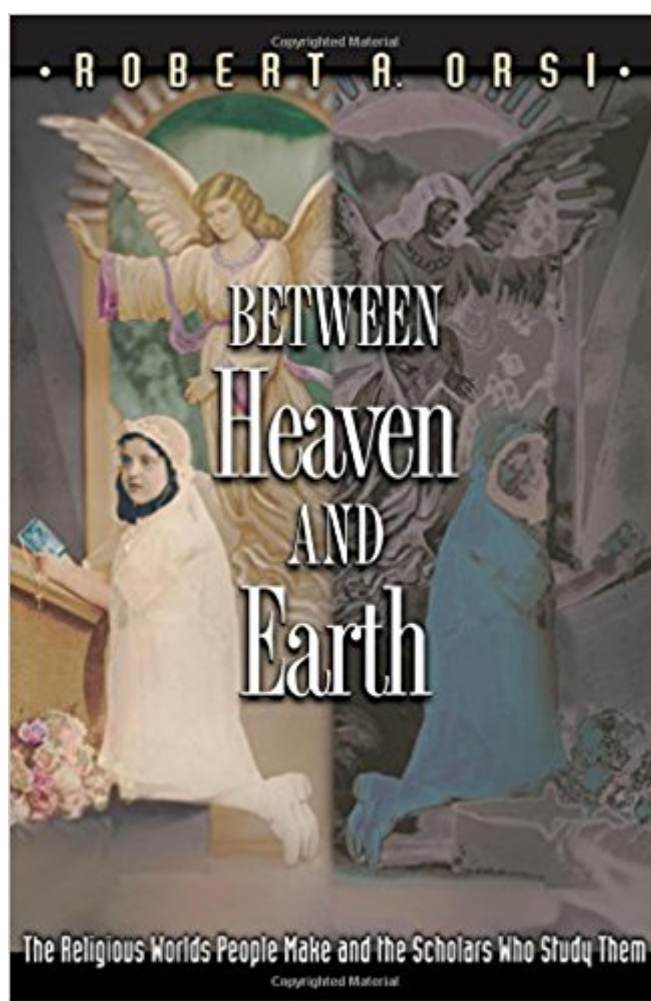


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# Between Heaven And Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make And The Scholars Who Study Them



## Synopsis

*Between Heaven and Earth* explores the relationships men, women, and children have formed with the Virgin Mary and the saints in twentieth-century American Catholic history, and reflects, more broadly, on how people live in the company of sacred figures and how these relationships shape the ties between people on earth. In this boldly argued and beautifully written book, Robert Orsi also considers how scholars of religion occupy the ground in between belief and analysis, faith and scholarship. Orsi infuses his analysis with an autobiographical voice steeped in his own Italian-American Catholic background--from the devotion of his uncle Sal, who had cerebral palsy, to a "crippled saint," Margaret of Castello; to the bond of his Tuscan grandmother with Saint Gemma Galgani. Religion exists not as a medium of making meanings, Orsi maintains, but as a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving people of all ages as well as the many sacred figures they hold dear. Orsi argues that modern academic theorizing about religion has long sanctioned dubious distinctions between "good" or "real" religious expression on the one hand and "bad" or "bogus" religion on the other, which marginalize these everyday relationships with sacred figures. This book is a brilliant critical inquiry into the lives that people make, for better or worse, between heaven and earth, and into the ways scholars of religion could better study of these worlds.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Harvard Divinity School professor Orsi, the reigning scholar of American Catholicism, brings together six essays about religion and the methodology of its study. Orsi (*The Madonna of 115th*

Street and Thank You, St. Jude) has always explored "lived religion," investigating the ways real people practice religion and how religious meaning suffuses their daily lives. That trademark interest marks these essays through and through. We learn about how the stories of saints and the stories of families intersect to make a "domestic hagiography," how children play a special role in families' and churches' understandings of spirituality and why people hang plastic Virgin Marys from the dashboard mirrors of their cars. Orsi interweaves these academic explorations with reflections on his own family: we read about his grandmother's devotion to Saint Gemma, his palsied uncle's faithful attendance at special Masses and breakfasts for Catholic "cripples" and his own experience conversing with a Haitian spiritualist and deity. Orsi has not written a memoir, per se, but has rather found in his own family a rich archive, full of religious experiences that tell stories about the extraordinary meanings ordinary people create in their lives. The fact that these essays exhibit an explicitly methodological, theoretical bent will guarantee that this book sells primarily to academic audiences, but it will do brilliantly there. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Winner of the 2005 Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in the Constructive-Reflective Studies Category, American Academy of Religion. One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2005 "[Orsi] 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. . . . 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." --Joëlle Biehl, *Anthropological Quarterly* "*Between Heaven and Earth* documents Orsi's growing confidence in the belief that religion is less about formal ideas or morality than how it structures networks of relationships, most important the relationships between family members, loved ones, their saints and Gods. . . . The result is frequently dazzling. . . . [A] compelling blend of personal narrative and scholarly inquiry." --John T. McGreevy, *Commonweal* "*Between Heaven and Earth* is a classic . . . . Balancing historical, archival and personal evidence in a rare style of historical auto-ethnography to study religious intimacy in fresh and intellectually satisfying ways, Orsi takes readers more deeply into his theoretical and conceptual levels of argument by introducing them to his uncle Sal and his grandmother. . . . This is a memorable book, both for the story of Orsi's family, in which he situates historical and cultural practices, and for the intellectual challenge his work represents to the interdisciplinary study of religions." --Claire Hoertz Badaracco,

America"Orsi argues that religion is best viewed not as a tool of meaning making, but as a complex and ambiguous 'network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together.' He persuasively demonstrates this through a series of case studies focused primarily on 20th-century American Catholicism. Orsi mixes personal family history with anthropological and historical argumentations. . . . [T]he book moves far beyond the study of Catholicism. Orsi's broader foci are religion as it is practiced and the frames that scholars of religion use to interpret their subjects."--Choice"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."--Joao Biehl, *Anthropological Quarterly*"Orsi shows how one might successfully approach a study of religion that is both critical and radically empirical, focused on the way that people inhabit and make their world through religious idiom embedded in a network of social and material relationships. This book is as methodologically important as it is engaging to read."--Richard J. Callahan, Jr., *Religion*"Robert Orsi strongly makes the case that positive and negative assessments of religious practice are beside the point. . . . [T]he power of *Between Heaven and Earth* is not in replacing the either/or of the good religion schema with neither/nor. Rather it is Orsi's challenge to view religion as we might view other relationships in our lives: with respect for its complexity, and, above all, with compassion."--Peter Manseau, *Church History*"In this much-reviewed and widely praised set of essays on the religious experience of mid-twentieth-century working-class Italian-American Catholics, Robert Orsi speaks to a series of large questions in the study of religion more generally. Drawing from his own family history, he provides an intimate look at the interior world of the Catholicism he knows best, expanding the usual cast of adult devotees to include children, saints, and scholars."--Ann Taves, *Journal of Religion*"*Between Heaven and Earth* is both a model of and a model for how one might learn about vernacular religion through material culture and ritual practice. I have often drawn on and referred to Orsi's book."--Peter Savastano, *transformations*"The author writes as a committed insider, and much of his work is biographical in the context of his own family and also autobiographical. This is possibly the finest and most meaningful aspect of the entire book."--Professor Graham Duncan, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*

An excellent argument that religion is best understood as a series of relationships rather than a shopping list of beliefs.

Delivered promptly and affordably for my daughters college course

Orsi's book is an interesting intro to some of the issues facing religious studies scholars. It presents the issues of how to study a religious community and what difficulties arise in doing so. For the reader less interested in the academic field of religious studies, there is still a wealth of information on religion in America, especially the history and development of American Catholicism. The book is accessible to a wide audience and is the kind of work that makes for good discussions with a variety of different types of groups. I will add, however, that for those who are already sufficiently aware of the problems of doing anthropological research on religious communities, it offers little that is new or insightful.

This book is written by an academic for an academic audience, but I think it is a rare example of eloquent academic writing that is accessible and at times very touching, weaving in and out between the writer's personal history and more theoretical observations on the place of the people who study religion.

Exactly as expected

Occasionally a book both enlightens me and turns me into a forthright opponent of the author's thesis. *Between Heaven and Earth* is a loosely connected set of essays about religious experience among mid-twentieth-century, working-class Italian-American Catholics, which the author uses to develop the rubbery notion that religion is really about interconnections of worshipers with family members as well as with the objects of their worship. Therefore, concludes Orsi, scholars of religion ought to refrain from criticizing the superstition of their subjects. Orsi writes well for a scholar. Although he includes enough academic jargon to satisfy his peers, his autobiographical ruminations on the religious practices of his grandmother and Uncle Sal are thoughtful, clear, and full of understanding. But the book is nonetheless depressing, a reminder to those of us who lived through the pre-Vatican II era in the United States of just how much gross superstition Roman Catholicism entertained and, in fact, encouraged. As for Orsi's thesis, the emperor has no clothes: worthless superstition is simply worthless superstition and has no redeeming value for either this world or the next.

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