is instead an intangible being, a theological creature rendered untouchable and distant by virtue of his absence from the physical world.

Having thus established the distinction between Orsi's concepts of absence and presence, we can now examine how this theological divide came to be and the resulting effects it has on our modern understanding of religion today. Orsi claims that "[b]eginning in early modernity as a dispute among Christians, divergent conceptions of presence became a point of absolute division between Catholics and Protestants, and then it evolved into one of the normative categories of modernity" (9). The major catalyst for these divergent conceptions came to be in the 16th century C.E. with the Protestant Reformation—but as easy as it would be to just say this and leave it at that, justification, I've found, is important in both theology and analytical essays. So, how and why did the Protestant Reformation give rise to the division between different Christian beliefs and their interpretations of presence and absence? To understand the answer to this question, we must examine what led to the Protestant Reformation and, as with many things in ASI 110, the answer can be connected to the Catholic Church. Leading up to the Reformation, the Catholic Church had drawn the ire of many people due to its practice of selling indulgences, and chief amongst those vexed was Martin Luther, a German monk and theologian. In response to what he viewed as both corruption of the church and an overreach in papal authority, he wrote his *95 Theses* that, as the title suggests, posed 95 arguments or proposals that challenged the commonly held Catholic beliefs of its time. Originally intended only for the eyes of Luther's local bishop, the *95 Theses* probably would not have seen widespread distribution and effect without the involvement of the printing press.

And yet, as fate would have it, someone had taken the *Theses* and made copies that were distributed throughout the Holy Roman Empire and Western Europe as a whole. The ideas found within the *Theses*—that scripture should be the primary religious authority, not the pope, and that salvation can only be achieved through faith, not works—resonated with many, and as circulation of these ideas spread, so too did the furor for change. The result of this uproar for religious reform was the Protestant Reformation, which saw the rise of new forms of Christianity such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, and various Anabaptist faiths, all of which stood in stark opposition to the Catholic tradition of deferring to papal authority. Instead, these new Christian religions adhered to the two big ideas presented within Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*: justification through faith alone, not works, and deference to scripture as the primary theological authority within the religion.

Robert Orsi argues that the rise of these two ideas of justification—characteristic of most Protestant forms of Christianity—has led to a modern world devoid of the presence of gods, one in which the gods are absent. Why is this? To answer that question, we must again look toward the example of the Eucharist. As I have already said, Catholic tradition holds that the blessed bread and wine literally becomes the flesh and blood of Christ. Thus, Christ is tangible and has real presence in the Catholic faith. In contrast, many Protestant faiths posit that the bread and wine are merely representative of Christ's body and blood; his presence is remote, and so he is absent. Instead, he is found in the signs of “tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings or beliefs” (38). But the absence of God is not merely found—if an absence of something can be described as being “found”—in the widespread Protestant idea of the Eucharist as a symbolic ritual. The absence of the gods is also enforced by the idea that scripture is the sole source of religious authority. By denying papal authority, forms of real presence—mortal intermediaries of divinity such as saints, the consecrated Host becoming the literal flesh and blood of Christ, and an emphasis on iconography in churches—disappears in favor of scripture, which speaks of God but does not tangibly connect God to the mortal world. In an ironic twist, by removing the Pope and undercutting the need for an organized, hierarchical, and mortal religious authority, the presence of divine authority—the real presence of God—is removed.

The Reformation marks the beginning of a grand pivotal shift toward these Protestant ideas in the modern Western world. As Protestantism grew in popularity and spread throughout the West, so too did the absence of the gods. The modern West is primarily informed by the religious divergence that spawned

from the Reformation, and our modern understanding of religion has been affected by this Protestant emphasis on the absence of gods. Today's dominant understanding of religion, then, is both warped and wholly different than it was centuries ago. Orsi articulates this idea within *History and Presence*, where he states that “modern theories of religion were written over accounts of the gods really present, submerging them in a theoretical underworld, while on the surface the gods were reborn as symbols, signs, metaphors, functions, and abstractions” (4). Thus, there is a “theoretical lens for the modern study of religion” informed by “[t]he internecine controversy among Christians about the nature of the Eucharist” (9).

We have established that modernity is shaped by the absence of gods. But what are the repercussions of the gods' absence in modern times? For one, this absence has led to the popular view that those who experience real presence are mentally unwell, out of touch with reality, and even backward. This perception has been used as a weapon against those people who are most likely to experience real presence today—women, children, people of color, and the elderly—in an effort to dismiss and downplay the credibility of said people, effectively keeping them under the boot of social structures that deem them as lesser beings. According to Orsi, in the modern world “[i]t is a dreadful thing to be in relationship with the gods really present. Painful and unexpected consequences may ensue. It is not safe to be so raw and vulnerable to real presences, to make desire and need so transparent” (6). The divide between those who embrace absence and those who experience presence represents “an ontological fault line that [has run] through all of modernity” (38). Both sides of this ontological fault line, as a result of being so divided and entrenched in their own beliefs, will find solace in their own doctrines and have difficulty accepting the positions of the other side. This division runs deep, as the absence of gods has created a vacuum in which other authorities have assumed power and influence—politicians, ideologies of all kinds, and the modern nation-state all profit from the absence of gods. In a sense, they have *become* the new gods by which the modern West is ruled. The West has experienced enough division in the past century alone for one to see that this statement is true.

As we have already established, however, the world wasn't always ruled by absence. To best understand religion in the context of the past, we must apply said lens of real presence as a corrective to our analysis of history. Let's take a look at Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*. In *Freedom*, Luther argues in favor of the two main axioms of Protestantism that have been adopted throughout much of the modern Western world—after all, he was a crucial progenitor of these ideas. He does this in a myriad of ways. One such way was through his explanation of the

“inward man”; a concept that places the onus of absolution upon one’s faith and soul. In regards to this, Luther says that “it will profit nothing that the body should be adorned with sacred vestments, or dwell in holy places, or be occupied in sacred offices, or pray, fast, and abstain from certain meats, or do whatever works can be done through the body and in the body” (2). This statement rings of intangibility and absence. In it, he says that nothing the “outward man” does—the physical, fleshly, tangible man—can affect the state of one’s soul or salvation. Luther makes it clear that he believes that “[o]ne thing, and one alone, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty; *and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ*” (2, emphasis added). The idea that “works” does nothing to help Christians achieve salvation was, at the time, a revolutionary one. It denies the then-prevalent belief that all Christians had to go out and do good things, attend Mass, and follow the Pope to go to Heaven. Instead, Christians could comfort themselves with the idea that as long as they recognized and embraced the word of God—scripture—as both holy and true, they wouldn’t be damned to Hell. But what is the importance of this? For Luther, that is easy to answer: his doctrine concerns the potential salvation of all Christian men and women. But in a broader sense, *Freedom of a Christian* offers a close-up and personal look into where the divergence between Catholics and Protestants, the presence and absence of gods, and the medieval world from the modern one begins.

History and Presence broadly categorizes religion into two forms: one that recognizes real presence, à la the Catholic faith, and one that embraces absence, à la Protestantism. However, it would be a gross oversimplification to say that all Catholics experienced “real presence” and all Protestants embraced “absence.” Orsi acknowledges this, saying that “[t]he simple equation—Catholics = presence, Protestants = absence—was a caricature and polemical overstatement already in early modernity, and it remains so in the twenty-first century” (25). Whilst it is true that most Catholics hold on to doctrine that emphasizes real presence, and most Protestants embrace absence, there are and always will be exceptions in both of these strands of Christianity.

Orsi recognizes that the modern embrace of absence was sparked by the Protestant Reformation and that in recent centuries the West has progressively and steadily rejected the real presence of gods in accordance with the rise of Protestantism. The division of Christianity between these two forms can be traced back to Martin Luther, who argued in his *Freedom of a Christian* that justification can only be achieved through faith, and that scripture, not the Pope, held final theological authority. The resulting absence of the gods opened a vacuum through which things such as politics and nation-states grew to have more pressing

importance in the daily and cultural lives of the devout—and said absence grew to become a weapon wielded by the societal elite in order to oppress and subjugate minorities who experienced true presence. By virtue of the passing of time and the widening of what Orsi refers to as the “ontological fault line,” the ability of those living in a modern world dominated by divine absence to fully understand the world as it once was—rich in the presence of gods, which informed every aspect of life—has been stunted. Thus, only by understanding what real presence is can we truly understand the past. And perhaps, with that understanding, we can mend the present and prepare ourselves for a better future.

Works Cited

Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Isidore, <https://isidore.udayton.edu>.

Accessed 15 Nov. 2022.

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

Trollinger, William. “Toward Modernity: Luther, Calvin, and Reformations.” ASI 110: Core Class Lecture. ASI 110: Core Class Lecture, 15 Nov. 2022, Dayton, University of Dayton.