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Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them, by Robert A. Orsi

Chad Berndt

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BOOK REVIEWS

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: THE RELIGIOUS WORLDS PEOPLE MAKE AND THE SCHOLARS WHO STUDY THEM

ROBERT A. ORSI
 PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004
 \$26.95, 264 PAGES

Reviewed by Chad Berndt

They can be found almost anywhere and everywhere, from the miniature Madonna on the dashboard of a passing car to the large crucifix in the local church, these religious figures have come to symbolize the devotional practices of Christians. In *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, Orsi examines the history and impact these iconic figures have had and the relationships they forged.

The opening chapter draws upon a personal relationship shared with Uncle Sal, a character who suffers from cerebral palsy, and who finds great comfort through Blessed Margaret of Castello, the patron of the unwanted. Orsi cleverly uses this personal narration as a way to explain why suffering and tragedy occur here on earth. Citing Catholic literature, Orsi is able to provide a theological response, stating: “Physical distress of all sorts, from conditions like cerebral palsy to the unexpected agonies of accidents and illness, was...an individual’s main opportunity for spiritual growth” (p. 21). Aside from the theological principles that consume much of the book, Orsi’s work draws upon a larger and more prevailing topic, centering on the need and formation of relationships, going as far as to say: “everyday life is about the mutual engagement of men, women, children and holy figures present to each other” (p. 73).

In stressing the importance of relationship formation, Orsi draws upon dissimilar accounts of relationships, in an effort to draw attention to earlier assertions. Citing the cases of Sal and Grandma Julia, both of whom form relationships with saintly figures, Orsi attempts to illustrate the various physiological and psychological effects relationships can have on the psyche. More importantly, Orsi contends that relationships tend to form mostly out of connectivity—the idea of being able to see oneself paralleled in another.

Connectivity allows individuals the opportunity to forge stronger and more mutual bonds, thereby forming a more complete and pervasive relationship.

While the author is quick to stress the importance of forming meaningful relationships, Orsi is equally as quick to aver the need to appreciate and uphold these sacred bonds. Orsi contends that all too often we become complacent in the relationships we have formed, not fully appreciating what it is we truly have. This ideology is further documented and developed using a narrative from Father Stanley Grabowski, in which he personally detests the excessive use of religious icons and figures for the simple fact that many have become complacent with their presence and do not fully appreciate the magnitude of their being. Orsi stresses the importance of appreciating relationships in that they help to promote equipoise, or equal distribution in a relationship, by requiring each person to give of themselves rather than just take.

In addition to the theological content of the book, this reviewer found the format to be somewhat unfavorable to the author's intentions. Structured in chapters, the author ruminates upon one religious figure or narration per chapter, whereby making the book and its chapters appear isolated and disconnected from the others. In a book that attempts to show connectedness, *Between Heaven and Earth* is not wholly able to reflect the same message.

Overall, Orsi's work is informative if not inspiring. Through the creative prose, which infuses personal accounts with historic annotations, Orsi is able to make the book and its theological teachings more manageable. Yet because of the content and his selective audience of Christian/Catholic readers, this reviewer questions the applicability of this book within a wider society. However, when viewed through the lens of a moral and ethical attitude, Orsi's work provides a deeply rich and compelling account, which could easily find its way into the classrooms of many high schools and colleges across the country.

Chad Berndt serves as principal of Queen of Peace School in Mishawaka, IN.