
Between Heaven and Earth is stunning in the true sense of the word; Orsi renders the reader temporarily dizzied and groundless with his bold call for a reevaluation of both our location as scholars and of the objects that we study. Between Heaven and Earth is a collection of seven essays, each throbbing with the urgent concerns of a scholar richly engaged in the project of questioning his own religious and academic worlds. Though an examination of Catholicism in America that traverses between autobiographical, ethnographical, theoretical and historical prose Orsi uproots common misconceptions of religion as a web of meanings. This stunning effect renders the reader paralyzed only momentarily as Orsi extends a thorough repositioning of religion as a web of relationships and locates the scholar in this web.

Between Heaven and Earth “offers religion as a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together” (2). Orsi seeks to understand religious worlds as steeped in and worked on through complex relationships of individuals with one another and with the enchanted worlds, filled with “sacred presence,” in which we all navigate. In his exploration of religion as a web of relationships Orsi unpacks two interconnected levels of intersubjectivity. The first is the intersubjective elements of social, cultural, and religious identities that include “the bonds of love and hate within which religious actors, including those drawn to violence, make their lives” (3). The second intersubjectivity is that of the religious scholar operating in the worlds where she or he works and lives. Each essay examines with sharp precision these bi-level intersubjectives that can never be separated for the scholar of religion. Orsi draws from Jean-Paul Sartre who asserts that “Research is a relationship,” adding that this is true not only for ethnographers, but also for historians.

The first four chapters offer a rich field in which Orsi harvests evidences for the relational character of Catholicism in America. These chapters, each a tapestry of research analysis and corresponding autobiographical notes, examine the culture of suffering in mid-twentieth century American Catholicism, the many names and materializations of the Virgin Mary, the location and use of children in shaping Catholic worlds, and Orsi’s grandmother’s relationship on earth to Saint Gemma Galgani in heaven. The third chapter in particular, “Material Children: Making God’s Presence Real for Catholic Boys and Girls and for the Adults in Relation to Them,” reveals Orsi’s sensitive attention to the lives of “real” children and to the social, political, and theological worlds that shape them and are shaped by them. This chapter in particular provides a long awaited theoretical contribution to the field that asks, “how is it that children, and specifically perhaps children in pain and distress, are so effective to think with in this culture and to think with in this way” (15).

Chapters five and six demonstrate the reasons why Orsi has become, and will likely remain, a leader in challenging old problematic paradigms in the field and in proposing new positions for the scholar. Chapter five is a compilation of Orsi’s reflections on ethnographic work done in Chicago, in which he argues that the discipline “would benefit from a season of experimenting” with rethinking the boundaries between popular/official, heresy/orthodoxy, good/bad, and especially us/them (175). Orsi articulates what has long been needed in a critical analysis of methodology, arguing that a scholar’s work has the potential to become “a site of many voices talking on top of each other and against each other, a place of unexpected intrusions and uncertain borders, built in the middle of and from the same stuff as what Sartre calls the ‘equivocal givens of experience’” (176). Finally, chapter six should become a must read for all scholars of religion. Orsi offers a sharp, critical
critique of the distinctions scholars have long made between good and bad religions, rooting this distinction in fear. He desires an understanding of religion that embraces ambivalence and ambiguity and for religious scholars to seek a “third way” between theological scholarship and radical secular scholarship. Nietzsche’s ghost lurks in Orsi’s call for the scholar who has “no need to fortify the self in relation to the other” (198).

Orsi’s work is for not only scholars of American Catholicism, but for all scholars in the field who seeks to understand their history and to move boldly into new identities and locations in the web of relationships between heaven and earth.

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